

THE POPULIST REVOLT

ANATOMY, ALCHEMY, AND
THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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1. The Binary World: *'The Pure People'* vs. *'The Corrupt Elite'*

On a cold January afternoon in Washington, a newly sworn-in president stood before a crowd stretching down the Mall and delivered a sentence that would echo for years. Power, he said, was being transferred - not from one party to another, not from one administration to the next, but from a capital city back to *'you, the people.'* Washington had flourished, he continued, whilst the people had not shared in its wealth. The establishment had protected itself, but not the country's citizens. [22056]

It was a familiar cadence, and not only in America. Across Europe and Latin America, on stages and screens, the same story was being told in different accents. Nigel Farage, flushed with the referendum result, spoke of a victory for *'real people,'* for *'ordinary people,'* for *'decent people.'* [22056] In Caracas and Budapest, in Rome and Melbourne, leaders who otherwise agreed on almost nothing found a common grammar: there were the pure and the corrupt; there were the people and the elite; and politics, properly understood, was nothing more and nothing less than the expression of the people's will against those who had betrayed it.



This is the binary world. It is not a slogan, though it works well as one. It is not merely a campaign tactic, though it is devastatingly effective in that role. It is a way of seeing - a moral map of society in which complexity collapses into two camps, and in which the deepest question in politics is not what we should do, but who we are. Understanding that map is the first task for anyone who wants to understand the populist revolt of our time.

A Thin-Centred Ideology

What, then, is populism? The word is used so freely that it has become almost meaningless. Open a newspaper and you will find it attached to almost anyone the writer dislikes: a tax-cutting conservative, a redistributionist socialist, a nationalist, a protectionist, a celebrity outsider. Cas Mudde, one of the scholars who has done most to rescue the term from this fog, is blunt about such confusion. Populism is not the same as being popular. It is not demagoguery - saying whatever people want to hear. It is not, in itself, anti-immigrant or right-wing. Nor is it merely a tool. [22056]

It is, he argues, a thin-centred ideology. The phrase needs unpacking because it does important work. An ideology, in this sense, is a worldview: a set of beliefs genuinely held by those who use populist language, and which will shape what they do if they gain power. Thin-centred means that this worldview is incomplete on its own. It does not tell you what kind of economy you should have, what foreign policy you should pursue, or how the welfare state should be organised. Those questions are answered by a host ideology - nationalism, socialism, nativism, social democracy -

to which populism attaches itself. What populism itself supplies is something more elemental: a picture of society. [22056;22055]

That picture is stark. In the populist imagination, society is ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups - the pure people and the corrupt elite - and politics should express the *volonté générale*, the general will of the people. [22056] The sentence is dense, but every clause matters. The groups are homogeneous: each is imagined as internally uniform. They are antagonistic: their relationship is one of conflict, not negotiation. And the moral charge is present from the outset. One side is pure. The other is corrupt.

Yascha Mounk reaches a similar conclusion by a different route. Populists, he notes, differ wildly from one another. Some are right-wing on the economy; some, like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, are left-wing. Donald Trump is not fond of Muslims; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not fond of anyone who is not. What they share is not a policy programme but a common narrative, a shared vision of politics. The only real reason we have political problems, the story goes, is that a corrupt and self-serving elite cares more about outsiders than about real people. The remedy is simple: elect someone who truly stands for the people, clear away the corrupt, and remove anyone who obstructs the people's will. [22057]

Mounk emphasises two elements. The first is anti-elitism - the claim that something is wrong with those who make the important decisions, and that it is time for a change. That, he points out, is a normal part of democratic politics. Virtually every successful American presidential candidate has engaged in some form of it. Anti-elitism alone does not make someone a populist, and it is not the most dangerous part of the package. [22057]

The second element is anti-pluralism: the claim that *'I and I alone represent the people,'* and that if you disagree, you are not merely wrong about something important - you are fundamentally illegitimate. You are a traitor. You are an enemy of the people. [22057] It is this second element that transforms a familiar democratic complaint into something else entirely. Without it, you have ordinary opposition politics. With it, you have the binary world.

Chantal Mouffe, writing from a different tradition, describes populism less as an ideology than as a discursive strategy: a way of drawing a political frontier that divides society into two camps, the people and the oligarchy. [22062] The language differs - oligarchy rather than elite, strategy rather than ideology - but the architecture is the same. A line is drawn. Two sides face each other. Everything else is secondary.

Nadia Urbinati underlines the same point from yet another angle. At the centre of populism lies the dichotomy between the people and the elite, along with a claim to exclusive representation: the populist presents herself as the sole voice of the populace, dismissing the pluralistic nature of society. In this reading, anti-pluralism is not an accidental by-product. It is a defining trait. [22063]

Pippa Norris adds a further refinement. Populism, she suggests, is best understood as a form of discourse about governance rather than as a party family or type of leadership. It can be adopted across the political spectrum. Its core elements are anti-establishment rhetoric, claims of sole representation, a thin ideology without specific programmatic claims, and a persuasive, emotionally charged style. [22065] Again, the pattern holds. The content of policy remains fluid. The structure of the story does not.

The Logic of Monism

If the binary is the skeleton of populism, monism is the logic that holds the bones together. In Mudde's account, monism means that the key categories are homogeneous. The people are all

the same. They all have the same interests and values. The elite, likewise, is not plural. It is not the elites, in the plural, with competing factions and contradictory agendas. The argument is that all the elites are identical. Whilst they behave as though they belong to different parties and hold different ideologies, they are actually all the same - and, more importantly, they are corrupt. [22056]

This is a remarkable claim, and it is worth considering carefully. In ordinary political life, we assume plurality on both sides of almost every divide. Workers disagree with one another about trade and taxes. Business leaders clash over regulation. Parties split into wings. Coalitions form and dissolve. Populist monism denies this messiness at its root. There is one people. There is one elite. The appearance of difference within either camp is a kind of theatre, a distraction from the real conflict between them.

The monism of the people serves another purpose as well. It answers in advance the question of who counts. If the people are one, then anyone who claims to have different interests is not merely a fellow citizen with a rival view. They are, by definition, not of the people. They must belong to the other side - to the elite, or to some group favoured by the elite at the people's expense. The category polices its own borders. Dissent becomes evidence of impurity. [22056]

Yet the boundaries of the elite are not drawn where a casual observer might expect. The main distinction in populism, Mudde insists, is moral, not sociological. Whether you belong to the elite or the people does not depend on how much money you have or whether you hold office. It depends on whether or not you have the right values. [22056] This is why the binary can absorb what might otherwise appear contradictory. A billionaire can stand on a stage and claim to be the voice of the people. Donald Trump can do it. Silvio Berlusconi can do it. The argument is that despite their wealth, each is actually one of the people - because they too are pure. [22056]

The moral criterion plays an enormous role here. It detaches the people from any fixed class position and reattaches it to a judgement about virtue. It allows the populist leader to be simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary: richer than almost anyone in the room, more famous than the journalists covering him, and yet, in the only sense the ideology treats as real, one of us. By the same token, the elite can include the poorly paid civil servant, the opposition activist, the academic, the judge - anyone whose values are deemed corrupt, regardless of their bank balance.

This is also why Mudde is careful to distinguish populist discourse from neighbouring forms of language that can sound similar. When Bernie Sanders spoke of the 99 per cent and the 1 per cent, he was identifying a conflict of interests and a system that produced unequal gains. In that framing, the problem was the system rather than the corruption of particular people. The core distinction was not moral. For Mudde, that is why Sanders was not a populist in the strict sense, even though he used an us-versus-them vocabulary and denounced an elite. Almost all politicians say something populist at some point, especially during campaigns. The question is how fundamental the pattern is to their broader view, and whether the key distinction within the people is based on morality. [22056]

Monism, then, is not a minor detail. It is why the binary can feel so clean. Complexity is not so much argued away as defined out of existence. Once the people are one and the elite are one, the political world becomes legible again. There is a side to join. There is a side to defeat. Everything else is noise.

Moralism: When Disagreement Becomes Betrayal

From monism to moralism is a short step, but it is one that closes the door on compromise.

If the divide between people and elite were merely a conflict of interests - labour against capital,

periphery against centre, debtors against creditors - then bargaining would still be imaginable. Interests can be traded. Losses can be compensated. Coalitions can be built across differences. But a moral struggle does not work like that. You do not compromise in a moral struggle, Mudde observes, because if the pure compromise with the corrupt, the pure become corrupted. [22056]

Once you grant its premise, the logic is relentless. To sit down with the other side is not prudence; it is contamination. To accept a half-measure is not statesmanship; it is betrayal. The ordinary verbs of democratic politics - negotiate, concede, split the difference, live to fight another day - begin to sound like moral failures. In this frame, populists do not have political opponents. They have enemies. The debate is moral: corrupt versus pure. You do not treat corrupt people as you would other political opponents. [22056]

As the comparative literature stresses, the narrative is not merely about economic or political power. It is often framed as a moral distinction, suggesting that the elite are inherently corrupt and disconnected from the needs of the populace. [22056;22062] Inherence is the crucial point. Corruption, here, is not a contingent failing that might be reformed. It is a condition of the other side. That is what makes the trap snap shut. If the elite are corrupt by nature, then the only safe politics is one of separation and victory, not accommodation. Kirk Hawkins describes the same dynamic through the language of discourse. Populism frames political discussion in black-and-white terms - good versus evil - and generates support partly by denigrating opponents through what he calls negative polarisation. [22064] This simplification is not a flaw in the messaging. It is the messaging. Complex landscapes are reduced to clear categories, and those categories carry moral voltage. Once the voltage is high enough, the middle ground looks less like common sense and more like collaboration.

There is a further twist. Because the distinction is moral rather than material, it can survive almost any change in material circumstances. A populist movement that wins office does not dissolve the binary by winning. The elite simply migrates. It becomes the deep state, the biased media, the obstructing courts, the disloyal opposition, the international bureaucrats, the experts who refuse to bow. The pure remain pure; the corrupt find new addresses. The struggle continues, because a moral struggle is not the kind of thing that ends on election night.

This is why populism's monistic and moralistic tendencies so often complicate its role as a democratic corrective. Populism can raise real questions about neglected grievances and unresponsive institutions. But it tends to reduce complex political realities to binary choices, and binary choices of a moral kind leave little room for the slow, impure work through which plural societies actually govern themselves. [22056;22059]

Anti-Pluralism and the Death of Opposition

If moralism makes compromise feel like corruption, anti-pluralism makes opposition feel like treason. This is the point at which the binary ceases to be merely a story that people tell and starts to rewrite the rules of democratic life.

Democracy, in the unwritten sense described by Daniel Ziblatt, depends on mutual toleration. You will often disagree with people. You may even find their ideas offensive. But at the heart of democracy lies public acceptance that the other side has a right to represent its views, a right to run for office, and a right to win if it beats you. That is a difficult belief to hold onto. It requires a certain modesty: the recognition that nobody has a monopoly on the truth, that you may be wrong, and that uncertainty is part of the bargain. [22057]

In Ziblatt's account, a populist is someone who believes they have a monopoly on the truth because they have an ultimate claim to legitimacy - that of representing the people. If a politician claims to

be the only true spokesman for the people, it becomes much harder to sustain mutual toleration. Mutual toleration is an unwritten part of political systems, but it is critical to any democracy. [22057]

When it erodes, something else takes its place. Ziblatt calls it constitutional hardball: the practice of pushing institutional prerogatives to the limit because the other side is seen as so bad, so dangerous, so illegitimate that it is not owed the usual considerations of democratic restraint. The companion norm is self-restraint - the willingness, when you do not claim a monopoly on truth, not to use every available power to its limit. Populism, with its exclusive claim to speak for the people, is structurally at odds with both norms. [22057] Mounk's formulation expresses the sharp edge of the same idea. Anti-pluralism is the element that says disagreement makes you illegitimate. You are not a rival to be defeated in argument or at the ballot box and then lived with. You are a traitor. You are an enemy of the people. [22057] Populist movements, the broader literature notes, often reject the legitimacy of dissenting voices, framing political opponents not merely as adversaries but as enemies of the people. This anti-pluralist stance threatens the democratic norms that depend on mutual toleration and compromise. [22057;22060]

Jan-Werner Müller draws the distinction that anti-pluralism destroys. We should not, he argues, regard people who hold certain views as enemies. They are political adversaries. The populist move is to collapse that distinction - to play a game in which the other side is an existential threat that should be cast out. [22059] Paul Taggart, surveying populists in power, notes the practical consequence: this binary perspective leads to the suppression of opposition. [22055] Once dissent is coded as disloyalty to the people, its suppression can be presented not as authoritarianism but as democratic hygiene.

Müller adds a crucial observation about how this operates in practice. Polarisation is a highly successful strategy, usually employed by right-wing or even far-right populists, who have discovered that if you convince people that everything is at stake - that they will lose everything - you can bring them to a point where they know their own side is sometimes acting in a decidedly anti-democratic way, yet are willing to look the other way. [22059] The binary does not merely organise the populist's worldview. It reorganises the moral permissions of the base. When the alternative is framed as annihilation, scruples become affordable luxuries.

And this, Müller insists, is far more a top-down phenomenon than a spontaneous surge in public feeling. The fact that people voted for the populist does not make them populists. [22059] The binary is cultivated. It is offered from above as a map, and it is powerful precisely because it is simple enough to be shared, repeated, and used as a test of belonging.

Emotion, Belonging, and Performance

Hawkins's black-and-white framing and Urbinati's account of rejected legitimacy belong to the same family of insights. [22063;22064] Across traditions and cases, the pattern recurs. The people are one. The leader speaks for them. Those who contest that claim are not fellow members of a plural demos. They are outside the demos altogether.

What makes this so potent is that it draws on the deepest source of legitimacy available in a democratic age. In a world where the people are the ultimate source of political authority, the claim to embody them exclusively is the strongest card in the deck. [22057] It is also the card that, once played in earnest, makes the rest of the democratic hand - opposition, alternation, the loyal minority, the right to lose and try again - look like cheating.

None of this would spread as far as it does if it were only a theory. The binary endures because it answers needs that run deeper than policy preferences.

Mudde notes that populism fulfils a need for identity and belonging among its supporters. [22056] Müller goes further: it fulfils not only economic needs but also deeper psychological desires for identity and belonging, sustained by a strong emotional connection between the populist leader and their base. [22059] Pippa Norris describes a similar cluster of needs - identity, community, representation - often tapped through emotions related to fear, insecurity, and resentment towards perceived threats from outsiders or elites. [22065] Mounk hears in the supporters' stance a search for recognition and validation of their concerns. [22057]

These are not trivial hungers. Modern societies are full of people who feel unseen by the institutions that claim to serve them, unheard by the parties that claim to represent them, and disoriented by the large abstract forces - markets, bureaucracies, demographic change - that reshape their lives without asking permission. The binary gives them a place in a story. You are not a residual category in someone else's spreadsheet. You are the people. Your frustrations are not private failures; they are evidence of betrayal. Your anger is not antisocial; it is civic virtue under another name.

Belonging, in this register, is double-edged. It binds the in-group with a warmth that many supporters describe as having long been absent from public life. It also sharpens the out-group into something colder. Fear and resentment towards elites or outsiders are not unfortunate side-effects; they are part of the emotional fuel. [22065] The same narrative that says you belong also says that someone else does not - and that their non-belonging explains what has gone wrong.

Style and performance form the connective tissue between the ideology and these emotions. Benjamin Moffitt's account of populism as performance is indispensable here. Populism is not only a set of claims; it is a way of appearing. One of its hallmarks is what he calls bad manners: swearing, political incorrectness, and overly demonstrative actions that contrast with the composed demeanour expected of political leaders. Donald Trump is an obvious example; so are Hugo Chávez and Pauline Hanson. [22066]

The bad manners are not accidental lapses. They are a method of authentication. By embracing low-culture aesthetics and vulgarity, populist figures present themselves as relatable and authentic, using elements of popular culture to narrow the distance between leader and base. [22066] In this theatre, the polished restraint of conventional leadership becomes a costume of the elite. Coarseness becomes a credential. To speak badly is to prove that you are not one of them.

Notice how the pieces lock together. The monist claim that the people are one finds its stagecraft in a leader who performs sameness - in taste, in speech, in enemies. The moral claim that the elite are corrupt finds its stagecraft in ostentatious disrespect for elite norms. The anti-pluralist claim that opponents are illegitimate finds its stagecraft in ridicule and denigration, which feel to the crowd less like cruelty than clarity. Performance does not decorate the binary. It makes the binary felt.

This is also why the emotional architecture is so resistant to factual rebuttal. If what you seek is recognition, a spreadsheet will not provide it. If what you seek is belonging, a policy white paper will not embrace you. The binary offers a home. Homes are not abandoned because a critic has found a statistical error in the floor plan.

A Self-Sealing System

Stand back, and the shape of the system becomes clear.

Populism, in the sense relevant to this book, is a thin-centred ideology that pictures society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps - the pure people and the corrupt elite -

and insists that politics must express the people's general will. [22056] It is monist: each camp is imagined as one. It is moralist: the line between them marks virtue, not merely interest or class, which is why a billionaire can stand with the people while a struggling opponent can be cast with the elite. [22056] Because the struggle is moral, compromise reads as contamination, and opponents harden into enemies. [22056] Because the leader claims exclusive representation of the people, pluralism looks like sabotage, mutual toleration like naivety, and dissent like betrayal. [22057;22059] And because the story confers identity, belonging, recognition, and a script for fear and resentment, it satisfies needs that ordinary programmatic politics often leaves unmet. [22056;22057;22059;22065] Style and performance bind the whole together, turning a worldview into a felt experience. [22066]

The binary is self-sealing. Evidence that seems to contradict it can be recast as proof of elite cunning. Electoral victory does not retire it; it relocates the corrupt. Defeat does not discredit it; it confirms the depth of the conspiracy against the people. Appeals to complexity sound like excuses. Appeals to procedure sound like tricks. Appeals to minority rights sound, within the monist frame, like the privileged pleading of those who are not the people at all.

It is also self-reinforcing. Once polarisation is underway, it rewards those who intensify it. Müller's point about supporters being willing to look the other way when their side crosses lines is not a side-note; it is a mechanism. [22059] Ziblatt's warning about the contagion of hardball points in the same direction: when one actor rejects mutual toleration, the temptation for others to respond in kind is strong, and the spiral is difficult to stop. [22057] The binary does not merely describe a conflict. It trains people to live within one.

None of this requires us to deny that populists sometimes identify real wounds. A thin-centred ideology can attach itself to genuine grievances as readily as to invented ones, and the feeling of being unheard is not in itself a delusion. But the binary does not merely name wounds. It organises them into a closed moral drama with only two available roles, and it makes leaving that drama feel like a kind of self-erasure.

This is the anatomy of the revolt at its point of origin: not yet the history of how we arrived here, not yet the economic and cultural pressures that feed it, not yet the media machines that amplify it, not yet the damage it can inflict on the institutions of self-government. Those chapters will follow. What this chapter has tried to show is simpler and, in a way, more unsettling. Before populism becomes a programme, a government or a crisis, it is a picture of the world. In that picture, there are only two kinds of people, and only one of them counts. Once you are living inside that picture, almost everything else - compromise, opposition, plurality, the right of the other side to win - begins to look not like democracy, but like the problem democracy exists to solve.

2. The Chameleon Ideology: Left, Right, and Thin-Centred Politics

On a Caracas balcony in the early years of the twenty-first century, Hugo Chávez told a roaring crowd that the people had at last seized the state from the oligarchy that had plundered it. A continent away and in a wholly different political universe, Marine Le Pen stood before French voters and promised to restore a nation she said had been betrayed by remote elites in Paris and Brussels. Within a single American presidential cycle, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump were both labelled populists - one railing against the billionaire class, the other against a swamp of coastal professionals and career politicians. Add Narendra Modi in India, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the Bolivarian project that outlived its founder: the same word applied to forms of politics that could scarcely be more opposed. [22057]

This is the central mystery of modern populism, and the term is not merely a journalist's lazy shorthand. Serious scholars apply the label across the political spectrum because it identifies something real. Yascha Mounk, surveying authoritarian variants from Trump to Modi, Orbán and Chávez, notes that, whilst these leaders may share a populist ideology, their economic policies and their enemies differ significantly. [22057] Some are ferociously right-wing on the economy; others, like Chávez, are anything but. Some fixate on Muslims, others on different out-groups, and others still on domestic oligarchs. If the substance diverges so widely, what common property makes the term useful at all?

The answer, argued with particular clarity by Paul Taggart and Cas Mudde, is that populism is not a complete programme for how society should be run. It is thinner than that - a moral grammar that can be spoken in almost any ideological accent. It attaches itself to other ideas as a certain kind of organism attaches itself to a host. Without the host, it has almost nothing to say about taxes, borders, gender, the welfare state or the constitution. With the host, it can sound like socialism in Caracas, nativism in Vienna, welfare chauvinism in Copenhagen, or something so unorganised that it argues for open borders in one Italian town and closed ones in the next. [22055;22056]

That shape-shifting is not a flaw in the concept. It is the concept. Understanding why populism moves so effortlessly across left and right, north and south, past and present is the surest way to understand what it actually is - and what it is not. This chapter traces that chameleon quality: the thin centre, the Heartland myth, the hosts supplied by left and right, Mouffe's left-populist counter-offer, the varieties that resist even the left-right binary, and the long historical arc behind the present wave.

The Parasite and Its Host

Paul Taggart puts the matter with a biologist's bluntness. Populism, he says, is a thin-centred ideology: 'it's like a creature that has to exist with another creature - it can't survive on its own, there's no pure example of populism, there's always populism and something else.' [22055] The phrase thin-centred is not his invention, he notes, but he has put it to serious analytical use. A thick ideology - liberalism, socialism, conservatism in their classical forms - offers a relatively complete map of the good society: economy, state, individual, nation, rights and duties. A thin ideology has a core, but that core is incomplete. It needs to borrow.

For Taggart, that core has three components. First, anti-institutionalism and hostility towards elites - though the institutions and elites in question vary from case to case. Second, a conception of the people derived from what he calls a Heartland: *'a kind of imagined version of the past and the occupants of the past.'* Third, a deep ambivalence about representative politics itself - a suspicion of parties, parliaments and professional politicians, even as populists seek to capture that machinery. [22055] Remove any one of the three and you no longer have populism as he understands it. Retain all three, and you still do not have a complete politics. You have a set of

ideas that must attach itself to something else.

Cas Mudde reaches the same structural conclusion by a slightly different route. In his widely cited definition, populism is a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups - the pure people and the corrupt elite - and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. [22056] But notice what that definition does not contain. *'Populism itself,'* Mudde insists, *'says very little about what type of economic system there should be or what type of political system there should be. It is the so-called host ideology.'* [22056] Almost every significant populist actor combines populism with another ideology. On the right, that host tends to be nationalism, and more specifically nativism - a xenophobic interpretation of nationalism, summarised in the old German slogan of *'Germany for the Germans, foreigners out'*. On the left, populism is generally combined with some form of socialism, today much more often social democracy than the old school. [22056]

The host does the heavy lifting. It determines who counts as the people, who counts as the elite, what the lost golden age looked like, and what must be restored or seized. Populism supplies the moral voltage: the sense that the division is not merely a disagreement about interests, but a confrontation between the virtuous and the corrupt. That is why, as Taggart puts it, you can be a right-wing populist or a left-wing populist without contradiction. [22055] The creature is the same; the host is different.

Pure populism is a phantom. Search the historical record for a movement that was only populist, with no nationalism, socialism, agrarianism or other attachment, and you will come away empty-handed. Ideologically, as the research synthesis puts it, populism is characterised as a thin-centred ideology that attaches itself to other frameworks, such as nationalism and socialism, to gain traction - an adaptability that allows it to resonate with left-wing movements such as those led by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and with right-wing figures such as Donald Trump in the United States. [22055;22056;22057]

Think of it, then, not as a party family in the old European sense, nor as a single leadership style, but as a moral operating system on which other programmes can run. The parasite metaphor is unkind, and Taggart offers it with a scholar's half-apology, but it captures something essential. Populism needs a host to live. The host needs populism only when ordinary ideological competition no longer provides the emotional charge that politics, at certain moments, seems to demand.

The Heartland Myth

If the host ideology changes from place to place, what remains constant? Taggart's answer is the Heartland - one of the most useful ideas in the literature, because it explains how the people can be invoked so passionately without ever being defined with a demographer's precision.

The Heartland is not a real province on a map. It is *'a kind of imagined version of the past and the occupants of the past,'* the place from which the people are derived. [22055] It is felt as much as it is argued; it has a powerful emotional aspect and shapes the sense of what should be done. [22055] When populists speak of the people, they are rarely describing the full, messy, plural population of a modern state. They are summoning the occupants of that imagined past - the solid citizens, the real producers, the authentic nation - and treating them as the only people who count.

Crucially, the people are often constructed negatively. *'We often know who the people aren't,'* Taggart observes. *'We know who the enemies are.'* [22055] The boundary is drawn through exclusion. Immigrants, cosmopolitan elites, corrupt party machines, foreign bureaucrats, the wrong kind of intellectuals - the list varies with the host, but the structure does not. There is always someone who does not belong to the Heartland. [22055] That negative construction gives populist

language its emotional force: it is easier to feel who does not belong than to specify what belonging requires.

The temporal orientation follows. Populism, Taggart argues, has an idea of where it wants to return to. It rarely has a utopian conception of where it wants to go. [22055] It is backward-looking - not necessarily in the crude sense of turning back the calendar, but in the deeper sense that its values are recovered from a lost past rather than devised for an unimagined future. Contemporary populists often do not present a worked-out vision of the society they will build. They offer a version of what has been taken away. Things are not going well; something has been lost; what have we lost; we need to get those things back. [22055]

This is the one constant that travels from left to right more reliably than any policy platform. A left-wing Heartland may be the industrial community before deindustrialisation, or the social-democratic settlement before neoliberal reform. A right-wing Heartland may be the culturally homogeneous nation before mass immigration, or the sovereign state before supranational law. The furniture of the imagined past differs. The structure - an emotionally charged yesterday, a people derived from it, enemies who do not belong, a politics of recovery rather than utopia - is shared.

The construct is powerful precisely because it is not a census category. It is a story about authenticity, loss and restoration - and, as Taggart notes, the people themselves are imagined, much as nations are imagined. [22055] Every successful populist movement tells some version of that story. The host ideology determines which past is sacred and which outsiders have desecrated it.

Left and Right: Same Grammar, Different Vocabulary

Once the thin centre and the Heartland come into view, the left-right split becomes easier to understand. These are not so much two different populisms as one grammar spoken with two vocabularies.

Mudde's map provides the clearest starting point. On the right, the host is nationalism, and more specifically nativism: the claim that the state belongs to the native group, and that non-natives are a threat to be excluded or subordinated. [22056] On the left, the host is some form of socialism or social democracy: the claim that the people are the popular classes, exploited by economic elites, and that politics should reclaim wealth and power for them. [22056] Geography reflects this pattern with surprising regularity. Right-wing populism has been more successful in the north, both in Europe and in America; left-wing populism has been somewhat more successful in the south. [22056] That geographical variation highlights the adaptability of populist rhetoric to different socio-political contexts. [22056;22065]

The comparison becomes sharper when the moral core is tested against difficult cases. Mudde draws a careful distinction between Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders - two figures endlessly linked in commentary and, in his view, wrongly so. The principal distinction in populism, he argues, is moral. Whether you belong to the elite or to the people does not depend on having a great deal of money or holding power; it depends on whether or not you have the right values. That is how someone like Trump or Silvio Berlusconi, among the richest people in their countries, can still present themselves as the voice of the people: despite their wealth, they claim the right values. [22056]

Sanders, Mudde contends, fails that test. He spoke of an us versus them and called out an elite, but *'the core of the distinction was not a moral one. It was an interest one to a certain extent. It was old school class.'* The rich, the one per cent, had different interests and manipulated the system; the problem lay more in the system than in the corruption of those people. [22056] The

distinction that matters is whether the people-elite divide is central to your ideology and whether the key difference is based on morality. [22056] Sanders, on this reading, was a radical democrat who used some populist language; at his core, he was not a populist. Trump, by contrast, stood in almost complete continuity with the grassroots Tea Party: *'if you see what Trump stood for and if you see what the grassroots Tea Party group stood for, it is almost a 100 per cent overlap.'* [22056] Media coverage often emphasised small government and low taxes; on the ground there was always Islamophobia, always the cultural enemies.

The point is not to impose a purity test on the word. It is to show how the same thin grammar - people versus elite, virtue versus corruption, the general will against mediating institutions - produces opposing forms of politics once the host fills in the blanks. For the right-wing populist, the elite are cosmopolitan and culturally liberal, defenders of immigrants and supranational rules; the people are the native nation of the Heartland. For the left-wing populist, the elite are the oligarchy and the cartel of traditional parties; the people are the popular classes and their allies. Mounk's observation returns with force: a shared populist ideology, but divergent economic policies and divergent enemies. [22057]

Even within a single country, the grammar can accommodate both vocabularies at once. Greece, Mudde notes, is the most extreme case: a left-wing populist party and a right-wing populist party actually forming a coalition government. [22056] Italy's Five Star Movement pushes the logic further towards incoherence. The party is *'so unorganized that at any level it will take any position'*: in certain localities it argues in favour of amnesty for undocumented immigrants, while in others it wants to close the borders to all refugees. What the party really stands for, Mudde says dryly, only the leader knows - and he does not really want to take any position. [22056] That is thin-centredness at the edge of emptiness: anti-elitism without a stable host.

Mouffe's Counter-Offer

Not everyone who uses the word treats populism as a thin ideology in Mudde and Taggart's sense. Chantal Mouffe, the Belgian political philosopher whose work follows the tradition she developed with Ernesto Laclau, offers a different and deliberately political reading. For Mouffe, populism is not a rigid ideology at all. It is *'une stratégie discursive'* - a discursive strategy - that constructs a political frontier dividing society into two camps: the people and the oligarchy. [22062] It is a way of doing politics, not a programme with a fixed manifesto. That is why, she insists, one must always specify whether one is talking about left populism or right populism.

Mouffe's starting diagnosis is that we are living through a *'moment populiste.'* The dominant class is increasingly destabilised by a proliferation of dissatisfactions - produced by the political, social and economic transformations that it itself set in motion, and by galloping inequalities. Unable to answer those grievances, it takes refuge behind institutions reduced to defending an existing order that a growing share of the population regards as unjust. [22062] The deeper context is what she calls post-democracy: under neoliberal hegemony, democracy has been reduced to its thinnest liberal component, amounting to little more than free elections, whilst defence of the free market has become ever more central. [22062] Politics, in the strong sense of a contest over the shape of common life, has been replaced by management.

In that setting, Mouffe argues, the central conflict of the future will be between right populism and left populism. Far from being a disaster, the populist moment can mark a salutary return of the political after years of post-politics - but only if the left wins the contest. [22062] Both types seek to bring together unsatisfied demands. The major difference lies in the composition of the we and in how the adversary is defined. [22062]

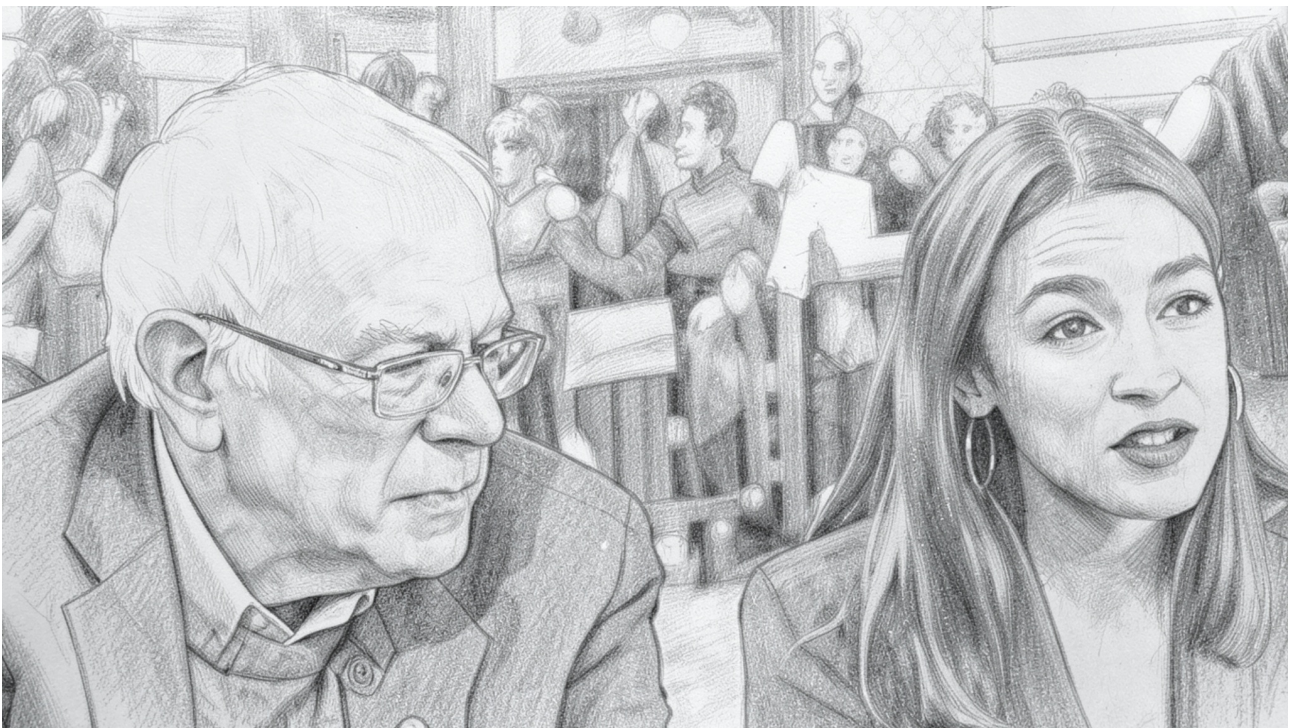
Right populism equates sovereignty with national sovereignty, reserved for *'true nationals.'* It

excludes immigrants. Its enemy is not neoliberalism but 'la figure de l'immigrant' - the figure of the immigrant. [22062] Although it articulates many forms of resistance to post-democracy, it does not necessarily identify the forces of neoliberalism as the adversary. For Mouffe, that path can lead to authoritarian nationalist forms of neoliberalism which, in the name of recovering democracy, in fact restrict it drastically. [22062]

Left populism, by contrast, seeks to recover democracy in order to deepen and extend it. Its project requires a 'chaîne d'équivalence' - a chain of equivalence - linking the demands of workers, immigrants and the precarious middle class, as well as other transversal democratic demands: those of the LGBT community, of women, of racialised people. [22062] The people, in this account, is above all a political, discursive construction, not a pre-existing sociological given. The goal of the chain is a new hegemony that will allow the radicalisation of democracy. [22062]

Mouffe is not describing a hypothetical possibility. She points to figures on the left who have chosen to '*retourner le stigmat*' - to reverse the stigma - and embrace the populist label, or at least its strategies: Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and La France Insoumise in France, Pablo Iglesias and Podemos in Spain. [22062] In her framing, left populism is not merely one more variety. It is the necessary response if the rise of right-wing populism is to be stopped - a way of confronting the populist moment on its own terrain rather than retreating into emptied centrist managerialism.

