

## Article

# Populism (studies) does not exist, but it still matters

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### *Abstract*

Despite the provocative statement made in the title, the aim of this article is not to argue that populism (studies) does not exist or that it cannot be a useful concept, or that there may not be space for a lively field of populism studies to develop. Yet the argument developed here is that it is only possible if our understanding of populism serves a purpose such as helping us make better sense of the world around us. If, on the contrary, the term is used to obscure, deflect and divert attention away from processes of power formation and consolidation, then populism and populism studies do not exist: they are a simulacrum, a con. To explore these issues, I first (re)engage with the concept of ‘populist hype’ originally developed with Jason Glynos (2016) and apply it more precisely to academia. I then turn to one key contradiction in populism studies whereby definitional debates are both incredibly lively and yet often used to conceal power. In both sections, I explore the way in which populism has often been conflated with the far right, losing its explanatory power and legitimising such politics. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on the future of populism studies.

The title of this article is a reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s 1973 lecture ‘Public opinion does not exist’ as it seems particularly fitting here. As Bourdieu explained ‘in saying that public opinion does not exist, I mean it does not exist in the form which some people, whose existence depends on this illusion, would have us believe’ (Bourdieu, 1973). This, in a nutshell, is the argument I deploy in this article with regard to populism and populism studies. My aim is not to argue that populism does not exist or that it cannot be a useful

concept, or that there may not be space for a lively field of populism studies to develop. Yet this is only possible if our understanding of populism serves a purpose such as helping us make better sense of the world around us. If, on the contrary, the term is used to obscure, deflect and divert attention away from processes of power formation and consolidation, then populism and populism studies do not exist: they are a simulacrum, a con.

While definitional concerns are not core to the argument of this article, it is worth clarifying nonetheless that my work is generally closer to the discursive approach (see Stavrakakis et al 2018; Katsambekis 2016, 2020) than to Bourdieu's. Here though, I would like to focus on the way we as academics use populism, our role in shaping ideas and public discourse, and the impact this has on society. As such, this article is indebted to and builds on an increasingly vibrant self-introspective field (Hunger and Paxton, 2021; Goyvaerts, 2021; Brown, 2022; Dean and Maiguashca, 2020; Eklundh, 2020; Katsambekis, 2020; Kim, 2021; De Cleen and Glynos, 2021). To do so, I first (re)engage with the concept of 'populist hype' originally developed with Jason Glynos (2016) and apply it more precisely to academia. I then turn to one key contradiction in populism studies whereby definitional debates are both incredibly lively and yet often used to conceal power. In both sections, I explore the way in which populism has often been conflated with the far right, losing its explanatory power and legitimising such politics. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on the future of populism studies.

### **Populist hype, anti-populism and the role of academics**

It has become a common trope to see articles dealing with the concept of populism start by acknowledging how spirited definitional debates are in the field. Almost as common are laments about the lack of precise definitions or their poor application. While recent years have witnessed the outlining of a broad consensus amongst scholars, 'namely the centrality of 'the people' and an antagonistic view of society that pits the former against an elite' (Katsambekis 2020), this relatively new field of research remains lively. It is indeed replete with countless exciting contributions as to the more precise meaning of the concept and how to use it, but also its impact and the implications of using it.

Populism has also become increasingly popular in academia. As the term has become almost ubiquitous in the media and politics, academics have started using it across disciplines, sometimes to refer to politics they assume are populist and sometimes simply in an attempt to have the latest buzzword in their titles and abstracts (Hunger and Paxton, 2021).<sup>1</sup> This has meant that the lively terminological debate that takes place in populism studies as a more niche subfield is not always engaged with by those who use the term within

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<sup>1</sup>As early as 2007, Cas Mudde (2007, p. 2) noted that 'despite relatively limited electoral significance within European politics, particularly if compared to the established party families, no party family has been studied as intensely as the populist radical right. Whereas the (edited) books on party families like the Christian democrats or liberals can be counted on the fingers of one or two hands, those on the populist radical right (irrespective of the term used) might already outnumber the combined total of books on all other party families together'.

their research. It is therefore sadly not uncommon to see articles or even projects use populism in a way that is not linked to the main schools of thought on it, but more importantly, not defined in any meaningful and clear way (Hunger and Paxton, 2021).

