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Why populism?

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Abstract It is a commonplace to observe that we have been living through an extraordinary pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment. But do the heterogeneous phenomena lumped under the rubric "populist" in fact belong together? Or is "populism" just a journalistic cliché and political epithet? In the first part of the article, I defend the use of "populism" as an analytic category and the characterization of the last few years as a "populist moment," and I propose an account of populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire. In the second part, I specify the structural trends and the conjunctural convergence of a series of crises that jointly explain the clustering in space and time that constitutes the populist moment. The question in my title is thus twofold: it is a question about populism as a term or concept and a question about populism as a phenomenon in the world. The article addresses both the conceptual and the explanatory question, limiting the scope of the explanatory argument to the pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist conjuncture of the last few years.

Keywords Repertoires · Crisis · Democracy · Majoritarianism · Populism · Protectionism

It is a commonplace to observe that we have been living through an extraordinary pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment. The moment has been defined most spectacularly by the successive shocks of the Brexit and Trump victories. But the broader moment includes the surge in support for the populist right that brought Norbert Hofer within reach of the Austrian and Marine Le Pen of the French presidency, made Geert Wilders's radically anti-Muslim Party for Freedom the most popular party in the Netherlands, and generated electoral breakthroughs for far right anti-immigrant parties in Sweden and Germany. It includes the consolidation of overtly illiberal, increasingly authoritarian populist regimes in Hungary and Poland and the

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radicalization of populist rhetoric elsewhere in East Central Europe. It includes the meteoric rise of the sui generis, shape-shifting Five-Star Movement in Italy. And it includes the left populist insurgencies of Bernie Sanders in the United States, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, the Podemos movement in Spain, and Syriza in Greece.

All of these have been called populist.[1] But do they really belong together? Have we really been living through a pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment? Or is the term populism, as some—not least the redoubtable Gáspár Miklós Tamás (2017)—have suggested, a massive misnomer, a journalistic cliché, and political epithet that serves more to stigmatize than to analyze?

Easy recourse to loose and loaded words like populism can certainly be an ideological reflex and a form of intellectual laziness. But I argue that "populism" remains a useful conceptual tool—and indeed one that is indispensable for characterizing the present conjuncture. Yet this raises a second set of questions: What explains the clustering in time and space that constitutes the populist moment? Why populism? Why here? And why now?

The question in my title—Why populism?—is thus in fact two questions. The first is a question about populism as a term or concept, the second a question about populism as a phenomenon in the world. The first is a conceptual question, the second an explanatory question. The first concerns the analytical tools we use to name and characterize the present conjuncture, the second the way we explain that conjuncture. I address both questions, limiting the scope of my explanatory argument to Europe and North America.

A contested concept

For half a century, the literature on populism has been haunted by doubts about the nature and even the existence of its object of analysis.[2] Students of populism have articulated three main reasons to be suspicious of populism as a category of analysis. The first is that the term lumps together disparate political projects with disparate social bases and modes of action. Movements widely considered populist are found on the left (as has often been the case in the Americas) and on the right (as has often been the case in Europe); others are hybrid movements that combine elements of left and right. Their social basis may be agrarian (as in the late nineteenth-century United States or in interwar East Central Europe) or urban (as in most Latin American cases). They may be

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[1] The populist moment, of course, is not confined to Europe and the United States. Among others, Prime Minister Modi of India (Jaffrelot 2015; Schroeder 2017), President Duterte of the Philippines (McCargo 2016), and President Erdoğan of Turkey (Aytaç and Öniş 2014; Selçuk 2016) have been analyzed as populists. But populism is not globally synchronized: the wave of Latin American left populisms of the early twenty-first century—sustained by a global commodity boom—peaked well before the populist conjuncture of Europe and North America.

[2] For early doubts, see Worsley (1969, p. 219) and, a decade later, Canovan (1981, pp. 3–7). For representative recent statements expressing or addressing these doubts, see Panizza (2005, p. 1) and Moffitt and Tormey (2014, p. 382). For a recent critical analysis of several generations of populism research, concluding with a cautionary note about the futility and empirical inadequacy of any global or strongly generalizing account of populism, see Knöbl (2016). On the history of the category "populism," see Houwen (2011) and Jäger (2016).

economically statist, protectionist, welfarist, and/or redistributionist (as in classic mid-twentieth century Latin American populisms, recent Latin American left-wing populisms, and, to a lesser extent, many contemporary European populisms, even those usually characterized as on the radical right); but they may also be neoliberal (as in Latin American "neopopulisms" of the 1980s and 1990s and some European populisms of the same period).[3] They may celebrate social and cultural liberalism (as in the Netherlands and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in Northern and Western Europe in the last decade and a half) or attack it (as in Hungary and elsewhere in East Central Europe in recent years).[4] They may be secular or religious. They may be challengers or incumbents; they may seek to mobilize or demobilize.

To be sure, virtually all such movements, figures, and regimes claim to speak in the name of "the people" and against various "elites." This discursive commonality has been emphasized in many discussions, and I consider it in detail below. Here I simply note that "the people" is a deeply ambiguous notion, with at least three core meanings.[5] It can refer to the common or ordinary people, the people as plebs; to the sovereign people, the people as demos; and to the culturally or ethnically distinct people, the people as nation or ethnos. To speak in the name of the "little people" against "those on top" would seem to imply a politics of redistribution. To speak in the name of the sovereign people against ruling elites would seem to imply a politics of re-democratization. And to speak in the name of a bounded and distinct people against threatening outside groups or forces would seem to imply a politics of cultural or ethnic nationalism. The problem of disparateness thus remains: what could be gained by subsuming these very different forms of politics under the label "populism"?

Speaking in the name of the people, moreover, is a chronic and ubiquitous practice in modern democratic settings.[6] This is a second reason for suspicion of populism as an analytic category. If populism is everywhere—as it appears to be in broad and inclusive accounts that focus on the claim to speak in the name of the people—then it is nowhere in particular, and it risks disappearing as a distinctive phenomenon.

The third problem is that "populism" is a morally and politically charged term, a weapon of political struggle as much as a tool of scholarly analysis. As has long been noted in the literature (Taguieff 1995), it is routinely used by journalists and politicians to stigmatize and delegitimize appeals to "the people" against "the elite," often by characterizing such appeals as dangerous, manipulative, and demagogic. In this deeply pejorative usage, "populism" serves to defend a thin, indeed anemic conception of democracy—a conception of "democracy without a

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[3] For debates about the compatibility of populism and neoliberalism, see Roberts (1995) and Weyland (1999, 2003).

[4] On the tension between liberal and anti-liberal strands in contemporary European national populisms, see Brubaker (2017).

[5] See Mény and Surel (2000, pp. 185–214). On the ambiguity of "the people," see also Canovan (1984, 2005), who argues that a fourth meaning of "people" (without the article) in Anglophone discourse—that of "human beings as such"—has colored the other meanings (2005, p. 2).

[6] The practice of speaking in the name of the people, to be sure, has older roots. On the early modern sources of the "populist theory of the state," see Skinner (2009, pp. 332–340).

demos."[7] Some scholars, too, build disapproval into the definition of populism; they define it as intrinsically anti-democratic (Müller 2016). But others emphasize populism's intrinsically democratic nature. Canovan (2002) characterizes it as "the ideology of democracy" and Christopher Lasch calls it the "authentic voice of democracy" (1996, p. 105). Ernesto Laclau—no doubt the single most influential theorist of populism—goes so far as to identify populism (which entails "question[ing] the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent") with politics as such, as distinct from administration (2005a, p. 47). If "populism" is such a deeply politicized term, and one that is used by scholars in such radically incompatible ways, can it serve as a useful category of analysis?

Populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire

These objections are serious, but they need not be fatal. They can be addressed, I think, by treating populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire.[8] Here I build on the well-established discursive and stylistic turn in the study of populism. This turn has allowed scholars—increasingly aware of the heterogeneous ideological commitments, programmatic goals, core constituencies, and organizational forms of populist movements and parties—to capture the discursive, rhetorical, and stylistic commonalities that cut across substantively quite different forms of politics.[9]

Following Jansen (2016), I also build on the literature on repertoires of political contention (Tilly 2006) and the broader literature on repertoires in the sociology of culture (Swidler 1986). [10] Jansen makes fruitful use of the repertoire concept in explaining the "situated political innovation" that led to the emergence of populism (more specifically populist mobilization) in Peru in 1931. Yet while Jansen treats populism as one (new) *element* in the broader repertoire of contentious political practices—and thus uses the 1931 elections in Peru to pose the question of how

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[7] Stavrakakis (2014, p. 567), quoting J. G. Feinberg. For critiques of liberal anti-populism from the left, see also Furedi (2005, 2016) and Rancière (2016).