Mouffe's analysis, as the research notes, frames populism as a discursive strategy rather than a rigid ideology. It emphasises the distinction between the people and the oligarchy, thereby highlighting the flexibility that allows both right-wing and left-wing forms. [22062] Where Mudde and Taggart offer the diagnostic concept of a thin centre, Mouffe offers a strategic fork in the road. Same chameleon. Different decision about which colour it should take.



Varieties Beyond the Binary

Even the left-right distinction, useful as it is, understates the range. Pippa Norris, drawing on the Global Party Survey and her work with Ronald Inglehart on cultural backlash, extends the analysis into four quadrants rather than two poles.

Populism, Norris argues, is not a distinct type of leadership - as is often assumed in the Latin American literature on charismatic presidents - nor is it even a family of political parties, as is often assumed in Europe. Rather, it is *'discourse about governance and can be adopted by actors across the entire political spectrum.'* [22065] In the United Kingdom, she notes, Theresa May adopted several different populist themes, while Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn have done the same. [22065] Populism can therefore be a way of speaking without encompassing the speaker's entire ideology, and it makes no other clear claims about programmatic policies. [22065]

When parties are plotted according to their economic left-right position and their liberal-conservative social values, four boxes appear. Authoritarian conservatives occupy the familiar right-wing, socially conservative cell: Trump, Le Pen, Orbán, the Alternative for Germany, the Swiss People's Party, Likud and kindred parties. [22065] The progressive left occupies the opposite cell: left-wing and socially liberal, with Podemos as a clear example, and figures such as Sanders and Elizabeth Warren often discussed in the same breath. [22065] But two further quadrants also matter enormously.

One consists of the nativist socialists: left-wing on the economy and highly conservative on social values. The Danish People's Party is Norris's example. It sits somewhat towards the left on the economy because it favours the welfare state, and it also supports fairly liberal policies towards gender and gay rights, whilst remaining firmly exclusionary on immigration and national identity. [22065] These are the welfare chauvinists - parties that defend social protection for the native people of the Heartland, not for outsiders. In Norris's figures, authoritarian conservatives account for about 46 per cent of populist parties, but nativist socialist parties are almost as numerous, at 42 per cent. [22065] *'Not all radical right by any stretch of the imagination,'* she cautions. [22065]

The fourth quadrant contains free-market libertarians: liberal on social issues such as gender and homosexuality, committed to a limited role for the state, and conservative in wanting that small state to stay out of the economy. [22065] They are fewer, but they exist, and they complicate any account that equates populism with either welfare expansion or demolition.

Spain illustrates the divide within a single party system. Vox sits with the authoritarian conservatives of the far right; Podemos sits with the progressive left; both are populist in Norris's sense. [22065] The British case shows the same discourse migrating into mainstream leadership across party lines - May, Johnson, Corbyn - which is possible only if populism travels as a way of speaking, not as a membership card in a fixed family. [22065]

Orbán belongs in this wider field as more than a standard right-wing populist. Mounk places him among the authoritarian variants that have used populist claims to consolidate power and undermine independent institutions, moving towards illiberal democracy - and, Mounk warns, tending further towards illiberal dictatorship once media, opposition rights and electoral administration are captured. [22057] The host here is a thick authoritarian nationalism; populism is the moral language through which that project claims to speak for the Hungarian people against Brussels, liberal NGOs and domestic opponents cast as foreign agents.

What Norris brings into the open is that the thin centre can pair with almost any combination of economic and cultural positions. The four quadrants remind us that populist is not a synonym for radical right, even if the radical right has been the most visible carrier in much of northern Europe and the United States. [22056;22065] Diversity does not soften the phenomenon. It is what the thin-centred structure predicts.

The Long Historical Arc

None of this is as new as the news cycle suggests. Populism has a long history, and its present

wave is better understood as a resurgence than as a birth.

In Europe, Mudde traces the story to mid-nineteenth-century Russia and the Narodniks - the Narodniki, in his telling - who were, in some ways, the most unlikely populists imaginable. They were a small urban elite who had concluded that the peasants were the real people, the seat of society's purity. They went into the countryside and informed the peasants of this flattering discovery. The peasants, busy starving, were unmoved. [22056] The episode seems almost comic in retrospect, but the idea travelled. In the early twentieth century, Narodnik ideas influenced agrarian populist movements across Central and Eastern Europe. Most of that region was not democratic; power remained with the military and the landowners, though a few agrarian populist leaders nonetheless broke through. [22056]

Across the Atlantic, the United States produced its own namesake. The People's Party, also known as the Populists, was very active at local and state level in the prairies, the plains, the Midwest and the West, and could dominate politics there. What it could never do was gain a foothold at the federal level: the American system favours the existing two parties. [22056] The Democratic Party adopted many People's Party issues in the early twentieth century; more recently, since the Second World War, it has been chiefly the Republican Party that has absorbed the issues of populist movements. [22056] Taggart adds a corrective that European scholars often need: Latin American populism has been a major presence since the 1940s, with many varieties and long experience of power, and every time one learns more about it, one learns more about populism as such. [22055]

Then came the strange mid-century disappearance. After the Second World War, Mudde argues, populism largely vanished from the European story. There were populist aspects in communism and fascism, particularly in their movement stages, but fundamentally both were the opposite of populism: they were elitist. Fascism did not believe that the people were pure; it believed democracy was mediocracy, and that one leader possessed the qualities the mass lacked. Communism saw the party as the vanguard of the people - another elite claim. [22056] The post-war era marked a period of relative stability until the neoliberal revolution, which, alongside the upheaval of the postwar consensus and decolonisation, contributed to the resurgence of populist movements. [22055]

The return began in fragments. The most important early West European episode, in Mudde's account, was Pierre Poujade in late-1950s France: a brief movement that entered parliament and then disappeared, but not without leaving a legacy. One of the men elected on that wave, the youngest parliamentarian in French history up to that point, was Jean-Marie Le Pen. [22056] Denmark and Norway saw Progress parties in the 1970s, but these remained highly isolated movements. [22056] The real formation that Mudde calls radical right populism began in the early 1980s and became truly successful in the 1990s. Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Front National became the prototype. [22056] In Austria, the Freedom Party took 27 per cent in 1999 and entered government in 2000. [22056] The rise of the Alternative for Germany after unification is another marker of historical continuity. [22055]

The great recession that began in 2008 matters, Mudde insists, but not as the origin myth it is sometimes made out to be. It was not the start of the wave. What it did was boost right-wing populism and create an opportunity for a couple of new left-wing populist parties. [22056] In the United States, the same crisis fed both the Tea Party and the milieu around Occupy Wall Street, whose themes Sanders later carried into the electoral arena even if, on Mudde's stricter test, his discourse remained less populist than the label suggested. [22056] Today, populist parties contest elections throughout Europe with increased success, and the map is diverse: radical right, left-wing populist, and idiosyncratic cases such as Five Star. [22056]

Read as a whole, the arc is cyclical rather than linear. Periods of dormancy are followed by resurgences corresponding to socio-political climates. [22056] Agrarian societies produced agrarian populisms; moments of institutional hollowness produce new hosts for the same thin centre. Latin America, Europe and the United States have each written chapters; none is the master copy. The chameleon is old. What changes is the colour of the landscape through which it moves.

The Frame, Not the Picture

So why does populism shape-shift so effortlessly across ideological divides and geographical borders? Because shape-shifting is what a thin-centred ideology does. It is a creature that cannot survive alone. [22055] It carries a moral grammar - the pure people against the corrupt elite, the Heartland against those who are not of it, the general will against the mediating institutions of representative politics - and borrows almost everything else. The host ideology paints the picture: nativism or socialism, authoritarian conservatism or progressive left politics, welfare chauvinism or free-market libertarianism, the Bolivarian project or the national-conservative one. [22056;22065] Populism supplies the frame.

That is why the same word can encompass Chávez and Le Pen, why Greece can be governed by both left and right populists in coalition, why Five Star can face opposite directions on immigration in neighbouring towns, why May and Corbyn can both draw on populist themes, why Mouffe can urge the left to fight for the populist moment, and why Norris finds nearly as many nativist socialist parties as authoritarian conservative ones. [22056;22062;22065] The diversity is evidence for the concept, not against it.

It is also why populism is simultaneously so dangerous and so difficult to define. It is dangerous because the moral grammar of purity and corruption is a poor language for plural societies that must negotiate among legitimate interests, and because, when it fuses with authoritarian hosts - as Mounk tracks from Orbán outward - it can hollow out the institutions that make democratic self-correction possible. [22057] It is difficult to define because observers keep looking for a thick programme where there is only a thin centre, and then feel cheated when the programme turns out to be whatever the host provides. There is no pure example. There is always populism and something else. [22055]

The practical lesson is analytical before it is normative. To understand any concrete movement that bears the label, ask two questions in order. First: is the thin centre present - the people of a Heartland, the elite as morally illegitimate, the ambivalence toward representation? Second: what is the host? The first tells you whether you are looking at populism. The second tells you what it will try to do in the world. Confuse the frame with the picture, and you will never stop being surprised when the chameleon changes colour. See the frame for what it is, and the colours begin to make sense - not as chaos, but as the predictable behaviour of a thin ideology that has been, for more than a century and a half, looking for something solid to cling to.

3. Broken Promises: Precarity, Inequality, and Post-2008 Shockwaves

By the middle of the 2010s, the official story of the Western economies was one of convalescence. Stock indices had clawed their way back. Headline unemployment was falling. Central bankers spoke of exit strategies and normalising monetary policy. In the aggregate statistics that filled the front pages of the financial press, the long night of the financial crisis appeared to be ending. Yet in neighbourhoods where industrial plants had closed, mortgages had been foreclosed, and full-time work had given way to temporary contracts and zero-hours shifts, the recovery was a rumour rather than a fact. Millions of people looked at the same numbers their governments celebrated and saw nothing of their own lives reflected in them.

That gap - between what the indicators showed and what working-class communities actually experienced - is the broken promise at the heart of the populist revolt. This is not a story about irrational voters or sudden cultural panic. It is a story about a social contract that had been fraying for a generation and then snapped under the weight of 2008. The people who lived through that rupture did not need a political scientist to tell them that something fundamental had changed. They felt it in the length of their contracts, the status of their jobs, their children's prospects, and the silence of the parties that once claimed to speak for them. Into that silence stepped a new cast of political entrepreneurs, armed with simple slogans and a keen sense of who had been left out in the cold.

This chapter traces the economic and institutional foundations of that revolt: the death of the long-term job, the slogans that either connected with or failed to reflect the insecure world of ordinary voters, the financial crisis that shattered elite legitimacy, the political window that opened in its aftermath, the fragmentation of the party systems that once absorbed discontent, and the elite-driven polarisation that followed. Cultural backlash, media strategy, and the erosion of democratic norms belong to later chapters. What follows here is the material and institutional ground on which those later dramas would be staged.



The death of the thirty-year job

For much of the twentieth century, the arc of a working life in the industrial democracies was legible and, for many, reassuring. You finished school or college. You found an employer. You stayed. After three decades, you retired with a pension and a sense that the bargain had been kept. That world has disappeared. [22061] In its place stands a labour market organised around mobility, flexibility, and the relentless churn of contracts - a market that rewards a minority handsomely while leaving the majority to descend the socioeconomic ladder rather than climb it.

Ian Shapiro, drawing on a panel study of American baby boomers, sets out the new expectation

with brutal clarity: people born in that era and since should expect to change jobs twelve to fifteen times during their working lives. [22061] For those on the right side of the information revolution, the churn can feel like opportunity - a succession of better roles, higher pay, and expanding networks. For the vast majority, it feels like something else entirely. They move from full-time jobs with high status to poorer jobs with lower status, and from there to part-time work with very low status. [22061] The trajectory is not sideways. It is down. The decline is not evenly distributed. The number of years spent in a single job has fallen most sharply among middle-aged men. [22061] These are workers who entered the labour market under the old assumptions, built identities around craft, seniority, and the expectation of steady advancement, and then watched those assumptions dissolve. Economic anxiety of this kind is particularly prevalent among middle-aged men who perceive a loss of status and security. [22061] Job insecurity, the decline of industrial employment, and the transition from high-status to low-status roles are significant contributors to the discontent that populism exploits. [22061] The wound is material, but it is also psychological: a sense that the ground has shifted underfoot and that no one in authority has either noticed or cared.

The generational dimension cuts deeper still. This is the first generation in countries such as the United States that does not envisage a better world for its children than the one it has itself inhabited. [22061] The post-war promise - that each cohort would live more securely and prosperously than the last - has been broken in plain sight. When parents no longer believe their children will do better, the entire moral architecture of liberal capitalism begins to look provisional. Economically disadvantaged groups, particularly those affected by job losses and the decline of traditional industries, experience heightened feelings of insecurity and abandonment by mainstream parties. [22061] The feeling of being left behind by political and economic systems fuels the appeal of populist leaders. [22059] Regions such as Appalachia, where industrial jobs have disappeared, starkly illustrate what happens when the old economic base collapses and nothing adequate replaces it. [22059] Populism finds fertile ground in regions experiencing economic decline and in places marked by a stark urban-rural divide, where rural communities often feel overlooked by urban-centric policies. [22064] Those with lower levels of formal education may be more susceptible to simplistic narratives, though educated individuals are by no means immune - particularly if they feel that their educational achievements have not led to economic mobility. [22064] Younger supporters may be driven by frustration with the status quo and a desire for systemic change; older supporters by nostalgia for a perceived better past and fear of losing cultural or economic status in a globalised world. [22065] What unites them is not a single ideology but a shared experience of precarity and a hunger for recognition. The emotional needs that populism claims to fulfil include a sense of belonging, security, and empowerment. [22064] The desire for recognition and respect - the psychological dimensions of identity and belonging - matters as much as the material shortfall. [22059]

The thirty-year job was never universal, and nostalgia can romanticise what was always uneven. But the expectation of durable employment, rising living standards, and a better future for the next generation was real enough to shape political loyalties for decades. When that expectation collapsed, those loyalties collapsed with it. What remained was a population available for mobilisation - not because it had suddenly become irrational, but because the institutions that once absorbed its grievances had stopped doing so.

Two slogans and what they said

Political language does not merely describe the world; it reveals whether a candidate inhabits the same world as the voter. The 2016 United States presidential election offered a masterclass in that distinction, distilled into two short phrases that conveyed almost everything about the gap between elite optimism and popular insecurity.

When Ronald Reagan declared in 1980 that America's best years lay ahead, the processes of deindustrialisation and labour-market upheaval were only just getting under way. [22061] The slogan could still sound plausible. A generation later, recycling the same forward-looking confidence in 2016 signalled something very different. To voters whose working lives had been defined by downward mobility, plant closures, and the evaporation of the old social contract, the claim that the best years still lay ahead tended to mean one thing: you are out of touch with my world. [22061]

Donald Trump's *'Make America Great Again'* said the opposite. It did not promise an unbroken ascent. It acknowledged a loss. Something has been taken away from you, the slogan implied, and I am going to get it back. [22061] It was a backward-looking mantra, and that was precisely its power. It encapsulated the difference between connecting with the insecure world of this population and failing to do so. [22061] One phrase assumed continuity and progress; the other assumed rupture and restitution. In a country where millions no longer believed their children would live better lives than they had, the politics of restitution proved far more resonant than the politics of sunny optimism.

The point is not that one slogan was true and the other false. The point is that one recognised the lived experience of precarity while the other did not. In an age of broken promises, the candidate who names the breakage has already won half the argument. The rest of the argument - who is to blame, what is to be done, who counts as the people - would be fought out in the years that followed. But the opening move was diagnostic: to see the insecurity, to name it, and to offer a story in which it might be reversed.

2008: the crisis that broke the deal

Until the financial crisis, technical and economic elites enjoyed enormous legitimacy. Capitalism was the only game in town. [22061] The end of the Cold War, the apparent triumph of liberal market institutions, and a long period of moderate growth had conferred on central bankers, finance ministers, and the professional classes around them an aura of competence that few dared to challenge. Then came 2008. Their prescriptions produced the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, and all that legitimacy was suddenly called into question. [22061]

The response that followed would define the politics of the next decade. Governments and central banks moved with extraordinary speed and on an extraordinary scale to stabilise the financial system. Banks were bailed out. Balance sheets were repaired. The architecture of global finance was shored up. What was not shored up, to anything like the same extent, was the real economy of households, small businesses, and communities that had been hit hardest. Elites essentially bailed out the banks while doing very little for the people in the real economy who had been severely hurt. [22061] The contrast with an earlier American response to crisis was not lost on those whose historical memory encompassed both eras. Franklin D. Roosevelt had focused on responding to people in the real economy; Barack Obama, in this telling, essentially bailed out the banks. [22061]

The human cost was staggering. More than twenty million people lost their homes. Downward mobility accelerated among those already on the wrong side of the labour-market transformation. [22061] Three years later, the stock market had recovered and the people at the top were fine. Those who had been left out in the cold were not. [22061] Adam Tooze, in his book *Crashed*, tells a very similar story about Europe: an essentially elite-centred response to the crisis, in which the priority given to financial stabilisation consistently outweighed the repair of ordinary economic life. [22061] These divergent outcomes began to become clear three or four years later, when most people's economic fortunes had not recovered but those of the elites had - and no one had been held to account. [22061]

Accountability is the hinge on which legitimacy turns. When a system produces catastrophe, protects those who designed it, and leaves the victims to absorb the losses, its moral claim begins to fail. The rise in inequality compounded the injury. Many people are now poor, and the squeeze has reached deep into the middle classes. [22067] The original promise of globalisation had been that all boats would be lifted. That idea, as Jan-Werner Müller has candidly admitted of his own earlier assumptions, turned out to be false. [22059] Adam Przeworski's finding points in the same direction: people nowadays tend to assume that the cake is shrinking, and surveys show that very large majorities are absolutely convinced their children are going to be worse off. [22059]

The post-war European settlement had rested on a different wager. Corporatism - trade unions, employers, and the state working together under a shared framework - made the optimistic assumption that growth was continuous and that its fruits could be distributed through negotiation rather than conflict. [22059] When that assumption broke down, the political consequences were severe. The institutions that had managed distributional conflict lost authority. The parties that had brokered the deals lost members. The voters who had trusted the arrangement began to look elsewhere.

A further conceptual framework emerged in this landscape. Adam Tooze's notion of the poly-crisis captures something that a simple list of misfortunes cannot: it is not merely an accumulation of various crises, but a qualitative leap in which energy crisis, cost-of-living crisis, war, climate disruption, and pandemic combine and reinforce one another. [22067] Many people, including those who study these dynamics professionally, feel deeply insecure and unable to do anything about the forces arrayed against them. [22067] Wilhelm Heitmeyer's concept of the loss of control identifies a major factor in these insecurities. [22067] Brexit's slogan '*Take Back Control*' crystallised that fear with ruthless efficiency - as if closing borders would itself restore mastery over a world that had slipped beyond the reach of ordinary politics. [22067] Closely related is what has been called the loss of ambiguity tolerance: when you feel deeply insecure, the demand to tolerate uncertainty becomes unbearable, and somebody who tells you exactly where things are going is very welcome. [22067]

The financial crisis did not create precarity, inequality, or the death of the long-term job. Those processes were already under way. What 2008 did was strip the remaining legitimacy from the elites who had managed - and celebrated - the old order, demonstrate that the system protected its own, and leave a population that had absorbed the losses without either redress or explanation. That is the setting in which populist politics ceased to be a fringe phenomenon and became a central fact of democratic life.

The political window opens

When elites are discredited and no one is held to account, political entrepreneurs take notice. The opportunity that emerged in the years after the crisis was seized by a recognisable cast: the Trumps, the Farages, the AfD, Marine Le Pen. [22061] Some mainstream politicians adapted rather than resisted - Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan among them. [22061] The boundary between outsider insurgency and insider opportunism became blurred. What mattered was the ability to speak to the sense of abandonment and offer a story in which agency might be restored.

The far right proved especially adept at instrumentalising crisis. Even when there are no crises, such movements invent them; but when real crises exist, they do not even need to do so - they need only exaggerate them. [22067] The narrative is simple and devastatingly effective. There is a problem. I am here to save you. I create hope. Then the world is okay. [22067] Through crisis, extreme-right groups are mobilised, while their leaders can present themselves as saviours. [22067] The interdependence of fear and hope is a uniquely powerful political tool: fear identifies

the threat and the traitor; hope identifies the rescuer and the path back to security. [22067] Together, they form a closed circuit that is difficult to interrupt with technocratic reassurance or incremental reform.

Welfare chauvinism gives this circuit a concrete policy form. Benefits, the argument runs, should be 'just for us' - and the definition of us becomes the central political question. [22067] Who belongs within the circle of solidarity, and who is a freeloader, a stranger, or a threat? The paradox is that many of these parties hold broadly neoliberal economic beliefs even as they demonise those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. [22067] They are for the market and against the poor, for national preference and against the redistributive institutions that once bound national communities together. The combination is not so much a contradiction as a strategy: economic liberalism for capital, cultural protection for the nation, and moral condemnation for those who can be portrayed as undeserving.

What makes this politics so potent is not only the content of the message, but also the vacuum into which it is spoken. Mainstream parties had spent a generation managing globalisation, financialisation, and labour-market flexibility as though these were technical adjustments rather than social transformations. When the bill came due in 2008, they had neither a compelling account of what had gone wrong nor a credible programme for those who had paid the price. The emotional needs that populism claims to fulfil - belonging, security, empowerment - were precisely those that the post-crisis settlement had left unmet. [22064] Into this vacuum stepped leaders who offered certainty in place of ambiguity, enemies in place of complexity, and a promise of restored control in place of managed decline.

The window did not open equally everywhere, nor did it remain open in the same way. But the pattern was consistent enough to demand explanation: populist forces advanced where precarity was deepest, where industrial employment had collapsed most completely, where the gap between elite recovery and popular stagnation was widest, and where mainstream parties had least to say. The next section turns to the institutional aspect of that advance - the fragmentation of the party systems that once channelled discontent into manageable forms.

Party fragmentation: the left's structural crisis

The economic story of precarity has an institutional counterpart: the hollowing-out of the party systems that once organised working-class politics. Research across twenty-six OECD countries over sixty years shows that the number of parties in parliament has risen from fewer than six to more than eight. [22061] Fragmentation is not a curiosity confined to one electoral system. It is a structural trend, and its consequences for democratic stability are profound.

The disappearance of industrial jobs hollows out the traditional centre-left with particular force. Parties such as Germany's SPD were closely connected to industrial workers through the trade-union movements; that constituency is shrinking. [22061] Large numbers of workers are no longer in that sector at all. They are in the service sector, or they are long-term unemployed, and do not feel protected by a party that is essentially connected to the unionised industrial workforce. [22061] Those who are disaffected become available for mobilisation by populist parties. [22061] What looks from the outside like a sudden surge of radicalism is, from the inside, the reallocation of a political constituency that the old left can no longer reach and the old right no longer bothers to persuade through material offers.

Germany offers a stark illustration. In 1994, the CDU/CSU and the SPD together took almost eighty per cent of the vote. By 2021, they did not even secure half, and for the first time it took three parties to form a government. [22061] The AfD doubled its share of the vote from ten to twenty per cent. [22061] The Volksparteien - the catch-all parties that had structured German

democracy since the Federal Republic's founding - had become minority players in a fragmented field. The arithmetic of coalition-building became more complex; the emotional register of politics became more raw.

In two-party systems, the dynamic is different but no less damaging. Donald Trump was selected as the Republican candidate by just six per cent of the United States electorate. [22061] Jeremy Corbyn won the Labour leadership in 2015 from a position far to the left of most Labour voters; parliamentary Labour voted 172 to 40 in a motion of no confidence, yet three months later the membership re-elected him by sixty-two per cent. [22061] In both cases, the formal structures of party democracy produced leaders far from the median preferences of the broader electorate - and, in Trump's case, a figure who would go on to redefine the terms of national politics. The greater the fragmentation, or the weaker the parties in two-party systems, the angrier voters become. [22061] Eventually, somebody comes along and says that what is needed is a strong hand. [22061]

That last sentence is not so much a prediction as a mechanism. Fragmentation multiplies veto points, shortens the time horizons of coalition partners, and makes coherent policy harder to sustain. Weak parties in two-party systems lose the capacity to discipline factions, filter out extreme candidates, and broker compromises that their voters can recognise as victories. In both configurations, the result is a politics that feels simultaneously over-complicated and under-responsive - one in which anger accumulates because nothing seems to get done, and in which the promise of a strong hand acquires the sheen of common sense. The left's structural crisis is therefore not only one of declining industrial employment. It is also a crisis of representation: of parties that no longer match the social structure they once mirrored, and of electoral systems that translate this mismatch into volatility, minority governments, and the serial disappointment of voters who continue to look for someone who will finally take their side.

Elite-driven polarisation

Polarisation is real. It has been a highly successful strategy, usually employed by right-wing or even far-right populists. [22059] But the common picture of polarisation as a spontaneous eruption from below - angry masses dragging reluctant elites into conflict - gets the direction of causality largely wrong. It has been shown very clearly that polarisation is far more an elite phenomenon than a product of anything happening on the ground. [22059] The crucial variable is elite behaviour, and more particularly the behaviour of centre-right elites. [22059]

This distinction matters when interpreting electoral results. The fact that people voted for a populist does not make them populists. [22059] Voting is often a signal of protest, a search for recognition, or a wager on the only candidate who appears to have noticed one's existence. To reduce the act of voting to a complete ideological identity is to misunderstand both the voter and the opportunity structure that made the vote possible. Centre-right elites who normalise far-right frames, treat democratic norms as optional, or calculate that riding the tiger of populist mobilisation will keep them in office bear a responsibility that cannot be offloaded onto the base.

Beneath these elite strategies lie the material and psychological conditions already traced in this chapter. The false promise that globalisation would lift all boats has given way to a widespread conviction that the cake is shrinking and that the next generation will be worse off. [22059] The post-war corporatist consensus, which had made continuous growth and negotiated distribution seem like reasonable assumptions, no longer holds. [22059] Recognition and respect - the psychological desires for identity and belonging - matter as much as wages and contracts. [22059] When people feel abandoned by the systems that once conferred status and security, they become receptive to narratives that name an enemy and promise restoration. When elites amplify those narratives for tactical gain, polarisation ceases to be a by-product of social change and becomes

a political project.

None of this requires us to deny that voters have real grievances or that cultural questions carry genuine weight. It requires us to locate the engine of polarisation where the evidence points: in the choices of elites who decide whether to contain conflict or inflame it, whether to repair the social contract or weaponise its breakage. Economic precarity, the post-2008 collapse in legitimacy, and the fragmentation of party systems created the kindling. Elite behaviour determined whether, and how fiercely, it would burn.

What does not correct itself

The structural conditions that gave rise to the populist revolt are not self-correcting. Precarity does not spontaneously resolve itself into secure employment. Inequality does not redistribute itself. Party systems that have lost their social anchors do not spontaneously grow new ones. The broken promise of the post-war social contract - steady work, rising living standards, a better life for one's children - remains broken for millions of people across the industrial democracies, and the official indicators of recovery continue to overlook them. Unless precarity, inequality, and that broken contract are addressed in substance rather than slogan, the electoral volatility and disillusionment that enabled Trump, Farage, Orbán, and Le Pen will simply produce their successors. The saviour narrative will find new voices. The interdependence of fear and hope will be mobilised again. The demand to 'take back control' will be directed at new targets. What 2008 revealed, and what the years since have confirmed, is that a political economy which socialises losses for the powerful and privatises them for everyone else will eventually face a reckoning - not necessarily a just one, and not necessarily a democratic one, but a reckoning all the same.

The chapters that follow turn to the cultural, communicative, and institutional dimensions of that reckoning: the politics of nostalgia and belonging, the media strategies that amplify grievance, and the pressure that populist governance places on democratic norms. Those stories matter. They cannot, however, be understood apart from the material ground mapped here - the death of the thirty-year job, the crisis that shattered elite legitimacy, the window that opened for political entrepreneurs, the fragmentation of the parties that once held the centre, and the elite choices that turned discontent into polarisation. The broken promise does not account for the whole of the populist revolt. It is where the revolt begins.

4. Cultural Anxiety and Nostalgia: Identity in an Age of Friction

Picture a man in his late fifties, still employed, still paying the mortgage, still able to put food on the table. He has not been made redundant. His factory did not close last year. By the conventional measures that dominate election-night graphics - income, employment status, housing tenure - he looks like a citizen whom the system has not abandoned. And yet, when the ballot arrives, he votes for a party that speaks of invasion, lost honour and a country that no longer resembles itself. This paradox is not merely a curiosity at the margins of contemporary politics. It is one of its central facts. People who have not lost their jobs still vote for cultural populists, and they do so in numbers large enough to redraw the map of democratic competition.

The previous chapter traced the material foundations of the populist revolt: precarity, inequality, the broken promise of 2008. Those foundations matter. But they do not tell the whole story. Alongside economic grievance, and often inseparable from it in voters' lived experience, runs a second current - cultural, emotional, identity-laden - that has proved at least as powerful in reshaping political loyalties. Cultural elements add an emotional layer that resonates with voters in ways that balance sheets and wage statistics cannot. [22063] Significant sections of the population feel threatened by progressive values and social changes; emotional and identity-based responses to those perceived threats are as significant as the economic grievances themselves. [22065] Among some citizens, there is a broader sense that their values and ways of life are under siege. [22067]

This chapter turns to that second current. It is about nostalgia as a political programme; about the holy trinity of family, religion and homeland; about the anti-gender campaigns that have travelled across borders; about the fluid and often cruel definition of who counts as the people, and about the poly-crisis atmosphere in which the loss of control becomes the defining anxiety of an age. It is also about a distinction that democratic politics cannot afford to blur: the fact that people voted for the populist does not make them populists. [22059] Cultural anxiety is a real and legitimate human response. The political programme built upon it is something else entirely.

The country that never quite was

Nostalgia is not merely a mood. In the hands of populist movements, it becomes a programme - a claim about what the nation once was, what it has lost, and who is responsible for that loss. Across populist movements, irrespective of their political alignment, a recurring theme is the concept of a Heartland: an idealised past or community against which the degraded present is measured and found wanting. [22055] Populism as an ideology draws on an imagined past that evokes feelings of nostalgia and loss. [22055] Right-wing populism, in particular, constructs its values around a sense of loss and identifies enemies - immigrants, liberal elites - as the agents of that loss. [22055]

The Heartland is not a place you can visit. It is a composite of memory, myth and selective forgetting: the high street before the chain stores, the school before the curriculum changed, the neighbourhood before the new faces arrived, the family before the arguments about pronouns and rights. It is powerful precisely because it feels specific while remaining vague enough to absorb almost any grievance. You do not need to have lived in the Heartland to mourn it. You need only believe that something essential has slipped away, and that those in charge either caused the loss or failed to prevent it.

Supporters of these movements are often characterised by a sense of lost status. [22063] There is a clear generational pattern. Older generations, who may have experienced greater economic stability in the past, find the current state of affairs particularly distressing. Nostalgia for a better past may drive their support for populist leaders who promise to restore that lost status. [22063]

Younger supporters, by contrast, may be driven by frustration with the status quo and a desire for systemic change, while older supporters are more often motivated by nostalgia for a perceived better past and by the fear of losing cultural or economic status in a globalised world. [22065] The two generations do not always want the same future. What they share is a conviction that the present represents a comedown from something that deserved to be preserved.

Feelings of lost status and identity play as significant a role as material explanations. [22056] Certain groups feel that they will be worse off than previous generations. [22056] This reverses the post-war expectation that each cohort would climb higher than the last. Populism fulfils a need for identity and belonging among supporters who often feel that they have been left behind in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. [22056] The far right attracts people who feel disenfranchised or left behind; the needs it claims to fulfil are recognition, security and a sense of belonging. [22067] It can exploit feelings of fear and anxiety around issues such as migration and economic instability. [22067] The emotional needs that populism claims to fulfil include a sense of belonging, security and empowerment. [22064]

None of this requires the Heartland to have been real. Idealised pasts rarely survive contact with archives. What matters politically is that the sense of loss is real - that people experience the present as a falling-away, and that leaders who promise restoration speak a language of restitution to which mainstream parties, fluent in the vocabulary of progress and adaptation, have largely forgotten how to respond.

Family, religion, homeland

If nostalgia supplies the mood, traditionalism supplies the content. Nadia Urbinati, reading the contemporary far right through Umberto Eco's classic inventory of fascist characteristics, finds a pattern repeated with almost liturgical consistency: the trinity of family, religion and homeland. [22063] They repeat the same story, she observes, across Meloni's Italy, Sweden, Poland and Hungary. [22063] The details vary. The structure does not.