Indeed, there is often the impression that one simply knows what populism is (something we also witness in the media and wider public discourse). This is despite the many warnings issued about the term and the potential impact of its misuse. Jean-Marie Le Pen's accession to the second round of the presidential election in France in 2002 was a watershed moment in the rise of the far right, but also of populist hype. In the aftermath, Annie Collovald (2004, p. 10) warned that the use of the term populism was not only 'blurrier, but also less stigmatizing than the ones it is meant to replace, such as fascism or extreme right'. In 2007, Cas Mudde (2007) powerfully noted when he coined the term 'populist radical right', which remains today a widely used term in the literature, that the order of the words was crucial:

In 'radical right populism' the primary term is populism, while 'radical right' functions merely to describe the ideological emphasis of this specific form of populism. Populist radical right, on the other hand, refers to a populist form of the radical right (Mudde 2007, p. 30).

It is ironic that while Mudde's definition is often used in mainstream research on the far right, his warning has gone unheeded and the use of the term is contrary to this absolutely essential point.

This points to some extent to a bandwagon effect which has led many academics to flock to populism studies, often mistaken for or conflated with far right studies, in search of citations and dissemination opportunities without necessarily doing due diligence to the field and its literature. The pressures faced by academics in the current neoliberal context have meant that bandwagoning, chasing citations and the prospect of clickbait dissemination have become common tropes in hot research topics.

As interest in populism grows, there has also been a growing interest in the way we use populism as academics and the impact our use has on wider society and public discourse. This is a particularly important development at a time when the scientification of social sciences has at times led to academics thinking of themselves as objective bystanders, studying their topic of research from above. This has often led to a lack of reflection on the role we play as shapers of and influencers on public discourse, albeit at a modest level compared to the media and politicians for example. Some academics have thus turned their attention to this precise issue, attempting to understand not so much what populism is, but what researching populism does.

As noted elsewhere (Goyvaerts et al., 2022), many of the imperatives academics face in the current context 'are increasingly embedded in reputational and career progression logics that, in turn, reinforce tendencies within and across spheres, thereby helping to sustain and further amplify the populist hype'. This concept of populist hype was developed in part to allow for a more systematic exploration of the impact of the concept and its research, and led to

some essential self-introspection within the field of populism studies (Glynos and Mondon, 2016. See also de Cleen et al., 2018; Mondon and Winter, 2020a). To be clear though, critique of populist hype is not an argument for gatekeeping, quite the contrary. Populist hype and the bandwagon effect (Mondon and Winter, 2020b) in fact reinforce gatekeeping practices and positions, as many newcomers who join a particular field tend to cite the most prominent scholars in the field for quick gratification. In populism studies, this tends to revolve around a handful of academics. This is a problem in terms of engagement with the wider literature of course, but it has a particularly detrimental effect on early career scholars who end up being ignored for the purposes of satisfying gatekeepers and peer-review processes. The sheer volume of publications by non-experts with little knowledge of the field also crowds out junior scholars as they try to make a name for themselves but find their research drowned in a sea of generic titles. Worst of all perhaps, it is also not uncommon to witness that due diligence is not even done to prominent scholars and gatekeepers with their research being cited to support inaccurate claims (Paxton and Hunger, 2021).

Yet the concept of populist hype is not simply about criticising such unethical practices, but exploring the impact these have: what is being framed, hyped and primed, and what is being ignored, obscured and euphemised; who is/are ‘the people’, how are they constructed; who decides where democracy starts and ends. Many of these questions are often taken for granted in research on populism that tends to see the liberal iteration as the only form of democracy possible. Despite having himself refuted his original thesis, it appears as if Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ thesis continues to haunt much of political science, and populism studies is no outlier. In this setting, populism becomes a powerful tool to discard all kinds of alternatives to the status quo, from the radical left, to the soft left and the far right, by equating them as equivalent illiberal threats (see Vergara, 2020).