[8] This does not mean that populism should be understood as "merely" discursive or stylistic. Any political practice, party, movement, figure, or regime that can be analyzed as populist also can (and must) be analyzed in terms of ideological commitments, substantive policies, organizational practices, bases of support, and so on. But what ties substantively different forms of populist politics together—what makes it possible to characterize them all as populist—is the discursive and stylistic repertoire on which they draw.

[9] These commonalities have been construed in various ways: in formal terms as a discursive logic; more informally as a set of characteristic discursive tropes or interpretive frameworks; or in terms of communicational, rhetorical, self-presentational, esthetic, or body-behavioral style. For the discursive logic approach, see Laclau (1977, 1980), and Stavrakakis (2004). For informal discursive, "ideational," or ideological approaches, see Taguieff (1995), Canovan (2002), Mudde (2004), Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), and Stanley (2008) (the latter four follow Freeden's (1998) account of nationalism in characterizing populism as a "thin" or "thin-centered" ideology). For approaches emphasizing communicational (including body-behavioral) style, see Kazin (1995), Knight (1998), Canovan (1999), Ostiguy (2009), Diehl (2011a, 2017), Moffitt and Tormey (2014); and—for the most sustained discussion of populism as a political style—Moffitt (2016). Moffitt and Tormey (2014) and Moffitt (2016) present definitions of populism as an ideology, a political logic, and a discourse as alternatives to their preferred definition of populism as a political style. But as their own discussion suggests, these four are not sharply distinct. I therefore prefer to speak of a single broad discursive and stylistic turn.

[10] Moffitt and Tormey also characterize populism (along with other political styles) as "repertoires of performance" (2014, p. 387; cf. Moffitt 2016, p. 38), but they focus on elaborating the notion of "political style" and do not analyze the notion of "repertoire."

repertoires of contentious practice change through creative responses to new situations—I treat populism itself as a repertoire and seek to identify and to characterize its constituent elements.[11]

The repertoire metaphor has three useful implications for the study of populism. First, it suggests a limited though historically evolving set of relatively standardized elements that are well known to, and available to be drawn on by, political actors. Yet while the elements are more or less standardized, and in some ways even scripted, they leave room for improvisation and elaboration: they must be filled out with particular content and adapted to local circumstances when they are used. As general discursive and stylistic templates, moreover, *all* of the elements can be elaborated in very different directions and specifically in ways that link up with political projects and stances of the right or the left.[12] This helps make sense of the deep political and ideological ambivalence of populism, and it helps to account both for the democratic energies populism may harness and for the antidemocratic dangers it may represent (Canovan 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012a).

Second, the repertoire metaphor suggests that instances of populism are related by what Wittgenstein (1958, paragraphs 66–67), writing about the difficulty of defining a game, famously called a "family resemblance," rather than by strictly logical criteria.[13] Just as there may be no common feature shared by all games, but instead a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail," so it may not be fruitful to seek to specify a necessary or sufficient set of elements for characterizing a party, politician, or discourse as populist.[14] A further implication of the family resemblance idea is that elements of the repertoire, taken individually, are not uniquely populist, but may belong to other political repertoires as well, and that it is the combination of elements—rather than the use of individual elements from the repertoire—that is characteristic of populism. As I argue below, the repertoire is indeed built around a core element: the claim to speak and to act in the name of "the people." But even this core element, though empirically predominant, is neither conceptually necessary nor empirically universal.[15] And the core element can be combined in differing ways with other elements from the populist repertoire, each of which can be given differing weights or inflections.

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[11] Because Jansen was working in the tradition of contentious politics research, with its strong organizational and mobilizational focus (Tilly 2006), his article focuses on innovations in concrete mobilizing practices (see also Jansen 2011). I am interested here in discursive and stylistic practices, not in organizational and mobilizational practices per se, except insofar as these have (as they necessarily do) a discursive and stylistic aspect. That said, one could also fruitfully follow Jansen more directly and treat populism as an organizational and mobilizational repertoire. On more contemporary innovations in populist organizational practices, see Urbinati (2015).

[12] For a critique of the widespread identification of populism with right-wing (or extreme right) forms of xenophobic nationalism in the literature on European populism, see Stavrakakis et al. (2017b).

[13] The "family resemblance" metaphor has been more widely used in the discussion of literary and musical genres (Fishelov 1991) than in the discussion of repertoires per se. But genre and repertoire are themselves closely related terms.

[14] A Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" approach to defining populism has been proposed by Roberts (1995); for a critique, see Weyland (2001). Collier and Mahon (1993) note the similarities between family resemblance approaches and Weber's ideal types.

[15] As Diehl (2011a, p. 31) notes, the claim to speak and act in the name of "the people" is extremely attenuated, if present at all, in the case of Silvio Berlusconi. Yet Berlusconi's mode of political communication and embodied manner of representing himself (by virtue of his origins) as "one of the people" are classically populist. Diehl concludes that while Berlusconi is not *only* a populist, in that he also exemplifies an antipolitical stance and mood and practices a form of "politainment," he is *also* populist.

Third, the repertoire metaphor suggests a way of responding to the claim that populism is ubiquitous (and therefore cannot serve as a useful analytical category). For while the populist repertoire is chronically *available* in contemporary democratic contexts, it is not chronically *deployed*. The cultural resonance and political traction of the various elements of the repertoire—and therefore their attractiveness to political actors—vary systematically across political, economic, and cultural contexts. Moreover, the repertoire is drawn on unevenly *within* a given time, place, and context: some political actors shun the repertoire altogether; some draw on it only occasionally or minimally (and may do so even as they criticize others for their "populism"); others draw more chronically and fully on a wider range of elements from the populist repertoire. Populism is thus a matter of degree, not a sharply bounded phenomenon that is either present or absent (Diehl 2011b, pp. 277–278). But it is not *only* a matter of degree: as suggested above and developed below, populisms also differ qualitatively in the combinations of elements drawn on and—quite markedly—in the directions in which the elements are elaborated and filled out.

In the name of the people: Vertical and horizontal oppositions

The core element of the populist repertoire is the claim to speak and act in the name of "the people." That this is central to or even constitutive of populism has been universally recognized in the recent literature, as that literature has come to be deeply informed by the discursive and stylistic turn. But since the claim to speak and act in the name of the people—to represent the people—is central to democracy, not just to populism, and is ubiquitous in contemporary democratic contexts, the literature usually adds the specification that populism involves the claim to speak and to act in the name of the people *and against* "*the elite.*"

In the influential view of Cas Mudde (2004, p. 543), for example, populism is defined by a vision of society as divided between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012b, pp. 1–2, 7–10) recommend this as a "minimal definition" in the spirit of Giovanni Sartori (1970), but it is arguably not minimal enough in one respect and too minimal in another. It is not minimal enough in that "the people" are not always represented as "pure," even if they are always valorized in some way; and corruption is only one of many failings ascribed to elites, and it is not always the most important one.[16] More fundamentally, Mudde's definition is too minimal in that it focuses solely on the *vertical* opposition between "the people" and "the elite" and neglects the *horizontal* opposition between "the people" and outside groups and forces. Speaking in the name of the people, I would argue, is better understood in relation to a *two-dimensional* vision of social space, defined by the *intersection* of vertical and horizontal oppositions.[17]

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[16] For critiques of putatively minimal definitions that characterize populism as a moralizing discourse that insists on the homogeneity of "the people," see Katsambekis (2016, p. 391) and Stavrakakis et al. 2017b, p. 424).

[17] This is richly suggested but not quite made explicit in Taguieff (1995). On horizontal and vertical dimensions, see also Brubaker (2017), Biorcio (2003, pp. 72–73), and Jansen (2011, p. 84n.). Stavrakakis et al. (2017b) and De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), which I encountered as I was completing this article, make the case for a sharp conceptual distinction between populism and nationalism, the former articulated in the vertical dimension around the notion of people-as-underdog, the latter in the horizontal dimension around the notion of people-as-nation. Though I lack the space to pursue the argument here, I am skeptical of the effort to "purify" (Stavrakakis et al. 2017b, p. 424) populism by reducing it to the vertical dimension alone, just as I am skeptical of reducing nationalism to the horizontal dimension alone.