Consider Giorgia Meloni. When she wrote her book, she never defined herself as a woman. She defined herself as a mother, a Christian and an Italian. [22063] The self-description is not accidental. It is a political theology in miniature. Motherhood stands for the family; Christianity for the civilisational frame; Italianness for the homeland. Each term performs exclusionary work. To elevate motherhood as the most important characterisation of women is to cast other forms of womanhood as secondary or suspect. [22063] To invoke Christianity as a cultural identification rather than as a faith is to turn religion into a boundary marker separating the nation from other

people. [22063] Defining the nation becomes a means of expelling from it those who are not identified with that particular idea of the nation. [22063]

Religion, in this configuration, is not primarily about belief in God. It serves as a cultural identification of one nation against other people. [22063] Anti-immigration goes hand in hand with the defence of tradition and the nation in the name of Christianity. [22063] Meloni's use of Judeo-Christian language is particularly revealing: it allows a party with an anti-Semitic heritage to launder that inheritance while still drawing a civilisational line against Islam and the secular left. [22063] The sacred is conscripted into the service of the border. Homeland completes the trinity. National culture becomes a field of active campaigning. The Meloni government has invited public schools to re-read classical Italian authors - Dante and the rest - as part of a project to rewrite national culture. [22063] The gesture looks innocuous, even edifying. Its political meaning is sharper: to fix a canon is to fix a people, and to fix a people is to decide who falls outside it. Those in a minority are regarded as guests. [22063] Guests may be tolerated. They do not set the rules of the house.

The cultural backlash is evident in the emphasis on traditional values, such as family and nationalism, which are set against perceived threats from immigration and diversity. [22063] The rise of anti-abortion and anti-gender movements further illustrates the cultural dimensions of populism, in which religion and national identity are used to reinforce exclusionary narratives. [22063] This cultural framing is deeply intertwined with questions of belonging and identity, suggesting that populism is as much about cultural anxieties as economic grievances. [22063] Culturally, populism draws on national identity and cultural narratives, using symbols and myths that resonate with the populace and mobilising support through emotional appeals. [22064] The emphasis on cultural identity is particularly pronounced in right-wing populism, where themes of nationalism and nativism prevail. [22067]

Beneath the soft language of tradition lies a harder doctrine of inequality. Equality, in the fascist inheritance that Urbinati traces, is regarded as something diminishing - Mussolini's contempt for the French Revolution's three words still echoes in the insistence that people must *'deserve what they get'*. [22063] Meloni's cancellation of the reddito di cittadinanza, the citizenship income, fits this pattern: solidarity is recast as conditional, and conditionality as moral desert. [22063] The obsession with belonging can take startling forms. When a hundred migrants died off the coast of Calabria, Meloni's public response was to ask the survivors' families why they had decided to undertake such a dangerous journey. [22063] The dead become responsible for their own deaths; the nation remains innocent of its shore.

The body as battlefield

The anti-gender front is where the trinity of family, religion and homeland takes flesh. Attacks on abortion do not always take the form of a frontal assault on the law. They proceed more subtly, by promoting ideas about the good of being a mother - as though motherhood were the most important characterisation of women. [22063] Anti-abortion bleeds into anti-gender, and anti-gender into hostility towards LGBTQ+ people. There is zero tolerance for them. [22063] They are held responsible for a declining civilisation. [22063] This is not a local quarrel. Nor is it simply directed against women; it is far subtler, conducted in the name of family and organised as an international family movement. [22063] Poland, Hungary and Italy have become the European showcases of a politics that treats gender, sexuality and reproductive rights as the front line of civilisational defence. Nativism, hostility to homosexuality, and related authoritarian tendencies emerge with particular clarity in Poland and Hungary. [22065] The same grammar travels: the family as fortress, the child as endangered inheritance, the queer person as contaminant, the feminist as traitor to the nation.

What makes the anti-gender campaign so effective is its capacity to fuse the intimate with the geopolitical. A dispute about bathrooms or schoolbooks is framed as a dispute about the survival of civilisation. A woman's decision about her body is framed as a decision about the demographic future of the people. The international family movement provides networks, talking points and a sense of belonging to a transnational community of the virtuous - ironically, a mirror image of the cosmopolitan elites it denounces. The rise of anti-abortion and anti-gender movements illustrates how religion and national identity reinforce exclusionary narratives. [22063] Populism often appeals to those who feel that their cultural or national identity is under threat; this can manifest itself in anti-immigration sentiments or a desire to return to traditional values. [22064]

The body, in this politics, is never merely a body. It is a border. It is a census. It is a warning of decline. And once decline becomes the frame, almost any restriction can be sold as defence.

Who counts as the people

Every populism claims to speak for the people. The decisive political question is always who is included in that phrase. Ruth Wodak's account of the grammar of far-right parties identifies four dimensions that recur across countries: nationalism as nativism - blood and soil - an anti-establishment posture, authoritarianism, and very conservative values. [22067] Nationalism as nativism is not patriotism with better branding. It is a theory of belonging grounded in descent, soil and cultural essence, and it carries within it an automatic theory of exclusion.

Welfare chauvinism gives that theory a fiscal face. The offer is welfare and all kinds of very good benefits - but only for us. [22067] The sting is in the last three words. Who decides who belongs to this us? The definition is never stable. It expands and contracts according to political need. One day, the unemployed native is inside the circle of solidarity; the next, he is a scrounger, useful as a downward scapegoat. The we/them grammar of the far right operates on multiple axes at once: against elites up there, against migrants outside, and against the unemployed below. [22067] The people are always under pressure from above and below and from without. The leader is always the one who notices.

Scapegoating is the method; dehumanisation is the language. Migrants arrive as floods, as contamination, as viruses, vermin, parasites, rats. [22067] The metaphors do not merely colour the debate. They move its subjects beyond the moral community in which ordinary obligations apply. Victim-perpetrator reversal completes the manoeuvre: the native majority is cast as the true victim; the minority, the migrant, the queer person becomes the aggressor. [22067] Those who are in a minority are considered to be like guests. [22063] They are present on sufferance, removable when the hospitality runs out.

Pippa Norris places this dynamic within a broader account of authoritarian values. Populist rhetoric is most dangerous when linked with authoritarian values. [22065] Those values are organised along three dimensions: us/them group security; conventionalism and hostility to outsiders; and loyalty to a strongman leader. [22065] Outsiders can be depicted in many ways - immigrants, racial or ethnic minorities, targets of Islamophobia, objects of misogyny, foreigners, subjects of xenophobia. [22065] Nativism, anti-homosexual politics in Poland and Hungary, and anti-Semitism all function as authoritarian dimensions of the same underlying structure. [22065] The identity of the outsider changes. The structure of the hostility does not.

The fluidity is the point. The people is not a sociological category waiting to be counted. It is a political weapon waiting to be aimed. Today, it may mean the native working class; tomorrow, the church-going family; the day after, anyone who speaks our language - the appeal to authenticity crystallised in Jörg Haider's slogan about the one who speaks as we speak. [22067] What it never means, for long, is everyone who lives here.

The age of lost control

Cultural anxiety does not arise in a vacuum. It emerges in a world that feels, to many people, as though it has slipped the leash. Adam Tooze's notion of the poly-crisis describes something that a simple inventory of misfortunes cannot capture: multiple crises combine to produce a qualitative leap. It is not merely an energy crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, plus war, plus climate, plus pandemic. [22067] The crises compound one another. They are mutually reinforcing. The citizen who could once narrate her insecurity as a single story - the factory closed, the wage stagnated - now confronts a tangle of threats that no single election, border or budget seems able to cut.

Wilhelm Heitmeyer identifies the loss of control as a major factor in these insecurities. [22067] In this light, Brexit's '*Take back control*' was less a policy prospectus than a diagnosis dressed as a slogan. The fear of losing control became attached to the fantasy that closing borders would, in itself, mean taking back control. [22067] Closely related is the loss of tolerance for ambiguity. Somebody who tells you this is where it goes is very welcome when the alternative is to endure uncertainty that has become unbearable. [22067] The strongman does not need to be right. He needs to be clear.

The far right has made an art form of exploiting this atmosphere. It instrumentalises crisis. Even if there are no crises, it invents them. But we do have crises - and so it does not even need to invent them; it only needs to exaggerate. [22067] The narrative that follows is almost childishly simple, which is why it works. There is a problem. I am here to save you. I create hope. Then the world is okay. [22067] The interdependence of fear and hope is particularly powerful. [22067] Fear identifies the threat and the traitor. Hope identifies the rescuer and the path home. Together, they form a closed circuit that technocratic reassurance struggles to interrupt. Emotionally, populism thrives on the performance of crisis and threat, evoking strong responses from its followers. [22066] During the COVID pandemic, the same structure produced a distinctive politics of the body and the expert. Populist governments lagged between seven and ten points on health responses; mistrust of experts, mistrust of science, and proclivities towards magical thinking left measurable traces. [22065] On the Italian right, the refusal of the mask could be moralised as strength: we take care of ourselves; if you are scared to be infected, it is because you are weak. [22063] Individualism became a test of virility. Solidarity became suspect.

The poly-crisis does not create cultural anxiety out of nothing. It amplifies and organises that anxiety, then hands it to political entrepreneurs who have been waiting for precisely this weather. The loss of control is the master key. Once people feel that the world can no longer be governed by the old means, the leader who promises to restore governability - by force, by exclusion, by recovering an imagined past - has already won a hearing that evidence alone cannot revoke.

Never only about wages

It is tempting, especially for analysts trained in political economy, to treat cultural anxiety as froth on a material wave - a secondary phenomenon that will subside when wages rise and jobs return. Jan-Werner Müller has spent a career resisting that temptation. Liberals, he observes, are not very good at identity politics at all, and that seems to be the real game today. [22059] Material demands were never concerned only with higher wages. They were also about a certain recognition, a certain respect for the working class. [22059] The pay packet and the respectful glance travel together. Separate them, and you misunderstand both.

Populism fulfils deeper psychological desires for identity and belonging. [22059] It appeals to the desire for recognition and respect. [22059] It fulfils needs for identity, community and representation, and taps into emotions related to fear, insecurity and resentment towards perceived threats from outsiders or elites. [22065] The distinction between material and cultural explanations is not always clear-cut; economic explanations must be understood within broader cultural sentiments.

[22059] Both material and cultural explanations are integral; cultural elements add an emotional layer that resonates with voters. [22063] Both dimensions are crucial. [22065] Both material and cultural explanations are crucial. [22067] Feelings of lost status and identity play an equally significant role. [22056]

Pippa Norris sharpens the authoritarian edge of this analysis. When populist rhetoric links itself to authoritarian values - us/them security, conventionalism, loyalty to the strongman - it becomes most dangerous. [22065] The outsiders in that schema can be almost anyone: immigrants, racial or ethnic minorities, Muslims, women, foreigners. [22065] Cultural backlash against progressive values and societal changes leaves significant sections of the population feeling threatened. [22065] Cultural backlash against immigration and multiculturalism expresses a broader sentiment among citizens who feel that their values and ways of life are under siege. [22067] Cultural backlash against perceived threats to traditional values and identities operates as a distinct driver. [22059]

Education offers no immunity. Those with lower levels of formal education may be more susceptible to simplistic narratives. [22064] But this does not preclude educated individuals from supporting populist movements. [22064] The graduate who feels that her cultural world is being dismantled, the professional who experiences demographic change as dispossession, the teacher who experiences curriculum reform as an attack on the nation - these are not figments of demagogic invention. They are real people with real attachments. The mistake is not to take their anxiety seriously. It is to confuse that anxiety with the programme that claims exclusive ownership of it.

After 2016, a certain kind of liberal response made the confusion worse. Müller describes the Trump safaris - expeditions into the heartland based on the narcissistic assumption that the whole upheaval was somehow about liberals. [22059] It was not. It was about recognition, respect, belonging, and the sense that those who ran the country had stopped seeing those who lived in it. Once established in people's minds as a story of elite failure, immigration becomes a kind of political and social fact that no subsequent spreadsheet can fully dislodge. [22059] Polarisation, Müller insists, is far more an elite phenomenon than anything occurring on the ground. [22059] The truly crucial variable is elite behaviour - and, more particularly, very often, the behaviour of centre-right elites. [22059]

When the centre moves the fence

The far right would never become so strong without the support of mainstream conservatives. [22067] That sentence, from Ruth Wodak, is the hinge on which the cultural story turns from movement politics to system politics. Cultural anxiety becomes politically transformative not only because demagogues articulate it, but also because centre-right elites amplify, normalise and launder it.

The mechanism is the shifting of the boundaries of what can be said. Taboos are breached and violated. [22067] The traditional post-war values, norms and rules of political culture and politeness are violated. [22067] What could not be said on a mainstream platform ten years ago is first said, then repeated, then treated as a legitimate contribution to debate. Calculated ambivalence, conspiracy narratives, the dead-cat strategy of distraction, victim-perpetrator reversal - the toolkit Wodak catalogues - do not remain confined to the fringes once mainstream actors decide that electoral arithmetic favours borrowing them. [22067] Revisionism, the rewriting of the past, proceeds with particular force in Hungary and also in Slovakia, but the temptation to tidy history for present purposes is not a Central European monopoly. [22067]

Müller's insistence that the crucial variable is elite behaviour, especially centre-right elite behaviour,

challenges a comfortable story in which polarisation rises spontaneously from an angry base. [22059] Elites choose. They choose which frames to adopt, which candidates to platform, which silences to break and which to enforce. When centre-right parties adopt far-right cultural frames - on immigration, on gender, on national history, on the definition of the people - they do not merely compete for voters who were leaving anyway. They move the fence. They teach a wider public that the fence was always arbitrary. And once the fence has moved, the next movement becomes easier.

Authenticity becomes the currency of this transaction. Haider's claim to be the one who speaks our language is the template: against the stilted speech of the technocrat, the leader offers the music of the kitchen table. [22067] Mainstream actors who try to imitate that music without believing it usually sound false. Mainstream actors who come to believe it cease, in a meaningful sense, to be mainstream. The drift is not a conspiracy. It is a sequence of incentives, fears and small permissions that accumulate until a country's political culture is no longer the one assumed by its post-war settlement.

Anxiety is not a programme

Hold two truths at once, or lose the plot of the age.

The first truth is that cultural anxiety is real. People form attachments to places, languages, rituals, hierarchies of respect and stories about who they are. When those attachments are strained by demographic change, by rapid shifts in social norms, by the poly-crisis sense that nothing is under control, the strain hurts. Older voters who remember a more stable order experience the present as loss. [22063] Communities that feel left behind reach for identity and belonging. [22056] Citizens who feel that their values and ways of life are under siege are not inventing the feeling, even when they are wrong about the threat. [22067] Populism taps into national identity and cultural narratives because those narratives already live within people. [22064] To dismiss the anxiety as false consciousness is to repeat the liberal failure Müller identifies: an inability to take identity politics seriously except when it is one's own. [22059]

The second truth is that a political programme built on that anxiety is not the same as the anxiety itself. The fact that people voted for the populist does not make them populists. [22059] Voting can be a protest, an experiment, a cry for recognition, a wager on the only candidate who appears to have noticed one's existence. Between the feeling and the programme lies a whole machinery of articulation: the Heartland myth, the trinity of family, religion and homeland, the international anti-gender campaign, the nativist definition of the people, the saviour narrative that converts fear into hope and hope into personal power, the mainstream elites who move the boundaries of the sayable until the unsayable becomes merely unremarkable. [22055;22063;22067;22059]

That machinery has a direction. It moves from belonging towards exclusion, from tradition towards coercion, from anxiety towards authorised hostility. It tells minorities they are guests. [22063] It tells women that motherhood is their primary characterisation. [22063] It tells queer people that they are agents of civilisational decline. [22063] It tells migrants they are floods and vermin. [22067] It tells the uncertain that ambiguity is unbearable and that only the strongman can end it. [22067] None of this follows necessarily from the ordinary human wish to feel at home in the world. It is a political choice about what to do with that wish.

The left's difficulty in responding has been partly diagnostic and partly imaginative. Turnout has collapsed; the capacity to transform underdogs into citizens has withered; social democrats, in Habermas's diagnosis as Urbinati cites it, are no longer capable of offering opportunity or a future. [22063] Into that failure of future-tense politics steps a politics of the restored past. It cannot keep its promises - the Heartland was never fully real, and the poly-crisis will not be solved by closing a

border - but it can keep winning arguments about recognition while its opponents continue winning arguments about GDP.

Cultural anxiety, then, is neither a hallucination nor a destiny. It is a human response to friction in an age that multiplies it: between demographic change and inherited identity, between progressive shifts in norms and conventional morality, between global interdependence and the desire for control, between the speed of the present and the pace at which belonging can be renegotiated. The danger is not that people feel the friction. The danger is the alchemy that turns the feeling into a licence - to redraw the people, to police the body, to breach the taboos of post-war political culture, and to call the result a homecoming.

The chapters that follow turn to the communicative machinery through which that alchemy is performed, and to the institutional consequences when it succeeds. What this chapter has insisted upon is prior and simpler. Before the meme, before the algorithm, before the captured court, there is a wound of belonging. It is real. It is legible. And it is not the same thing as the movement that claims to heal it by deciding, once and for all, who is allowed to belong.

5. Bad Manners and Fast Food: The Power of Low-Culture Aesthetics

In January 2019, after the Clemson Tigers had won the Super Bowl, Donald Trump invited the team to the White House and laid on a feast. It was not the usual state-dinner choreography of silver service and carefully plated restraint. Instead, there was an enormous spread of fast food from McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's and Domino's, piled high on long tables and lit by candelabras, as if the golden arches had crashed a state banquet and decided to stay. In Benjamin Moffitt's description, the media coverage was *'totally and utterly snarky'* - the subtext being that this was bringing *'disrespect to the White House'*. [22066] The photographs travelled the world. The jokes wrote themselves. And his supporters loved it.

That is the paradox at the heart of this chapter. What looks like vulgarity, chaos or stupidity to one audience reads as authenticity, solidarity and defiant pride to another. The McDonald's banquet was not a catering accident. It was a statement - carefully cultivated even when deployed to appear utterly artless. Smashing political decorum and adopting the language and tastes of the street has become a sophisticated political strategy. The question is not whether it is in bad taste. The question is why it works.



Bad manners, defined

Benjamin Moffitt, based at the National School of Arts in Melbourne, has done more than most to give this phenomenon a name and a structure. In his account, populism is best understood not only as an ideology or a thin set of ideas, but as a political style - a repertoire of performance suited to intensely mediated times. That style has three defining features. The first is the familiar appeal to the people versus the elite. The third is the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat. Between them sits the second, which political scientists take less seriously and more often dismiss as mere theatre: bad manners. [22066]

Bad manners, as Moffitt defines them, are *'a coarsening of political rhetoric and a disregard for appropriate modes of acting in the political realm.'* The elements include *'the use of swearing, political incorrectness, being overly demonstrative and colourful'*. [22066] This is not simply rudeness as a personality flaw. It is a deliberate departure from the codes that ordinary politics treats as sacred - composure, restraint, the careful calibration of language, the performance of expertise. Set against it is what Moffitt calls the technocratic political style: *'rigidness, rationality, composure, use of technocratic language'*. [22066] One style promises mastery. The other promises recognition. They do not compete on the same pitch.

The second presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton remains the clearest

visual representation of this clash. Trump was 'skulking around behind her... totally against kind of the rules... he didn't care', while Clinton was '*acting in the proper manner we expect of politicians*'. [22066] These were not two debaters operating according to the same rulebook. One was playing chess. The other was flipping the board. The point is not that Trump was more skilled at debate. It is that he had redefined what the contest was about. Once the rules themselves become the target, the candidate who still observes them looks not dignified but captive - a prisoner of the very etiquette the audience has come to distrust.

A brief taxonomy of transgression

What bad manners looks like in practice varies widely across cultural contexts, and Moffitt is careful on this point: '*what is bad manners in one context obviously differs from one another cultural context to another*'. [22066] The common thread is not a single vocabulary of insult. It is transgression - norm violations performed deliberately, publicly and without apology. The bad manners are the point.

The range is instructive. Marine Le Pen has accused political rivals of being paedophiles. [22066] Beppe Grillo's V-Day rallies against Italian politicians and the mass media were, as Moffitt dryly notes, named for something that 'if you know what V stands for it's not very nice' - essentially national F* You rallies staged as popular festivals. [22066] Of Trump, Moffitt simply shrugs: 'we don't even need to go through his examples'. [22066] This is a wry acknowledgement that the scholar's own catalogue had been overtaken by the evening news. Rodrigo Duterte pushed the register further still. Moffitt's reaction is almost physical: 'I almost couldn't believe what was happening in front of my eyes'. [22066]

Nadia Urbinati's work provides the theoretical hinge. Low-culture aesthetics and deliberately bad taste function as a political tool. They '*create an image of authenticity and relatability, distinguishing their leadership style from traditional political elites*'. [22063] The approach '*often leverages vulgarity or seemingly embarrassing behaviour to appeal to the frustrations of the populace, showcasing a rejection of the status quo*'. [22063] Ruth Wodak makes a similar observation: vulgarity and low-culture aesthetics '*can serve as identity markers, allowing populist leaders to connect with their base by rejecting elite norms and embracing a more relatable persona*'. [22067] Pippa Norris frames the same dynamic as a strategy rather than an accident: '*transgression and provocation*' can '*resonate with voters seeking authenticity and a break from conventional politics*', and the deliberate use of bad taste or low-culture aesthetics may serve as an identity marker connecting populists with average citizens. [22065]

The submissions analysis puts it without euphemism. Populist leaders '*engage in behaviours that defy conventional political norms... adopting a vulgar or unconventional style that resonates with their base, fostering a sense of connection through chaos and drama*'. [22055] Such tactics '*may serve as identity markers that enhance relatability and authenticity*'. [22055] Chaos, in other words, is not a side-effect. It is a product.

The high/low cultural axis

If bad manners were only about swearing and stagecraft, the story would end here. It does not. Pierre Ostiguy's framework, as Moffitt presents it, relocates the entire debate. On this reading, populism is fundamentally about embracing the low - cultural low, political low - and that axis operates '*perpendicularly to the left and right axes*'. [22066] This is a crucial insight, and one still under-absorbed in much public commentary. Populism is not merely a point on a left-right spectrum. It occupies an entirely different dimension.

Moffitt's mapping follows directly: '*we can actually map different politicians in four different categories*' along two axes - the left-right one we already know, and the high-low one that Ostiguy

illuminates. [22066] A politician can be left and high, left and low, right and high, or right and low. The populist move is the move to the low, regardless of the horizontal coordinate. That is why comparisons that treat a left populist and a right populist as opposites often miss what they share, and why comparisons that treat a polished conservative and a vulgar nationalist as cousins often overstate the kinship. The relevant distance is vertical.

Moffitt adds a caveat that matters for the rest of this chapter. The populist right is *'arguably better at embracing the low of popular culture than the populist left'* - partly because of *'certain genres that align more with the right'*. Country music at Trump's inauguration; Three Doors Down, kind of a one-hit wonder bar rock band. [22066] This observation is not a moral ranking. It is a comment on cultural repertoire. Some popular forms already carry the grain of anti-elite feeling; others have been colonised by the institutions the populist claims to oppose. For now, the right has found it easier to sound like the street.

The broader pattern is consistent across the source material. Populism embraces *'low-culture aesthetics and vulgarity as a means of connecting with the electorate.'* By *'participating in reality TV shows or using informal language, populist figures present themselves as relatable and authentic.'* [22066] The discursive performative approach described by Moffitt and others is comprehensive: it concerns *'how actors situate themselves, how they present themselves, how they use fashion, how they speak, how they use cultural references'*. [22066] This is not a communications add-on. It is the politics.

Fast food, fish and chips, and folk songs

Here the argument becomes almost comically concrete. Populists do not merely talk about the people. They eat like them, sing like them, smoke like them, and wrestle like them. Taste - literal taste - becomes a political instrument.

Hugo Chávez had his own television show, *Aló Presidente*, on which he *'used to dance, break into folk songs, sing to his audience - things we wouldn't necessarily expect of a politician'*. [22066] Pauline Hanson's *'claim to authenticity in Australia has been that she literally... owned a fish and chip shop'* - *'that's common people's food, she's one of the common people'*. [22066] Nigel Farage has repeatedly been photographed *'sucking on a dart with a pint a beer - showing that he's one of the people'*. [22066] In a Dutch debate, Geert Wilders made a single dietary refusal do the work of a manifesto, *'declining that he would not eat couscous... that's not food for him, that's multicultural stuff'*. [22066] Abdallah Bukharan in Kazakhstan *'recorded an album of himself singing songs and distributed them to every public servant in the country'*; his nickname was the Crazy Lover. [22066]

And then there is Trump, for whom the archive is almost too rich. His love of fast food, *'particularly McDonald's and Diet Coke,'* is *'well documented'* - eating McDonald's on the plane, Taco Bell, and the White House Super Bowl feast, whose media coverage was *'totally and utterly snarky'* because *'this is bringing disrespect to the White House'*. [22066] There is also the photograph from his association with World Wrestling Entertainment, showing Trump shaving the head of Vince McMahon. Moffitt's caption writes itself: *'that guy became president'*. [22066]

Clive Palmer, the Australian MP, provides Moffitt's showstopper. Palmer appeared *'dressed in a bunny onesie... in a promotional advertisement for a radio station, in which he's singing an electro song while smearing peanut butter on the chest of a man wearing the mask of our prime minister'* - *'a sentence you've never heard in an academic presentation'*. [22066] The laughter in the room is part of the evidence. So is the fact that the man in the onesie was in parliament.

The point is not that these scenes are funny, though they are. It is that *'this embrace of... popular culture can set populists outside the mainstream... and really do them a great service in terms of*

showing their bona fides as being part of the people'. [22066] Populists are performing belonging. As Norris's work suggests, transgression and provocation can resonate with voters seeking authenticity and a break from conventional politics. [22065] The Big Mac is not a snack. It is a credential.

Cas Mudde's observation about populist wealth sharpens the paradox further. Trump and Silvio Berlusconi, *'among the richest people in their country,'* can 'still pretend to be the voice of the people because the argument is that despite their wealth, they're actually one of them... they are pure too'. [22056] The moral logic of populism is not a means test. It is a purity test. The billionaire who eats like a trucker has passed it. The professor who eats quinoa has not. The fast-food photograph cuts across the bank balance; more efficiently than any stump speech, it says that money has not turned this person into one of them.

The celebrity-outsider machine

Once popular culture becomes the medium, a particular political-media creature emerges: the quasi-celebrity populist leader. *'Populist leaders can become quasi-celebrities known as much or even sometimes more for their media performances and stylistic outbursts than for the content of their politics'*. [22066] The content does not disappear. It is simply no longer the main event. The outburst is.

The protective effect is real. *'As politicians become media identities and celebrity heroes the situation allows them to get away with things that they might not have been otherwise able to get away with, avoiding scrutiny because of their media glow and star aura that surrounds them'*. [22066] The star aura is not a metaphor for charisma. It is a structural feature of a media system that treats celebrity as a category governed by its own rules - rules that are more forgiving, more narrative-driven, and more resistant to ordinary political fact-checking than those governing a junior minister.

The examples quickly accumulate. Sarah Palin emerged as a politician and became *'a media star'* - with a reality television show (Sarah Palin's Alaska), the Sarah Palin Channel, and a career as a best-selling author. [22066] Pauline Hanson became *'a mainstay on Australian breakfast television,'* appeared in a Donut King commercial, danced on Dancing with the Stars, and turned up on Celebrity Apprentice - *'a nice Trumpian twist'* - in a trajectory that *'basically rehabilitated her career'*. [22066] Tucker Carlson has been *'put up as potentially the next Republican star – again a media personality, not a political actor per se'*. [22066] And hanging over the American case is Moffitt's open question: *'Would Donald Trump have been president if we didn't have The Apprentice? I don't know'*. [22066] The honesty of the shrug is the point. We cannot run the counterfactual. We can only observe that the apprenticeship in celebrity preceded the apprenticeship in office.

Mudde's account of Trump as a media animal completes the picture. *'If there's one thing that Donald Trump understands way better than anyone else, it is the media. Donald Trump understands because he is a media creation and actually as a businessman has built his business largely on his media profile.'* He understands that the media is *'completely self-obsessed.'* Call the media out *'and you are in the news for days. That is why he all the time writes about the fake news and the failing New York Times'*. [22056] The attack on the press is not a break with media logic. It is media logic turned inward - a perpetual motion machine in which denunciation of coverage generates more coverage, which in turn generates more denunciation. The celebrity shield and the conflict engine are the same machine viewed from two angles.

The Mitt Romney problem

If the performance of low-culture authenticity were easy to fake, every consultant in Washington

and Westminster would already have packaged it. They have tried. The results are a masterclass in the uncanny valley of politics.

Moffitt's counter-example is Mitt Romney, and he reads the passages in full because, as he says, he loves them. First: *'Get out and vote... said Romney at one point, stopping to guzzle a glass of lemonade. Romney was asked how it tasted, to which he replied "Lemon. Wet. Good."* Second: *'My favourite meat is hot dog by the way, that is my favourite meat... My second favourite meat is hamburger... I know steaks are great but I like hot dog best and I like hamburger next best'.* [22066]

Moffitt's verdict is merciless and precise: *'To me that sounds like what would happen if an alien came to earth and tried to learn in a week how to talk in a folksy style and failed miserably'.* [22066] The lemonade tasting notes read like a laboratory report. The hot-dog hierarchy evokes a man who has been briefed that ordinary people eat processed meat and is now reciting that brief under oath. Nothing is wrong with hot dogs. Everything is wrong with performing a love for them on instruction.

This is the chapter's key revelation, and Moffitt is explicit about why he dwells on it. The point is only *'partly to make fun of Mitt Romney... the bigger part is to show how badly this can go for quote-unquote mainstream politicians and that populists'* performance of this authenticity, their performance of taste and embrace of low and popular culture, is an essential part of their arsenal'. [22066] Authenticity cannot be manufactured by memo. When a candidate adopts the signifiers of popular culture without having internalised them, the audience can sense it. A failed performance is worse than none at all - it confirms the suspicion that the candidate is not merely distant from ordinary life but is now acting it out, which is a deeper insult.

Urbinati's observation returns with sharper teeth. The approach that *'leverages vulgarity or seemingly embarrassing behaviour to appeal to the frustrations of the populace'* works only if the rejection of the status quo looks genuine. [22063] The difference between Trump's McDonald's and Romney's hot dog is not nutritional. It is ontological. One man appears to want the thing. The other appears to want to be seen wanting it. Voters, whatever else they may be, are connoisseurs of that distinction.

The media logic match

Why does any of this achieve such cut-through? Because the populist style and the operating system of contemporary media are, to a startling degree, one and the same.

Moffitt's concept of mediatisation names the broader shift: *'social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction have changed because of the media's influence'.* [22066] Under media logic, certain values dominate: *'simplification, polarisation, emotionalisation, negativism, prioritisation of conflict, focus on scandals, and the privileging of the visual'.* [22066] These values, Moffitt argues, *'almost perfectly line up'* with populist political style. [22066] The appeal to the people versus the elite maps onto sports-based dramatisation. Anti-elite sentiment maps onto the prioritisation of conflict and the denial of expert knowledge. Bad manners map onto personalisation, stereotyping and emotionalisation. The performance of crisis, breakdown or threat maps onto intensification, simplification and the focus on scandal. [22066] The conclusion is blunt: *'Populism is essentially the political style par excellence in mediatized political times'.* [22066]

Mudde reaches the same junction by a different road. Private media *'chases eyeballs'* through scandal, polarisation and conflict. *'And who provides good conflict? Populists'.* [22056] This is not merely because of what they say, but because *'quite a lot of populists are very good at what they do. Even Donald Trump, and it sounds bizarre...'* [22056] Actors such as Farage, Marine Le Pen, Wilders and Trump *'are really good at playing media'.* [22056] The skill is not incidental. It is

selection pressure. In a system that rewards conflict, the politicians who survive and thrive are disproportionately those who can produce it on demand.

Wilders's tweet strategy is a miniature version of the whole. *'He would tweet twice a day... just provoking enough that the media would go with them, but not so provoking that they would ignore them... he would tweet something, the media would read it and would say "Wilders said this. What do you think?" Perfect strategy because you set the agenda'*. [22056] The calibration is the art - loud enough to travel, but not so loud that the gatekeepers refuse to carry the package. Mudde adds a crucial dependency that will matter in later chapters: 'social media only is effective if it can break into the mainstream. Like if Trump had only tweeted and CNN had ignored him, we wouldn't have the same effect'. [22056] The low-culture performance still needs the high-prestige amplifier. The outsider still needs the insider's microphone. That is not a contradiction within the strategy. It is the strategy.

Kirk Hawkins's work on polarising rhetoric sits alongside this media match. Populism frames politics in *'black and white terms about who is good and who is evil,'* and it generates *'political support by denigrating others'*. [22064] Media logic does not invent that binary. It multiplies it, accelerates it, and rewards the politicians who can deliver it in forms suited to a segment, a headline or a clip. The use of media logic, which prioritises sensationalism and emotionalisation, further amplifies the reach and impact of populist messages. [22066] Simplification into us versus them narratives resonates with those who feel disenfranchised by traditional political structures. [22064;22067] The match is almost too neat to be accidental.

Calculated spontaneity

Here is the chapter's central insight, stated without ornament. These strategies are sophisticated and carefully managed. They work precisely because they appear spontaneous, unpolished and accidental. The bad manners are not mistakes. They are assets. The McDonald's photograph is not an embarrassment. It is a statement. The bunny onesie is not a lapse of judgement. It is a communication strategy.

As the submissions analysis puts it, populist leaders *'engage in behaviours that defy conventional political norms... adopting a vulgar or unconventional style that resonates with their base, fostering a sense of connection through chaos and drama'*. [22055] The chaos is the product. The product is sold as the absence of product. That is the alchemy.