Through the widespread anti-populism core to much research on populism, scholars have aided the far right in achieving the status of legitimate alternative to the status quo, albeit unwillingly. As Jana Goyvaerts (2021) notes, ‘Most mainstream definitions of populism understand it as a threat to democracy’. Anti-populist approaches are common, and some outstanding research has helped us uncover the insidious ways they have become seen as the norm (see Stavrakakis, 2017; see also Kim, 2021). This is particularly crucial in a field many join with a superficial knowledge of the literature and interest in doing it due diligence. Research that tends to otherwise portray itself as scientific, rational and objective often ends up reinforcing hegemonic norms such as electoral primacy. As Goyvaerts states in her excellent study, the way in which we study populism matters:

anti-populist definitions are accompanied by a defence of a liberal, elitist democracy, and/or a defence of the status quo. Definitions that defend populism are on the other hand more critical of the current status quo and how liberal democracy works today, and claim populism might be a stimulating force towards a more radical or agonistic democracy.

Populist hype is not just an issue within academia; we have also witnessed a disproportionate focus on populism in the media. Often, academics are used as credentials for journalistic work on the matter, demonstrating that the borders between the two are porous and academics have a direct responsibility for the substance of public discourse. Worse perhaps, when populism is used in the media, it generally refers to the far right, rather than to populism itself. This has not only led to a misunderstanding of what populism is, but to the legitimisation of far right politics as representing democratic demands and grievances, albeit irrational ones disliked and denounced by both the mainstream media and academic elite. This in turn has delegitimised the concept of ‘the people’ itself as core to democracy (Mondon, 2015; Mondon and Winter, 2020). It is no surprise that for decades far right politicians, from Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen to Matteo Salvini, have tried to appropriate the term populism. Yet this can be pushed further as even critical approaches can fail to take full account of hegemony, reproducing its very limitations and thus perpetuating and consolidating it. As Bice Maiguashca (2019) powerfully noted, populism as a logic often serves a process of abstraction and deradicalisation of radical politics within academic work:

while populism is ultimately about securing, widening, and radicalising democracy (read pluralising it); for feminists the struggle must move beyond calls for participation, representation, and the recognition of demands, important though they are, and encompass the quest to both overturn intractable relations of subordination/marginalisation and to build a world of social justice, in general, and ‘gender justice’, in particular (p. 779).

This myopic trope in populism studies, which often leads to ignoring hegemonic structures, becomes particularly clear in the way academics in the field tend to ignore their own positionality and standpoint with regards to race and whiteness.

### **Populism studies, whiteness and euphemisation**

Issues of populist hype and anti-populism have been discussed at length and in far more sophisticated ways than I could here. What I would like to turn to now in this review of the challenges posed to the field of populism studies is something which has remained almost entirely invisible, even in the more critical side of the field. In recent years, the term populism has become one of the most used to discuss the rise of the far right. Definitional debates, caveats and warnings about populism being at best a thin ideology or a discourse attached to more robust ideologies have not seemed to take hold across the field and beyond. Research undertaken for another project (Mondon, 2022b) has shown that between 2016 and 2021, 2543 articles were published whose titles and abstracts contained either far right, extreme right, radical right, populist right or right-wing populis\*.<sup>2</sup> In these, ‘populis\*’ was used in just under half

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<sup>2</sup> This data extracted from the Web of Science and data collection is discussed in more detail here (Mondon 2022b).

of the articles (46.8%), coming second to yet another poorly defined term, ‘far right’ (47.8%) (see Mondon, 2022b). In the full corpus (n= 508250), ‘populis\*’ (3885) was still second, but this time to ‘party/parties’ (4051) with ‘far right’ coming a distant third (2027).