In the vertical dimension, "the people" are defined in opposition to economic, political, and cultural elites. "The people" are represented as morally decent (though not necessarily pure), economically struggling, hard-working, family-oriented, plain-spoken, and endowed with common sense, while "the elite"—the rich, the powerful, the well-connected, the (over-) educated, and the institutionally empowered—are seen as living in different worlds, playing by different rules, insulated from economic hardships, self-serving and often corrupt, out of touch with the concerns and problems of ordinary people, and condescending toward their values, habits, and ways of life.

"The people" can be defined not only in relation to those on *top* but also—still in the vertical dimension—in relation to those on the *bottom* (Müller 2016, p. 23). Those on the bottom may be represented as parasites or spongers, as addicts or deviants, as disorderly or dangerous, as undeserving of benefits and unworthy of respect, and thus as not belonging to the so-called decent, respectable, "normal," hard-working "people."[18] The downward focus of populist anger and resentment has been much less widely discussed than the upward focus. But it should not be neglected, especially since the upward and downward orientations are often closely connected: those on top are often blamed for being overly solicitous of those on the bottom. Populism is keenly attuned to the distribution not only of *resources* and *opportunities* but of *honor, respect,* and *recognition*, which may be seen as unjustly withheld from "ordinary" people and unjustly accorded to the unworthy and undeserving (Hochschild 2016).

In the horizontal dimension, "the people" are understood as a bounded collectivity, and the basic contrast is between *inside* and *outside*. This opposition is central—albeit in different forms—to left-wing as well as right-wing populism. Left-wing populism construes the bounded collectivity in economic or political terms and identifies the threatening "outside" with unfettered trade, unregulated globalization, the European Union, or (especially in Latin America) American imperialism. Right-wing populism construes the people as a culturally or ethnically bounded collectivity with a shared and distinctive way of life and sees that collectivity as threatened by outside groups or forces (including "internal outsiders": those living on the inside who, even when they are citizens of the state, are not seen as belonging, or fully belonging, to the nation).

What I want to emphasize here—since it is characteristic of the present European and North American populist conjuncture—is the *tight discursive interweaving* of the vertical opposition to those on top and the horizontal opposition to outside groups or forces. In both left and right variants of populism, economic, political, and cultural elites are represented as "outside" as well as "on top." They are seen not only as comfortably insulated from the economic struggles of ordinary people, but also as differing in their culture, values, and way of life. They are seen as culturally as well as economically mobile—in effect, as rootless cosmopolitans, indifferent to the bounded solidarities of community and nation. Their affective and cultural as well as economic investments are seen as moving easily across national boundaries, their moral self-understanding, cultural identity, and economic fate as de-linked from those of "the people."

Left-wing variants of the intertwining of vertical and horizontal oppositions are more likely to emphasize the elite's supranational or global economic ties, horizons, and

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[18] The most striking contemporary instance of this downward focus of populism is that of Duterte in the Philippines; see, for example, Curato (2017).

commitments. Syriza's leader Alexis Tsipras did so, for example, by punningly coupling "external troika" and "internal troika" (*troika exoterikou—troika esoterikou*) as a way of delegitimizing the previous three-party ruling coalition by linking it to the hated troika (the European Commission, European Central Bank, and IMF) responsible for imposing austerity on Greece (Stavrakakis and Siomos 2016). Right-wing variants are more likely to emphasize elites' cultural outsiderhood. They are more likely to criticize elites for welcoming immigrants and financially supporting refugees while neglecting the hard-working "native" population and for favoring mixing and multiculturalism while denouncing ordinary people as racist and Islamophobic, as Hilary Clinton infamously did when she characterized Trump supporters as "a basket of deplorables."

The intertwining of vertical and horizontal oppositions is also evident, of course, when those "on the bottom"—for example, Roma in East Central Europe, certain groups of immigrant origin in Western Europe, and African Americans and certain other racialized minorities in the United States—are simultaneously seen as "outside," and when their putatively irreducible outsiderhood or "difference" is seen as explaining or legitimizing their lowly position. There is nothing specifically populist about this kind of culturalization, racialization, or naturalization of inequality. It becomes populist when elites—domestic or international—are blamed for prioritizing or privileging in some way those who are at once on the bottom *and* outside, while neglecting the problems and predicaments of "ordinary people."

Rounding out the repertoire

In addition to this core element, I want to sketch briefly five additional elements of the populist repertoire. These are best understood as elaborations or specifications of the vertical opposition between people and elite and/or the horizontal opposition between inside and outside. My account of these elements is inflected by my concern with the European and North American populist conjuncture, and my examples are drawn from this conjuncture. But it is important to underscore that all five elements—like the core element just sketched—have a long history and that none is restricted to Europe and North America.[19]

The first of these can be called *antagonistic re-politicization*: the claim to reassert democratic political control over domains of life that are seen, plausibly enough, as having been depoliticized and de-democratized, that is, removed from the realm of democratic decision-making (Canovan 2002). This has been emphasized by theorists and defenders of left populism in the Laclau tradition, notably Mouffe (2005), Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2013), and Stavrakakis (2014). But it is characteristic of right-wing populism as well (Probst 2002). Antagonistic re-politicization may involve opposition to the claim, popularized by Margaret Thatcher, that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal economic policies. It may involve opposition to the extension of administrative, technocratic, and juridical at the expense of political modes of decision-making. It may involve opposition to the stifling of debate about fundamental political questions that may result from grand coalitions or ideologically

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[19] Knöbl (2016) justly criticizes presentist accounts that are oblivious to the long history of populism—and to the almost equally long history of scholarly attempts to come to grips with populism. On the historical mutations of populism, see Abromeit et al. (2015).

indistinguishable groupings of major parties.[20] Or it may involve opposition to the abdication of key aspects of national sovereignty to the European Union, with its deep "democratic deficit" and its depoliticizing "constitutionalization" of economic liberties (Grimm 2015).

In all these cases, contentious re-politicization has an anti-elite thrust. Elites are represented—again, plausibly enough—as distrusting "the people," and thus as favoring modes of decision-making that are insulated from the pressures, passions, and putative irrationality of democratic politics. Contentious re-politicization draws sharp and antagonistic boundaries between "the people" and "the elite."[21] Liberal anti-populists denounce this polarizing language as "Manichaean," but analysts in the Laclau tradition defend the antagonistic language and the energies it can mobilize (Katsambekis 2014).

The second element is *majoritarianism*—the assertion of the interests, rights, and will of the majority against those of minorities. Majoritarian claims may be directed against those on top, those on the bottom, or those at the margins. They may challenge the privileged few in the name of the many. Yet they may also challenge the rights and benefits accorded to those on the bottom—certain welfare benefits (in means-tested systems), for example, or the procedural protections of criminal law, for which the "decent, hard-working majority" must allegedly bear the cost.[22] Or they may challenge efforts to promote the interests, protect the rights, or recognize the dignity of marginal groups, defined by religion, race or ethnicity, immigration status, sexuality, or gender. They may reject discourses and practices of multiculturalism, diversity, or minority rights, seeing these as disadvantaging or symbolically devaluing those in the mainstream. Majoritarianism thus again highlights the ideological indeterminacy and ambivalence of populism.[23] It also highlights the interweaving of horizontal and vertical oppositions, since majoritarianism may be directed *simultaneously* against those on top, those on the bottom, and those at the margins: "the elite" may be faulted precisely for protecting and promoting those on the bottom and those at the margins at the expense of "ordinary people" and those in the mainstream.

The third element is *anti-institutionalism*. This is of course a selective anti-institutionalism. Once in power, populists may construct their own institutions and seek to dominate and work through existing ones (Müller 2016, pp. 61–62). But as an "ideology of immediacy" (Innerarity 2010, p. 41; Urbinati 2015), populism distrusts the mediating functions of institutions, especially political parties, media, and the courts. Populists often deploy an anti-party rhetoric, even when they establish new

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[20] Sharp rhetorical opposition to the stifling of political debate by consensus-oriented establishment parties was central, for example, to the rise of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands (who denounced the consensual pieties of what he called the "left church") and Jörg Haider in Austria (who denounced the "power cartel" of the long-running Grand Coalition). Populist complaints about power cartels are not unfounded. For the classic analysis of the emergence of the "cartel party, in which colluding parties become agents of the state and employ the resources of the state … to ensure their own collective survival," see Katz and Mair (1995).

[21] Laclau's insistence on the simplifying, antagonistic logic at the heart of populism—and at the heart of politics (as opposed to administration)—has obvious affinities with Carl Schmitt's (2007) understanding of the distinction between friend and enemy as the essence of "the political."