The paradox has a broader implication that Jan-Werner Müller helps to name. *'The fact that people voted for the populist doesn't make them populists'*. [22059] The voters who respond to the McDonald's photo or the V-Day rally are not themselves, by definition, vulgar, chaotic or politically unsophisticated. They are responding to a signal. The signal says: this person is not like them. He is like us. Or at least - and this may be enough - he is on our side. Müller's related observation that material demands were *'never just about higher wages'* but *'also about a certain recognition, a certain respect for the working class'* belongs here too. [22059] The fish-and-chip shop, the pint, the Big Mac, the folk song - these are technologies of recognition. They say, more efficiently than a white paper on regional development, that the leader has noticed those who have not been noticed.

What the media dismisses as embarrassing, the base receives as defiant solidarity. Two audiences. One performance. Completely different meanings. The discursive performative approach insists that we take the whole package seriously: *'how actors situate themselves, how they present themselves, how they use fashion, how they speak, how they use cultural references'*. [22066] Populism, on this view, is an aesthetic regime as much as an ideological one. To study only the manifesto is to study the wrong object.

The communication styles of populist leaders are integral to their appeal. The performative approach, characterised by bad manners and a departure from traditional political decorum, resonates with segments of the electorate precisely because it differentiates these leaders from their mainstream counterparts and makes them more relatable. [22066] The blending of media with political figures contributes to celebrity status and creates a protective barrier against scrutiny. [22066] Low-culture aesthetics and bad manners are not the froth on the wave. In mediated conditions, they constitute much of the wave.

Not separate spheres

If bad manners work - if the McDonald's feast outperforms the careful policy briefing, if the V-Day rally fills a square that a white paper cannot - what does that reveal about political communication and the relationship between voters and the political class?

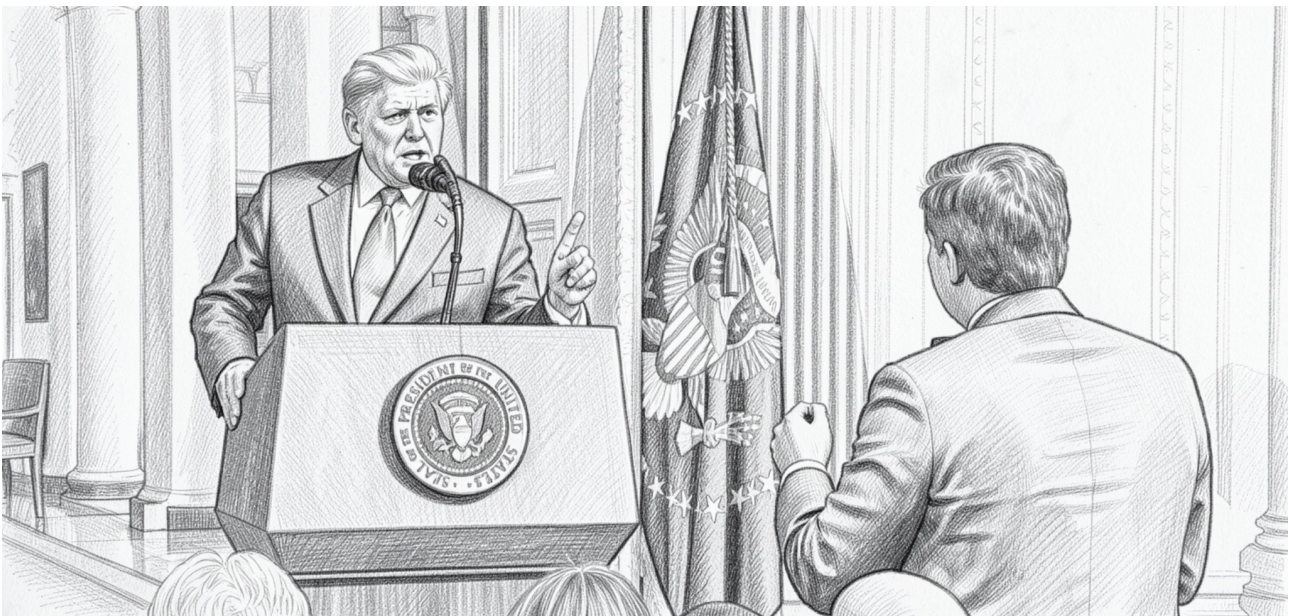
It does not, by itself, mean that democracy is finished. That darker ledger belongs to later chapters. What it does mean is more precise and, in its way, more demanding. Populist style is an exquisitely calibrated instrument for a specific media and political environment. It is also an instrument that requires something consultants cannot order by the pound: a coherent performance, sustained over time, that appears to be no performance at all. Romney's lemonade proves the difficulty. Trump's banquet proves the payoff. Between them lies the gap that mainstream politics has spent a decade failing to close.

Moffitt's closing insistence is the right place to leave the argument. *'Politics, popular culture are not separate spheres when it comes to understanding populism'*. [22066] If we want to understand why populism succeeds, we need to understand not only what populists say but how they present themselves, what they eat, what they watch, whom they wrestle, which songs play at their inaugurations and which foods they refuse on camera. The cultural turn in the study of populism is not a detour from political science. It is political science - conducted at the level where voters actually live, which is to say at the level of taste, manners, and the small defiant pleasures of watching someone finally refuse to behave.

6. The Attention Economy: Echo Chambers, Crisis, and Disinformation

It begins, as so many political days now do, with a phone. A short message is typed, dictated, or thumbed out in a rage that may or may not be genuine. The message is designed to wound, to bait, to provoke a reaction. Within minutes, it is screenshotted, quoted, condemned, defended. Within the hour, a cable-news chyron has absorbed it. By evening, the opposition has been obliged to answer it, the original author has issued a second message about the first, and the entire political class has spent a working day inside someone else's frame. Cas Mudde's dry observation about Donald Trump's media strategy still cuts cleanly through the noise: call out the media and you are in the news for days. Attack the '*failing New York Times*,' brand the coverage '*fake news*,' and the paper will spend precious column inches proving that it is neither failing nor fake - while the attacker remains the protagonist of the story throughout. [22056] The loop is so familiar that it barely registers as a strategy. It is simply the weather of contemporary politics.

This chapter is about that weather - not the performance of bad manners or the aesthetics of the street, which belong to another part of this book, but the ecosystem that rewards, amplifies and commercially depends on such performances. Populism did not invent the attention economy. The attention economy did not invent populism. What happened is more intimate and more structural: the emergence of a commercial and algorithmic media order whose deepest incentives - conflict, simplicity, emotional charge, scandal, the visual punch - correspond almost perfectly to what populists already do best. The result is not a conspiracy. It is a market.



The Grammar of Mediatized Politics

For most of the postwar decades, the media landscape in Western democracies looked nothing like this. Until the 1980s, Mudde notes, the vast majority of what people consumed came through a narrow set of channels: state television, state radio, and newspapers linked to parties or trade unions. Gatekeepers decided what counted as news and what did not. Almost everyone received roughly the same diet of information. [22056] That arrangement had its own pathologies - deference, exclusion, the quiet burial of inconvenient stories - but it was not organised around the continuous maximisation of audience emotion. The shift that followed was commercial before it was technological. Almost all media became privately owned and driven by money. In the American phrase that Mudde borrows, outlets began to '*chase eyeballs*.' Readers and viewers meant advertising; advertising meant revenue; revenue meant survival. And what attracts readers and viewers? Scandal. Polarisation. Conflict. '*Who provides good conflict?*' Mudde asks, and

answers without hesitation: *'Populists'*. [22056;22058]

The commercial logic is almost embarrassingly simple once it is stated. A politics of careful compromise, technical trade-offs, and the long committee meeting that ends in a paragraph nobody will quote does not travel well across a news desk that must fill a homepage every hour. A politics of moral confrontation - pure people against corrupt elite, existential threat against decisive salvation - travels superbly. The media did not need to convert to populism as a creed. They needed content that performed. Populists supplied it.

Politicians as Celebrity-Heroes

Benjamin Moffitt has given this alignment its most precise vocabulary. We live, he argues, in a mediatised political world: social and cultural institutions have been reshaped by media influence and have become increasingly dependent on media logic for their continued existence. [22066] That logic privileges a familiar set of values and techniques - simplification, polarisation, emotionalisation, negativism, the prioritisation of conflict, a focus on scandals, and the privileging of the visual over other senses. [22066] Set these alongside the features of populism as a political style and the overlap is almost total. The appeal to the people against the elite lends itself to sports-style dramatisation. The coarsening of political manners encourages personalisation and emotional charge. The performance of crisis, breakdown or threat thrives on intensification, simplification and scandal. [22066] Moffitt's conclusion is not a flourish. It is a diagnosis: *'Populism is essentially the political style par excellence in mediatised political times'*. [22066]

Once politicians become media identities and celebrity heroes, something else happens. They acquire what Moffitt calls a *'media glow and star aura'* that shields them from scrutiny they would otherwise face. [22066] The ordinary rules of accountability bend around the figure who is already the story. The camera does not merely report on the politician; it co-produces the politician as a character, and characters are harder to audit than office-holders. This is not to argue that every populist is a television creation. It is to argue that the mediatised environment systematically favours those who can inhabit the grammar of television, the feed, and the clip that travels without a briefing note attached.

The craft of surviving within that grammar has been refined into something close to a science. Before Trump's volcanic tweet-storms, Mudde reminds us, there was Geert Wilders. Wilders tweeted twice a day - measured, not manic - *'just provoking enough that the media would go with them, but not so provoking that they would ignore them'*. [22056] The sequence was elegant. A tweet appeared. The media reported that Wilders had said something. Other politicians were asked what they thought. The agenda was set by a man who never gave interviews and therefore never had to defend the tweet under hostile questioning. He was never actually criticised in the way that a guest on a Sunday programme is criticised, because he was never in the studio. The others fought over his frame while he remained, protected, the author of the day. [22056] Trump's version is louder and less calibrated, but the underlying insight is the same: the media is *'completely self-obsessed'*, and a politician who understands that obsession can remain within it indefinitely. [22056]

Ruth Wodak describes the same machinery from the other side of the newsroom. Continuous provocations, growing more radical over time, are needed to keep generating headlines. Taboo violation becomes a catalyst. The norms of postwar political culture and politeness are thrown out of the window, and - the crucial point - *'nothing happens.'* People may be scandalised, but the scandal does not end the career; it feeds the next cycle. [22067] Shamelessness is not a personality defect in this environment. It is a renewable resource. An FT journalist told Wodak that his entire approach to writing had changed: instead of exercising the investigative patience for which the Financial Times is known, he now found himself waiting for Trump to do something, and

Trump was doing something all the time. [22067] The time factor itself becomes strategic. Courts cannot keep up. Journalists cannot keep up. Everybody is running. [22067] Evaluation collapses into pursuit.

Wodak also identifies the diversionary tactic that keeps the chase moving in the preferred direction: the dead cat strategy. When politics becomes uncomfortable for a government - any government, not only a far-right one - another topic is dropped on the table. Everyone looks at the dead cat and forgets what was being discussed. In Austria, she notes, the reliable dead cat is the headscarf: when climate policy or some other difficulty threatens, someone proposes a law about headscarves for three-year-olds or five-year-olds or ten-year-olds, and the conversation obediently moves elsewhere. [22067] Calculated ambivalence operates alongside the dead cat. Slogans are designed to address different audiences at once. Jörg Haider's apologies, in Wodak's account, were masterclasses in the form: an apology that signalled to those who knew how to hear it that he did not really mean to apologise. [22067] The mainstream can quote the apology. The base can hear the wink.

Social media did not invent this playbook. It industrialised its distribution. Platforms enable direct communication between populist leaders and their followers, bypassing the traditional filters of the press and fostering a sense of immediacy, authenticity and shared purpose. [22055;22058;22060] The leader no longer needs the evening bulletin to reach the base; the base is already in the pocket, refreshed every few minutes. Direct leader-follower contact is a hallmark of populist communication for a reason: it collapses the distance once imposed by professional mediation, and that distance was where scrutiny lived. [22064;22063] Opponents can be framed in real time as enemies of the people; the framing does not wait for a newspaper's morning edition. [22063]

But Mudde's caveat is essential and remains insufficiently absorbed. Social media alone is not enough. 'Social media only is effective if it can break into the mainstream. If Trump had only tweeted and CNN had ignored him, we wouldn't have the same effect'. [22056] The viral post that never crosses into broadcast and broadsheet coverage remains a subcultural event. The viral post that forces CNN to cover it, because a million followers are already talking and the network needs eyeballs, becomes national politics. [22056] The relationship is symbiotic, not substitutive. Traditional outlets that ignore a populist's social media activity diminish its impact; outlets that amplify it, even to condemn it, complete the circuit. [22056]

Echo Chambers and Engineered Conflict

Jan-Werner Müller sharpens the point about the platforms themselves. The internet is not identical with Facebook. Facebook is '*a very particular business model that... runs on optimising for outrage and a certain kind of conflict*'. [22059] Algorithms built to maximise engagement do not maximise truth, complexity or the slow work of persuasion. They prioritise the sensational and the polarising, and those priorities align with remarkable neatness with populist rhetoric. [22059;22064] The feed is not a public square with a slightly addictive interface. It is an engagement engine whose fuel is the emotion that keeps the thumb moving. Outrage is efficient fuel. So is fear. So is the delicious heat of watching one's side land a blow.

Inside that engine, echo chambers form with almost geological inevitability. Individuals consume news that reinforces existing beliefs; meaningful dialogue across disagreements diminishes; information silos harden; divisive narratives travel further inside the silo than any corrective ever will. [22061;22064] Ian Shapiro notes the demographic texture of the problem: most twenty-five-to forty-year-olds no longer get their news from the news at all. They get it from social media, and they gravitate towards the social media of like-minded people. The result is '*echo chambers of self-reinforcing messages*' - bad for truth, and worse for the possibility of a shared political

world. [22061] Distrust of establishment elites, already a core element of populist appeal, finds daily confirmation in feeds that never show the elite in any other light. [22061] Alienation from mainstream parties deepens not only because the parties have failed, but also because the informational environment makes failure the only story available. [22061] Strong, charismatic leaders promising straightforward solutions to complex problems thrive where complexity has been algorithmically filtered out. [22061]

Kirk Hawkins adds a distinction that matters more than it might first appear. Ideological polarisation - disagreement over issues - is not the same as affective polarisation, which arises when people actively dislike their political opponents. [22064] You can be far apart on policy and still grant the other side basic legitimacy. Affective polarisation withdraws that legitimacy. In the United States, Hawkins observes, the charts on affective polarisation have been *'going straight up'* for decades; some other countries show increases too. [22064] Both Democrats and Republicans, in survey after survey, treat polarisation itself as a top issue - with each side typically locating the disease in the other. [22064] Traditional media, for their part, can contribute to disinformation and amplify populist sentiment when they prioritise sensationalism over nuanced reporting. [22064] The commercial pressure Mudde described and the affective spiral Hawkins measures are not separate stories. They are the same story told at different altitudes.

Müller insists on a further correction that polite commentary often resists. Polarisation is real, but 'it's also clearly an elite-driven development' - not simply a bottom-up eruption of popular hatred. In the United States, research has shown *'very clearly that actually polarisation is much more an elite phenomenon than anything on the ground'*. [22059] Anecdotes of mutual loathing abound, and they are not insignificant. But the engine, on Müller's reading, sits higher up. The behaviour of centre-right elites is *'absolutely crucial'*: when the centre-right declares far-right positions acceptable, or begins to adopt them as its own, it sends citizens a signal that what they might initially have regarded as problematic or as a violation of basic norms now lies within the bounds of normal politics. [22059] That is when, in his phrase, *'it gets really dangerous.'* Polarisation is not only a mood. It is a strategic tool. [22059;22064]

The strategic character becomes unmistakable in Müller's example of immigration politics in the United States. A compromise immigration law that might actually have regulated the issue was blocked because Donald Trump judged that a deal would count as a win for Biden and the Democrats. He did not want the issue resolved. 'In a perverse way... these people want to keep it going as an issue. They're not actually necessarily interested in finding... right policies'. [22059] An issue that remains live remains useful. A problem solved is a weapon retired. The attention economy, which thrives on unresolved conflict, has no commercial objection to this arrangement. Neither, often, does the populist who lives by it.

The Performance of Crisis

If conflict is the currency, crisis is the mint. Moffitt's account of the performance of crisis remains the clearest statement of the mechanism. Populism *'gets its impetus from the perception of crisis, breakdown or threat and at the same time aims to induce crisis through dramatization and performance – this in turn leads to the demand to act decisively and immediately'*. [22066] The crisis is both found and made. Moffitt's example, Hugo Chávez, escalated throughout his career a perceived crisis of imperialist conspiracy perpetrated by the United States - starting small, then growing bigger and bigger as the political need increased. [22066] The performance does not require the crisis to be false in every particular. It requires the crisis to be total, urgent and solvable only by the performer.

Wodak places this dramaturgy within what the economic historian Adam Tooze has called the *'polycrisis'*: not merely the addition of separate crises, but a qualitative leap in which energy,

cost of living, war, climate, pandemic, supply chains, employment and the erosion of social cohesion combine into something new. [22067] In such conditions, Wilhelm Heitmeyer, a German sociologist whom Wodak admires, speaks of a pervasive '*loss of control*' - the feeling, shared by many, including herself, that one cannot actively do anything about the forces shaping one's life. [22067] Alongside it comes a loss of tolerance for ambiguity: people grow tired of not knowing where things are going and become receptive to anyone who offers a clear direction. [22067] Certainty becomes a consumer good. The far right exploits this opening. Even when no crisis exists in the form alleged, one can be exaggerated or invented; conspiracy narratives are spread; a scapegoat is selected - migrants, Jews, Roma, the unemployed, whoever fits the local repertoire - and the leader presents themselves as a saviour. [22067]

The formula Wodak has tracked across decades of far-right rhetoric is brutally efficient: create fear, then create hope, then offer a simple plot. There is a problem; I am here to save you. [22067] The interdependence of fear and hope is old - Spinoza already understood it - and it remains, she argues, '*really very forceful*'. [22067] Some far-right leaders present themselves almost as messiahs, hinting at a higher force or divine mission. When Trump survived an assassination attempt, the messianic staging wrote itself: saved, sent, chosen. [22067] '*Make America Great Again*' is continuous with older European variants - '*Make Austria Great Again*' was already in circulation decades earlier under Haider. [22067] The myth of salvation does not require theological sincerity. It needs narrative fit.

Disinformation is the polycrisis's native language. Wodak is careful with terminology: these are conspiracy narratives, not theories - they are fiction. [22067] Their power lies less in evidence than in the hunger for explanation when events feel unintelligible. During the pandemic, the claim that Bill Gates had implanted something so that everyone would fall ill with COVID spread through social media at a speed that official corrections could not match. '*You think how can people believe that,*' Wodak observes, '*but you want an explanation and things are so complex and difficult to understand*'. [22067] Complexity is painful. A villain with a name is a relief. Pippa Norris, writing on populists, pandemics and sceptical trust, traces how false claims and misinformation - bleach as cure, masks as irrelevant, social distancing as unimportant - undermine the compliance that public health requires and, more enduringly, corrode trust in established institutions and mainstream media. [22065] The populist move is twofold: do not trust the privileged, the fake media, the partisan judges; trust instead the people, the silent majority, popular sovereignty against expertise. [22065]

Demonising experts and scientists, Wodak notes, accelerated during the pandemic and has since hardened into what she calls a new politics of common sense - Trump's preferred register, in which common sense is permanently set against the supposedly out-of-touch knowledge classes. [22067] The linguistic reversals are revealing. Positively connoted concepts are inverted: public health measures become a '*COVID dictatorship*,' invoked by people who, Wodak acidly notes, have never experienced a dictatorship, or they would not use the word that way. [22067] Freedom and democracy are claimed by movements whose practices hollow out both. The vocabulary of contamination migrates from epidemiology into the politics of belonging: floods of migrants, viruses threatening the body politic, a völkisch discourse of purity under siege. [22067] Dehumanisation follows the metaphor. Others become vermin, parasites, rats, ticks. The FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl has described Social Democrats as '*leftist ticks*' to be '*deprived of their breeding ground*' - not a metaphor offered in passing, but a sustained semantic field in which a rival party is discussed in the language of infestation and extermination. [22067] The deep state travels from American conspiracy culture into European discourse as the hidden second government behind the visible one. [22067] And at the edge of the continuum, the endorsement of physical violence ceases to be unspeakable: Trump at a rally, nostalgic for the old days when protesters '*would be carried out*

on a stretcher,' offers the audience permission it is entirely capable of using. [22067]

Steven Levitsky's warning about the phrase '*enemies of the people*' belongs in the same frame. When populists face critical media, they do not answer the criticism; they reclassify the critic. The media become enemies of the people. When a judge blocks an executive order, the judge becomes an impostor standing in the way of the sole authentic representative of the people. [22057] The move is not a debating tactic. It is an attempt to delegitimise the dissenting voice as such, allowing misinformation to flourish in the space where mutual toleration used to live. [22057;22067] Once the referee is redefined as a player for the other team, there is no longer a shared game.

The Media Trap and Normalisation

All of this leaves mainstream media in a structural dilemma that good intentions cannot resolve. The relationship with populism is symbiotic. Populists receive extensive coverage because they generate sensational content; the coverage, even when hostile, can inadvertently legitimise the rhetoric it intends to police. [22056;22067] Mudde's point about media frames compounds the problem: media need a simple story. 'It can't be complicated. It is either you take over the world or you died'. [22056] A populist wave that is real but uneven, rising in some countries and stalling in others, averaging well below a majority, does not fit the frame. So the coverage oscillates between apocalypse and obituaries, both of which misrepresent a phenomenon that is stubborn, diverse and commercially convenient. [22056]

Normalisation through absorption is the quieter half of the same process. Wodak observes mainstream parties adopting far-right slogans and claims of authenticity - Sebastian Kurz posting the same appeal that the Austrian far right had used, the conservative appropriating the far right's language of being '*one of us*'. [22067] What was once a boundary marker becomes shared vocabulary. The centre does not defeat the far right by stealing its clothes; it teaches the electorate that the clothes were never really out of bounds. Müller's warning about centre-right elite behaviour is the political-science version of the same observation. [22059]

It is tempting, at this point, to reach for technological determinism - to say that the platforms made us do it. Müller offers a useful historical cold shower. Every media revolution has attracted the same style of claim: the printing press is invented, and next day the wars of religion; radio is invented, and next day Hitler; television is invented, and next day McCarthy. 'These positions are not totally wrong, but they're also not quite right'. [22059] Outcomes are not pre-ordained. The printing press also produced scientific journals. Radio also produced the fireside chat and the shipping forecast. The feed can amplify conspiracy, and it can also organise mutual aid. What matters are the institutional choices, the business models, the regulatory voids and the elite behaviours that determine which affordances of a new medium become dominant. Facebook's optimisation for outrage is a design decision and a profit model, not a law of nature. [22059] The chase for eyeballs is a commercial settlement, not a technological inevitability. [22056]

Still, the settlement we have is one in which populists swim with intuitive ease. Polarisation is profitable for platforms and for politicians who feed on division. [22059;22064] Crisis is content. [22066;22067] Emotionalisation entrenches divisions that reasoned argument then cannot reach. [22066;22067] Direct communication supplies authenticity on demand. [22055;22060] Echo chambers ensure that this authenticity is rarely tested against hostile facts. [22061;22064] Disinformation corrodes the institutional trust that would otherwise slow the spiral. [22065;22057] And the mainstream, needing a story simple enough to survive the homepage, finds in the populist the character it cannot stop casting. [22056]

Stand far enough back and the pattern is almost architectural. A media system reorganised

around private revenue and algorithmic engagement will systematically reward actors who simplify, polarise, emotionalise, scandalise and perform crisis. Populism, as Moffitt argues, is the style that already specialises in exactly those moves. [22066] The attention economy did not create the thin ideology of pure people against corrupt elites, nor the affective hunger for belonging, nor the real grievances that earlier chapters of this book have traced through economics and culture. What it created was a petri dish. In that dish, calibrated provocation outcompetes careful governance; the dead cat outruns the white paper; the messianic gesture outshines the committee report; and the politician who understands that the media are self-obsessed can remain, indefinitely, the name on the chyron. [22056;22067]

The digital public sphere is therefore not neutral infrastructure upon which politics happens to play out. It is an active participant in the populist moment - a participant with its own incentives, its own blind spots, and its own preference for the fight that never ends. To treat the media ecosystem as a mirror that merely reflects popular will is to misunderstand both the mirror and the will. Mirrors in the attention economy are curved. They enlarge whatever already screams. And populism, whatever else it is, has never had trouble screaming.

None of this is an alibi. Elites who mainstream the previously unsayable are making choices. [22059] Journalists who trade evaluation for pursuit are making choices. [22067] Platform designers who optimise for outrage are making choices. [22059] Voters who prefer the simple plot to the difficult trade-off are making choices, under constraints the polycrisis has made brutally tight. [22067] The attention economy explains why certain political styles flourish so extravagantly in our moment. It does not absolve the gardeners. But any serious attempt to understand the populist revolt - its anatomy, its alchemy, its possible futures - has to stop treating the media system as scenery. The scenery has a plot. It has a business model. And for now, that model runs on the very energies populism exists to supply.

7. Governance Friction: What Happens When Outsiders Take Over?

The room in Brussels did not look like a battlefield. It looked like what it was: a conference suite of glass, microphones and bad coffee, the kind of space in which European finance is usually negotiated through the language of spreadsheets and conditionalities. But in the first half of 2015, it became something else. Across the table sat the Troika - the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund - the unelected machinery that had, for years, dictated the terms of Greek survival. Opposite them sat the new Greek government, led by Syriza, a coalition of the radical left that had stormed into office promising to end austerity and restore dignity to a country crushed by debt. The confrontation that followed was not merely a fiscal dispute. It was the governing paradox of populism made flesh: the outsider who has become the insider, yet still speaks as if the room belonged to someone else. In the rhetoric that framed those months, the message was pure defiance. 'You're behaving like the mafia. You think we're a hostage. We're not. We're free to go.' [22056] It was the populist moment at its most theatrical - the pure people against the corrupt technocrats, popular sovereignty against the spreadsheet. Then, after the referendum, after the all-night sessions, after the moral theatre had exhausted itself, Syriza signed anyway. Within months, the party that had vowed to change everything began, as Cas Mudde would later put it with characteristic dryness, 'to look more and more like other parties'. [22056] The gap between the promise and the reality of office is the subject of this chapter. What happens when the anti-institutional force is required to operate the institutions?



The Governing Contradiction

Populism enters government carrying a structural contradiction that no amount of campaign energy can dissolve. Paul Taggart has long insisted that one of its defining features is an ambivalence about representative politics itself - a suspicion of the very machinery through which modern democracies actually govern. [22055] In his account, populism is not a utopian project with a detailed map of the future. It is more often a politics of return: a longing for a lost Heartland, an imagined past in which the people were whole, the elites were honest, and politics had not yet been captured by intermediaries. [22055] The classic trope is the reluctant politician - the figure who claims not to want power at all, but merely to sort things out and leave. [22055] That posture works brilliantly on the stump. It works less well once the same figure holds the seals of office, commands the civil service, and discovers that the budget must still balance, the courts still rule, and the bond markets still have opinions. If part of the ideology is anti-establishment, then power is less a destination than a trap. [22055] The outsider who becomes the establishment must either cease to be an outsider, remake the establishment in his own image, or pretend - noisily,

permanently - that he is still outside.

Taggart's framework for understanding what populists actually do in office offers the most useful structure for making sense of this trap. He identifies three broad strategies. The first is to moderate: to become less anti-institutional, to retain the language of embattlement while practising something closer to conventional politics, until the populism itself quietly falls away. Silvio Berlusconi is the textbook European case - still complaining of judicial persecution and media hostility, still performing the role of the wounded outsider, yet in practice growing more conventional over time. [22055] The second strategy is the opposite of moderation. It is to restructure the institutions: to reshape the constitutional settlement, the judiciary, the media environment and the surrounding civil society so that the anti-institutional promise is fulfilled and the new rulers are protected. Latin American leaders who recast constitutions, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rewritten settlement in Turkey, Law and Justice's judicial reforms in Poland, and Viktor Orbán's long campaign against independent media and civil society in Hungary all belong to this family of tactics. [22055] The third strategy is stranger and, in some ways, more revealing. It is to behave as if one were still in opposition: to govern by breaking things, unsettling things, shaking the furniture, and sustaining the narrative that everyone is against you even when you hold the highest office in the land. Taggart's reading of Donald Trump's first term places him firmly in this third category - not because Trump lacked the will to dominate, but because American institutions proved resilient enough to make wholesale constitutional redesign impossible, leaving permanent opposition mode as the workable alternative. [22055]

These are not tidy boxes. Real governments move between them, combine them, or devise hybrids under pressure. But the typology does something essential: it rejects the lazy assumption that every populist in power is simply an authoritarian-in-waiting. Populism, Taggart insists, is not inherently anti-democratic. It is a version of democracy that places heavy emphasis on popular sovereignty, claiming to redress a balance that elites have supposedly tilted. [22055] Most populists who reach office do not end up as authoritarians, even if the notable cases that do dominate the headlines. [22055] What they all face, however, is the same friction. The ideology that brought them to power is poorly suited to the work that now begins.

Moderation Under Constraint: The Greek Case

Syriza remains the purest European illustration of that friction under external constraint. Greece in 2015 was not merely the setting for a domestic drama; it was a stress test of what left-wing populism could achieve inside a monetary union whose rules had been written elsewhere. Syriza governed as a coalition of the radical left, in an unusual arrangement that also involved a right-wing populist partner - a reminder that populism's thin ideology can unite strange bedfellows when the shared enemy is the establishment. [22056] The campaign had promised rupture. The reality of office was negotiation. When the bailout talks stalled, the government reached for the classic plebiscitarian instrument: a referendum designed to demonstrate that the Greek people rejected the creditors' terms. It worked, in the narrow sense. Sixty-one per cent voted no. The European Union did not move. The government then ignored its own referendum and signed. [22056] Mudde's verdict is merciless and, for anyone who has watched new parties enter office, unsurprising. 'New parties promise a great deal, especially that they will do everything differently. Inside the European Union, you are not going to do everything differently, because the EU does a great deal for you - and against you - and after a few months you start to resemble the parties you ran against.' [22056] That resemblance is survivable if you are an ordinary establishment party having a bad year. It is catastrophic if your entire brand rests on a promise to change the world. Two years of that incompetence, Mudde noted, left Syriza doing horribly in the polls. [22056]

The Greek case is extreme, but the pattern is widespread. Populist parties struggle to fulfil

campaign promises within the constraints of existing political systems, and nowhere is this more visible than in Europe, where the European Union's legal, fiscal and monetary architecture imposes hard limits on what any national government can unilaterally rewrite. [22056] Centre-right and centre-left parties have long made promises they cannot fully uphold within that structure; the difference is that populists have usually made the impossibility itself their selling point. When they then encounter the same walls, the discovery looks like betrayal rather than realism. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis had already catalysed a decline in conventional political competition, with populist figures emerging as embodiments of public anger towards elite failures. [22061] Job insecurity, political fragmentation and economic disparity had prepared the ground. [22061] Populists could mobilise support by presenting themselves as the only viable solution to the crises they highlighted. [22066] What they could not always do was turn that mobilisation into a governing programme capable of surviving contact with bond yields, treaty law and the slow machinery of administration. The tactics that win elections - crisis framing, moral binary, the permanent sense of emergency - raise awkward questions about sustainability once the election is over and supporters expect substantive policy rather than another rally. [22059]

Redefining the Game: Orbán and Plebiscitarian Power

If the first path is moderation under constraint, the second is an attempt to dissolve the constraint by redesigning the field. Here the record is darker, and it is important to be precise about what this chapter is and is not doing. The detailed mechanics of democratic erosion - the sequencing of court-packing, media capture, electoral law tweaks and the slow normalisation of exceptional powers - belong to a later discussion. What matters here is the logic of government. Restructuring institutions is, in Taggart's terms, a way to keep the anti-institutional promise while simultaneously making life easier for the new incumbents and harder for their enemies. [22055] Changing the constitution is the most drastic version; Ecuador and Erdoğan's Turkey are the obvious examples. [22055] Short of that, governments tinker: Law and Justice in Poland presented judicial reform as the clearing-out of old judges, while critics saw it as packing the bench with loyalists. [22055] Hungary under Orbán has shown how populist governance can erode independent institutions and the rule of law, shifting the system towards what observers call illiberal democracy - elections that still occur, but within a landscape where media, civil society and legal counterweights have been systematically weakened. [22057;22055] Venezuela's trajectory under Hugo Chávez is the cautionary extreme: direct-democratic institutions introduced in the name of the people, followed by the destruction of independent courts and media, and an eventual descent into autocracy. [22056] Hungary, Mudde notes with particular force, has pursued related techniques inside the European Union - not always by closing newspapers outright, but by arranging for friends to buy them, a quieter method that achieves similar ends while proving harder for external actors to sanction. [22056]

Orbán's opportunistic use of referendums belongs to the same repertoire of government. Plebiscitarian instruments appeal to populists because they appear to enact popular sovereignty directly. In practice, they are often deployed strategically and discarded when inconvenient. Orbán held a referendum on an EU migration redistribution deal that was already dead; he lost it not because Hungarians suddenly embraced immigration, but because turnout fell below the threshold he himself had raised to protect against opposition use of the same instrument. [22056] The episode is almost comic in its cynicism, and entirely serious in what it reveals: the people are sovereign when they say yes to the leader's script. When they fail to perform on cue, parliament will do. Syriza's ignored bailout referendum belongs to the same family. [22056] Direct democracy, in populist hands, is less a constitutional principle than a campaign technique that happens to require ballot papers.