While this is not surprising, it is already somewhat concerning as populism scholars will have no doubt noted that populism is not a concept essentially linked to the right or far right. Left-wing populism has been both politically powerful and well researched. In fact, some prominent scholars and experts have even argued that the far right should only reluctantly, if at all, be called populist (Stavrakakis et al 2017; see also Karavasilis 2022). Yet it has become increasingly common to see the term and/or concept appear in research on the far right, sometimes as the main definer without even the far right or right-wing adjective, and sometimes without any definition at all. This is not an entirely new trend either. In 2008 for example, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (2008) published *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. The title was rather misleading as the content of the book was less about populism, than about the radical right. The cover itself has photos of Pim Fortuyn, Silvio Berlusconi and Jean-Marie Le Pen, hinting clearly that the focus was on the right. While left-wing populism was not particularly present in Europe at the time, it is striking that the book was published at a time when the study and politics of populism were particularly vibrant in Latin America, thus adding to the confusion.

Of course, this could simply tell us that populism has become a particularly useful term to explain the rise of far-right politics in recent years. Yet this would not only go against the definitions given of it in most serious settings, but also the fact that it is often used ‘purely as a label’ and left undefined (Hunger and Paxton, 2021, p. 11), something that we also witness in the media (Bale et al., 2011). For example, research done with Katy Brown on the Guardian’s ‘The New Populism’ series showed that ‘despite roughly averaging three occurrences per text, 1037 articles (more than two thirds of the corpus) only use *populis\** once across the whole piece, including 11 examples where it only occurs in the headline’ (Brown and Mondon, p. 2021). This was highlighted particularly well regarding academia in Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton’s recent survey of the field which showed that ‘in the papers lacking a definition of populism, the very concept is often irrelevant to the argument or causal claim made. The populist label is attached to research that speaks rather of other ideological concepts’ (Hunger and Paxton 2021, p. 12). It clearly points to the grip the term populism has taken and the strength of the populist hype that more often than not it is used in an off-hand manner whereby definitions and even due diligence to the literature appear superfluous, something most academics would find shocking in many fields (although by no means all, and various other areas of research subject to bandwagon effects experience similar such poor practices).

While the lack of proper care in defining and using the concept is of great concern and can lead to a number of serious issues, another problem finds itself obscured in the euphemising potential of populism when related to far right studies. As already mentioned, while this euphemisation has been dis-

cussed at length in terms of the way it is used to replace more stigmatising terms, it can also take place in academic milieux which pride themselves on being at the forefront of populism definitional debates. In certain settings, populism can obscure other power relationships. This could not be clearer than in the case of racism. In the corpus aforementioned, the term was conspicuously absent considering the articles collected are dealing with politics generally associated with racism. Rac\* was 11th appearing in 285 articles, and racis\* was 15th appearing in 175 (or 6.9%). While a more in-depth study would be useful in bringing to light some more precise findings, the aim here is to highlight what is framed as worthy of centring in our research, what will catch the eye of the reader and what we think our main contribution speaks to (see also De Cleen and Glynos, 2021).

Ironically, one common justification to explain the lack of use of racism in populism studies is that it is a very contested term with no clear definition. As such, when authors attempt to define the parties or politics they research, they tend to use other terms to describe these, such as populism of course, but also nativism, authoritarianism and ethno-exclusivism. Nativism and authoritarianism are particularly interesting here as they are part of the triptych that defines Mudde's populist radical right, which remains one of the most used definitions. Tellingly though, 'radical right' (found in 824 articles or 32.4%), 'nativis\*' (83 or 3.3%) and 'authoritarian\*' (157 or 6.7%) are used far less than 'populis\*' (46.8%) in the titles and abstracts in the corpus. This is even more striking when the full corpus is taken into account, with 'populis\*' appearing 3885 times compared to 'radical right' (1512), 'nativis\*' (142) and 'authoritarian\*' (281). This points first and foremost to populist hype, as the term – while secondary to such politics by most definitions – is one of the most used. It also points to the fact that the use of racism (or lack thereof) is not necessarily due to other terms being preferred, but simply to poor terminological practices more generally. This is further substantiated by Hunger and Paxton's study (2021:12) which shows that 'a conflation of populism with nativism is a common feature of European populism research'. Furthermore, as discussed convincingly by George Newth (2021), the use of 'nativism' to discuss the far right does not automatically negate the racism core to these politics.<sup>3</sup>