[22] On "penal populism," see Pratt (2007) and Roberts (2003).

[23] For a discussion of "majority rights" from the perspective of normative political theory, see Orgad (2015).

parties in order to compete in elections, and the parties they establish are generally weakly institutionalized vehicles for personalistic leadership.[24] They often claim to promote direct rather than representative democracy, most often through majoritarian procedures like referenda or plebiscites, but sometimes through experiments with "horizontal"—"distributed, participatory and networked" (Tormey 2015, p. 13)— forms of political involvement. And even as populists seek to exploit or to control the established media, they also seek to bypass it and to communicate directly with their supporters, as Trump and Wilders (and India's Narendra Modi) have done through Twitter and Beppe Grillo has done through an innovative blog. Populists often distrust the complexity and non-transparency of institutional mediation and the pluralism and autonomy of institutions. Thus Trump, for example, has ferociously attacked the legitimacy of the (mainstream) media and the legitimacy of the courts as well. And Hungary's Fidesz regime has pursued a comprehensive institutional *Gleichschaltung* that has subordinated courts, media, the economy, and academic and cultural institutions to the party-state.[25]

The fourth element is *protectionism*. This is the claim to protect "the people" against threats from above, from below, and, today especially, from the outside. I distinguish economic, securitarian, and cultural protectionism. All three are central to the present populist moment. Economic protectionism highlights the threat to domestic producers from cheap foreign goods, to domestic workers from cheap foreign labor, and to domestic debtors from foreign creditors. Securitarian protectionism highlights threats from terrorism and crime. And cultural protectionism highlights threats to the familiar life world from outsiders who differ in religion, language, food, dress, bodily behavior, and modes of using public space.

Populist protectionism depends on the rhetoric of "crisis" (Moffitt 2016). Populists dramatize—and often of course exaggerate and distort—the threats from which they claim to offer protection. And when in power, they dramatize their response to crisis. They do so by staging events that purport to show jobs being saved or created, walls being built, undocumented immigrants being deported, terror suspects being rounded up, and alien cultural forms such as the niqab being removed from public space.[26]

The fifth and final element of the populist repertoire pertains not to the "*what*" of populist discourse but to the "*how*": to matters of communicational, rhetorical, self-presentational, and body-behavioral style.[27] The populist style has been usefully characterized by Ostiguy (2009) as a "low" rather than "high" style that favors "raw" and crude (but warm and unrestrained) over refined and cultivated (but cool and reserved) language and self-presentation. In principle, as Ostiguy emphasizes, the high-low dimension is fully independent of the left-right axis, generating a two-dimensional space of political appeals or stances that includes "high" left and "high"

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[24] On anti-party parties, see Tormey (2015, pp. 113–119). On personalistic leadership as a key aspect of populism, see Weyland (2001, pp. 12–14).

[25] Since taking office in late 2015, Poland's Law and Justice Party government has been following Orbán's model, especially with respect to the courts, media, and cultural institutions.

[26] I return to the theme of crisis below.

[27] This topic has been explored in the literature on media and political communication by Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) and Pels (2003) and in the populism literature by Taguieff (1995), Knight (1998), Canovan (1999), Ostiguy (2009), Diehl (2011a, 2017), Wodak (2015), Moffitt and Tormey (2014), and Moffitt (2016).

right as well as "low" or populist left and right stances.[28] The populist style performatively devalues complexity through rhetorical practices of simplicity, directness, and seeming self-evidence, often accompanied by an explicit anti-intellectualism or "epistemological populism" (Saurette and Gunster 2011) that valorizes common sense and first-hand experience over abstract and experience-distant forms of knowledge. The "low" style is enacted not only through ways of talking but also through embodied ways of doing and being: since the body is a potent political operator and signifier, proximity to "the people" can be communicated and performed through gesture, tone, sexuality, dress, and food (Diehl 2011a, 2017; Moffitt 2016, pp. 63–68).[29]

A further aspect of populist style opposes common sense and plain speaking to the constraints and restraints of polite speech and political correctness. Populists not only criticize the rules governing acceptable speech: they relish violating those rules. Through an attention-seeking strategy of provocation, they foreground their willingness to break taboos, refuse euphemisms, and disrupt the conventions of polite speech and "normal" demeanor (Ostiguy 2009; Moffitt 2016, pp. 57–63). As Coleman (2016) has noted, for example, Trump used conspicuous rudeness, crude sexual references, and a general "bad boy" demeanor to project an image of authenticity, in contrast to Clinton's perceived scriptedness and inauthenticity. Similar observations have been made about Jörg Haider, Pim Fortuyn, and Silvio Berlusconi on the right, but also about Alexis Tsipras on the left and about the hard-to-classify Beppe Grillo, among others.

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Let me take stock of the argument so far. I noted at the outset that populism is a deeply ambiguous, promiscuously deployed, and chronically politicized concept. Yet I have tried to show that it should not be dismissed as nothing more than a lazy journalistic cliché or an ideologically charged political epithet. By characterizing populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire, I have argued that the concept can be given analytical purchase and bring into focus important aspects of contemporary politics.

My sketch of the main elements of the populist repertoire—the claim to speak in the name of "the people" against both "the elite" and outside groups or forces; the antagonistic re-politicization of depoliticized domains of life; the claim to speak in the name of the majority against unfairly privileged minorities; the valorization of immediacy and directness against mediating institutions; the economic, securitarian, and cultural protectionism; and the "low" style and deliberate violations of rules of polite speech and demeanor—does not pretend to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Like the populist repertoire as a whole, the constituent elements I have described are not sharply bounded but rather loose congeries of discursive and stylistic themes, motifs, and practices, and it would certainly be possible to construe the elements in a

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[28] Ostiguy develops his argument with reference to Latin America and especially Argentina, but he argues persuasively that the high-low distinction travels well to other contexts. See also Ostiguy and Roberts (2016), which uses the high-low distinction to analyze Trump in comparative perspective.

[29] Not all populists employ a "low" style. Enoch Powell, for example, claimed to speak in the name of the people as he warned in apocalyptic terms about black immigration to Britain in the 1960s, but he had been a professor of ancient Greek before entering politics, and his speeches were delivered with refined diction and laced with classical allusions. Given the "family resemblance" definitional strategy adopted here, it is not surprising that the various elements of the populist repertoire are not always found together.

somewhat different way. I hope that this sketch nonetheless shows that populism can be construed in a way that is definite enough to withstand the charge of being a vague and catch-all category; rich and distinctive enough to withstand the charge of ubiquity; and morally and politically ambivalent enough to withstand the charge of being a stigmatizing (or celebratory) political category that is ill suited to analytic use.

Explaining the populist conjuncture

I turn now to the second question signaled in my title. What explains the clustering in time and space that constitutes the present pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment? Why populism? Why here? And why now?

The explanatory question is in fact several distinct questions. Some of these pertain to specific occurrences, especially the Brexit and Trump victories. These are likely to turn out to be "events" in Sewell's (1996) stringent sense: profoundly and enduringly consequential happenings that transform structures. Explaining such transformative events is obviously important. But any credible explanation will necessarily turn on a great variety of time- and place-specific contingencies. Had some of these contingencies played out differently, the outcomes might well have been different: Brexit and Trump might well have lost. On the other hand, had *other* contingencies played out differently, Norbert Hofer might be President of Austria, and Marine Le Pen (or Jean-Luc Mélenchon) President of France.[30] Analysts interested in explaining specific events would then have faced radically *different* questions.

Yet for those more interested in patterns and clustering than in particular events, as I am, the underlying question would have been precisely the same: namely, how did we reach the point at which Brexit, Trump, Hofer, and Le Pen —but also Sanders, Mélenchon, Syriza, and the 2015 Greek referendum rejecting the terms of further bailouts—all had a real chance of victory, and the Eurozone and Schengen system of free movement a real chance of collapsing, at around the same time?