Then there is the third path - permanent opposition from inside the palace. Trump's first term is

Taggart's central exhibit. The Constitution was not rewritten. The judiciary, for all the noise, held firm in crucial respects. Congress, in Taggart's tart phrase, 'effectively lay on its back and failed to assert its powers', but those powers were not formally rewritten either. American institutions proved, contrary to many predictions, 'pretty robust'. [22055] Elite resistance mattered: 'the so-called deep state did its job, lawyers did their job, judges did their job, many times.' [22060] Democratic backsliding, where it occurs, is typically a gradual erosion driven by civilian leaders rather than the sudden collapse associated with a military coup - and the tempo of that erosion interacts with the capacity of courts, legislatures and civil society to respond. [22060] In Trump's first term, the combination of institutional resilience and elite resistance channelled the presidency towards a politics of unbroken combat. If you cannot remake the system, you can still break furniture inside it. You can unsettle, denounce, reverse, tweet, withdraw, re-enter, and keep the base in a state of permanent mobilisation. [22055] Governing becomes a form of campaigning. The narrative of ongoing political engagement - everyone against us, the swamp still undrained, the real victory always just ahead - takes the place of the slower work of administration. [22055]

Spectacle is not a side-effect of this strategy. It is the strategy. 'Populism', Taggart observes, 'is hugely spectacular, and the trouble with spectacle is that we all want to watch it. The real problem is that we focus on it too much precisely because it is exciting, dramatic, a show.' [22055] Media systems already favour populist narratives because they generate conflict and scandal and dominate news cycles, often without the sustained scrutiny needed to test governing competence. [22067] In opposition, that affinity is an advantage. In office, it becomes a substitute for delivery. The cameras remain trained on the fight; the unglamorous measures of policy - hospital capacity, procurement timelines, regulatory detail - slip out of view. Populism is also, historically, episodic: it flares, captures attention, and often fails to establish the durable party families that other ideologies build over generations. [22055] Permanent opposition mode is one way to prolong the episode - to remain vivid without becoming ordinary. The cost is that ordinariness is where most governing actually happens.

Spectacle, the Pandemic, and the Accountability Paradox

Nowhere was the friction between populist identity and governing responsibility more starkly apparent than in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pippa Norris's work on populists, pandemics and sceptical trust offers something rarer than anecdote: comparative measurement. Populist rhetoric, as she traces it through the Global Party Survey, rests on two core elements - anti-establishment criticism of experts, officials, intellectuals and scientific authorities, and the claim that rightful authority lies in popular sovereignty and majority rule. [22065] 'Who needs experts? What do they know?' The deep state, the media, the privileged, the laboratories: all are presented as suspect. 'Trust the people instead.' [22065] That rhetoric is most dangerous, Norris argues, when it fuses with authoritarian values. [22065] But even without that fusion, it has implications for government. If expertise is corruption by another name, then the early warnings of an exponential pandemic are discounted from the outset.

The data are blunt. Using the Oxford stringency index across health measures and lockdown closures, and controlling for GDP, health-security capacity, demographics, regime type and time elapsed since the first confirmed case, strongly populist governments lagged other governments by seven to ten points on health measures in February 2020, with an effect of similar size on lockdown measures in March. [22065] In the most affluent, high-income countries - precisely those that should have been best placed to respond - the gap was larger still: health measures were, on average, fifteen points lower in January and thirty points lower in February among governments scored as strongly populist. [22065] Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Boris Johnson were not isolated eccentrics. They were typical of a broader pattern. [22065] Throughout February, while the virus spread from China into Europe and beyond, strongly populist administrations did

essentially very little. The United States imposed a ban on Chinese nationals flying in; it emerged that the first cases seeding New York had come via Europe. A task force was created but did not initiate effective measures, nor did many states, even after the first deaths were recorded. Populist governments scrambled and caught up later; by then, given the exponential mathematics of transmission, it was somewhat too late. [22065]

Norris's explanation is not a conspiracy theory about death wishes. It is an analysis of ideology under pressure. Mistrust of experts is part of populism; so too are mistrust of science, a proclivity towards magical thinking, and mistrust of the state and of state intervention. Those dispositions help to explain the delay. [22065] Bolsonaro's public disdain for masks and his insistence on physical glad-handing became a global emblem of the type; Johnson's late lockdown belonged to the same pattern of hesitation; Modi's India and other cases completed the comparative picture. [22065] When the information environment itself is polluted - when people are told to 'drink bleach', or that 'masks do not matter', or that 'social distancing is unimportant' - trust ceases to be a straightforward civic virtue. Norris's useful distinction is between trust and sceptical trust: compliance with authority is valuable only when the information is accurate. [22065] Populist governance during a pandemic did not merely fail a technocratic test. It put into practice, in real time, the anti-expert ideology that had been a campaign asset and exposed it as a public-health liability.

Crisis also exposes the accountability paradox that haunts populists in office. The ideology divides the world into the pure people and the corrupt elite; politics becomes a moral binary rather than a negotiation among legitimate opponents. [22055] You do not compromise with the corrupt, because compromise contaminates the pure. [22056] That monistic and moralistic structure sits uneasily with the foundational principles of liberal democracy, which depend on checks, balances and the legitimacy of opposition. [22056] It is even less compatible with the ordinary experience of governing, in which things go wrong - pandemics spread, budgets miss targets, wars are mismanaged, infrastructure fails - for reasons that include contingency, complexity and the limits of state capacity. A conventional politician can resign, reshuffle, apologise, or blame the business cycle. A populist who accepts full responsibility risks undermining the claim that he is the uncorrupted champion of the people. The structural temptation is therefore to direct blame outwards: towards the deep state, the courts, the media, the European Commission, the Troika, or the saboteurs still embedded in the ministries. [22055;22060] Trump, as the pandemic ran roughshod through the country, took no responsibility and offered no serious federal coordination. [22065] Orbán blames Brussels. Greek creditors were portrayed as a mafia. The enemy must remain external, or the identity dissolves.

This is not merely rhetorical cowardice. It is identity maintenance. Populism regards opponents not as adversaries with standing but as enemies who are corrupt and immoral; once in power, that framing can be used to justify suppressing their rights. [22055] Even when suppression is not the chosen path, the framing makes honest self-criticism almost impossible. Failure must be treachery. Delay must be sabotage. A lost referendum must result from the wrong kind of people turning out, or the wrong kind of question, or interference by foreign-funded NGOs. The permanent campaign provides the emotional infrastructure for this move: keep supporters mobilised, keep the narrative of siege alive, and the reckoning over unfulfilled promises can always be deferred until the next confrontation. [22055] Ruth Wodak and others have noted how far-right and populist discourse sustains a fighting habitus even in government - constantly identifying new threats, because governing-as-negotiation would require the very compromises that the moral binary forbids. [22067] If it is not migrants, it is something else; the conflict must not end, because the conflict is proof of authenticity.

Economic Promises and Their Limits

Economic populism runs into a similar wall. Campaigns can promise the restoration of industrial glory, the cancellation of debts, walls that pay for themselves, or an end to austerity without difficult choices. Markets, central banks, supply chains and - in the eurozone - the European Central Bank do not campaign. They clear, price and constrain. Mudde's point about EU membership is the continental expression of a global condition: in a deeply interdependent economy, sovereignty is already pooled, delegated and hedged, and discovering that fact in office produces either quiet adaptation or noisy rage. [22056] Adaptation looks like betrayal to the base. Rage looks like incompetence to everyone else. Governments that fail to deliver lose support; that is ordinary democratic hygiene. [22061] Populist governments face a sharper version of the same test because their mandate was defined in opposition to the idea that delivery requires compromise with existing structures. When long-term job insecurity and regional economic despair have already hollowed out trust in conventional competition, a populist who also fails does not simply lose an election. He risks confirming the deeper suspicion that nobody can deliver - a cynicism that feeds the next outsider rather than restoring the centre. [22061] Electing a disruptor, as one sober analyst put it in a different register, will not resolve the underlying insecurity of communities that have watched mills close and wages stagnate; the card is easy to play and hard to cash. [22061]

None of this means that populists in office achieve nothing, or that their critique is baseless. One of populism's genuine contributions, especially in opposition, is to politicise or repoliticise issues that had been sealed beneath a technocratic consensus - immigration, European integration, austerity, even the unglamorous question of whether public services still work for those who use them. [22056] Taggart notes that populism can mobilise citizens around specific grievances when traditional elites have failed to address them adequately; that corrective function is real. [22055] The difficulty lies in translating criticism into action. Diagnosis is not prescription. A politics organised around recovering a lost Heartland, morally unmasking elites, and performing reluctance in the face of power is exceptionally good at identifying what is wrong, but exceptionally under-specified about what should be built. [22055] Host ideologies - nationalism, socialism, religious conservatism - supply some of the missing programme, which is why left and right populisms diverge so sharply once their shared anti-elite rhetoric is stripped away. [22056] But the populist layer itself remains thin, and thin ideologies chafe against thick institutions.

Consider the three strategies again in this light. Moderation is the admission, spoken or unspoken, that the thin ideology cannot run a modern state without borrowing the tools of those it denounced. Restructuring is the attempt to thin the institutions until they fit the ideology - a project that can slide, where restraint fails, towards illiberal democracy or worse, as Venezuela's painful arc attests. [22056] Permanent opposition is a refusal to choose: stay thin, stay pure, stay at war, and let spectacle do the work that policy cannot. Trump's first term, with its resilient institutions and unbroken theatre, is the clearest recent demonstration that the third path is available where the second is blocked. [22055;22060] Syriza's arc is the clearest demonstration that the first path, under severe external constraint, exacts a brutal price in credibility. [22056] Orbán's Hungary suggests what can be achieved through a sustained blend of the second path and permanent campaigning when constitutional leverage and media power are available within a union that struggles to police its own members. [22057;22056]

The pandemic adds a fourth lesson that cuts across all three strategies. Anti-expert ideology is not an optional flourish of populist style. It is integral to the discourse Norris measures - the same discourse that elevates popular sovereignty as the rightful source of authority. [22065] In ordinary times, that posture can resemble democratic humility, a defence of common sense against insulated professionals. In a fast-moving biological crisis, it becomes a mechanism of

delay, misinformation and fragmented coordination, with measurable deficits on stringency indices and, downstream, a toll on bodies. [22065] Magical thinking is not a metaphor when bleach enters the conversation. It is a hazard of government. The accountability reflex - take no responsibility, blame the hidden network, keep the federal hand light while the fire spreads - follows with grim consistency from the same identity. [22065]

What the Evidence Reveals

What, finally, does the experience of government reveal about populism's essential nature? It reveals that populism is stronger as a solvent than as a cement. It dissolves the authority of existing elites, parties and consensuses with remarkable efficiency. It is far less adept at producing a stable alternative order, unless it ceases to be populist (moderation), colonises the state so thoroughly that opposition becomes decorative (restructuring), or replaces order with permanent drama (opposition-in-office). It is diagnostic rather than curative: brilliant at critique, thin on programme. [22055] Its power lies in naming failures that mainstream politics preferred to manage quietly - the long aftertaste of 2008, the cultural and economic dislocations of globalisation, the sense that representative institutions had become a closed shop. [22061] Those failures were not invented. But translating anger into administration requires institutions that populism is ideologically disposed to distrust, as well as forms of expertise that it is disposed to mock. The friction is not an accident arising from the incompetence of particular leaders, though incompetence certainly occurs. The friction is inherent in the ideology.

There is a further irony, neatly captured by Taggart's remark about spectacle. We watch populists in power with a fascination that itself shapes the phenomenon. The drama crowds out the dull. Cabinet minutes lose to rallies; procurement guidelines lose to insults; the slow accumulation of administrative capacity loses to the next outrage. [22055] Media economies already primed for conflict amplify the incentive. [22067] In that environment, the third strategy - govern as if still in opposition - is not merely a response to institutional resilience. It is a rational adaptation to an attention market that rewards the fight and forgets the spreadsheet. Syriza learned in Brussels that the mafia line plays better than the memorandum. Trump learned in Washington that the war with the deep state plays better than the inter-agency meeting. Bolsonaro learned in Brasília that the anti-mask gesture travels farther than the epidemiological briefing. These lessons are compatible with very different host ideologies and institutional settings. What they share is the discovery that populism's electoral strengths become governing weaknesses unless something gives - the ideology, the institutions, or the pretence that one is still only visiting power.

This chapter has traced that discovery through the negotiating rooms of the euro crisis, the constitutional workshops of illiberal democrats, the chaotic communications of a pandemic, and the daily blame-shifting through which outsider identity is preserved inside the state. It has not yet asked, in full, how liberal-democratic guardrails are eroded when restructuring becomes systematic, or how populism's corrective energies should be weighed against its corrosive ones on the longer balance sheet of democratic life. Those questions require chapters of their own. What can be said here is narrower and, in its way, harder. When outsiders take the wheel, they do not escape the road. They encounter the friction that the road always contained - law, expertise, interdependence, opposition, failure - and reveal, in the sparks, what their politics was always made of.

8. Democratic Backsliding and Constitutional Hardball

In the spring of 2010, Hungarian voters handed Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party a two-thirds supermajority in parliament. It was a democratic mandate, won through democratic means, after a campaign conducted in the language of national renewal and popular sovereignty. The opposition had collapsed under the weight of its own failures; the electorate wanted change; the ballots were counted in the ordinary way. Within months, the new government had rewritten the constitutional settlement. The Fundamental Law was pushed through in nine days, with virtually no consultation with the opposition. Courts were reorganised. Electoral maps were redrawn. Media licences were rearranged. Each step was clothed in legality. Each was defended as the fulfilment of the people's will. And together, they began to hollow out the very system that had produced the mandate. This is the paradox explored in this chapter: how a government with genuine popular legitimacy can use the mechanisms of democracy against democracy itself. The story is not primarily about tanks in the streets or colonels on television. It is about lawyers, parliamentary majorities, retirement ages and media acquisitions. It is about what happens when the letter of the law is pressed so hard against its spirit that the spirit cracks. If you are looking for the smoking gun of a classic coup, you will not find it. That is the point.



Two Core Values in Tension

Liberal democracy rests on two core values that exist in permanent, productive tension. One is collective self-determination - the democratic element, which holds that the people should choose their rulers. The other is individual rights and freedoms - the liberal element, which holds that majorities may not do whatever they like to minorities, opponents or inconvenient institutions. Populists threaten both. [22057] They directly threaten individual rights by scapegoating minorities and portraying critics as illegitimate. They also set themselves against the rule of law and the independent institutions that make rights enforceable rather than merely decorative. When the media criticise them, the media become '*enemies of the people*.' [22057] When a judge rules that an executive order is unconstitutional, the populist response is not a legal argument but a claim to superior democratic standing: who is the judge? I am a representative of the people. [22057] The sequence is grimly familiar. Populism first establishes what observers have called illiberal democracy - elections still occur, but within a landscape in which rights and counterweights have been systematically weakened - and then tends towards an illiberal dictatorship. [22057] The path is incremental. The destination is not.

Daniel Ziblatt has given this process its most useful name: constitutional hardball. The practice is deceptively simple. It involves pushing every legal and constitutional prerogative to its absolute limit - following the letter of the law in ways that systematically undermine its spirit. Two unwritten pillars underpin liberal democracy, and hardball attacks both. [22057] The first is mutual toleration: the habit of accepting political opponents as legitimate, even when you despise their politics, even when you are certain they are wrong about everything that matters. The second is institutional self-restraint: the refusal to exploit every legal power simply because you can. Neither pillar is written into most constitutions. [22057] Both are essential. Without them, the formal architecture of democracy becomes a toolkit for its own dismantling.

The examples are almost embarrassingly ordinary. The United States Constitution places no numerical limit on the size of the Supreme Court. A president unhappy with the Court's rulings could, in purely legal terms, expand the bench until the majority flipped. Nothing in the text forbids the Senate from blocking every presidential nomination for years on end, depriving the executive of the personnel required to govern. Each of these manoeuvres is technically lawful. [22057] Collectively, if everyone plays this game, they make the system profoundly dysfunctional. Constitutional hardball is also contagious. [22057] Once one side starts playing, its opponents face a powerful temptation to fight fire with fire. The descent into dysfunction accelerates. Restraint looks like unilateral disarmament. Escalation looks like survival. There is a surprising element here that Ziblatt emphasises. [22057] Everyone understands why a leader who shoots into a crowd is a danger to democracy. What is interesting about constitutional hardball is that it does not look like that. It looks like procedure. It looks like committee work. It looks like a statute with a preamble about efficiency. This is the central insight, and it is more unsettling than any coup narrative: what is legal can actually destroy democracy. [22057] The way democracies die today is not primarily through military coups, but through constitutional and parliamentary manoeuvres - rulings, statutes, procedural innovations, the slow accumulation of advantages that never quite cross the line into open illegality. Using legal means to push powers to the maximum, slowly and incrementally, allows democracy gradually to wither away. [22057]

Hungary: A Case Study in Slow Demolition

Hungary is the paradigm case, and it is worth tracing step by step because the lethality lies in the cumulative effect rather than in any single outrage. The 2010 supermajority gave Orbán the power to change the constitution unilaterally. He used it. [22057] He imposed earlier retirement ages on judges - perfectly legal, and framed as administrative modernisation - clearing the bench of inconvenient incumbents and allowing him to pack the courts with loyalists. He redrew electoral districts to maximise Fidesz's share of seats regardless of the popular vote. [22057] He installed allies in the electoral commission. [22057] He systematically captured the media landscape: independent broadcasters were forced out; critical newspapers were bought by friendly oligarchs who discovered, after completing the purchases, that there was mysteriously no market for critical journalism, and folded the titles. Cas Mudde has noted the elegance of the method. [22056] Orbán is surrounded by lawyers. He does not always close newspapers outright, in the Polish style of loud confrontation. He works out how other countries do things and selects elements that individually do not look bad but are devastating when combined. Lower the retirement age of judges; extend the number of judges; let a friend buy the last opposition paper and shut it. Each move is legal. Capitalism permits the purchase. The cumulative result is that the last independent voice disappears. [22056]

By 2014, international observers were declaring Hungarian elections mostly free but no longer fair. The formal rituals of democracy continued. [22057] Ballots were cast. Results were announced. The substance had shifted. The elections were free enough for the government still to claim democratic credentials, but unfair enough that the opposition could no longer compete on a level

playing field. Hungary had satisfied all the standard criteria for a consolidated democracy - GDP per capita above fourteen thousand dollars, multiple free elections since 1990. It was supposed to be a safe democracy. It was not. [22057] The COVID-19 emergency supplied an epilogue that stripped away the remaining pretence. Orbán suspended parliament indefinitely, assumed the power to rule by decree, and told citizens they could be jailed for spreading false rumours on social media. Hungary, Yascha Mounk concluded bluntly, was now a dictatorship. It is one of the most important cases of a democracy that appeared secure sliding, through legal means, towards dictatorship. [22057] The case matters precisely because it confounds the older literature on democratic consolidation. Wealth and electoral habit were supposed to lock countries into the democratic club. Hungary demonstrated that the lock could be picked from the inside, using the keys issued by the club itself. Mudde's observation that Hungary has pursued related techniques inside the European Union only sharpens the point: membership of a democratic club is not, by itself, a vaccine. [22056]

The vocabulary used to describe this process has itself become a battlefield. For a time, scholars and journalists reached for the phrase illiberal democracy. Orbán embraced it proudly. In a famous 2014 speech, he declared that liberal democracy had failed and that Hungary would be an illiberal state. The label seemed to capture something real: elections still happened; liberalism was being discarded. Jan-Werner Müller was, for a time, willing to accept the terminology. He no longer is. The label, he now argues, is highly problematic - because what was being attacked was not merely liberal refinements or elite preferences, but the communicative democratic rights, including free assembly and free speech, that make meaningful democratic participation possible in the first place. Strip away those rights and what remains is not a rough-and-ready democracy purged of liberal excess. [22059] It is something else wearing democracy's clothes.

The Battle over Definitions

The definitional stakes extend far beyond academic pedantry. Everybody still wants to be called a democrat. Even the regime in Beijing wants to be called a democracy. It therefore matters enormously who gets to call themselves a democrat, and how the concepts of democracy and liberalism are parcelled up in public argument. By conceding Orbán the democracy label even while criticising the illiberal prefix, critics inadvertently allowed him to retain a form of democratic legitimacy. [22059]

Müller is careful not to collapse liberalism and democracy into an undifferentiated whole; the distinction remains analytically useful. But he insists that communicative rights are not optional liberal ornaments. They are the conditions under which democratic choice is meaningful rather than theatrical. The concept of illiberal democracy as it appears in the literature - free and fair elections occur, but the rule of law and independent media are compromised - is at best a transitional category, not a stable endpoint. [22059] As Müller warned and Mounk confirmed, the logic of populism pushes relentlessly from that intermediate station towards outright dictatorship. [22056] [22057]

The monistic and moralistic nature of populism conflicts with the foundational principles of liberal democracy because it dismisses the necessity of checks and balances. Once those checks are treated as optional, the transition is not a question of whether, but of how quickly. [22056] Mudde's formulation is useful here: populism is pro-democracy if democracy is defined narrowly as popular sovereignty and majority rule, but it is systematically at odds with liberal democracy, which also requires minority rights, the rule of law and independent courts. The monism does the damage. [22056] The people are imagined as one. Anyone who claims different interests is reclassified as elite, and the elite is corrupt, and the corrupt do not deserve the protections that liberal democracy extends even to those it dislikes. [22056]

Beneath the legal manoeuvres lies an ideological force that makes them appear not merely expedient but righteous. Populists claim exclusive ownership of the people. The claim is not that they represent a majority, or even a plurality. It is that they alone embody the authentic people, and that disagreement is therefore not political but existential. I and I alone represent the people - if you disagree with me, you are not just wrong about something important, you are fundamentally illegitimate. You are a traitor. You are an enemy of the people. This anti-pluralism is not a rhetorical tic. [22057] It is a governing philosophy. When the media criticise the government, they become enemies of the people. When a judge rules against an executive order, the populist response is to question the judge's standing rather than the legal reasoning. Each institution that pushes back - courts, press, prosecutors, civil society - is re-categorised as part of a corrupt establishment that must be neutralised. [22057] The logic is self-reinforcing. You undermine the institutions, then use their weakness as evidence that they were corrupt all along. The diagnosis justifies the cure; the cure confirms the diagnosis.

Contrast this with a moment that has become almost unimaginable in many contemporary political cultures. During the 2008 American presidential campaign, John McCain held a town-hall meeting at which a supporter called Barack Obama an Arab and implied that he was a danger to the country. McCain, to his lasting honour, corrected her. Obama, he insisted, was a decent family man and a legitimate politician with whom he disagreed. The exchange embodied mutual toleration: the refusal to treat an opponent as an enemy even when doing so would have been electorally convenient. [22057] Populist anti-pluralism is the negation of that moment. It does not merely fail to correct the supporter. It trains the supporter to see correction itself as betrayal.

The primary targets of this governing philosophy are what political scientists call non-majoritarian institutions: courts, prosecutors, civil society organisations, independent electoral bodies, central banks, regulatory agencies. Their legitimacy derives not from an electoral mandate but from professional expertise, procedural independence or constitutional design. [22057] That is precisely what makes them essential to liberal democracy - and politically vulnerable. They can be attacked as unelected elites frustrating the will of the people. The attack writes itself. Who elected the judges? Who funds the NGOs? Who appointed the electoral commissioners? The answers are always some version of '*not you*,' and in a politics organised around popular sovereignty as the sole legitimate source of authority, '*not you*' is a hanging offence.

The pattern travels. Poland's Law and Justice government packed its constitutional tribunal with party loyalists and presented the operation as the clearing-out of old judges - a rhetorical move that turns packing into purification and makes resistance sound like nostalgia for a corrupt past. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan systematically dismantled judicial independence after the 2016 coup attempt, using emergency powers to purge thousands of judges, prosecutors, academics and civil servants, while employing populist rhetoric to justify authoritarian measures and attacking the judiciary and media in ways that undermined the checks and balances necessary for a functioning democracy. The coup attempt supplied a genuine security shock; its aftermath converted that shock into a permanent warrant for institutional demolition. [22064] Emergency powers have a habit of outliving emergencies.

In Italy and Austria, the normalisation of far-right discourse and attacks on political opponents and the judiciary have revealed a similar erosion of democratic norms by quieter means. The ability of populists to generate conflict and scandal attracts media attention, allowing them to dominate news cycles and set political agendas without facing substantial criticism. Spectacle becomes a solvent. [22067] The cameras remain trained on the fight; the slow work of institutional capture slips out of frame until the capture is complete enough to be irreversible without crisis. The Hungarian model proved exportable precisely because it was incremental and legally defensible at every step. Admirers did not need to import tanks. They needed to import lawyers, media

strategies and a theory of the people that made institutional resistance look like treason.

Smart Repression and Manufactured Polarisation

Bill Scheuerman has described the contemporary toolkit as '*smart repression*' - less blunt force, more insidious techniques. Surveillance replaces the midnight knock, or supplements it. Critical NGOs are denied state funding rather than banned outright. Social media information environments are manipulated. Nonlethal but effective tools of control accumulate. [22060] The advantage of smart repression is diagnostic as well as strategic. Each individual measure can be litigated, debated, or presented as reform. The cumulative architecture of control is harder to discern until it is already load-bearing. By the time the pattern becomes unmistakable, the institutions needed to identify and resist it may already be compromised.

Venezuela is the cautionary case of escalation - what happens when the institutional guardrails have gone. Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999 with genuine popular support and introduced genuine democratic innovations: participatory budgeting, community councils, and social missions in health and education. [22056] He also called referendums with admirable frequency, using direct democratic instruments to claim democratic legitimacy for his rule. But the referendums were held amid media dominance and the deployment of resources that systematically tilted the playing field. [22056] The monism of the ideology did its work. Independent courts and media were destroyed. [22056] When Chávez died in 2013, Nicolás Maduro inherited a state apparatus that had been systematically stripped of independent institutions. There were no independent courts to check him, no independent media to expose him, and no prosecutorial independence to investigate him. What had begun as illiberal democracy - free elections coexisting with a compromised rule of law - tipped into unambiguous authoritarianism. [22056;22059] Venezuela demonstrates why the intermediate category matters. Once the institutional fabric has been sufficiently eroded, there is no way back without catastrophic disruption. Chávez did not necessarily set out to create a dictatorship. Maduro inherited one because the preconditions had been assembled, piece by legal piece, under the banner of the people. [22056]

Referendums, viewed in this light, deserve a colder assessment than the romance of direct democracy usually permits. Populists reach for them because they appear to enact popular sovereignty without the friction of representative institutions. In practice, they are often deployed strategically and discarded when inconvenient. Orbán held a referendum on an EU migration redistribution deal that was already dead; he lost it not because Hungarians suddenly embraced immigration, but because turnout fell short of the threshold he himself had raised to prevent the opposition from using the same tool. The voice of the people, having failed to perform on cue, was simply redirected through parliament. [22056] Syriza's ignored bailout referendum in Greece belongs to the same family. Direct democracy, in populist hands, is less a constitutional principle than a campaign technique that happens to require ballot papers. The people are sovereign when they say yes to the leader's script. When they fail to turn out, or say the wrong thing, other instruments will suffice.

Polarisation is often treated as a tragic by-product of social division, a fog that descends on societies and makes democratic life harder. Müller's insight is sharper: polarisation is frequently a deliberate political strategy, usually employed by right-wing or far-right populists. [22059] If you convince people that everything is at stake, that they will lose everything, then you bring them to a point where they know that their own side is sometimes acting in a distinctly anti-democratic way, but are willing to look the other way. [22059] They condone behaviour they would once have condemned because the alternative has been framed as apocalyptic. Polarisation turns democratic politics into a zero-sum game - we either win or we lose everything - in which the usual norms of restraint and toleration are suspended because the stakes are presented as existential.

[22059] This is the mechanism through which constitutional hardball becomes acceptable within a political coalition. Each individual violation of norms is framed as a necessary defensive measure against an existential threat. The violation is not denied. It is justified.

Crucially, Müller insists that this polarisation is much more an elite phenomenon than a phenomenon on the ground. [22059] The comforting story in which ordinary citizens spontaneously come to hate one another beyond repair is, according to the evidence, overstated. Anecdotes of mutual loathing exist, of course; they always do. But the crucial variable is elite behaviour: what leaders declare acceptable, what they refuse to condemn, where they draw lines, and where they erase them. [22059] This is not a welcome finding for democratic theory, which prefers to locate virtue in the demos and vice in the few. It is, however, an empirically stubborn one. The anecdote about Trump's immigration bill is revealing in this regard. A bipartisan bill that would have introduced significant restrictions on immigration was killed partly because, in Müller's analysis, the populist political interest lay not in solving the problem but in preserving it as a mobilising issue. Trump did not want a law that regulated immigration in the right way, because it would count as a win for Biden and the Democrats. These people want to keep it going as an issue. They are not actually necessarily interested in finding right policies. [22059] The issue is the fuel. Resolution would extinguish it. So resolution is sabotaged, and the sabotage is presented as principle. Politics becomes apocalyptic not because the underlying problems are uniquely apocalyptic, but because apocalypse is a superior mobilisation technology. [22059]

Enablers, Guardrails, and the International Dimension

One of the most underappreciated aspects of democratic backsliding is the role of mainstream conservative parties in normalising the far right. It is not just far-right elites. Very often, the behaviour of centre-right elites is absolutely crucial - what they now declare to be acceptable discourse, where they effectively end up disagreeing with the far right, and where they cease to disagree. [22059] When a respected centre-right politician signals that a particular far-right policy or framing is acceptable, they provide a legitimising bridge for voters who might otherwise have been repelled by the extremism. You can be a good Christian Democrat, the signal runs, and hold these views. Positions that citizens might initially have regarded as violating basic democratic standards, or as excessively cruel, become thinkable once someone they trust as a moderate has endorsed them. [22059] The Overton window does not shift primarily because extremists are persuasive. It shifts through the endorsements and adoptions of those perceived as moderate. Centre-right parties that chase the far right, making migration their signature theme when it was not even the public's foremost concern, have repeatedly discovered that far-right light is a poor electoral product and an even worse democratic one. [22059] The erosion of democratic norms, then, is not solely a project of populist outsiders. It requires enabling behaviour from establishment insiders. [22059] The fact that people voted for the populist does not make them populists; the more consequential question is what elites do with the permission structure created by those votes. [22059]

To counter this enabling dynamic, some political systems have attempted containment. The cordon sanitaire - the practice whereby mainstream parties agree never to include populist parties in governing coalitions - has been maintained in Germany with respect to the AfD, and for much of its history in the Netherlands with respect to Geert Wilders's PVV. [22056] The logic is straightforward. If populist parties cannot govern, they cannot dismantle institutions from within. Keep them outside the room where the constitutional furniture is rearranged, and the furniture survives. But the strategy has recognised limitations. Proportional representation systems provide structural openings for populist parties to accumulate seats even without governing. More awkwardly, the cordon sanitaire can paradoxically increase the appeal of populist movements by reinforcing their outsider status. [22056;22064] The establishment's decision to exclude them literally confirms

their anti-establishment appeal. In the eyes of their supporters, the claim that the elite is a closed shop becomes an observable fact rather than a slogan. Moreover, as far-right parties grow larger, the cordon becomes increasingly difficult to sustain without either minority government or uncomfortable grand-coalition arrangements that may themselves deepen popular disillusionment. [22056] Containment that resembles a cartel can become recruitment material for those being contained.

Scheuerman's broader insight deserves emphasis because it corrects a still-powerful cultural image of how democracies end. Democratic backsliding typically takes the form of gradual erosion - not sudden collapse or military coups. The key players are civilian leaders operating through legal channels. [22060] This gradualism is both strategically effective and diagnostically difficult. Each individual step - a forced judicial retirement, a media licence revocation, a redistricting exercise, a campaign-finance rule change, a tweak to the appointments process - appears manageable and open to legal challenge when viewed in isolation. By the time the cumulative effect becomes visible, the institutions needed to resist may already be compromised. [22060] If backsliding happens too quickly, there is no time to litigate or mobilise. [22060] Pace matters as much as direction. A slow bleed can be more lethal than a dramatic rupture because it never quite triggers the emergency reflexes that a coup would activate. The cultural imagination still relies on twentieth-century footage: tanks, juntas, and the radio announcement at dawn. The twenty-first-century version is quieter, and that quietness is part of its power. [22060]

Elite resistance has, in some cases, moderated the process. During Trump's first term, institutional resistance from inspectors general, FBI leadership, career civil servants, lawyers, and judges slowed and partially deflected executive overreach. The so-called deep state, in Scheuerman's account and in adjacent analyses, did its job; lawyers did their job; judges did their job, many times. [22057;22060] American democracy, Mounk and Ziblatt argued during that period, was still alive, but it had been exposed to a level of risk not experienced in living memory. [22057] That resistance, however, is not a structural guarantee. It depends on the personal courage of individual actors within institutions whose independence is itself under attack. An elite theory of democratic defence is only as strong as the elites who still believe the norms are worth defending - and as the civil society and mass politics that can, when necessary, extend beyond elite resistance into broader democratic coalitions. [22060] Scheuerman is careful on this point. Elite-centred resistance is not only about elites, even when it appears so; it is also about the civil society and mass politics that give elites reasons, cover, and pressure to hold the line. [22060] When elites themselves are the agents of hardball, or when they have been replaced, the guardrail becomes the threat. The question then shifts from whether institutions will hold to whether anyone left inside them still wants them to do so.

Democratic backsliding does not occur in a geopolitical vacuum. Autocratising populist governments have found common cause with one another, sharing models, techniques, and political cover. Orbán's Hungary became a destination for international admirers, including American conservatives who found in Budapest a working model of illiberal democracy that they wished to import. The city became a kind of seminar campus for the politics of institutional capture: come for the conferences, leave with the playbook. The weakening of American commitment to democratic norms - visible in the reluctance to criticise allied autocrats and in explicit praise for authoritarian leaders - sends a signal of permissiveness to governments pursuing their own assaults on institutions. [22057;22060] When the world's pre-eminent democratic power abandons its role as an international defender of democratic norms, the political cost of democratic backsliding falls. Allies notice. Rivals notice. Domestic audiences notice that the old sermons about the rule of law no longer carry consequences. The smart-repression toolkit - surveillance technology, social media manipulation, denial of civil society funding - is also increasingly transferable across borders

and available from non-democratic suppliers. [22060] Techniques travel. So do justifications. A move that would once have incurred sharp diplomatic costs can now be framed as sovereign choice, cultural authenticity, or resistance to globalist interference. The international environment does not cause backsliding. It can make backsliding cheaper, faster, and easier to present as patriotism.