Yet when one engages in more depth with such practices, some interesting findings arise. While these are anecdotal thus far and based on the reception of the papers which were presented as part of this project, they point to trends which I believe will not be surprising to colleagues. Let me illustrate with one particular anecdote. At a conference recently, I attended a panel on populism and nationalism with some excellent research being presented. However, based on my expertise in the field of racism, I felt that some of what was discussed referred as much to racism as it did to nationalism. In fact, both could have been referred to, as while the terms describe different kinds of politics, they are nonetheless often intertwined and can be complementary. When I asked whether the presenters could explain why they were using nationalism instead

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<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that the term nativism has been argued to be problematic when applied to the European context.

of racism when the latter could apply better to some of what was discussed, I received two responses which I had ironically mentioned as common responses in a paper I presented on the matter that very morning.

The first was to discard my claim, saying that what was talked about was ‘not racism’ (see Lentin, 2020). In this understanding, racism is limited to its ‘frozen’ forms: it is something that is limited to the past and takes the shape of caricatural iterations such as fascism and even more so Nazism. As such, even if it is acknowledged to still occur in our societies, it is generally exceptionalised and individualised (Mondon and Winter, 2020a). While this position is incredibly common in public discourse, it is widely discarded in research on racism itself, which generally sees it as an evolving ideology tied to wider power structures and systems. Yet, outside of the field, and in Politics and Political Science in particular, while scholars logically take as a starting point that ideologies evolve (for example, liberalism today is not the liberalism of John Stuart Mill), they generally seem unable to apply the same to racism.

The second response acknowledges that racism is indeed a malleable and evolving ideology, but that it is a concept that is too contested to be applied easily, in the form of a conference paper or article. Interestingly, this flies in the face of the most interesting research conducted on populism, which seeks to understand what is generally acknowledged to be a slippery concept with multiple uses. Therefore, the refusal to engage with the complexity of racism is in direct contradiction with the willingness to spend countless words and articles trying to get to the essence of populism or at least explore all its various occurrences and branches. This is further surprising for two reasons: first, the literature on racism as a concept is incredibly developed in sister disciplines such as sociology, and while there is no precise consensus on a definition, some basic traits can be easily extracted based on an even cursory survey of the literature. Second, the use of the term ‘racism’ is fairly common in day-to-day interaction, perhaps even more so than populism, and many academics would not shy away from using it on social media for example to discuss certain events. And yet, despite some very precise and impressive literature and a tendency to use the term in vernacular discussions, racism does not seem to make the cut in ‘serious’ research on populism or the far right. This links to a wider refusal to discuss whiteness and positionality in fields that generally lack diversity.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that there is not some excellent research linking populism and racism, but it remains marginal and tends to be undertaken by scholars who would not consider themselves as part of populism studies. This points to a need for further reflection on the positionality of those taking part in the field.

### **Can populism studies exist?**

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest a few ways forward for populism studies. These are by no means prescriptive nor about policing the field,

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<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of white logics and white methods, see (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008).



but about ensuring that we, as scholars, adhere to what should be expected academic norms. In this case, such due diligence is not just about academic integrity, it is also political. At a time when reaction is resurging the world over and it is becoming ever clearer that progress is not inevitable, in our role as public actors, we have a duty to ensure that our work does not participate in either strengthening a failing hegemony, or legitimising reaction, or both. As this short review article has shown, populist hype and anti-populism have led to this dual movement under the guise of 'objective' research. First, the careless use of populism to describe all matters of politics, from the left to the far right, has served to reinforce the idea that there is no (acceptable) alternative to the status quo. From an academic point of view, such a normative position and blindness to the contingent existence of the current hegemony is naïve at best. From a political point of view, at a time when the world is facing many crises, from the rise of inequalities to the climate crisis, failing to account precisely for the resurgence of reactionary politics and its links to the status quo is itself reactionary as it serves such politics. Indeed, the second effect of populist hype and anti-populism is to legitimise reactionary politics. Too often are they painted as the opposition to the status quo, which is in and of itself a legitimising factor when said status quo is clearly no longer working for many or responding to the key challenges of our time. Furthermore, defining far right parties as populist lends them a veneer of popularity and democratic legitimacy they have not only never had but always craved. This is not to underplay the scale of reaction and its support, but merely point out that in most, if not all cases, there are far more people who remain opposed to such politics than are in support (see Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mondon, 2022a). This does not mean that attention should not be paid to far too many people supporting such politics, quite the contrary. It simply means that this attention must be proportionate, must aim to break down such support not by placating supporters but by supporting those at the sharp end of such politics and dismantling the power structures that allow such discourses to spread. This means that we must pay closer attention to processes of mainstreaming beyond elections and account for top-down effects such as mediation (Brown et al ., 2021; Mondon, 2022a). As discussed elsewhere,