Seeking to explain the highly contingent outcomes of specific elections and referenda, then, differs sharply from seeking to explain the emergence of a social and political constellation in which a clustered and concatenated series of events had become thinkable rather than unthinkable. I am interested in the latter: in the *conditions of possibility* of this cluster of outcomes, not in the local contingencies that explain why

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[30] Austrian Freedom Party candidate Norbert Hofer, who made opposition to Islam (which has "no place in Austria") central to his campaign, far outpaced other candidates in the first round of the Austrian presidential election in April 2016. In the runoff, Green party candidate Alexander Van der Bellen won the barest of majorities, but the result was annulled because of irregularities. In the re-run of the second round, postponed until December 2016, Van der Bellen won by a more comfortable 54–46% margin (Wodak 2016). Although Emmanuel Macon decisively defeated Le Pen in the second round of the French election, winning two-thirds of the vote, the four leading candidates were running neck and neck in the run-up to the first round, and any matchup seemed possible in the second round, including a runoff between Le Pen and left populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which would have given Le Pen a good chance of victory. It should be emphasized, moreover, that François Fillon and Macron *also* waged populist campaigns. After a "fake work" scandal involving his wife landed him in legal troubles, the arch-conservative Fillon mobilized street protests against the judiciary, complaining of a "political assassination" and an "institutional coup d'état." And Macron founded En Marche! as a movement, not a party (or as what Bordignon (2017) called an "anti-party party"), appealing directly to "the people" beyond divisions of left and right and promising to "re-found" the political system.

the outcomes, in each case, fell on one side or the other of the razor-thin line that separates victory from defeat.

Explaining the populist conjuncture requires a layered explanatory strategy that integrates processes of different scale, scope, and temporal register (Sewell 2005, p. 109).[31] I begin by sketching two sets of decades-spanning structural trends that have gradually expanded opportunities for populism: the transformations of party politics, social structure, media, and governance structures that have fostered a generic populism—a heightened tendency to address "the people" directly—and the demographic, economic, and cultural transformations that have encouraged more specific forms of protectionist populism. I then discuss the conjunctural coming-together of a series of crises—the Great Recession and sovereign debt crisis, the refugee crisis, and the security crisis occasioned by a series of terror attacks, all in the context of a crisis of public knowledge—to form a "perfect storm" that was powerfully conducive to populist claims to protect the people against threats to their economic, cultural, and physical security.[32]

Structural transformations (1): The crisis of institutional mediation

Several developments have come together in recent decades to make politicians less dependent on parties and more inclined to appeal directly to "the people." The first is the transformation of parties and party systems and the weakening of "party democracy" (Mair 2002, 2011; Kriesi 2014). Membership in, loyalty to, and trust in political parties have plummeted, while electoral volatility—not just shifts in support for existing parties, but the formation of new parties and the disappearance of old ones—has increased.[33] Contributing to the transformation of parties and party systems is an ongoing social structural and cultural process of individualization, which has massively eroded the socially encapsulating subcultural boundaries that had tied many parties strongly to particular subcultural communities defined by the division of labor, confession, or comprehensive ideology (Katz and Mair 1995). Individualization has made individuals more structurally and culturally "available" for and potentially

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[31] I should emphasize that what I seek to explain is the pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist conjuncture of the last few years, *not* the emergence and consolidation of anti-immigrant (and, increasingly, anti-Muslim) populisms in western and northern Europe since the 1980s. My explanatory argument is thus narrower in temporal scope than most discussions of European populism. But I conceptualize my explanandum more broadly than most discussions: I include eastern and southern Europe (and the United States) as well as western and northern Europe, and I include left-wing and hybrid or hard-to-classify populisms, as well as the right-wing populisms on which the European literature has overwhelmingly focused—a focus sharply (and in my view correctly) criticized by Stavrakakis et al. (2017b).

[32] A fuller, more fine-grained treatment would require attending not only to the structural and conjunctural but also to the "eventful" (Sewell 2005, pp. 100–123) temporal register: to the contingencies of time, place, and situated action. I limit myself to the structural and conjunctural registers here, not only because of space limitations, but also because I am interested in explaining a broad pan-European and trans-Atlantic moment, not a specific set of national (and subnational) outcomes.

[33] Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2015) find that both dimensions of electoral volatility have increased substantially in the last quarter century in Western Europe; volatility has been even higher in Eastern Europe. There is of course considerable variation among countries: in Western Europe, the collapse of traditional parties and the de-institutionalization of party systems has been most striking in Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, and (most recently) France.

receptive to appeals to "the people" as a whole that bypass established parties and other intermediary institutions.[34]

The pervasive "mediatization of politics" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), the intensifying commercialization of the media, and the accelerated development of new communications technologies have likewise made politicians less dependent on parties and more inclined (and able) to appeal directly to "the people." They do so through strategies of "self-mediatization" that both *exploit* the mainstream media—which is as dependent on political actors as they are on the media—and, more recently, *bypass* the mainstream media through Twitter and other social media platforms.[35] The mediatization of politics and commercialization of the media have also fostered a populist style of political communication that matches the populist style of media coverage of politics: a style characterized by simplification, dramatization, confrontation, negativity, emotionalization, personalization, and visualization (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Esser 2013, pp. 171–172). These tendencies (and the literature on mediatization) predate the internet era, but they have been heightened, and qualitatively transformed, through the affordances of social media and digital hyper-connectivity.

A final medium-term trend that creates opportunities for generic populism is the growing technical, economic, and legal complexity and opacity of structures of governance and the growing distance between citizens and the most consequential loci of collective decision-making. This is seen in the empowerment of administrative agencies—and the lobbyists that have access to them—at the expense of elected legislatures, in the increasing reliance on technical expertise, in ongoing processes of juridification, and—in Europe—in the hollowing out of the powers of the nation-state through the delegation of key competencies to the European Union, with its structurally much weaker possibilities for democratic control. Since all of these developments remove certain matters from the realm of democratic decision-making, they create opportunities for populist claims to re-politicize depoliticized domains of collective life.[36]

The complexity, opacity, and distance of structures of governance also foster populist demands for simplicity, transparency, immediacy, and direct accountability and populist challenges to the authority of expertise.[37] Like the social structural process of individualization mentioned above, this is a longer-term process, not one confined to the last few decades. As Calhoun (1988, p. 220) observes, the opportunities for

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[34] Individualization has been especially conspicuous in the last half century in the formerly "pillarized" societies of Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands, though it is of course a much broader and longer-term process. While individualization does entail a kind of structural and cultural disembedding (especially in these formerly structurally and culturally highly segmented societies), it does not necessarily entail the kinds of atomization, anomie, social disorganization, and manipulability by demagogues that were emphasized by some early theorists of Latin American populism. On reflexive individualization as central to late modernity, see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002.

[35] On the reciprocal dependence of Trump and the media, see Gitlin (2016).

[36] In a broader, more theoretical argument, Mouffe (2005, pp. 51–55) blames the hegemony of a purely liberal, consensual, depoliticized model of democracy for the growing strength of right-wing populism; see also Stavrakakis (2014).

[37] Although the growing complexity of structures of governance—and the increasingly complex interdependence of social, economic, and political life more generally—fosters populist demands for simplicity, transparency, and immediacy and breeds skepticism toward the claims of expertise, it also fosters technocratic claims for *expanding* the role of expert authority. On populism and technocracy as complementary critiques of party democracy in an age of short-term "electoralism," complex governance structures, and pervasive mediatization, see Caramani (2017).

populism created by the "apparent distance of centers of power from most people's everyday lives" have been "endemic to modern and modernizing societies." This is because the experience of the encroachment of an alien system world on the everyday lifeworld (to use Habermas's terms) is grounded in long-term processes of the expansion in the scale of social organization and the growing importance of indirect social relationships that are "mediated by technology and complex organization" (p. 223).

Structural transformations (2): Toward a protectionist populism

Demographic, economic, and cultural transformations have created opportunities for more specific forms of populist politics that claim to protect "the people" and their accustomed way of life against threats from above, from outside, or from the margins of society. The large-scale immigration of the last half-century—a large and increasing fraction of which has come from outside Europe—has provided the most direct and consistent stimulus for protectionist populism in Western Europe (and to a lesser extent in the United States). This immigration has altered the structure of the labor market, substantially increased the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity of the population, and gradually but profoundly transformed urban public space. This has created opportunities for claims to protect the jobs, welfare benefits, cultural identity, and way of life of "the people"—sometimes construed specifically as the "native" or "autochthonous" people, sometimes simply as the citizenry—against migrants and, in Europe, in the last decade or so, against Muslims in particular. And indeed economically and culturally protectionist forms of anti-immigrant populism have become chronic since the 1990s throughout most of Western Europe.[38]

The opening of national economies to large-scale immigrant labor is part of a broader set of economic transformations that have fostered a partly overlapping yet distinct form of populism in Western Europe and the United States. In relation to the rapid growth, relative stability, relative equality, and widely diffused prosperity of the immediate postwar decades, economic transformations of the last several decades have created opportunities for claims to speak in the name of the "little people" or "ordinary people" against "those on top" as well as against outside groups and forces that are seen as threatening "our" jobs, "our" prosperity, "our" economic security, or "our" way of life. The litany is familiar: it includes the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of production; the dramatic increases in inequalities of income and wealth; the steep, regionally concentrated decline of stable, well-paying manufacturing jobs; the accelerating cross-border flows of goods, services, and investments as well as labor; and the shifting of risks and responsibilities to individuals through neoliberal modes of governance. Strikingly, social-democratic parties did not seize the political opportunity created by these major economic shifts. Instead, their neoliberal turn in recent decades left the field open to other parties, on the right as well as the left, to advance populist economic claims.