The Pattern and the Paradox

Step back from the individual countries and the pattern becomes clear. Constitutional hardball is the method. Anti-pluralism is the ideology. Polarisation is the strategy that makes the method tolerable to one's own side. Centre-right enabling is the bridge that widens the audience. Smart repression is the contemporary toolkit. Gradualism is the tempo that frustrates diagnosis. Non-majoritarian institutions are the preferred targets because they are both essential and electorally orphaned. Illiberal democracy is the transitional station that should never have been conceded as a stable form of democratic life. Venezuela is the reminder of the terminus. Hungary is the reminder that the terminus can be approached from within the European Union, with lawyers rather than generals, in a country that had already passed every conventional test of democratic safety.

The most haunting paradox of constitutional hardball and democratic backsliding is that they are so clearly legible in hindsight and so difficult to arrest in real time. Hungary satisfied every criterion for a consolidated, safe democracy in 2010. Venezuela had held free elections and pioneered participatory experiments that many progressives admired. Turkey had been a NATO ally and an EU candidate. Poland had been the success story of post-communist transition. Each case looked different from within, narrated by governments with genuine electoral mandates that claimed - sincerely or otherwise - to be fulfilling the people's will. The statutes were published. The majorities were real. The justifications were expressed in the language of popular sovereignty. That is precisely what makes this moment so diagnostically demanding. The virus replicates using the host's own machinery. It does not need to smash the laboratory. It needs only to rewrite the protocols, one lawful amendment at a time, until the laboratory remains standing but is no longer free.

9. Democratic Balance Sheet: Corrective Force vs. Existential Danger

Chapter 8 traced the machinery of democratic backsliding - the lawful, incremental, almost bureaucratic dismantling of liberal constraints by governments that still claim a popular mandate. The picture that emerged was sobering: courts packed, electoral maps redrawn, media captured, norms of restraint abandoned, all without a single tank in the street. That analysis, however, leaves a harder question unanswered. Is populism the disease eating away at the body politic, or is it merely the fever - the visible symptom of an infection that was already deep in the bloodstream long before the first populist leader took the podium? The distinction is not academic. If populism is the disease, the prescription is containment and rejection. If it is the symptom, the prescription is to diagnose whatever came first, and the fever may even prove useful. This chapter draws up a balance sheet. Not a rhetorical one, in which the conclusion is smuggled into the opening sentence, but a genuine one: assets on one side, liabilities on the other, and a verdict that refuses the comfort of a clear answer. The question is whether populism is a democratic wake-up call, the thing that brings democracy down, or - most uncomfortably - both at once.

What Went Wrong First

Before populism emerged as a mass electoral force, something had already gone badly wrong with mainstream democracy. The trouble did not begin with a charismatic outsider railing against the elite. It began with the elite agreeing among themselves. Cas Mudde has made the point with characteristic bluntness: European integration and immigration *'were kept off the political agenda by the main parties in countries like the Netherlands or Germany'* because *'all the elites simply agreed on it.'* There was no conspiracy, he insists - just a consensus so complete that debate became unnecessary, and therefore impossible. *'You don't have a debate on issues that everyone agrees on.'* [22056] The result was a politics in which some of the most consequential questions facing European societies - who belongs, how open the borders should be, how far sovereignty should be pooled - were treated as settled technical matters rather than live democratic choices. When people felt that those issues were not being addressed, Mudde notes, *'whether that is true or not is irrelevant. When people believe it is true, it is true.'* [22056] In democratic politics, belief is a fact in its own right.

The ideological convergence that made this possible had a name and a decade. In the 1990s, Mudde observes, *'most centre-left parties, social democrats adopted a so-called pragmatic third way position which embraced neoliberalism and which made the difference between centre left and centre right ideologically pretty small'* - not least because many centre-right parties responded by moving towards the centre on social and cultural questions. [22056] The famous choice between left and right dwindled into a choice between two managers of the same settlement. Elections continued. Parliaments sat. The rituals of democracy were observed. But the range of alternatives on offer narrowed until voting felt, to a growing proportion of the electorate, less like self-government and more like choosing a slightly different administrator.

Chantal Mouffe has offered the most influential diagnosis of this condition: post-democracy. Under neoliberal hegemony, she argues, the productive tension between liberal and democratic principles was eliminated. Democracy was reduced to its most minimal liberal component - free elections and the protection of some rights - while free markets became central to the political order. The role of parliaments diminished because elections no longer offered genuine alternatives, merely alternation between centre-right and centre-left. Everything that opposed the centrist consensus was presented as extremist or disqualified as populist, while politics itself was reduced to *'simple management of the established order by technocrats outside popular sovereignty.'* [22062] The language is sharp, but the empirical pattern it describes is hard to dismiss. When the only permissible positions are those already held by the governing class, disagreement is pathologised

rather than debated. The word populist becomes less a description than a disqualification - a means of removing certain claims from the table without having to answer them.

Jan-Werner Müller approaches the same terrain from a different angle. Populism, in his account, arises partly from what might be called undemocratic liberalism: the practice of insulating critical issues from democratic contestation and treating certain questions as too important, too technical, or too morally settled to be left to voters. [22059] The liberal commitment to rights, markets and international institutions is not itself the problem. The problem lies in the habit of removing the most contested questions from the arena in which citizens are supposed to decide them. When that habit becomes entrenched, the people who feel excluded do not disappear. They look for someone who will put those questions back on the agenda, loudly and without apology.

The structural evidence of this detachment can be seen in the electoral numbers. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser has documented the long decline of the Christian democratic party family - once the great stabilising force of post-war Western Europe - from roughly 25 per cent of the vote in the 1980s to around 15 per cent in the most recent decade: a '*dramatic decline*', slow enough to go unnoticed from year to year yet large enough, in retrospect, to redefine the party system. [22058] Conservatives declined too, though less steeply. The catch-all party, that mid-century invention designed to gather broad coalitions under a single roof, is '*almost disappearing in western European societies*.' [22058] These were not accidental fluctuations. They reflected a party system becoming progressively detached from significant parts of its electorate. The cartel had closed in on itself. The people outside it were growing restless. And in a democracy, restlessness eventually finds a vehicle.

Populism's Democratic Function

That vehicle has a name, and it is not merely a curse word. The affirmative case for populism's democratic function begins with a simple observation: when a subject is not debated, it cannot be decided. Mudde is direct. '*One of the best things about populism, particularly when in opposition, is that they politicize or repoliticize certain issues*' - specifically immigration, European integration, and austerity, all of which had been absorbed into an elite consensus and removed from genuine democratic competition. [22056] Populism blew the lid off. Issues that technocrats had filed under settled reappeared as live political questions, complete with winners, losers, and the awkward necessity of choosing. Whether one likes the answers populists offer is a separate matter. The prior fact is that the questions were once again being asked in public, where democratic questions belong.

Mudde's favourite small example is public transport - a policy area that sounds mundane until one notices who pays the price. One consequence of European integration, he notes, has been sustained pressure to privatise public transport. In the textbook version, privatisation means efficiency: investment in profitable routes and the minimisation of unprofitable ones. In practice, across much of Europe, it has led to more expensive services, spottier coverage, and the exclusion of the periphery. The people who lose out are socialised to blame the government rather than the private operator, because they still believe that public transport is a public responsibility. And when they complain, the technocratic answer is ready-made: we cannot reverse this, it is the European deal. [22056] Populism puts such matters back on the table. It insists that a policy with real losers is a political choice, not a law of nature. That insistence is, in itself, a democratic service.

Mouffe frames the larger picture. The current '*populist moment*', she argues, is '*a salutary return of the political after years of post-politics*' - after the illusion of a consensual politics in which ideological cleavages had supposedly dissolved in favour of technocratic rationality. [22062] Post-politics was never the end of ideology. It was the hegemony of one ideology masquerading as the absence of all others. When that pretence cracked, politics returned - noisy, moralistic,

sometimes ugly, but recognisably political. The alternative to that return was not a serene liberal order. It was the continued management of an order that growing numbers of citizens no longer recognised as their own.

The historical American record offers a quieter version of the same corrective function. Populist movements in the United States have rarely captured the federal government in their own name. What they have repeatedly done is force the mainstream to respond. Mudde notes that the issues of the People's Party in the early twentieth century were absorbed by the Democratic Party; more recently, since the Second World War, it has been the Republican Party in particular that has taken up the issues of populist movements. [22056] Outsider pressure, then, has repeatedly compelled insider adaptation. That is the corrective function working as intended: not the replacement of the system, but the system's reluctant acknowledgement that it had stopped listening.

Something else has changed within the citizenry itself. Ronald Inglehart's concept of cognitive mobilisation describes a population that is better educated and more politically self-confident than previous generations. 'Now when a leader says you should do this, a lot of people say why. They didn't used to say that.' [22056] Mudde regards this as a healthy democratic development. These are '*critical citizens*' who hold leaders to account rather than passively following partisan cues - '*exactly what we always wanted of democracy*,' even if it creates problems for the established practice of politics. [22056] In the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Catholic voters voted Catholic, workers voted social democratic, and the upper middle class voted liberal. They did not so much make choices as inhabit subcultures. That world has gone. The citizens who replaced it ask questions. Populism may be one of the vehicles through which this newly assertive citizenry makes itself heard - not always wisely, not always fairly, but audibly.

Mouffe goes further still. Left populism, she argues, can '*open the way to the reaffirmation and extension of democratic values*' if it prevails. The problem is not populism as such, but which kind wins. [22062] She proposes what she calls radical reformism: not the abolition of representative democracy, but the transformation of institutions to make them more genuinely representative, complemented where useful by elements of direct or participatory democracy. In her framing, '*we are not systematically confronted with a crisis of representative democracy in itself but with a crisis of its current post-democratic incarnation.*' [22062] The remedy is not to smash the machinery of representation. It is to make representation mean something again. Whether one shares her confidence in the left-populist path, the underlying claim is serious: the democratic deficit came first, and populism is, among other things, a demand that this deficit be closed.

The Liabilities: When the Alarm Becomes the Fire

So much for the assets. Now for the liabilities - and they are not small. Even granting everything above, populism contains a structural logic that is antithetical to the liberal democratic settlement. The same Mudde who praises populism's capacity to repoliticise buried issues is unsparing about its downside. '*On the downside, it leads to polarisation. And the reason is simple. The debate is moral. Corrupt versus pure.*' [22056] Populists 'don't have political opponents, they have enemies.' [22056] This is not a rhetorical habit that could be discarded with better media training. It is the ideological consequence of a thin-centred worldview in which the elite is not merely wrong but corrupt, and the people are not merely right but pure. In a moral struggle, compromise is contamination. 'You don't compromise in a moral struggle because if the pure compromise with the corrupt, the pure get corrupted.' [22056] Some of the fundamental aspects of liberal democracy are, Mudde concludes, at odds with populism. [22056]

Pluralist democracy requires political adversaries to treat each other as legitimate even when they disagree profoundly - to accept that the other side has a right to run, a right to persuade, and a right, if it wins, to govern. Populism's moral binary corrodes precisely that requirement.

Yascha Mounk and Daniel Ziblatt have identified the two unwritten pillars of democratic governance that this corrosion attacks. The first is mutual toleration: public acceptance that opponents have a legitimate right to compete and to win, even when one finds their ideas offensive. [22057] The second is institutional self-restraint: the convention that those in power do not exploit every legal prerogative to the maximum, and that possessing a certain institutional power does not mean always using it to the hilt. [22057] Neither pillar is written into most constitutions. Both are load-bearing. Remove them, and the formal structure remains standing while democratic practice collapses.

Mounk is unequivocal about the trajectory. 'In the long run, populism doesn't just establish an illiberal democracy. It actually tends towards an illiberal dictatorship.' [22057] Once a government controls the media, curtails the rights of the opposition, and places loyalists on the electoral commission, the second core value of the political system - the possibility of removing a government by democratic means - comes under threat. [22057] Hungary provides the proof of concept and deserves to be examined without flinching. Viktor Orbán, democratically elected, used entirely legal means - enforcing retirement ages on judges to clear the courts for allies, redrawing electoral districts to manufacture supermajorities - to dismantle institutional independence incrementally, until independent observers concluded that the last election was '*mostly free but no longer*' fair. [22057] Each step was lawful. Each was defended as the will of the people. The destination was a system in which the people could still vote but could no longer meaningfully choose.

The shift in category matters as much as the institutional change. Kaltwasser notes that Orbán's Fidesz '*started as a mainstream right party and transformed itself now into a populist radical right party.*' [22058] This is not a policy adjustment. It is a change of political species. The same trajectory, he argues, now haunts the Republican Party in the United States, which he describes as '*anything but a mainstream right party*' any longer - '*a populist radical right party,*' whatever the historical label of conservative once implied. [22058] When mainstream parties themselves become carriers of populist logic, the corrective and corrosive functions are no longer divided between opposition and government. They inhabit the same organisation.

Polarisation is the accelerant. Müller observes that it '*has been a very successful strategy, usually employed by right-wing or even far-right populists*' - and the mechanism is brutally simple: '*if you convince people that everything is at stake, they will look the other way*' at their own side's anti-democratic behaviour. [22059] Voters who know, at some level, that their side is behaving badly will condone it anyway because the alternative has been framed as an existential catastrophe. Political scientists have documented this mechanism across many cases. It is difficult to defeat. [22059] And the polarisation itself, Müller adds, is '*much more an elite phenomenon than anything on the ground*' - a top-down dynamic driven by leaders and strategists, which becomes self-reinforcing once activated. [22059] The anecdotes of mutual hatred at the dinner table are real enough. The engine is higher up.

The spiral does not require populists to be confined to one side. Mudde's example is Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign, which, once Trump was the nominee, became essentially a form of moral counter-populism: '*Trump is bad and we are good.*' [22056] '*The problem is populism when successful often leads to anti-populism and anti-populism pretty much used the same moral dynamics.*' [22056] Clinton's campaign, Mudde notes, was more negative than Trump's - and less focused on issues. The result is a spiral of polarisation that '*by and large undermines any possibility of compromise which is the basis of liberal democracy.*' [22056] When both camps inhabit a moral universe divided between the pure and the corrupt, the centre does not hold because it has been redefined as betrayal. Mounk's assessment of the American case is therefore bleak without being apocalyptic: 'American democracy is still alive, but it's been put at a level of risk that we have not experienced in our lifetimes.' [22057]

The relationship between populism's success and democratic health is also mediated by electoral and institutional structures - a point that argues against both panic and complacency. Mudde notes that the United States system *'favours the existing two parties.'* Populists can dominate states and localities, but have found it far harder to break through at the federal level as a third force. [22056] What the American system does allow, as the Trump era demonstrated, is the capture of one of the two parties from within. Proportional representation systems are more hospitable to populist entry: they lower the threshold for seats and influence without necessarily handing over the keys to government. [22056] Viewed dispassionately, the numbers are less terrifying than the headlines. Across nineteen EU countries, Mudde found, the most successful populist party is, on average, the third-biggest party in the country, with roughly 18 per cent of the vote - *'very, very, very far away from the majority.'* [22056] Calculated across all twenty-eight member states, the average falls below 15 per cent. That is a lot. It is not a takeover. The gap between electoral presence and systemic dominance is precisely where institutions either hold or fail.



Fragmentation and the Crisis of the Mainstream Right

Fragmentation is the broader weather system in which these parties grow. Kaltwasser documents the simultaneous pressure exerted by two long revolutions. The first is Inglehart's silent revolution: the gradual cultural liberalisation of Western societies, the shift towards post-materialist values, and the opening of the cultural agenda. The second is what Pierre Ignazi identified as early as 1992 as the silent counter-revolution: a segment of the electorate *'very unhappy with that development,'* authoritarian and nativist in orientation, and pushing back. [22058] The two revolutions occurring at once produce a multi-dimensional political space in which the economic and cultural axes are simultaneously active. The result is fragmentation and polarisation. [22058] The old catch-all party could manage a one-dimensional contest. It struggles, and often fails, when the map has two axes and the coalitions on each pull in opposite directions.

The crisis of the mainstream right is the structural amplifier. Kaltwasser's central argument is that mainstream right parties must hold together two increasingly incompatible electorates: those attracted by the silent revolution - liberal, progressive, open to cultural change - and those attracted by the counter-revolution - authoritarian, nativist, defensive of a lost order. *'Almost impossible to get these two different electorates together,'* he concludes, and this is what mainstream right parties across Western Europe are experiencing. [22058] Angela Merkel's long tenure is, on this reading, a case study in the trade-off. She was extraordinarily successful in office-seeking - four terms, coalition after coalition - but the policy dimension became so unclear that the question *'what the hell did she want'* became a fair summary of public confusion over immigration, energy,

and much else. [22058] Votes declined even as office was retained. Clarity was sacrificed to permanence. And populist competitors moved into the space that clarity had once occupied.

For Kaltwasser, the stakes are civilisational in the precise rather than the rhetorical sense. 'If we don't have strong mainstream right parties I think that it's very difficult to imagine that liberal democracy and the liberal democratic order is going to prevail in western Europe.' [22058] After 1945, mainstream right parties - above all the Christian democrats - were crucial to consolidating liberal democracy and building the European project. [22058] Their weakness is not a niche problem for conservatives. It is a problem for the order that conservatives, liberals and social democrats jointly constructed. Where checks and balances, independent courts and a robust media still function as circuit breakers, populist consolidation is harder. Where those circuit breakers have been weakened or captured - as Chapter 8 examined in detail - the same electoral share produces a very different regime outcome. Institutions are not incidental to the balance sheet. They make the difference between a corrective shock and systemic failure.

This is the crux, and it is uncomfortable. The same features that make populism an effective democratic alarm bell - its moralistic fervour, its anti-elite aggression, its capacity to mobilise the previously disengaged - are precisely those that make it corrosive when it moves from opposition to power. The corrective cannot be separated from the danger. They are packaged together in the same thin-centred ideology. You cannot have repoliticisation without the moral binary. You cannot have the mobilisation of the unheard without the construction of enemies. You cannot have the energy that forces mainstream parties to listen without the energy that, once in office, treats institutional restraint as a betrayal of the pure people. The balance sheet does not show two different phenomena, one healthy and one pathological. It shows one phenomenon with two faces, and which face appears depends on whether the populist is shouting from outside the gates or holding the keys.

Müller's warning against determinism is essential here. There is a persistent temptation, he notes, to draw straight lines from new forces to catastrophe - *'printing press, next day wars of religion; radio, next day Hitler'* - and 'these positions are not totally wrong, but they're also not quite right.' [22059] Nuance is not a luxury. Populism's consequences are not pre-ordained. They depend on institutional strength, the behaviour of centre-right elites, whether mainstream parties absorb legitimate grievances or sneer at them, and whether the circuit breakers hold when pressure comes. The ideology supplies a logic. The surrounding order determines how far that logic runs.

Crucially, Müller insists, 'the fact that people voted for the populist doesn't make them populists.' [22059] And 'there's very little evidence' of a comprehensive shift in popular mentalities away from democratic values. [22059] Top-down polarisation is real; so are moments when voters prioritise their side winning over certain values. That is not the same as the 1920s, when significant numbers of Europeans would have openly declared that they no longer believed in parliaments or liberalism. [22059] Most people who vote for populist parties are not rejecting democracy. They are dissatisfied with a system that has stopped serving them, or that they believe has stopped serving them, which in politics amounts to the same thing. That is not a verdict on democracy itself. It is a verdict on the parties and elites that were supposed to make it work - and on the post-democratic settlement that treated their concerns as category errors.

Mouffe sees the current moment as a fork in the road. If right populism prevails, the road leads to *'authoritarian nationalist forms of neoliberalism which, in the name of recovering democracy, actually restrict it drastically.'* If left populism prevails, it can deepen democratic participation and extend democratic values. [22062] This may be optimistic. The historical record of the past fifteen years suggests that the populist path from grievance to power to consolidation is more reliably

followed by the authoritarian right than by the democratic left. Orbán has imitators. The left-populist experiments have been fewer, shorter, and more easily absorbed or defeated. Mouffe's fork is real as a theoretical possibility. As an empirical tendency, the road has curved more in one direction than the other. That fact belongs on the balance sheet too.

The Balance Sheet

What, then, does the balance sheet actually show? Populism has genuinely repoliticised issues that elite consensus had buried. It has returned debates to the public sphere - on borders, on sovereignty, on austerity, on the reach of markets into public goods - that technocracy had filed under administrative necessity. [22056] Through election after election, it has demonstrated that significant portions of Western electorates feel unrepresented and unheard. Democracies ignore that finding at their peril. The silent revolution and the silent counter-revolution have redrawn the political map; the catch-all party is fading; the mainstream right is struggling to hold its coalition; the Christian democratic pillar has lost a third of its electorate. [22058] These are not hallucinations produced by demagogues. They are structural facts that demagogues exploit.

But the mechanism populism uses to achieve all this - the moralistic division of the world into pure people and corrupt elites, the refusal to treat opponents as legitimate, the conversion of politics into a struggle in which compromise equals contamination - is structurally destructive of the pluralism on which liberal democracy depends. [22056] Mutual toleration and institutional self-restraint, those unwritten pillars, cannot survive indefinitely in a climate where the other side is an enemy and every legal prerogative becomes a weapon. [22057] The Hungarian sequence is not a cautionary fairy tale. It is a documented pathway from democratic mandate to *'mostly free but no longer'* fair, travelled through lawful steps. [22057] On Mounk's account, the American level of risk is without recent precedent. [22057] The polarisation spiral, once driven by elites, feeds itself. [22059]

The corrective comes packaged with the pathogen. That is the honest finding, and it is more useful than either the celebration or the excommunication that dominates public debate. Populism is not simply the people's voice, pure and misheard. Nor is it simply a virus to be quarantined. It is a thin-centred ideology that thrives on real democratic deficits, performs a real repoliticising function, and carries a real anti-pluralist logic that, under favourable institutional conditions, consumes the system that allowed it to speak. Whether democracies can extract the diagnosis without administering the poison - whether they can hear the alarm without handing the fire brigade to arsonists - is not a question this chapter can settle. It is the question that leads, inevitably, to Chapter 10: what, if anything, can be done.

10. Fighting Back and Rebuilding: Lessons for Mainstream Politics

After more than a decade of disruption, the question hanging over liberal democracies is no longer merely what populism is. Its anatomy has been mapped, its alchemy described, its electoral arithmetic tallied. What remains - and what this final chapter must confront - is the harder question of what to do about it. Diagnosis, however precise, is not a cure. And the cure, if one exists, will not arrive through a single lever pulled in a single capital, nor as a clean technical fix administered by experts who somehow stand outside the politics they claim to repair. The populist revolt has exposed structural failures in representation, economic security, party systems, media incentives and the emotional register of democratic life. Addressing those failures requires something more demanding than clever messaging or a better fact-checking apparatus. It requires political will, coalitional imagination, and the courage to offer people something worth voting for.

That is not a counsel of despair. It is a counsel of seriousness. The preceding chapters have shown that populism thrives where mainstream politics has hollowed itself out - where parties have converged on a narrow neoliberal consensus, where job tenure has collapsed for a generation of workers, where elections have become managerial alternations rather than genuine contests over the direction of society, and where large portions of the population have simply stopped believing that anyone in power speaks for them. The tools for fighting back and rebuilding are, in important respects, already identifiable. What is less certain is whether the political classes that lost the plot are capable of recovering it.

The Italian Warning

One hundred years after Mussolini's March on Rome, Italy has a far-right government under Giorgia Meloni. The symbolism is not accidental, and neither is the substance. As Nadia Urbinati has observed, the Italian case crystallises a failure that extends far beyond the peninsula: every time a plebeian moment arises in Europe, it goes right, never left. [22063] That pattern is not a law of nature. It is the accumulated consequence of choices made by parties that once claimed to speak for the working and precarious classes, and then abandoned that claim.

Umberto Eco's fourteen characteristics of what he called ur-fascism remain a useful diagnostic. Traditionalism - the elevation of family, religion and homeland as sacred and non-negotiable - sits alongside a demand for homogeneity of values, an anthropology of inequality that treats hierarchy as natural, and an obsession with belonging that polices the boundary between those who are inside the nation and those who are not. [22063] Meloni's self-definition is almost a textbook illustration. She presents herself as *'a mother, a Christian, and an Italian'* - not as a woman with individual rights, nor as a citizen among equal citizens, but as the embodiment of a traditional role nested within a cultural and religious identity. Anti-abortion politics is reframed as pro-family and anti-gender-ideology. Religion functions less as theology than as a marker of cultural identity deployed against immigration. The language is contemporary; the underlying grammar is older.

What makes the Italian trajectory especially instructive is the way neoliberal and far-right logics have fused. The meritocracy myth - the insistence that outcomes reflect desert, and that failure is personal rather than structural - connects the neoliberal claim that *'it is your fault if you fail'* with a fascist hierarchical anthropology in which some people simply deserve more than others. [22063] When Italy's citizenship income law was abolished on the grounds that people must *'deserve what they have,'* the ideological thread was visible in plain sight. A policy that had provided a floor of security for the precarious was dismantled in the name of desert, and desert was defined by those already secure.

The left's great failure, Urbinati argues, is representational before it is programmatic. Voter turnout

in Italy has collapsed from roughly ninety per cent to sixty per cent or less. The poor and the precarious do not vote, in significant part, because the left does not represent them. [22063] Candidate lists contain no representatives from precarious or poor strata. The left never produced a serious proposal for precarious workers; it accepted neoliberalism and left a portion of the population without representation. As Jürgen Habermas put it, the responsibility lies with social democrats who are no longer capable of offering opportunity. [22063] When a section of the demos has no one who speaks its language, feels its precarity, or appears on a ballot paper that looks like its neighbourhood, that section does not vanish. It goes elsewhere - or stays at home, which in a majoritarian system is functionally a gift to whoever mobilises the angry remainder.

Eco's question, relayed by Urbinati, cuts both ways: when we ask who they are, we should also ask who we are. [22063] The Italian far right did not create the vacuum. It filled it. And Italy's dependence on some €255 billion in COVID recovery funds, even as Meloni aligned with Hungary and Poland against Brussels oversight, underscores a further tension: economic interdependence with European institutions coexists with a political project that treats those institutions as adversaries. [22063] Defending democracy, Urbinati insists, means resisting the minimalist temptation - the idea that, as long as elections are held, the substance of representation can wither without consequence. Formal procedures without substantive inclusion are a hollow shell. The Italian case is a warning written in the present tense.

The Engagement Dilemma

If the diagnosis includes the left's representational collapse, the strategic question that follows is whether mainstream parties should engage with populist claims or reject them outright. Cas Mudde's formulation has become almost proverbial because it is precise: populism *'often asks the right questions but gives the wrong answers'*. [22056] That is not a compliment dressed as criticism. It is an account of populism's corrective function. Issues that elites had removed from democratic debate - the privatisation of public transport, monetary policy set by unelected technocrats, the insulation of large areas of economic life from electoral contestation - were repoliticised by populist movements precisely because mainstream parties had treated them as settled, technical, or beyond the proper scope of politics. Populism, in Mudde's terms, is an *'illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism'*. [22056] The illiberalism is real and dangerous. The democratic grievance is often real as well.

The trap for anti-populists is mirroring. Mudde has observed that the spiral of polarisation means anti-populism can reproduce the moral dynamics of populism itself: a pure us against a corrupt or deplorable them, a politics of moral quarantine rather than persuasion. [22056] The 2016 Clinton campaign is the cautionary example. By standard measures, it was more negative than Trump's - and the negativity backfired, confirming among a decisive slice of voters the sense that elites held them in contempt. De-platforming creates martyrdom. Fact-checking alone does not change minds already shaped by distrust; people who believe the system is rigged do not trust its referees. Social media amplification of populist messaging, Mudde notes, is genuinely potent only when it breaks into mainstream coverage. [22056] The deeper problem is cultural and political rather than merely informational. Dismissing populist voters as simply ignorant or bigoted feeds the very alienation on which populism thrives. It confirms the story populists tell: that the people who run things despise you, do not listen, and will never change course.

Engagement, then, cannot mean capitulation to exclusionary framing. It means taking grievances seriously enough to offer better answers - answers that identify real sources of insecurity and propose remedies that do not require a scapegoat. That is harder than denunciation. It is also the only path that does not deepen the spiral.

Building a Counter-Hegemony

Chantal Mouffe has argued for a more ambitious response: a left-wing populism understood not as a mirror of the right, but as a fundamentally different discursive strategy. For Mouffe, populism is not an ideology with fixed content. It is a way of dividing the political field between the people and the oligarchy. [22062] What matters is how the people is constructed and who is named as the adversary. That construction is constitutive, not merely tactical.

Right-wing populism defines we in national or ethnic terms and identifies immigrants as the enemy. Crucially, it refuses to name neoliberal forces as the real adversary. [22062] Anger is redirected downwards and outwards - towards the migrant, the minority, the cosmopolitan - rather than upwards towards the structures that produced precarity in the first place. Left populism, if it is to mean anything distinctive, must define a radically different we: inclusive of workers, immigrants, the precarious middle class, LGBT people, feminists, ecologists and racialised minorities, united by what Mouffe calls a chain of equivalence. [22062] There is the oligarchy, the neoliberal establishment. The chain of equivalence does not erase differences among these groups; it articulates them around shared opposition to a common adversary and a shared commitment to extending liberty and equality.

Mouffe's diagnosis of the present is that we live in a populist moment precisely because the ruling class has destabilised itself through its own policies. Post-democracy reduced elections to mere alternation between centre-right and centre-left, eliminating genuine political alternatives. [22062] Parliament became a place for managing the existing order rather than contesting it. When dissatisfaction multiplies and no mainstream channel can absorb it, the field opens to whoever can speak in the register of the people against those above. The right occupied that register first in much of Europe and the United States. The left, Mouffe argues, must contest it rather than cede it.

That contestation includes extending a hand to right-populist voters - not validating their exclusionary framing, but offering different interpretive tools that redirect genuine grievances towards egalitarian goals. [22062] A worker who feels abandoned by globalisation is not automatically a xenophobe; a xenophobic vocabulary may be the only political language currently available that acknowledges the abandonment. Providing another language is political work, not a public-relations exercise.

Mouffe's radical reformism is careful about institutions. The goal is not to abolish them, but to transform them democratically from within - embracing neither the social-democratic accommodation that left workers stranded nor the anarchist anti-institutionalism that abandons the terrain of the state. [22062] Margaret Thatcher understood that language shapes hegemony: she used it strategically to shift the common-sense understanding of freedom and equality. The left, Mouffe insists, must do the same - recovering the capacity to redefine what freedom and equality mean in conditions of precarity, ecological crisis and concentrated economic power. Agonistic politics acknowledges that passion and conflict are inherent in democracy. The technocratic fantasy of consensus eliminates legitimate conflict and, in doing so, fuels the very populism it claims to oppose. [22062] A democracy that cannot accommodate disagreement in an adversarial but non-enemy form will find that disagreement returns as enmity.

The Reform Agenda

Strategy without structural reform, however, is theatre. Ian Shapiro's account of the underlying causes of the populist surge points towards specific remedies, even if the politics of implementing them is formidable. Three causes recur throughout his analysis: long-term job insecurity, party fragmentation, and the divergent response to the 2008 financial crisis. [22061]

Workers born since the late 1950s have faced a labour market in which changing jobs twelve to fifteen times over a working life has become a realistic expectation rather than a mark of failure. Middle-aged men have been hit hardest by declining job tenure. [22061] The political consequence is not abstract. Trump's slogan *'Make America Great Again'* acknowledged loss. Hillary Clinton's *'America's best years lie ahead'* denied it. That asymmetry mattered electorally. [22061] People who have experienced downward mobility or chronic insecurity do not reward politicians who tell them the future is bright while their present remains precarious. They reward politicians who acknowledge the loss - even when the remedies those politicians offer are simplistic, xenophobic or economically incoherent.

What is needed, Shapiro argues, is no mystery. Education must become a lifelong process rather than a one-time event in youth; Denmark is the gold standard for continuous reskilling linked to active labour-market policy. [22061] Massive investment is required for those who cannot retool in the way economists casually prescribe. The forty-five-year-old steelworker cannot be expected to become a software engineer. He can, however, build windmills, retrofit housing, or work in infrastructure if the public investment exists to create those jobs. [22061] Expanded social protection for populations that are not doing well is not optional padding; it is the condition under which economic transition does not become political dynamite.



The political system also requires structural reform. In the United States, safe seats mean that primary voters - often activists on the ideological fringes - effectively choose the representative in a large proportion of districts. Trump was chosen as the Republican candidate by roughly six per cent of the US electorate. [22061] Figures such as Jim Jordan and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez illustrate, from opposite ends of the spectrum, how safe-seat dynamics reward intensity over breadth. In the United Kingdom, Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour leader by some 450,000 members with a sixty-two per cent share, while the parliamentary party voted 172 to 40 in a motion of no confidence - leaving the party paralysed between its membership and its MPs. [22061] Reducing the distorting power of primaries, redistricting to reduce safe seats, introducing higher electoral thresholds in multi-party systems, and creating more single-member constituencies where fragmentation has gone too far are not exotic prescriptions. [22061]

The data on fragmentation are stark. OECD figures covering twenty-six countries over sixty years show the number of effective parties rising from fewer than six to more than eight. [22061] In Germany, the CDU and SPD fell below fifty per cent combined for the first time in 2021, while the AfD doubled from roughly ten per cent to twenty per cent and newer formations such as the BSW registered in the low teens. [22061] Party systems that once aggregated conflict into two or three large camps now scatter it across a crowded field, rewarding niche mobilisation and making stable governing coalitions harder to assemble.