The issue is not so much about populism as a concept or it being used in far-right studies, but how and how much it is used and the impact this has on what is primed and what is ignored, what is highlighted and what is obscured. On the one hand, the use of populism, instead of racism for example, diverts attention away from these politics finding their roots in some of the most exclusionary ideas, but it also links so-called populist politics to 'the people' qua demos. This not only gives them a veneer of democratic support, which they generally do not have, but also places the blame for the rise of such politics squarely on 'the people', as if politics was simply a matter of bottom-up pressure rather than top-down mediation and agenda setting. In turn, it removes the agency and responsibility from mainstream elite actors, whether

they be in the media, politics or even academia, regarding the rise of reactionary politics, as if these actors had no power to influence politics, policy or public discourse (Mondon, 2022a).

We must therefore question what is meant by democracy beyond normative and limited hegemonic understandings and take power structures into account more seriously. Constructing ‘the people’ of populism solely and uncritically through the prism of liberal democracy limits our understanding of democratic power and success to a calculation of votes, seats and majorities (see Mondon and Winter, 2020a). This narrow prism can be situated within what Jacques Rancière would call ‘the police’ rather than ‘politics’. For Rancière (1995), policing is ‘a statist and societal process of rounding up people in a community through a hierarchized distribution of places and functions’. It ‘organizes a distribution of the sensible, in other words it makes some subjects audible, visible, and others completely imperceptible. [...] The police then is the harm done through the domination of the people’. Politics, on the other hand, ‘is the process of disrupting and overturning the order of the police by asserting the equality of anyone with anyone.’ Too often has the use of populism in academic circles served to police rather than encourage or even study politics.

So what does this mean moving forward? Quite simply, populism and populism studies must be seen as political constructions and studied as such. Populism studies should not (just) be about studying populism out there in the world, but a constant reflection on how we, as academics, study populism, what our positionality in power struggles is and what vision of the world we are putting forward. Populism studies should therefore be critical and open to acknowledging how interlinked populism is with ideology and ideologies: it cannot be a field unto itself and must always remain linked to sister fields and disciplines (see Rooduijn, 2018).

I am often asked whether I think we should simply do away with the term altogether. It is my belief that the term is doing more harm than good in the wider public discourse and that we as academics should refrain from using it in our media appearances and warn journalists about misusing it. In academia, we should take bandwagoning effects far more seriously. This is not about gatekeeping, but about making sure that the space is filled with useful, expert contributions rather than clogged up by countless publications written with no interest beyond one’s own self-promotion.

This echoes a recent call by Benjamin de Cleen and Jason Glynos (2021) to move ‘beyond populist studies’ as

a call not just to move beyond the reifications of populism in the study of populism but also a broader call to move beyond the reification risks associated with academia’s populist moment, as most clearly embodied in the idea of populism studies.

Yet there remains far more to uncover in the academic realm and no matter how frustrated I have become over the years, I have always returned to such debates. This is because studying the construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’

is absolutely essential in our current political moment. As deeply politicised understandings of democracy and ‘the people’ are used to justify ever more reactionary politics, we must engage in uncovering these processes and shed light on their contingency. In doing this, we can start thinking beyond the current hegemony and towards more emancipatory understandings of democracy and fulfil our role to society as academics.

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