The description just given applies to the United States as much as to Western Europe. But the institutional architecture of the European Union has provided a distinctive focus and an irresistible target for both economic and cultural forms of

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[38] For broad accounts, see Betz (1994) and Kitschelt and McGann (1995). On the politics of "home" and autochthony, see Duyvendak (2011) and Mepschen (2016). On nativism and populism, see Betz (2017).

protectionist populism in Europe. This has been the case for a quarter of a century, ever since the heatedly contested Danish and French referenda on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Euroskeptic populists have highlighted the deep democratic deficit of the European Union, its imposed policy straitjacket, its quasi-constitutional elevation of market freedoms above all other considerations, its foundational commitment to downgrading and in key domains dissolving national boundaries, and its position as both "on top" and "outside" of national polities.[39]

In the domain of the politics of culture, more specifically the politics of identity and difference, new waves of emancipatory liberalism since the 1960s have created opportunities for populists to attack political correctness and to speak in the name of a symbolically neglected, dishonored, or devalued majority against the alleged privileging of minorities.[40] On the one hand, restrictions on speech deemed offensive or harmful to minorities, discourses and practices of multiculturalism, diversity, affirmative action, and minority rights,[41] and the stigmatization of opponents of such discourses and practices as racist, xenophobic, or Islamophobic have provoked majoritarian claims against the perceived symbolic elevation and special treatment of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, both immigrant and non-immigrant. On the other hand, the expanding recognition of LGBT rights and the stigmatizing of opponents of such rights as homophobic or (more recently) transphobic have created opportunities for claims to defend traditional forms of marriage and family and traditional norms of gender and sexuality against the perceived symbolic elevation and special treatment of gender and sexual minorities.[42] This symbolic transvaluation has culminated recently in the recognition of gay marriage and, in the United States, in the recognition and implementation of broad transgender rights by courts, legislatures, and the civil rights division of the Obama administration Department of Education.[43]

Large-scale immigration, economic transformations, and new waves of emancipatory liberalism can all be seen as projects of socially, economically, and culturally

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[39] On the distinctive importance of the post-Maastricht process of accelerated Europeanization in fostering right-wing populism in France, see Berezin (2009). On the "over-constitutionalization" of the EU that elevated market freedoms to quasi-constitutional status, see Grimm (2015). Pre-Brexit flashpoints of populist Euroskepticism included the initial Danish rejection (and French near-rejection) of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitution in 2005. For a useful pre-Brexit review of the literature on Euroskepticism, see Vasilopoulou (2013).

[40] On cultural backlash, see Bornschier and Kriesi (2013) and Inglehart and Norris (2016). The importance of honor, recognition, and respect to Tea Party and Trump supporters has been stressed by Hochschild (2016). For an account of contemporary populism (with reference to support for Trump and Brexit in particular) as a "rent-restoration project," emerging in response to the liberal "rent-destruction project" that sought to overcome the structural disadvantages based on race, gender, and nativity, see Jackson and Grusky, unpublished paper.

[41] On the "minority rights revolution" of recent decades, see Skrentny (2002).

[42] In northern and western Europe—and most strikingly in the Netherlands—emancipatory liberalism in the domain of gender and sexuality has figured in culturally protectionist populist politics in a very different way: a "civilizational" populism has embraced gender and sexual liberalism as central to the (post-) Christian West yet intrinsically incompatible with Islam. On the putatively liberal dimensions of this civilizational populism, see Brubaker (2017).

[43] In East Central Europe, the populist reaction against emancipatory liberalism has a different focus and target, since the region's right wing populists, led by Viktor Orbán, understand emancipatory liberalism not only, or primarily, as an internal development, but as a foreign ideology imported from the west and imposed by "Brussels." Emancipatory liberalism is seen by the region's national populists as a kind of neocolonial "mission civilisatrice" that requires elaborate systems of rights for Roma, national minorities, and gender and sexual minorities. On EU enlargement and gay rights, see Mole (2016) and Slootmaeckers et al. (2016).

liberal elites. They therefore all create opportunities for populism in a double sense: opportunities for speaking in the name of "the people" against elites, and opportunities for claims to protect the people" against threats from outside and from the margins.

Converging crises

The medium-term trends outlined above help explain the routinization of a thin, generic, "background" populism in recent decades. They help explain the tendency for political actors to address "the people" directly and to adopt at least some elements of a populist style of communication. They help explain why anti-immigrant populist and (more recently) Euroskeptical parties have become a structural feature of the political landscape in most West European countries. And they help explain the periodic populist challenges to the American political establishment in recent decades, from George Wallace and Ross Perot to Pat Buchanan, the Tea Party, and Occupy Wall Street (Judis 2016).

The problem with this account, though, is that it explains too much. If all of these trends favor populism, then we face the problem of explaining why populism is not ubiquitous. Construing populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire—and as a matter of degree, rather than a sharply bounded phenomenon that is either present or absent—offers a way around this difficulty. In the last several decades, intertwined transformations of politics, social structure, and the media on the one hand and of ethnocultural demography, economics, and the politics of culture on the other have created opportunities and incentives for almost *all* political actors to draw in *some* contexts on *some* elements of the populist repertoire. But "thicker" forms of populism, drawing on the full range of elements from the repertoire, are *not* chronic or ubiquitous. The populist repertoire is indeed chronically *available* in contemporary democratic contexts, but it is not chronically or uniformly *activated*: it is drawn on unevenly. As I argue above, the cultural resonance and political traction of the various elements of the repertoire vary systematically across political, economic, and cultural contexts.

What, then, explains the populist conjuncture of the last few years? Why now, rather than any other time in the last several decades? My argument is that several independent crises have converged in recent years to create a "perfect storm" supremely conducive to populism, especially to forms of right-wing populism that unite economic, cultural, and securitarian protectionism.

The notion of crises converging in a perfect storm, to be sure, is not an innocent one. It risks naturalizing the notion of crisis and ratifying the journalistic cliché that populism is a response to crisis. But "crisis" is not a neutral category of social analysis; it is a category of social and political practice that is mobilized to do specific political work (Brubaker 2011, p. 252 n. 12). As an interpretive frame and rhetorical form, "crisis" is not prior to and independent of populist politics; it is a central *part* of populist politics (Moffitt 2016; Stavrakakis et al. 2017a)—though not of course of populist politics alone.[44] In politics (as in journalism or scholarship) the rhetoric of "crisis"

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[44] Stavrakakis et al. (2017a) appreciate Moffitt's emphasis on crisis as a construction, representation, and performance, while noting the earlier emphasis on this theme by Hay (1995) and—in connection with the study of populism—by Laclau (2005b). Yet in their account, crisis is not *only* construction, representation, and performance: they follow Laclau in seeking to theorize the relation between the objective and subjective moments of crisis, or, as Sum and Jessop (2015, p. 40) put it, the "dialect of semiosis and materiality."

serves as a bid for attention, a marker of urgency, a claim that extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. With the complicity of mainstream, alternative, and social media, political actors construct, perform, intensify, dramatize, and in these ways contribute to *producing* the very crises to which they claim to *respond*. This does not mean, of course, that populists (or other political actors) can construct crisis ex nihilo; they must have favorable materials to work with. But populism thrives on crisis. It is therefore important to keep in mind that "crisis" is a contested interpretive frame, not a neutral descriptive term. When I speak of a concatenated series of crises, then, this is a shorthand way of referring to a converging cluster of situations that have been widely *construed and represented* as crises, not just by political actors usually considered populists, but also by other political actors and the media, including the mainstream media.