The 2008 financial crisis remains the hinge. Franklin Roosevelt, confronting the Depression, tackled the real economy. The Obama administration, confronting 2008, bailed out the banks.

More than twenty million people lost their homes; elites recovered; workers did not. [22061] That divergence, Shapiro argues, gave rise to a generation of populist entrepreneurs - Trump, Farage, the AfD, Le Pen - and allowed figures such as Boris Johnson, Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to retool existing projects in a more explicitly anti-elite register. [22061] Biden's first term represented the first Democratic administration since the 1960s to attempt to reassemble something like the Great Society coalition - an experiment whose significance lies precisely in its attempt to reverse the post-2008 pattern. [22061]

Shapiro's summary is blunt and useful: 'It's not rocket science - the politics of getting it done is the hard part'. [22061] And if these things are not addressed: *'there will be another Trump and another Trump and another Trump'*. [22061] The warning is not rhetorical flourish. It is a claim about structural causation. Charisma and demagoguery exploit conditions; they do not create them from nothing. Leave those conditions intact and the supply of entrepreneurs will renew itself.

Defending Democracy: Four Strategies

Even well-designed reforms require a democracy sufficiently intact to enact them. Bill Scheuerman's typology of resistance strategies addresses a darker scenario: democratic backsliding that is gradual and civilian-led, yet capable of proceeding with coup-like speed. [22060] The question is not only how to win the next election under normal conditions, but also how to defend democracy's institutional and normative infrastructure when it is being hollowed out from within.

Scheuerman distinguishes four approaches. The first is elite pushback and the maintenance of institutional guardrails - the model associated with Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. It is necessary but insufficient. Levitsky's frank admission that *'democracies are defended by elites'* is both a realistic and a troubling observation, because elites do not always do the right thing. [22060] Laura Gamboa's research on moderate institutionalism - litigating, mobilising for the next election, the Wisconsin model of patient legal and electoral pushback - has shown the greatest success in the available studies. But the small-n problem and the rapid pace of modern backsliding limit how far those findings can be generalised. [22060] Guardrails work when they are staffed by elites acting in good faith, and when sufficient time is available. Neither condition can be assumed.

The second approach is civil disobedience in the Rawlsian tradition: public, nonviolent, conscientious, and maintaining fidelity to the law even while breaking particular laws. On Rawls's own account, it works in a *'nearly just society'*. [22060] The problem arises when shared liberal democratic norms themselves fragment. January 6 was either an act of patriotism or proto-fascism, depending on whom one asked. When the interpretive community that gives civil disobedience its meaning splits apart, the practice loses its elective affinity with liberal democracy - even as it retains a normative status that other forms of protest lack. [22060] Civil disobedience presupposes a horizon of shared legitimacy. Where that horizon fractures, the practice becomes harder to sustain as a common language of dissent.

The third approach draws on Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's research on civil resistance: broader nonviolent movements that mobilise large numbers, prompt shifts in the loyalties of security apparatuses, and prove more tactically resilient than violent alternatives. [22060] A decade ago, this appeared to be a genuinely hopeful model. Scheuerman's assessment of the more recent record is sobering. Smart repression has adapted - deploying nonlethal weapons, surveillance technology, the withdrawal of state funding from universities, and insidious social media manipulation. [22060] The record of civil resistance over the last decade is less encouraging than it appeared when *Why Civil Resistance Works* first shaped the debate. Adaptation does not mean defeat, but it does warn against complacency.

The fourth position in the typology is militant or uncivil disobedience. Rawls himself acknowledged

its legitimacy once institutional erosion had reached a sufficient threshold. Scheuerman is careful: that is not, or not yet, where established democracies find themselves. [22060] The caution matters. Premature escalation can give authoritarian actors the pretext they seek; delayed resistance can come too late. Judgement about thresholds is inescapably political and contextual.

All four approaches are connected by a structural tension. Mass politics is extraordinarily time-consuming and exhausting - creating deep friction with the acceleration of modern political life. [22060] And yet there is no substitute for it. What Levitsky and Ziblatt called a '*broad democratic coalition*,' including civil society leaders alongside party actors, remains the essential vehicle. [22060] Institutions do not defend themselves. Elites alone are unreliable. Movements without institutional footholds burn out or are repressed. The work of defence is coalitional, patient and unglamorous - which is precisely why it is difficult to sustain against opponents who thrive on spectacle and speed.

The Information Environment

None of these strategies operates in a vacuum. The information ecosystem is not merely a backdrop to the populist challenge; it is one of its structural drivers. Private media's pursuit of eyeballs produces the conflict and scandal that populists exploit. [22056] Donald Trump understood the media's own logic better than almost anyone in contemporary politics: he called journalists '*fake news*' and thereby kept himself in the headlines for days, turning antagonism into oxygen. [22056] Outrage is a business model. Polarisation is profitable. A media economy organised around attention will systematically amplify the performers who attract the most of it, and populist politics is, among other things, a performance optimised for that economy.

Cognitive mobilisation - the phenomenon whereby better-educated citizens demand accountability and challenge old forms of gatekeeping - cuts both ways. [22056] It produces critical citizens who refuse to defer to authority simply because it is authority. It also opens the door to conspiratorial thinking and the rejection of expertise, because the same sceptical disposition that interrogates power can be directed against any claim to knowledge that inconveniences a preferred narrative. The old gatekeepers were often arrogant and sometimes corrupt. Their erosion has not automatically produced a more enlightened public sphere. Instead, it has produced a fragmented one, in which trust is scarce and incentives to manufacture distrust are strong.

Mudde's observation that social media amplification of populist messaging matters most when it breaks into mainstream coverage points towards a systemic rather than a channel-by-channel response. [22056] Building alternative information outlets is useful, but insufficient. The incentive structures of the entire information economy - the advertising models, the engagement metrics, the collapse of local news, the fusion of entertainment and politics - shape what counts as political reality for millions of people. Reforming those structures is as much a democratic task as reforming electoral systems or labour markets. Without such reform, even well-crafted programmes and sincere coalitional work will struggle to be heard above the noise that rewards the simplest and angriest story.

What Fighting Back Requires

So where does that leave the project of fighting back and rebuilding? The honest answer is that no one can know. History does not owe democracy a happy ending, and the record of the last decade is strewn with moments when institutions bent further than their defenders thought possible. Predictions of resilience have been wrong before. Predictions of inevitable collapse have also been wrong. What can be said, without offering false comfort, is that the errors can be diagnosed and the tools identified.

The Italian case shows what happens when the left abandons the precarious and the poor: turnout

collapses, representation withers, and plebeian energy flows rightward into projects that wrap hierarchy and exclusion in the language of family, faith and nation. [22063] Mudde's corrective insight shows why pure refusal is a dead end: populism often identifies real exclusions from democratic debate, and anti-populism that merely moralises against voters deepens the alienation it fears. [22056] Mouffe's counter-vision shows that the construction of the people is a political act, not a demographic fact - and that a left unable to articulate an inclusive we against oligarchic power will keep losing the argument to those who articulate an exclusive we against the migrant and the minority. [22062] Shapiro's agenda shows that job security, lifelong education, social protection and party-system reform are not utopian demands; they are specific responses to specific causes, and the obstacle is political will rather than technical ignorance. [22061] Scheuerman's typology shows that defending democracy under pressure requires elites, movements, legal strategy and civil society in combination - and that none of these is sufficient alone. [22060] The media environment shows that attention economies will continue to favour conflict until their incentives are changed.

None of this guarantees success. Coalitions fracture. Reforms stall. Smart repression adapts. Voters who have been told for a generation that failure is their own fault may not trust the sudden rediscovery of solidarity. The acceleration of political time works against the slow work of organising. And the international context - from Meloni's alignment with illiberal governments inside the European Union to the global circulation of populist tactics and funding - means that no democracy rebuilds in isolation. [22063]

And yet despair is not analysis. Democracies have recovered from worse fractures than the present one. The New Deal was a response to catastrophe; the postwar social settlements in Europe were built from rubble; the civil rights transformation in the United States was won against entrenched resistance by precisely the kind of broad democratic coalition that contemporary theorists still describe as essential. [22060] Those episodes were not inevitable. They were made - by movements, by parties that rediscovered their purpose, by elites who sometimes chose the republic over their short-term advantage, and by leaders who offered people a future that acknowledged loss without surrendering to nostalgia or scapegoating.

The challenge facing mainstream politics is therefore not primarily a lack of knowledge. The knowledge is available, scattered across the analyses this book has drawn together: the representational void on the left, the corrective kernel inside populist revolt, the discursive battle over who counts as the people, the structural economics of insecurity, the institutional mechanics of fragmentation and safe seats, the repertoire of democratic resistance, and the distorted incentives of the information economy. The challenge is one of political will, coalitional imagination, and the courage to offer people something worth voting for - something that does not require them to hate their neighbours in order to feel seen, and does not require them to pretend that the last forty years of economic restructuring left everyone a winner. If those things are not offered, Shapiro's warning stands: there will be another Trump, and another, and another. [22061] If they are offered - imperfectly, contentiously, through the agonistic struggle that Mouffe insists is democracy's native condition rather than its failure [22062] - then the populist revolt need not be the last word on the democratic experiment. It can be what crises sometimes become when societies are still capable of learning: a brutal education, and a chance to rebuild on foundations that were always more fragile than their beneficiaries cared to admit.

The work begins where it has always begun - not in the abstract defence of a system, but in the concrete recovery of representation, security and meaning for people who concluded, not without reason, that the system had stopped working for them. Whether that recovery arrives in time is the open question on which the future of democracy now turns.

Acknowledgement: A Tribute to the Scholars

This book has explored populism's anatomy and alchemy, its causes and consequences, its corrective potential and its democratic dangers. Behind that exploration stand the voices, arguments and years of research of thirteen scholars whose work has shaped not only this text, but the entire field of contemporary populism studies.

Each of them has approached the phenomenon from a distinct angle - political theory, comparative politics, discourse analysis, democratic theory, political economy. Together, their contributions form a composite map of the populist moment: its conceptual architecture, its rhetorical repertoire, its economic roots, its cultural anxieties, its governing contradictions, and the institutional fragility it exposes.

What follows is a tribute to those thirteen minds. It is not merely a list of names or citations. It is an acknowledgement of intellectual journeys, of bodies of work built over decades, and of ideas that have travelled from seminar rooms and academic journals into public debate, policy discussion, and - one hopes - the renewal of democratic practice itself.

The order mirrors the way their work threads through this book, beginning with the scholars who define populism's conceptual core and ending with those who illuminate the paths forward. Each profile sketches the scholar's background, central insights, recent work, and the particular way this book has drawn on their thinking. The debt is profound. The gratitude is lasting.



CAS MUDDE

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1967, the Netherlands
- Nationality: Dutch
- Education: MA and PhD in Political Science, Leiden University (supervised by Peter Mair)
- Current Position: Stanley Wade Shelton UGAF Professor of International Affairs and Distinguished Research Professor, University of Georgia
- Honours: Stein Rokkan Prize (2008), Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award (2015), foreign member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, honorary doctorate from Södertörn University (2026)

Core Concepts and Insights

Cas Mudde is the scholar who provided populism studies with its most influential definition. His characterisation of populism as a *thin-centred ideology* has become the field's standard vocabulary. The definition is both precise and layered: populism divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps - the pure people versus the corrupt elite - and insists that politics should express the people's general will.

Thin-centred captures a crucial insight: populism does not offer a complete blueprint for government. It says little about economic systems, foreign policy, or welfare design. Those gaps are filled by a *host ideology* - nationalism, nativism, socialism, social democracy - to which populism attaches itself. This explains why populism can appear on the left (Hugo Chávez, Podemos) and on the right (Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán) without losing its structural identity.

The division Mudde describes is not sociological but *moral*. Wealth or formal office does not automatically place someone in the elite; a billionaire can claim to belong morally to the people. Conversely, a judge, academic, or poorly paid civil servant can be portrayed as elite if their values are deemed corrupt. Membership is determined by virtue, not class position.

This moralism has consequences for governing. *Compromise becomes contamination*: if the pure negotiate with the corrupt, they risk becoming corrupt themselves. This logic closes the door on the incremental, pluralist bargaining that representative democracy requires. Political opponents are recast as moral enemies, while defeat is framed not as an electoral setback but as an existential catastrophe.

Mudde also formulated the tension that runs through much of this book: populism as an *illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism*. Populists invoke popular sovereignty - a democratic principle - but their hostility to pluralism, minority rights, and autonomous institutions is profoundly illiberal. At the same time, their rise often reflects genuine failures: technocratic insulation, elite self-dealing, and the removal of consequential decisions from democratic contestation. Populism can repoliticise what liberalism has depoliticised, but it does so in ways that threaten the very freedoms that democracy is meant to protect.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

This book draws more extensively on Mudde than on any other scholar. *Chapter 1* builds its definition of populism around the thin-centred ideology, the pure-people/corrupt-elite dichotomy, and the moral rather than material basis of group membership. *Chapter 2* uses the host-ideology concept to explain why populism travels across the ideological spectrum, aligning itself with nativism on the right and socialism on the left. *Chapters 6 and 9* draw on Mudde's analysis of media, conflict, and the repoliticisation of previously insulated issues. *Chapter 7* applies his framework to Syriza's experience in Greece, tracing the friction between populist rhetoric and the constraints of governing. *Chapters 9 and 10* return to his assessment of populism's democratic record: populism asks important questions about representation and responsiveness, but offers answers that corrode pluralism and compromise.

Throughout, the book treats Mudde's definition not as a settled taxonomic box but as a living analytical tool - one that clarifies without oversimplifying, acknowledges populism's corrective potential without romanticising it, and keeps the tension between its democratic and illiberal elements in view.

Selected Publications

- *Youth Wings of the Populist Radical Right* (with Ann-Catrine Jungar et al.), Oxford University Press, 2026
- *The Far Right Today*, Polity, 2019
- *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser), Oxford University Press, 2017
- *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2007 (Stein Rokkan Prize)
- *The Populist Zeitgeist, Government and Opposition*, 2004



PAUL TAGGART

Personal and Academic Background

- Current Position: Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Sussex

Core Concepts and Insights

Paul Taggart introduced two enduring concepts to the study of populism: the *Heartland* and the idea of populism as a political creature that cannot survive without a host. The Heartland is neither a real place nor a statistically complete population. It is an *imagined and emotionally charged version of the past* whose supposedly authentic inhabitants constitute the people. It is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere - a moral image of wholeness, purity, and belonging that populists invoke to define who counts and who does not. The Heartland allows the people to be constructed negatively through exclusion. It does not require an exhaustive census. Its borders shift: today's outsider may be the immigrant, tomorrow the cosmopolitan, the next day the intellectual. The concept explains how populism can feel concrete and vague at the same time - rooted in nostalgia for something that never quite existed, yet powerful enough to mobilise millions.

Taggart's second contribution is his account of populism's *deep ambivalence towards representative politics*. Populists distrust parties, parliaments, and professional politicians, yet must use precisely those institutions to gain and exercise power. This produces what Taggart calls an *episodic* quality: populism flares up at moments of crisis or mobilisation, but struggles to sustain itself as a governing project because it lacks the programmatic detail and institutional patience that government requires.

When populists take office, Taggart identifies *three broad strategies*: *moderation* into more conventional politics; *institutional restructuring* to fit the populist vision (rewriting constitutions, centralising power, weakening checks); or *governing as if still in opposition*, maintaining permanent disruption and mobilisation rather than settling into routine administration. These are not mutually exclusive boxes, but tendencies that can overlap and shift.

Taggart also developed the idea of *unpolitics* - populism's promise to transcend or purify politics even while operating through political institutions. Populists claim that real representation would not require bargaining, compromise, or pluralism; it would simply enact the people's will. This utopian framing sets populism on a collision course with the messy, impure, slow-moving machinery of representative democracy.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 2 uses Taggart's Heartland to explain the imagined past from which the real people are drawn, combining it with his portrayal of populism as a thin creature dependent on an ideological host. The chapter retains Taggart's emphasis on *ambivalence towards representative politics*, distinguishing his framework from Mudde's more ideology-centred approach. *Chapter 7*, on the friction of governing,

draws heavily on Taggart's three strategies for populists in power. It applies those strategies to Syriza in Greece, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Trump in the United States, showing how the tension between insurgency and administration unfolds in practice. The book also draws on Taggart's observations about *spectacle and the reluctant-politician trope*: the leader who claims not to want power, but accepts it only out of duty to the people. That performance reinforces the anti-political posture whilst advancing a profoundly political project.

Selected Publications

- Populism and Democracy: The Road Ahead (with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser), *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2025
- Populism and Democracy: Mapping the Field (with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser), *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2025
- The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties, *British Journal of Political Science*, 2024
- *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (co-edited with Rovira Kaltwasser, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy), Oxford University Press, 2017
- Populism and Unpolitics, in *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, Routledge
- *Populism*, Open University Press, 2000



YASCHA MOUNK

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1982, Germany
- Nationality: German-American
- Education: History, University of Cambridge; PhD in Government, Harvard University (supervised by Michael Sandel)
- Current Position: Professor of the Practice of International Relations, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; Senior Fellow, SNF Agora Institute
- Honours: *The People vs. Democracy* named among the best books of 2018 by the *Financial Times*

Core Concepts and Insights

Yascha Mounk's central contribution is his distinction between ordinary *anti-elitism* and the more dangerous *anti-pluralism* that defines populism. Democratic challengers routinely criticise governing

elites; this is a normal part of opposition politics. Populists go further, claiming that they, and they alone, represent the real people. Political opponents are not merely wrong - they are *fundamentally illegitimate*: traitors and enemies whose interests need not count.

This distinction provides vital clarity. It explains why not every insurgent or outsider candidate is a populist, and why the most dangerous element of populism is not its critique of elites (which may be warranted), but its *rejection of pluralism* - the refusal to accept that a democracy contains many legitimate voices, interests, and visions of the common good.

Mounk situates populism within a broader analysis of liberal democracy's *internal tensions*. Democracy, understood as popular sovereignty, can conflict with liberalism, understood as rights, the rule of law, and constraints on majorities. When these elements pull apart, two pathological forms emerge: *illiberal democracy*, in which elections survive but rights and institutional checks erode; and *undemocratic liberalism*, in which institutions protect rights but insulate major decisions from democratic contestation, fuelling the sense that voting changes nothing.

In Mounk's account, populism thrives in the gap created by undemocratic liberalism. Citizens experience important decisions - on trade, immigration, monetary policy, and European integration - as being removed from electoral influence. Populists exploit that frustration, but their solution is to weaken the liberal constraints that protect minorities, opposition rights, and institutional independence.

Mounk also warns that illiberal democracy is not a stable end state. Once incumbents capture the media, judiciary, and electoral administration, the system can slide from competitive authoritarianism into *outright dictatorship*, all whilst retaining democratic rhetoric. His warning is both structural and urgent: the long-run danger is not a mildly illiberal but still competitive democracy, but the incremental closure of democratic space itself.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 1 uses Mounk's concept of anti-pluralism to distinguish populism from ordinary anti-establishment politics. The chapter emphasises that *the exclusive claim to representation* - 'I alone represent the people' - is what turns a democratic challenge into a populist threat. *Chapter 2* applies Mounk's cross-ideological comparison, showing that populists differ widely on policy yet share a common narrative structure. *Chapter 8*, on democratic backsliding, deploys his framework of liberal rights and popular sovereignty to examine Hungary's incremental erosion of competitive democracy. *Chapter 9* uses Mounk's warning that populism can progress from illiberal democracy towards illiberal dictatorship, and cites his assessment that American democracy had entered a period of unusual and serious risk. The book treats Mounk as a guide not only to populism's conceptual contours, but also to its *real-world trajectory* and the mechanisms by which democracies decay.

Selected Publications

- *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*, 2023
- *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*, 2022
- *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State*, 2019
- *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*, 2018
- *Stranger in My Own Country: A Jewish Family in Modern Germany*, 2014
- Founder and editor-in-chief, *Persuasion*; host, *The Good Fight* podcast



JAN-WERNER MÜLLER

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1970, Germany
- Nationality: German
- Education: BSc, University College London (1994); MPhil, Oxford (1996); DPhil, Oxford (1999)
- Current Position: Class of 1943 University Professor of Politics, Princeton University; founding director, Project in the History of Political Thought; director, Program in Political Philosophy
- Honours: Guggenheim Fellowship (2024), Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (2025), European Academy of Sciences and Arts (2018), Bavarian Book Prize for *Furcht und Freiheit*

Core Concepts and Insights

Jan-Werner Müller's defining contribution is his insistence that populism is, at its core, *anti-pluralist*. Its crucial claim is both moral and exclusive: only the populist and the populist's supporters constitute the authentic people. Everyone else - minorities, opposition parties, critical media, independent judges - is *morally external to the demos*. Electoral defeat can therefore be explained away as fraud or manipulation, while critics can be dismissed as illegitimate rather than merely mistaken.

Müller draws a sharp distinction between *adversaries and enemies*. Democratic adversaries reject one another's policies but recognise each other's right to compete, win, and govern. Populists turn contestation into an existential struggle. Opponents are not merely wrong; they are threats to the nation, traitors, or puppets of foreign powers. This reframing enables supporters to tolerate - or even celebrate - anti-democratic conduct by their own side because the alternative has been presented as catastrophic.

A second key insight is *top-down polarisation*. Müller insists that a vote for a populist does not prove that the voter has internalised a fully populist worldview. Leaders and party elites cultivate this binary, make previously unacceptable positions appear normal, and signal to supporters that certain groups are legitimate targets. *Centre-right elites* are especially consequential: when they mainstream far-right frames, adopt nativist rhetoric, or enter a coalition with radical parties, they lend respectability to ideas that were recently beyond the pale.

Müller also challenges the oxymoron *illiberal democracy*. When communicative rights, media pluralism, and meaningful electoral competition disappear, the resulting order should no longer receive democratic validation. Labels matter: calling Hungary or Turkey illiberal democracies grants them a legitimacy they no longer deserve. If elections are no longer free and fair, if opposition is criminalised, if courts are captured, the system is authoritarian, not democratic.

In *Democracy Rules*, Müller links democratic freedom to *equality and uncertainty*. No political actor can permanently claim to know or embody the people. Elections and public contestation must remain

genuinely open. Once a leader or party treats victory as preordained and defeat as impossible, democracy's essential openness has been foreclosed.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 1 uses Müller's distinction between adversaries and enemies, alongside his account of top-down polarisation, to explain how populist elites turn policy disagreement into moral warfare.

Chapter 4 draws on his insistence that material demands also concern *recognition, identity, and respect* - economic grievance and cultural anxiety are not separate tracks but are mutually reinforcing. *Chapter 6* applies Müller's warning against *technological determinism*: social media platforms did not cause populism, but their business models - optimised for engagement, outrage, and emotional intensity - interact with populist rhetoric in dangerous ways. *Chapters 8 and 9* draw on Müller's critique of illiberal democracy and his warning that *populist outcomes are not predetermined*. The fact that many citizens vote for populist parties does not mean that entire electorates have abandoned democracy; much depends on what elites do with that support, and whether democratic institutions and norms hold.

Selected Publications

- *Street, Palace, Square: The Architecture of Democratic Spaces*, Penguin, 2026
- *Democracy Rules*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (US) / Penguin (UK), 2021
- *Furcht und Freiheit: Für einen anderen Liberalismus*, Suhrkamp, 2019 (Bavarian Book Prize)
- *What Is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016
- *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Yale University Press, 2011
- *Constitutional Patriotism*, Princeton University Press, 2007



CHANTAL MOUFFE

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1943, Charleroi, Belgium
- Nationality: Belgian
- Education: Universities of Louvain, Paris, and Essex
- Current Position: Emeritus Professor of Political Theory, Department of Social Sciences, University of Westminster
- Honours: Honorary doctorates from University of Valparaíso (2014), University of Costa Rica (2019), KU Leuven (2019)

Core Concepts and Insights

Chantal Mouffe approaches populism not as a fixed ideology, but as a *discursive strategy* - a means of constructing a political frontier that divides society into two camps: the people and the oligarchy. The composition of each side is not predetermined; it is *politically constructed*. It is therefore necessary to distinguish left populism from right populism: they draw the dividing line in different places and include different groups within the people.

Her broader democratic theory is one of *agonistic pluralism*. Mouffe argues that conflict cannot be eliminated from politics through rational consensus or technocratic management. The Habermasian dream of a conflict-free public sphere is not only unattainable but also undesirable: it ignores the role of passion, identity, and power in political life. Democratic institutions should *transform antagonism into agonism* - turning relations between enemies (who seek to destroy one another) into relations between adversaries (who contest fiercely but recognise each other's legitimacy).

Mouffe's defence of *left populism* is both strategic and normative. She constructs the people as a *chain of equivalence* linking workers, immigrants, precarious groups, feminists, LGBT communities, ecological movements, and racialised minorities. Their demands are not treated as identical, but are articulated around a shared opposition to oligarchic and neoliberal power. The frontier runs vertically - people versus oligarchy - not horizontally (nationals versus foreigners, as in right populism).

Right populism, by contrast, constructs a nationally or ethnically exclusive people and redirects dissatisfaction towards migrants, minorities, and globalists. The structure - people versus elite - may look similar, but its content and consequences are radically different.

Mouffe's concept of *post-democracy* describes the period from the 1990s to the 2008 crisis, when centre-left and centre-right parties converged around neoliberal economic policy and offered voters little substantive choice. Politics was reduced to technocratic management, while major decisions were insulated from electoral contestation. In Mouffe's view, left populism is a *democratic counter-hegemonic project* capable of restoring genuine contestation and repoliticising what the post-political consensus had depoliticised.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 2 explicitly contrasts Mouffe's discursive-strategy approach with the thin-centred-ideology frameworks of Mudde and Taggart. It presents her left/right distinction, the chain of equivalence, and the political construction of the people as analytical tools that prevent populism from becoming synonymous with radical right. *Chapter 9* draws on Mouffe's account of the *populist moment* as marking the return of politics after the post-political consensus, as well as her insistence that conflict is not a pathology but a necessary feature of democracy. *Chapter 10* applies her proposals to the task of democratic renewal: building an inclusive we, pursuing radical reformism rather than centrist compromise, and treating political opponents as adversaries rather than enemies.

The book is cautiously critical of Mouffe's empirical optimism. It notes that authoritarian-right populisms have often proved more durable than left-populist experiments (Syriza, Podemos), and that the chain of equivalence is easier to describe in theory than to construct in practice. Nevertheless, it treats her agonistic framework as an essential *corrective to overly consensus-based models* of democracy.

Selected Publications

- *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, Verso, 2022
- *A Green Democratic Revolution*, 2023
- *For a Left Populism*, Verso, 2018
- *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, 2013
- *On the Political*, 2005
- *The Democratic Paradox*, 2000
- *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (with Ernesto Laclau), 1985



NADIA URBINATI

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1955, Italy
- Nationality: Italian; naturalised United States citizen
- Education: PhD, European University Institute, Florence (1989)
- Current Position: Kyriakos Tsakopoulos Professor of Political Theory and Hellenic Studies, Department of Political Science, Columbia University
- Honours: David and Elaine Spitz Prize for *Mill on Democracy* (2004), Lenfest/Columbia Distinguished Faculty Award (2008-09), Commander of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic (2008), Capalbio International Prize for *Me the People* (2020)

Core Concepts and Insights

Nadia Urbinati examines populism as a *transformation from within electoral democracy* rather than an external invasion. The populist leader claims to embody a unified people, treating competing representatives, independent institutions, and plural opinion as obstacles to the people's authentic voice. Democracy is not overthrown; it is *disfigured*.

Her work is rooted in the theory and history of *representation*. Representative democracy, Urbinati argues, is not a defective substitute for direct rule. It is a system in which opinion, advocacy, and political judgement remain *plural and revisable*. Elections do not produce a single, final will of the people; they produce mandates that are partial, contested, and open to ongoing interpretation.

Populism disfigures this system by *collapsing the distinction between the whole citizenry and one partisan section* that claims to represent the whole. The populist leader's supporters become the only authentic people; minorities and opponents are recast as guests, privileged outsiders, or enemies. This produces *monism and exclusive representation*: one voice, one will, and one legitimate interpretation of the public good.

Urbinati also connects contemporary populism to longstanding *democratic and anti-democratic traditions*. In her analysis of Italy's far right, she draws on Umberto Eco's concept of *ur-fascism* to identify recurring elements: the cult of tradition, the rejection of modernism, the appeal to a frustrated middle class, and an obsession with conspiracy. These are not identical to 1930s fascism, but they echo it.

Her recent work highlights the Italian right's focus on the *trinity of family, religion, and homeland* (as articulated by Giorgia Meloni), and how solidarity is redrawn on the basis of moral merit. Those deemed undeserving - migrants, the long-term unemployed, single mothers - are excluded from the safety net. Representation becomes conditional: only those considered morally deserving have a claim to be represented.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 1 uses Urbinati to reinforce the claim that *exclusive representation and rejection of social plurality* are central to populism, rather than incidental features. *Chapter 4* draws on her analysis of Italy's far right, the politics of family, religion, and homeland, and the *representational failure of the left* among precarious and poorer citizens. *Chapter 5* applies Urbinati's account of *low-cultural aesthetics* and performances of authenticity - the use of bad taste, folk culture, and deliberate vulgarity to signal distance from elite refinement. *Chapter 10* returns to her diagnosis of the Italian left's representational vacuum, and to her warning that formal elections cannot compensate indefinitely for substantive exclusion.

The book treats Urbinati's *representation-centred theory* as a counterweight to approaches focused purely on performance or communication. Populism is not only about how leaders speak; it is about how democracy's core institution - representation - is reimagined, and ultimately undermined.

Selected Publications

- *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019 (Capalbio Prize)
- *The Tyranny of the Moderns*, Yale University Press, 2015
- *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, Harvard University Press, 2014
- *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*, University of Chicago Press, 2006
- *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government*, University of Chicago Press, 2002 (Spitz Prize)



PIPPA NORRIS

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1953
- Nationality: British-American
- Education: BA in Politics and Philosophy, University of Warwick (1974); MSc (1975) and PhD in Politics, London School of Economics (1988)
- Current Position: Paul F. McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics, Harvard Kennedy School; affiliated with Harvard's Department of Government, Center for European Studies, and Weatherhead Center for International Affairs
- Honours: Johan Skytte Prize, Karl Deutsch Award, Sir Isaiah Berlin Lifetime Achievement Award

(2017), Samuel Eldersveld Award (2020), Murray Edelman Award (2021), Warren E. Miller Award (2022), International Fellow of the British Academy (2024), Sir David Butler Award (2025), honorary DSc from the University of London (2026)

Core Concepts and Insights

Pippa Norris defines populism as a *discourse about governance*, rather than as a fixed party family or type of leadership. Its claims about anti-establishment politics and popular sovereignty can be adopted across a range of economic and cultural positions. This definitional choice prevents populist from becoming synonymous with radical right and creates scope for studying left-populist, centrist-populist, and libertarian-populist variants.

Her *four-quadrant model* cross-classifies parties along two axes: the economic left-right axis and liberal-authoritarian cultural values. The resulting map distinguishes *authoritarian conservatives* (right economically, authoritarian culturally), *progressive-left populists*, *welfare chauvinists or nativist socialists* (left economically, authoritarian culturally), and *free-market libertarians*. The model demonstrates that populist and authoritarian are not synonyms, and that economic and cultural cleavages can cut across one another.

Together with Ronald Inglehart, Norris developed the *cultural backlash* thesis. They argue that authoritarian populism is fuelled not primarily by economic decline, but by a reaction amongst citizens - especially older, less educated, white, and rural voters - who experience progressive value change, immigration, and multiculturalism as threats to familiar identities and social hierarchies. Economic insecurity matters, but its political significance is filtered through cultural values and authoritarian predispositions.

Norris's work on *sceptical trust* offers a normative and empirical alternative to both blind faith and blanket cynicism. A healthy democracy requires citizens to *trust but verify*: holding authorities and institutions accountable through evidence-based scrutiny, without treating every expert, journalist, or civil servant as inherently corrupt. Populist leaders cultivate *cynical distrust* - the assumption that all elites lie, all media manipulate, and all institutions serve hidden agendas. That generalised suspicion corrodes the epistemic foundations on which democracy depends.

Her comparative research on *populism and the COVID-19 pandemic* found that strongly populist governments responded more slowly to the crisis, were less likely to follow scientific advice, and were more likely to prioritise political messaging over public-health outcomes. This pattern held across regions and regime types, suggesting that *anti-expert rhetoric has governing consequences*, rather than merely campaign consequences.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 2 uses Norris's *governance-discourse definition and four quadrants* to demonstrate that populist discourse travels across different economic and cultural combinations, and to resist the conflation of populism with the radical right. *Chapter 4* draws on the *cultural backlash* framework to link authoritarian populism to identity threat, conventionalism, and preferences for strong leaders. *Chapter 7* applies Norris's pandemic research to argue that anti-expert populist rhetoric constrained policy choices during the COVID-19 crisis. The chapter cites differences in health outcomes and lockdown stringency amongst strongly populist governments, while noting that these claims should be verified against Norris's underlying study. *Chapter 9* draws on her discussion of identity, community, fear, and resentment, as well as her warning that *cultural and economic drivers interact* rather than operating on separate tracks. The book also acknowledges Norris's wider scholarship on *electoral integrity*, trust, and democratic resilience, placing cultural backlash within that broader research programme.

Selected Publications

- *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify*, Oxford University Press, 2022 (Ronald F. Inglehart Best Book Award, 2023)
- *Things Fall Apart, the Center Cannot Hold: Fractionalized and Polarized Party Systems*, *European Political Science*, 2024

- Big Little Election Lies: Cynical and Credulous Evaluations of Electoral Fraud, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2024
- Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?, *Political Studies*, 2023
- Measuring Populism Worldwide, *Party Politics*, 2020
- *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (with Ronald Inglehart), Cambridge University Press, 2019



BENJAMIN MOFFITT

Personal and Academic Background

- Education: PhD in Government and International Relations, University of Sydney; BA Honours in Sociology and Communications, University of Wollongong
- Current Position: Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, School of Social Sciences, Monash University
- Honours: Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award; named the leading Australian university researcher in Political Science by *The Australian* (2026)

Core Concepts and Insights

Benjamin Moffitt reconceptualised populism as a *political style and performance*, rather than solely as an ideology or discourse. In his framework, style refers to the repertoires of embodiment, aesthetics, and communication that political actors use to resonate with audiences. Populism concerns *how politics is performed*, not only what is said or believed.

Moffitt identifies *three elements of populist style*: the appeal to the people against the elite; the *performance of crisis* (the claim that the nation faces an existential threat requiring urgent, decisive action); and the deployment of *bad manners* - vulgarity, political incorrectness, breaches of etiquette, and the deliberate use of low-cultural aesthetics (fast food, tabloid media, folk culture) to signal authenticity and distance from elite refinement.

Bad manners are not incidental. They constitute a *class performance*: the populist leader eats McDonald's, speaks crudely, dismisses political correctness, and violates the norms of respectability politics. This performance tells supporters, '*I am like you; the elite despise us both.*' It also provokes outrage from established media and political elites, which the populist then presents as evidence of the elite's disconnection.

Moffitt situates populism within the *mediatisation of politics* - the transformation of political communication by mass media, social media, and the 24-hour news cycle. Populist style is optimised for visibility, conflict, and emotional intensity, all of which attract media attention. The *performance of crisis* creates urgency and justifies rule-breaking; bad manners generate spectacle; and the people-versus-elite binary provides narrative simplicity. His framework explains why populism can *feel the same across wildly different ideological contexts*: Trump and Chávez, Farage and Iglesias, Le Pen and Tsipras do not share policy programmes, but they draw on the same stylistic repertoire - informality, transgression, crisis rhetoric, and the claim to speak for ordinary people against out-of-touch elites.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 5 is based almost entirely on Moffitt's framework. It uses his concept of *bad manners and low-cultural aesthetics* to explain Trump's McDonald's photo-ops, Farage's pints-and-pubs branding, and Berlusconi's bawdy humour. The chapter presents these not as accidents of personality, but as deliberate *stylistic choices with political effects*. Chapter 6, on media and the attention economy, draws on Moffitt's account of *mediatisation and the performance of crisis*. Populist style and platform algorithms interact: both reward emotional intensity, conflict, and simplicity. The chapter also draws on Moffitt's observation that populism thrives in *high-choice media environments*, where attention is scarce and provocation cuts through.

The book presents Moffitt's performance-centred approach as *complementary to, not contradictory with*, the ideology-centred (Mudde) and discourse-centred (Mouffe) approaches. Style provides the delivery mechanism; ideology and discourse supply the content. All three are needed to explain populism's contemporary power.

Selected Publications

- *Populism*, Polity Press, 2020 (second edition, Key Concepts series)
- *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, 2016
- How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism, *Government and Opposition*, 2015
- Populism and Media in Western Europe, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 2017
- Articles in *European Journal of Political Research*, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Political Studies*, and *Democratization*



RUTH WODAK

Personal and Academic Background

- Born: 1950, London
- Nationality: British-Austrian
- Education: MA and PhD in Linguistics, University of Vienna
- Current Positions: Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Discourse Studies, Lancaster University; Honorary Professor, University of Vienna; affiliated with the University of Łódź
- Honours: Wittgenstein Award (Austrian Science Fund, 1996), Kerstin Hesselgren Chair (Swedish Parliament, 2011), Bruno Kreisky Prize for lifetime achievement (2020), honorary doctorates from the University of Örebro and the University of Łódź

Core Concepts and Insights

Ruth Wodak brought *critical discourse analysis* to the study of populism, demonstrating that language does not merely describe political reality but actively constructs it. Her *discourse-historical approach* situates texts within their historical, political, and social contexts, tracing how rhetorical strategies evolve, become normalised, and spread across movements and borders.

Wodak identifies a repertoire of radical-right rhetorical strategies. *Nativism* and the blood and soil trope define authentic belonging in terms of ancestry and territory, excluding immigrants and minorities from the imagined community. *Calculated ambivalence* involves conveying different messages to different audiences: dog-whistles, euphemism, and plausible deniability allow leaders to signal extremism to core supporters whilst maintaining respectability among mainstream audiences.

The *dead cat strategy* (a term borrowed from political consultancy) involves introducing a shocking or outrageous statement into public debate to dominate the news cycle and divert attention from damaging issues. The content of the provocation matters less than its capacity to shift the agenda. The strategy works because media organisations, competing for clicks and ratings, amplify the spectacle.

Wodak also analyses *victim–perpetrator reversal*: the rhetorical move through which the dominant group (white, native-born, Christian-majority) claims victim status, whilst those who have historically been marginalised are cast as aggressors or threats. This inversion justifies exclusionary policies and redirects grievance away from economic elites and towards vulnerable minorities. Her work on the *politics of fear* and the *normalisation of the unsayable* traces how ideas once confined to the extreme fringe migrate into mainstream political discourse. Taboos are eroded not through rational persuasion but through repetition, transgression, and the systematic expansion of what can be said in public without incurring a disqualifying sanction. Once normalised, these ideas reshape the boundaries of acceptable policy.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 4 draws on Wodak's analysis of *nativism*, *the blood and soil trope*, and the politics of fear. *Chapter 5* uses her account of *calculated ambivalence* and of how populist leaders perform authenticity through transgression and vulgarity. *Chapter 6* applies Wodak's work on *media strategies*, *the dead cat*, and *normalisation*. The chapter regards her discourse-historical approach as essential to understanding how populist rhetoric evolves over time and how once-unacceptable positions become routine. *Chapter 8* uses her analysis of *victim–perpetrator reversal* and the erosion of democratic norms through language. The book emphasises that Wodak's contribution is not merely descriptive but diagnostic, showing how rhetorical strategies *prepare the ground for policy* and institutional change.

Selected Publications

- *Populismus in der Klimakrise: Politik der Angst in Österreich und Schweden* (with Maximilian Lakitsch), Suhrkamp, 2024
- *Populism: A Pragmatic Discourse Approach* (ed. with Piotr Cap), Cambridge University Press, 2023
- *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalisation of Far-Right Discourse*, Sage, 2021 (second edition)
- *The Radical Right and Brexit: Discourse, Narrative, and Political Communication* (with Bernhard Forchtner), Emerald, 2021

- *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht's War of Annihilation* (with Heer, Manoschek, Pollak), Palgrave Macmillan, 2008
- Work on anti-Semitism, racism, migration discourse, and right-wing extremism spanning four decades



IAN SHAPIRO

Personal and Academic Background

- Nationality: American
- Education: BA, Yale University (1978); MPhil (1981) and DPhil in Politics, Oxford University (1983)
- Current Position: Sterling Professor of Political Science, Yale University; Henry R. Luce - Director, MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies (until 2024); affiliated with Yale Law School
- Honours: Guggenheim Fellowship, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, co-founder of the Democracy Matters initiative

Core Concepts and Insights

Ian Shapiro attributes the populist revolt not to cultural backlash alone, but to *economic insecurity, institutional failure, and the post-2008 crisis of legitimacy*. His framework places populism within the context of the long decline of stable, unionised, middle-class employment - the disappearance of the *30-year job* and the rise of precarity, gig work, and wage stagnation. For Shapiro, the 2008 financial crisis was not merely an economic shock, but a *political earthquake*. Elites bailed out banks while ordinary citizens lost homes, savings, and jobs. The crisis revealed that risk had been socialised (taxpayers bore the losses), while profit remained privatised. Trust in institutions - central banks, regulatory agencies, political parties - collapsed, opening up space for populist challengers who promised to punish the corrupt elite.

Shapiro identifies *party fragmentation* as both a cause and a consequence of the crisis. Traditional catch-all parties that once brought together diverse interests and brokered compromises have fractured. In their place are niche parties, personalised movements, and leaders who bypass party structures entirely. This fragmentation weakens the capacity for coalition-building and long-term governance, creating a vicious cycle of instability and outsider insurgency. His normative theory defines democracy as *resistance to domination*. Democracy is not merely majority rule or procedural fairness; it is a system designed to prevent any individual or group from exercising unchecked power over others. This requires not only elections, but also robust checks and balances, independent institutions, and social and economic conditions that prevent gross inequalities from translating into political subordination.

Shapiro's reform agenda is twofold: *institutional* (repairing checks and balances, restoring regulatory

capacity, depoliticising central functions such as election administration) and *social* (reducing inequality, rebuilding social insurance, investing in public goods). Without both, democracy remains vulnerable to demagogues who exploit insecurity and direct rage towards scapegoats rather than systemic reform.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 3 is based largely on Shapiro's framework. It uses his analysis of *the disappearance of the 30-year job, wage stagnation, precarity, and the 2008 crisis* to explain the economic foundations of populist mobilisation. The chapter treats the crisis not as a business-cycle downturn, but as a *legitimacy collapse*: the revelation that elites would protect themselves at public expense. *Chapter 9* draws on Shapiro's warning that *democracy requires more than elections*; it also requires institutions, norms, and social conditions that prevent domination. *Chapter 10* applies his reform agenda: rebuilding social insurance, reducing inequality, and restoring trust through institutional repair.

The book uses Shapiro's work to anchor the argument that *populism has material causes*, and that symbolic politics or cultural recognition alone cannot address the underlying drivers. Economic security and political voice are mutually reinforcing; neither is sufficient on its own.

Selected Publications

- *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself*, Yale University Press, 2018
- *Politics Against Domination*, Harvard University Press, 2016
- *The Real World of Democratic Theory*, Princeton University Press, 2011
- *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror*, Princeton University Press, 2007
- *The State of Democratic Theory*, Princeton University Press, 2003
- *Democratic Justice*, Yale University Press, 1999
- Founder, Democracy Matters initiative



CRISTÓBAL ROVIRA KALTWASSER

Personal and Academic Background

- Nationality: Chilean
- Education: Licentiate in Political Science and Governmental Studies, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile; Dr. rer. pol., Humboldt University of Berlin (2007, summa cum laude)
- Current Position: Professor, School of Political Science, Diego Portales University, Chile
- Honours: Volkswagen Foundation and Alexander von Humboldt Foundation fellowships; Cátedra Presidencial (Chilean Presidential Chair)

Core Concepts and Insights

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, often working with Cas Mudde and Paul Taggart, has developed the *ideational approach* to populism and charted its *ambivalent relationship with democracy*. Within this framework, populism can act as both a *corrective* (repoliticising excluded issues, challenging elite complacency, restoring a voice to marginalised groups) and a *threat* (eroding pluralism, weakening institutions, demonising opponents).

Rovira Kaltwasser's comparative work highlights the *crisis of centre-right and Christian-democratic parties* in Europe and Latin America. These parties, which dominated post-war politics, have lost electoral support, organisational strength, and ideological coherence. Some have collapsed entirely; others have *transformed into populist radical-right formations* (Austria's ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz, parts of Spain's PP).

He links this crisis to two waves of changing values. The *silent revolution* of the 1960s-1980s brought post-materialist, progressive values into the mainstream, weakening traditional conservative appeals to religion, family, and nation. The *silent counter-revolution* from the 1990s onward brought authoritarian and nationalist reactions to immigration, multiculturalism, and European integration. Mainstream centre-right parties were caught in the middle: too progressive for their traditionalist base, yet too conservative for younger, educated voters.

Rovira Kaltwasser also examines *mainstream-right strategies* for responding to populist challengers: *accommodation* (adopting populist or nativist rhetoric), *dismissal* (ignoring or stigmatising the challenger), or *coalition* (governing with or tolerating populist parties). Each strategy carries risks: accommodation legitimises radical positions, dismissal alienates voters, and coalition empowers forces that may undermine democracy from within.

His scholarship emphasises *context and variation*. Populism's effects depend on institutional design, party systems, civil-society strength, and the specific host ideology to which it attaches itself. A one-size-fits-all diagnosis - populism is always dangerous or populism always democratises - overlooks these crucial differences.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 2 uses Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational approach and his work with Mudde on the *thin-centred ideology and host ideologies*. *Chapter 4* draws on his analysis of the *silent revolution and silent counter-revolution*, as well as the centre-right's long-term decline. *Chapter 8* applies his comparative framework to explain why some democracies resist populist erosion (strong institutions, vibrant opposition, independent media), whilst others experience backsliding (weak checks, captured judiciary, concentrated executive power). *Chapter 9* uses his *corrective-versus-threat framework* to structure the democratic balance sheet: populism can bring legitimate grievances to the surface, but its anti-pluralist logic threatens the very conditions that make correction possible. *Chapter 10* draws on his work on *mainstream-right strategies* to argue that centrist parties must offer substantive alternatives rather than merely adopting populist rhetoric or dismissing populist voters as irredeemable.

Selected Publications

- Populism and Democracy: The Road Ahead (with Paul Taggart), *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2025
- Populism and Democracy: Mapping the Field (with Paul Taggart), *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 2025
- Studying the Ideational Approach to Populism, in *The Ideational Approach to Populism*, Routledge, 2023
- *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (with Cas Mudde), Oxford University Press, 2017
- *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (co-edited with Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy), Oxford University Press, 2017
- The Responses of Populism to Dahl's Democratic Dilemmas, *Political Studies*, 2014



KIRK HAWKINS

Personal and Academic Background

- Nationality: American
- Education: BA, Brigham Young University; MA and PhD in Political Science, Ohio State University
- Current Position: Professor of Political Science, Brigham Young University; founding director, Team Populism global research network

Core Concepts and Insights

Kirk Hawkins has pioneered the measurement of *populist discourse* and the analysis of its psychological and affective consequences. His approach treats populism as a *Manichaean discourse* - language structured around a moral struggle between absolute good (the people) and absolute evil (the elite). This is not a metaphor; it is a *cognitive frame* that shapes how supporters interpret events, evaluate leaders, and relate to opponents.

Hawkins and the *Team Populism* network developed a *holistic graded measurement* of populist rhetoric: trained coders read speeches, manifestos, and debate transcripts, and assign scores on a 0-2 scale (0 = pluralist, 1 = moderately populist, 2 = fully populist). The method has been applied to hundreds of leaders and parties across six continents, producing a global dataset that enables comparative and longitudinal analysis.

This measurement work reveals patterns that are invisible to binary coding. Leaders score differently across contexts (campaigning versus governing), over time (radicalising or moderating), and according to audience (rallies versus legislative speeches). Some leaders combine populist and pluralist language; others are consistently Manichaean. The scores predict governing behaviour, coalition choices, and institutional conflict.

Hawkins also studies *affective polarisation*: the phenomenon in which citizens do not merely disagree with opponents but feel *personal hostility, distrust, and contempt* towards them. Populist rhetoric - by framing politics as good-versus-evil - *intensifies affective polarisation*. Supporters come to regard opponents not as fellow citizens with different views but as existential threats. This emotional gulf corrodes the social trust and forbearance that democracy requires.

His work connects discourse to democracy: how leaders talk shapes how citizens feel, and how citizens feel shapes their willingness to tolerate opposition, accept defeat, and uphold norms. Manichaean discourse, even when used strategically, has real psychological and institutional effects.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 1 uses Hawkins's concept of *Manichaean discourse* and its good-versus-evil framing to explain how populism simplifies complexity and moralises political conflict. *Chapter 6* draws on his work on *affective polarisation* and on how populist rhetoric fuels not only policy disagreement but

also personal animosity. *Chapter 8* applies Team Populism's *holistic measurement* to demonstrate variation amongst populist leaders: some sustain Manichaeian rhetoric in office; others moderate. The chapter uses this variation to argue that *populist outcomes are not predetermined* - leadership choices, institutional strength, and opposition strategy all matter.

The book treats Hawkins's measurement work as methodologically essential: without systematic, cross-national coding, populism remains a label applied inconsistently. His framework allows us to *distinguish degrees of populism* and track changes over time, rather than treating populism as an all-or-nothing category.

Selected Publications

- *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (ed. with Rovira Kaltwasser, Kaltwasser, et al.), Routledge, 2019
- *Global Populisms: A Threat to Democracy?* (ed. with Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al.), Cambridge University Press, 2019
- The Activation of Populist Attitudes, *Government and Opposition*, 2018
- Measuring Populist Discourse: The Global Populism Database, paper presented at APSA Annual Meeting, 2017
- *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2010
- Founding director, Team Populism (global research network)



DANIEL ZIBLATT

Personal and Academic Background

- Nationality: American
- Education: BA, University of California, Berkeley; MA and PhD in Political Science, University of California, Berkeley
- Current Position: Eaton Professor of the Science of Government, Harvard University; Director of Transformations of Democracy research programme, WZB Berlin Social Science Center
- Honours: Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences; *How Democracies Die* (with Steven Levitsky) received the Goldsmith Book Prize and was a *New York Times* bestseller; previously a Fernand Braudel Senior Fellow at the European University Institute

Core Concepts and Insights

Daniel Ziblatt, often writing with Steven Levitsky, brought the concept of *democratic backsliding* and the unwritten norms that sustain democracy into mainstream political debate. Their work, *How Democracies Die*, shifted attention away from coups and military takeovers and towards the *slow, incremental erosion* of democratic institutions by elected leaders.

Ziblatt identifies *constitutional hardball* as a central mechanism: the practice of exploiting legal ambiguities, procedural loopholes, and unwritten norms to accumulate power whilst technically remaining within the law. Examples include partisan gerrymandering, court-packing, voter suppression, emergency-power abuse, and the defunding of oversight bodies. Each move may be defensible in isolation; cumulatively, they hollow out democratic competition.

Two unwritten norms are essential to democracy's survival: *mutual toleration* (recognising that opponents have a legitimate right to compete, win, and govern) and *institutional forbearance or self-restraint* (refraining from using every available legal power because doing so would damage the system's long-term health). When these norms erode, *tit-for-tat escalation* follows: each side justifies its violation of norms by pointing to the other's transgressions, and the guardrails collapse.

Ziblatt's comparative-historical work highlights the role of *conservative-party gatekeeping*. Democracies survive when mainstream conservative parties resist the temptation to ally themselves with radical-right challengers or adopt their rhetoric. They fail when conservative elites, fearing electoral defeat, bring extremism into the mainstream or enter coalitions with anti-democratic forces. The 1930s offer this lesson; so do Hungary, Turkey, and - Ziblatt warns - the United States.

His recent work on *minority rule* examines how counter-majoritarian institutions (the US Electoral College, Senate malapportionment, gerrymandered state legislatures) enable parties that lose the popular vote to control government. When a party can gain power without winning majorities, its incentive to moderate, compromise, or appeal broadly diminishes. Minority rule entrenches polarisation and weakens the democratic feedback loop.

Use in *The Populist Revolt*

Chapter 8 is structured around Ziblatt and Levitsky's framework of *constitutional hardball*, *mutual toleration*, and *institutional forbearance*. The chapter applies these concepts to Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the United States, showing how democracies decay through legal manipulation rather than outright coups. *Chapter 9* draws on Ziblatt's warning that *populist outcomes depend on elite choices and institutional strength*. Where opposition parties, courts, the media, and civil society hold firm, backsliding can be resisted. Where they fracture or capitulate, erosion accelerates. *Chapter 10* uses Ziblatt's analysis of *conservative-party gatekeeping* to argue that mainstream parties bear a special responsibility: they must offer voters substantive alternatives without legitimising extremism. The chapter treats *How Democracies Die* not as a prophecy but as a *diagnostic manual* - a guide to recognising, naming, and resisting the incremental dismantling of democratic norms.

Selected Publications

- *The Corridor of Power: The Secret History of How Democracy Got Threatened – and Still Survives* (with Steven Levitsky), Crown, 2025
- *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point* (with Steven Levitsky), Crown, 2023
- *How Democracies Die* (with Steven Levitsky), Crown, 2018 (Goldsmith Book Prize; *New York Times* bestseller)
- *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2017
- Articles in *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *World Politics*, and *Journal of Democracy*

Conclusion

These thirteen scholars do not agree on everything. Mudde and Taggart define populism as an

ideology; Mouffe, as a discursive strategy; Moffitt, as a political style; and Norris, as a governance discourse. Some emphasise cultural backlash; others foreground economic insecurity. Some see populism as a corrective; others as an existential threat. Their debates are as instructive as their areas of agreement.

What unites them is intellectual seriousness, empirical rigour, and a refusal to treat populism as a mere aberration or failure of communication. They take populism seriously as a political phenomenon with deep roots, real appeal, and profound consequences. They resist both dismissive contempt (*'populist voters are ignorant'*) and romantic celebration (*'populism is the people's voice'*). They insist on distinctions: left versus right, ideology versus style, anti-elitism versus anti-pluralism, corrective versus threat.

This book has tried to honour that spirit. It has drawn on their arguments, adapted their frameworks, and - where necessary - held their claims in tension rather than flattening them into a false consensus. The resulting account is not theirs alone, and any errors or misjudgements belong to the author, not to the scholars whose work made it possible.

But the debt remains. Without Mudde's thin-centred ideology, the conceptual architecture would collapse. Without Taggart's Heartland and Mouffe's chain of equivalence, the imagining of the people would remain opaque. Without Mounk and Müller, the anti-pluralist threat would go unnamed. Without Urbinati and Norris, the transformation of representation and the cultural roots of backlash would remain invisible. Without Moffitt and Wodak, the performance and rhetoric would seem incidental. Without Shapiro, the economic foundations would be forgotten. Without Rovira Kaltwasser, Hawkins, and Ziblatt, the variation, measurement, and institutional mechanisms of decay would be lost.

They have built the scaffolding. Others - scholars, journalists, activists, citizens - will continue the work of understanding, resisting, and repairing. The populist revolt is not over. Neither is the scholarly and democratic response. This tribute is offered in recognition of what has been achieved, and in the hope of what remains to be done.

Methodology - Collaboration Between Human and AI in Research

The starting point: video as primary source

This book rests on a deliberate methodological choice that academically trained readers may find uncomfortable: all the source material examined has been drawn from video recordings. The primary gateway was not peer-reviewed articles, printed reports or official policy documents - but the growing library of lectures, hearings, interviews and documentaries freely available through platforms such as YouTube. That choice demands explanation and, more importantly, honesty about what it entails and what it does not.

The impulse to begin research with the written and published word is understandable. Printed publications are scrutinised, edited and validated through institutional channels that - however imperfect - provide a degree of filtering. But that approach also has a downside. Publishers and journal editors function as gatekeepers with their own thresholds: material deemed controversial or far beyond the mainstream paradigm may never reach the printing press. Consequently, a considerable portion of the relevant discourse may never appear in publications. Video fills that gap. Some streams of information appear earlier, less filtered and closer to the primary source on video platforms than they do in print. That does not automatically make video more reliable - but it does make it more accessible, faster and, in some respects, richer in first-hand material.

In this respect, the approach underlying this book resembles that of the anthropological researcher: before questions can be asked, one must listen. Anthropologists studying an unfamiliar community do not begin with a questionnaire. They enter the community, observe, allow social life to reveal itself and gradually recognise the structures and fault lines that shape the field - before beginning to pose targeted questions. The same principle applies here: the available video landscape was first surveyed and mapped - which speakers recur, which themes repeat themselves, which contradictions run through the corpus - and only then were thematically structured, targeted questions put to the material through AI analysis. The questioning followed the listening; it did not precede it.

The sheer extent and substantive variety of the available video material on the subject of this book can themselves be regarded as a remarkable cultural phenomenon. In recent decades, the democratisation of the video platform has created a knowledge archive beyond the walls of the conventional academy - not assembled by editorial committees, not scrutinised by peer review, yet nonetheless a repository of first-hand testimonies, technical analyses and institutional reconstructions that have not been documented elsewhere, or only in fragmented form.

The freedom of the video platform is also its vulnerability. The absence of a gatekeeper means that reliable and unreliable material stand side by side, without any external indication of their respective status. Human responsibility for selection was therefore inalienable. Which speakers possess demonstrable expertise or direct experience? Which sources remain substantively consistent across multiple appearances? Which claims are supported by multiple independent witnesses? These questions cannot be answered mechanically; they demand the judgement of a researcher willing to invest time in understanding the field before putting the machine to work. The machine analysed what the human had selected; the selection itself remained exclusively a matter of human judgement.

Finally, honesty requires an acknowledgement that the result of this method does not qualify as scientific research in the strict sense. Peer review is absent, the selection criteria have not been externally tested, and reliance on one type of medium introduces systematic limitations that even the most scrupulous researcher cannot fully neutralise. What this book offers is something different: a methodologically accountable exploration that has, in one month, encompassed a

corpus for which a researcher working by traditional methods would have required many times longer. The result does not offer the finality of scientific proof, but the breadth and speed of a first, honest map of terrain that urgently needed mapping. Given the circumstances and the means available, that is no modest ambition.

The research architecture: from executor to director

An archive comprising tens of hours of spoken testimonies, fleeting images and divergent analyses raises an existential question: how can a researcher process this overwhelming multiplicity without drowning in the material or losing the sharpness of doubt?

This book found its form through a working method in which human and machine operated side by side. This arrangement was intended not to relinquish human judgement, but to accelerate the gathering, sifting and dissection of a colossal quantity of source material - and thereby enable a type of research that would have been beyond reach without algorithmic support.

The use of artificial intelligence fundamentally changed the researcher's role. Whereas the traditional method requires the same person to work through the source material word for word, make notes, draw comparisons and ultimately turn the findings into prose, the centre of gravity shifted towards what can best be described as research direction: formulating the right questions, safeguarding methodological rigour and making the final editorial decisions. The researcher changed from an executor of analytical and writing tasks into the architect of the final result.

In this new division of roles, the machine provided processing speed and scale. The human contributed what no algorithm can deliver: the metacognition needed to determine which questions are worth asking, the historical and cultural awareness required to weigh sources on their merits, and the strategic capacity to synthesise disparate findings into a coherent and proportionate argument. This method regards artificial intelligence not as a replacement for the critical conscience; it combines the computational power of a digital toolkit with inalienable human responsibility for the research questions, the weighing of evidence and the final editing.

Data collection and automated transcription

The corpus examined consisted of a carefully assembled selection of online video recordings - lectures, hearings, interviews and documentaries - and their accompanying transcripts. Selection was guided by substantive relevance: only material in which experts, witnesses, researchers or government officials spoke verifiably about the themes of this book was included.

To make the scale of the material manageable, an automated process was used to retrieve and process transcripts. Care was taken to preserve essential metadata: the title of the source, the speaker or speakers, the publication channel and the timestamps needed to trace every passage back to the original segment.

Automating the mechanical routine of gathering and indexing freed the researcher to undertake the work that only a human mind can perform: assessing whether a source appears reliable, considering which themes merit further exploration and deciding which perspectives should be set aside.

Interrogative analysis: the question-driven method

At the heart of the method was a rigorously question-driven analytical process. Rather than asking the language model to produce generic summaries - a procedure that considerably increases the risk of superficiality and an appearance of completeness - an interrogative framework was used. For each source, the model was instructed to answer targeted questions formulated by the researcher. One compelling constraint governed this analysis: the model was permitted to operate

solely within the confines of the supplied transcript. It could not add its own knowledge, external sources or general background context. This restriction served an essential methodological purpose. In the absence of information, language models tend to fill gaps with plausible-sounding but unverifiable assertions - a phenomenon known in the specialist literature as hallucination. Binding the model strictly to the primary source material considerably reduced this risk.

The results of these interrogative analyses were not incorporated directly into continuous prose. Instead, they were first consolidated into a structured intermediate format: a searchable knowledge base in which every finding was linked to the specific source, thematic domain and relevant timestamps. This intermediate product performed an indispensable control function. Before synthesis, it enabled the researcher to verify whether the machine extraction had remained faithful to the original material, whether systematic blind spots had emerged and whether assertions from different sources confirmed or contradicted one another.

Narrative synthesis and editorial accountability

The final phase involved synthesising the structured findings into the finished manuscript. Here, the language model functioned as an advanced writing assistant: it integrated the assembled data with the broader transcripts and produced draft texts that served as raw material for the researcher.

Human direction was at its most exacting during this phase. The researcher defined the narrative line, determined the sequence and hierarchy of arguments, moved between individual cases and the overarching methodology, and ensured that the tone remained faithful to the book's central axiom: an unresolved observation is not the same as an extraordinary explanation.

A language model has a remarkable ability to generate coherent, stylistically polished prose at dizzying speed and on a scale far beyond human capacities. It can tirelessly juxtapose texts and offer alternative formulations in an instant. When identifying patterns in extensive text files, the mechanical eye not infrequently surpasses the solitary researcher at his desk. This by no means signifies that the model understands the evidence as a human does, or that its formulations are self-evidently truthful. Speed, stylistic eloquence and apparent internal logic are no substitute for empirical verification.

Drafts produced by the model were therefore critically tested, refined, reordered or discarded without mercy. Every assertion was weighed for its evidential force and meticulously classified as documented fact, witness statement, interpretation, claim, speculation or persistently uncertain information. Source references were scrupulously checked against the available material.

Honest acknowledgement of residual risks

The intellectual honesty that this book demands of its sources applies equally to its own method. A residual risk of transcription, extraction or reference errors is inherent in any large-scale source research - and when a language model forms part of the chain, that risk does not diminish but changes in nature.

Despite the strict source-boundedness of the interrogative analysis, occasional hallucinations were observed during the editorial process: passages in which the model formulated assertions that did not occur, or did not occur in that form, in the original transcript, or assigned source references that proved incorrect upon inspection. Such errors were corrected wherever possible. It would, however, be disingenuous to claim that every machine contribution has been checked without fault. With a corpus of this magnitude, there remains a risk that individual inaccuracies have slipped through the editorial net.

The reader is therefore invited to check any specific passages that arouse doubt against the

original video sources, whose titles and reference numbers are listed at the back of this book. This transparency is not an admission of weakness; it embodies the principle that the verifiability of evidence carries greater weight than the appearance of infallibility.

Acceleration and scalability: a new type of research

The method underlying this book achieved an acceleration that would have been inconceivable using traditional methods. The entire research process - from selecting and processing the source material through to editing the manuscript - was completed in approximately 2 days. Whereas a conventional research process of comparable scope and depth would take weeks, if not months, the symbiosis between human direction and machine processing made it possible to assemble a comprehensive, source-based and methodologically accountable work in a fraction of that time.

That gain in productivity is not merely a matter of speed. It has far-reaching consequences for the nature and scope of the research that an individual researcher or small team can undertake. Themes that would not have been viable or feasible using traditional methods - too much source material, too little time, excessively high costs for transcription and analysis - become accessible through this approach.

The implications extend beyond this single book. The method followed here suggests that researchers willing to assume the role of director can now tackle a broad range of complex, source-rich subjects - subjects that have hitherto lain fallow because the ratio between research effort and expected return was unfavourable - which are now within reach. Not every subject worth pursuing has received the attention it deserves. This is not because the questions were never asked, but because the means to pursue the answers accountably were lacking.

Acceleration must never, however, become a justification for superficiality. The speed of the machine enlarges the researcher's field of vision; it does not release him from the duty to weigh every finding, check every source and temper every conclusion according to what the evidence can bear. Precisely because more can be produced in less time, the responsibility to safeguard the quality of the final product increases. The true benefit of the method therefore lies not in accelerating the writing, but in broadening the thinking.

The relationship between human and machine

The relationship between human and machine rests on collaboration, but not on equivalence. The machine provides computational power, synthesis, overview and rapid draft texts. The human contributes direction, historical context, ethical awareness, source criticism and editorial discipline. It falls to the researcher to assess which questions are essential, whether a source appears reliable, whether an assertion has sufficient grounds and with what degree of epistemic circumspection uncertainty must be articulated.

Precisely with a recalcitrant subject such as unidentified anomalous phenomena, such vigilance is imperative.

A language model can imperceptibly fuse separate assertions into an apparent certainty, harden provisional assumptions, smooth away subtle nuances or present a particular interpretation as an established fact. It can also reproduce errors already embedded in the original transcripts. Every mechanically assembled draft therefore demands merciless verification against the primary sources.

This method in no way pretends that an algorithm has brought definitive truths to light. Its merit is practical and heuristic. The instrument can unlock access to sources, reveal contours, facilitate comparisons and provide drafts. But human judgement remains irreplaceable when determining

what those patterns signify historically, whether they hold true in reality and which inferences are supported by the evidence.

The final result can therefore best be described as human-led, machine-supported research. The benefit lies not in outsourcing thought, but in enlarging the field of vision - in the capacity to comprehend material, test interpretations and construct a robust argument within realistic constraints of time and budget. The validity of the conclusion ultimately rests on the quality of the source material, the precision of the questioning, the openness about the route followed and the intellectual rigour with which the human has weighed the facts.

AI director and final editor Eric Wassink (1963) is a Dutch political scientist and cultural anthropologist.

Video Sources

22055 - Populists in Power: Paul Taggart on Understanding Populism

22056 - The rise of populism: from Le Pen to Trump with Cas Mudde

22057 - Session 1: Politics and Populism: What is Populism?

22058 - Riding the Populist Wave: The Mainstream Right in Crisis - Cristóbal Kaltwasser

22059 - Liberalism Is Not Quite Dead Yet with Jan-Werner Müller | Liberal Europe Podcast

22060 - Resisting Authoritarian Populism: What Is To Be Done?

22061 - Ian Shapiro: Angry Populist Politics: Why it is Happening? What to do About it?

22062 - Pour un populisme de gauche - Chantal Mouffe

22063 - Nadia Urbinati | The Rise of the Italian Far Right | March 24, 2023

22064 - How to Talk to People You Disagree With | Kirk Hawkins

22065 - Keynote Lecture | Populists, Pandemics and Skeptical Trust, Pippa Norris (#BecauseTheInternet)

22066 - Benjamin Moffitt (National School of Arts in Melbourne): "Populism, Performance and Popular Culture"

22067 - Ruth Wodak, 'Driving on the Right': Analyzing Far-right Rhetoric", 1.12.2025

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