The financial crash and Great Recession were compounded, in Europe, by the sovereign debt crisis and the deep institutional crisis of the Eurozone and the European Union itself (Offe 2016, pp. 16–31). The disastrous straitjacket imposed on debtor and trade-deficit countries by monetary union was aggravated by creditor countries' (especially Germany's) unwillingness to mutualize debt, and by the insistence on austerity as a condition for bailouts. This deepened and prolonged mass unemployment. And it directly provoked the left populist reaction—the anti-austerity Indignados movement and its heir, the Podemos party, in Spain, and the transformation of Syriza from a marginal far left movement to governing populist party in Greece—that threatened the very existence of the Eurozone in July 2015, when Greek voters, urged on by the Syriza government, rejected the Troika-imposed terms of a further bailout.[45]

But the economic crisis cast a long shadow: its effects were felt well beyond the hardest-hit countries and well beyond moments of peak unemployment or maximum tension over debt.[46] And the crisis energized the right as much as the left. Throughout Europe and North America, populists have used the crisis to dramatize economic insecurity and inequality, to tap into economic anxieties, and to highlight the disruptions of neoliberal globalization. And they have proposed a resonant counter-narrative emphasizing the need to protect domestic jobs and markets. The counter-narrative informed the Brexit and Trump campaigns and the Mélenchon and Sanders insurgencies. But it also found expression in the striking shift in recent years to a protectionist and welfarist stance on the part of most of Europe's national-populist parties. These parties have increasingly targeted segments of the electorate that have been alienated by the neoliberal turn of European social democrats (and of the Democratic Party in the United States).[47]

Outside of Spain and Greece, it was the European refugee crisis of 2015 that most immediately and visibly provoked a populist reaction. The rhetoric of "crisis" in connection with migration and asylum-seeking in Europe and North America is of course not new. And while the 2015 numbers were large, they were not objectively overwhelming: although the 1.3 million applicants for asylum in EU countries were nearly twice the previous high (in 1992), they amounted to only one-quarter of 1 % of

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[45] On Podemos, see Kioupkiolis (2016); on Syriza, see Katsambekis (2016) and Stavrakakis and Siomos (2016). For the left populist reaction generally, see Stavrakakis (2014).

[46] For the variation by region and country within Europe in the effects of economic crisis on populist politics, see the volume edited by Kriesi and Pappas (2015), which however covers developments only through 2013.

[47] On working-class support for Europe's right wing populist parties, see Rydgren (2013).

the population of the European Union.[48] Even in Germany, where net in-migration (of asylum-seekers and others) reached 1.1 million in 2015, this amounted to less than 1.4% of the population and did not hugely exceed the net inflow of nearly 800,000 recorded in 1992.[49] Yet the 2015 surge of asylum-seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere afforded rich opportunities for dramatizing—and televisualizing— a sense of borders being out of control, an image of multitudes of strangers not only at the gates but already inside them, indeed an apocalyptic narrative of Europe being under siege from a seemingly endless supply of desperate men, women, and children willing to face death at sea and violence and exploitation at the hands of smugglers in order to reach the promised land of Germany or Sweden. In a context in which European national-populist discourse had already come to focus increasingly on the threat of "Islamization" in the preceding decade and a half, the fact that the large majority of asylum-seekers were Muslim gave additional traction to the trope of a Muslim "invasion."

The most direct political effects of the refugee crisis were felt in Germany, Sweden, and Hungary. In Germany, the crisis produced both a moment of extraordinary openness (Merkel's September 2015 decision to open German borders to asylum-seekers arriving via Hungary and Austria[50] and the remarkable response in German civil society) and a strong reaction against that openness. The reaction was expressed, among other ways, in the transformation of the Alternative für Deutschland from a neoliberal "party of professors" to an anti-immigration, anti-Muslim populist party that achieved dramatic electoral breakthroughs in a series of 2016 Landtag elections (Goerres et al. 2017) and in the 2017 federal election. In Sweden, which received even more refugees per capita in 2015 than Germany, support for the far-right anti-immigrant populist Sweden Democrats (Rydgren and Van der Meiden 2016) surged, with late summer polls showing them supported by nearly a quarter of the population, neck and neck with the long-dominant Social Democrats. In Hungary, a key waystation on the Western Balkan route, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán took the lead in constructing a razor-wire border fence, a step followed quickly by others. Orbán struck the posture of a lonely leader with the mission of saving Europe from itself, and notably from what he called Europe's "suicidal liberalism."[51]

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[48] See http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/; http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/08/02/appendix-a-asylum-applications-1985-through-2015/. The approximately one million Syrians who have sought asylum in Europe in recent years is only one-fifth of the number of Syrians registered as refugees in Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

[49] https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/2154/umfrage/entwicklung-der-zu – und-fortzuege-in-deutschland-seit-1987/.

[50] This meant in practice that Germany decided to allow asylum applications to be filed by those arriving at the Austrian-German border via Hungary and the Western Balkan route, although it could have rejected such applications, since Austria and Hungary counted legally as safe states, and the "safe third country" principle allows states to deny entry to those seeking asylum if they are turned back to a state that is officially considered safe. (Greece, too, counted legally as a safe state. And as the state of first arrival in the EU for the overwhelming majority of those seeking asylum in Germany in 2015, it was theoretically obliged by the Dublin Regulations governing the EU's putatively unified asylum procedure to process their asylum applications. But Greece's meager asylum-adjudicating infrastructure had been overwhelmed well before the 2015 crisis, and EU states had not enforced the Dublin requirement vis-à-vis Greece since 2011.)

[51] For Orbán's reference to "suicidal liberalism," see http://budapestbeacon.com/public-policy/orban-hungarys-sovereignty-depends-on-receiving-eu-funds/27582.

But like the economic crisis, the refugee crisis cast a long shadow: its effects were felt throughout Europe and beyond. Following Orbán, leading political figures in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic took up a virulent anti-Muslim, anti-migrant rhetoric. The nominally Social Democratic Prime Minister of Slovakia, for example, vowed that the country would not accept "a single Muslim."[52] In Austria, another key waystation en route to Germany and points north, support for the far right, anti-immigrant Austrian Freedom Party surged, leaving the party consistently ahead in the polls between summer 2015 and spring 2017. So did support for Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, which stands out even on the populist right in the vehemence of its anti-Muslim rhetoric (Vossen 2016); Wilders also led in polls for nearly two years until a few weeks before parliamentary elections of March 2017. Fears of borders being out of control were central to the constellation of moods that made Brexit possible: a much-discussed UK Independence Party poster during the campaign featured a photograph of refugees massed at the Croatian-Slovenian border with the slogan "Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all."[53] And the crisis resonated across the Atlantic as well: Trump characterized Merkel's decision to welcome refugees as "insane" since Syrian refugees might be a "Trojan horse" for ISIS.[54]

The refugee crisis—again like the economic crisis—generated a broader crisis of European institutions (Offe 2016, pp. 136–146). It overwhelmed the Dublin system that regulates applications for asylum, and it brought the Schengen system of internal free movement to the point of perhaps irreversible collapse. Free movement has been one of the most genuinely popular aspects of European integration. But its political viability depends on effective external border controls. By dramatizing the porousness of external frontiers, the refugee crisis encouraged populists to stake out more radical forms of Euroskepticism.

The refugee crisis of the summer of 2015 was only the most visible and dramatic phase of a larger migration crisis. Like the United States and other rich countries, the European Union has developed in recent decades an increasingly complex system of extraterritorial "remote control"—to use the late Aristide Zolberg's (1999) phrase—in order to keep unwanted migrants at bay (see also Guiraudon 2003; Zaiotti 2016). The fragile—and of course normatively problematic—March 2016 agreement with Prime Minister Erdoğan to cut off flows through Turkey is a well-known example. Less well known is the history of cooperation with Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya to prevent sea crossings to Spain and Italy (and to prevent migrants from storming the border fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco). This cooperation has always been precarious, quite apart from the moral and political questions it raises. But a key link in the system broke down altogether with the collapse of state authority in Libya. Sea crossings to Sicily and the small Italian island of Lampedusa have surged since 2014, as has support for the radically anti-migrant

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[52] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/islam-has-no-place-in-thiscountry-says-slovakian-prime-minister-weeks-before-it-takes-over-eu-a7052506.html.

[53] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants.

[54] http://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-october-11-2015-trump-carson/.

Northern League. Deaths at sea have also surged, reaching a record level of more than 5000 in 2016.[55]

The wave of terror attacks since 2015 provided a third key element of the "perfect storm." These too need to be situated in comparative and historical perspective: in the context of the new phase of transnational jihadi militancy that began in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, but also in the context of the rise and decline of various forms of homegrown nationalist and leftist terrorism in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, peaking in the 1970s and 1980s. The number of those killed in the new attacks in Europe and the United States, on the order of perhaps 400 altogether,[56] is an order of magnitude less than the nearly 3000 killed in the attack on the World Trade Center or the roughly 2500 killed by the Provisional IRA and ETA in the United Kingdom and Spain[57]; and it is a vanishingly small fraction of those killed in attacks elsewhere in the world.

Still, the increased frequency of the attacks, the symbolic resonance of attacks in the heart of Paris, Brussels, Berlin, London, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Barcelona, and the tremendous amount of media coverage given to them have enabled the populist right to cultivate and to dramatize a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The attacks have enabled them to join the Schmittian political semantics of friend and enemy to the Huntingtonian thesis of a clash of civilizations by invoking a war between radical Islam—or sometimes Islam tout court—and the West.

This has been most immediately and directly the case in France, where the recent attacks have been concentrated, and where an official state of emergency, introduced in the aftermath of the Bataclan attacks of November 2015, has been extended six times.[58] But like the economic and refugee crises, the terror attacks cast a long shadow; they have afforded rich opportunities for political actors throughout Europe and North America to cultivate and dramatize insecurity. And while 9/11 and the spectacular attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 each could be seen as singular, one-off events, the recent wave of attacks could be woven into a narrative of chronic and endemic insecurity, especially in a context in which the "lone wolf" terrorist, inspired by jihadist propaganda yet acting alone or with minimal logistical support, can wreak havoc, and in which an estimated two- to three-thousand young Europeans—mainly second-generation immigrants—have traveled to Syria to fight under the auspices of ISIS.

The perfect storm was constituted by the *coming together*—or better, the active, discursive *bringing-together* or *tying-together*—of the economic, refugee, and security crises and of the economic, demographic, cultural, and physical insecurities and anxieties that these crises enabled political actors and the media to dramatize, televisualize, and emotionalize. The populist right throughout Europe, for example, used the attacks on a train near Würzbug, outside a musical festival at Ansbach, and at a

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[55] https://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean.

[56] For the numbers killed each year in terror attacks in Europe between 1970 and 2016, see the graphic at http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/03/terrorism-timeline.

[57] For casualties in the Northern Ireland and Basque conflicts, see Sánchez-Cuenca (2007, pp. 291–292).

[58] President Macron has pledged to lift the state of emergency, but the proposed new anti-terrorism legislation that would replace it would institutionalize a number of the security measures currently allowed under the state of emergency. See https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/will-frances-state-of-emergency-become-permanent/532848/.

Christmas market in Berlin—all carried out by perpetrators who had applied for asylum in Germany—to link the refugee crisis and terrorism. And the sexual molestation of more than a thousand women in Köln, Hamburg, and other German cities on New Year's Eve 2015—overwhelmingly, according to police sources, by young North African and Middle Eastern men, about half of whom had arrived in Germany in 2015—allowed the European populist right, as well as Donald Trump, to link openness toward refugees to the breakdown in public order and security and to dramatize the connections between ethnoreligious demography, cultural difference, and physical insecurity.[59]

More generally, the Brexit, Trump, and Le Pen campaigns—for all their evident differences—tied together economic, ethnodemographic, cultural, and crime- and terrorism-focused insecurities in a newly resonant narrative. This narrative defined the opposition between *open and closed* or *inside and outside* as more fundamental than that between *left and right*.[60] In this fundamentally protectionist narrative, the basic imperative is to protect "the people"—economically, demographically, culturally, and physically—against the neoliberal economy, open borders, cosmopolitan culture, and "open society" said to be favored by the economic, political, and cultural elite at national and European levels.

The Brexit, Trump, and Le Pen campaigns promised to defend and to revive the bounded national economy in the face of "savage globalization" and the frictionless cross-border movement of goods, labor, and capital. They promised to defend national—as well as European and Christian—culture and identity from dilution or destruction through large-scale extra-European immigration.[61] And they promised to protect public order and security against threats from both outside and inside—and against an elite portrayed as soft on crime and terrorism, in thrall to political correctness, deluded by the myth of multiculturalism, and insufficiently cognizant of the threat from radical Islam.

The final element of the perfect storm is the crisis of public knowledge that is suggested by talk of fake news, alternative facts, and a post-truth era. The superabundance and seemingly democratic hyper-accessibility of "information" in a hyper-connected digital ecosystem, exacerbated by the proliferation of dis- and misinformation churned out for profit or propaganda (Persily 2017, pp. 67–68), have weakened the authority of the mediating institutions that produce and disseminate knowledge: universities, science, and the press. As a result, a cloud of suspicion shadows all claims to knowledge.

Anxieties about the convergence of media, commerce, and new communications technologies go back more than a century, and I described above the ways in which the mediatization of politics and the commercialization of the media have expanded opportunities for populism in recent decades. But something fundamental has changed

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[59] For the retrospective police analysis of the New Year's Eve violence, see http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/uebergriffe-in-koeln-frauen-wurden-opfer-von-silvester-gewalt-1.3072064.

[60] On the emergence of a new dimension of political competition in Europe defined by differing experiences with and stances toward globalization, see Kriesi et al. (2006) and Azmanova (2011).

[61] Although the Brexit campaign focused primarily on intra-European migration, it was shadowed by a concern with extra-European (and, notably, Muslim) migration as well, as suggested by the controversial poster of refugees mentioned above and by the argument that remaining in the EU would potentially expose the UK to massive immigration from Turkey.

in recent years as smart phone and social media use has become nearly universal.[62] Trump's spectacular use of Twitter to appeal directly to his huge and active following and to bypass and denounce the mainstream media—even as he skillfully exploited the media's dependence on him and used Twitter to make news the mainstream media felt they had to cover—would not have been possible even a few years earlier.

The crisis of public knowledge presents an opportunity for populists—and specifically, in the current conjuncture, for the populist right. It is an opportunity to further undermine and discredit the press. And it is an opportunity to generate and propogate not just "alternative facts," but an entire alternative world-view that is not only massively insulated from falsification but seemingly massively confirmed by a continuous supply of new "information." The hyperconnected digital media ecosystem enhances the performative power of populist discourse: the power to create or at least to deepen the very crises to which populists claim to respond, and the power to sharpen and exacerbate the very divisions—between "the people" and "the elite," and especially between insiders and outsiders—that populists claim to diagnose and deplore.

Conclusion

I suggested above that my structural account of the medium-term trends conducive to populism explained too much. My conjunctural account of converging crises explains both too little *and* too much. It explains too little in that this highly generalized sketch—which, for reasons of space, necessarily abstracts from the messy particularities and contingencies of time, place, and situated action—cannot account for the substantial variations across Europe and North America in degrees and forms of populist politics. It explains too much in that—like my account of medium-term trends—it would lead one to expect populism and nothing but populism.

Yet populism is of course not uniformly strong, even at this distinctively populist moment. I would like to speculate, by way of conclusion, about three factors that can make populism a self-limiting (Taggart 2004, pp. 276, 284) rather than a self-feeding phenomenon. The first is what can be called "poaching." As is often observed (see recently Joppke 2017), there is no sharp boundary between populism and non-populism, or even anti-populism. Both substantive themes and stylistic devices from the populist repertoire are routinely appropriated by "mainstream" political actors,

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[62] A few statistics for the United States can serve to convey the magnitude and abruptness of the shift. The share of the US population over age fourteen with a smartphone soared from a mere 11% at the end of 2008 to 75% at the end of 2014. The same period saw the explosive growth of social media. Regular Facebook users amounted to barely 10% of the US population in 2008, but just four years later they made up more than half the population (and of course a much higher fraction among younger people). Worldwide, Facebook had ten times as many users by the end of last year—nearly 2 billion—as it had in 2009. Twitter users increased more than six-fold in the US from 2010 to 2014, growing from 10 million to 63 million. More Americans under age fifty today regularly get news online than from television. On smartphone use, see https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/US-Smartphone-Penetration-Surpassed-80-Percent-in-2016. Facebook figures for 2011 (160 million in United States), based on the company's IPO, are from http://www.zdnet.com/article/facebooks-ipo-by-the-numbers/; figures for September 2008 are from http://www.adweek.com/digital/latest-data-on-us-facebook-age-and-gender-demographics/. For worldwide figures for Facebook, see https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/. Figures on Twitter use are from https://www.statista.com/statistics/274564/monthly-active-twitter-users-in-the-united-states/. On sources of news, see http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/.

sometimes precisely in an effort to combat populist challenges. A classic recent example was Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's notorious open letter to "all Dutch people," published in all major newspapers seven weeks before the election. Rutte used simple, direct language to proclaim his identification with the discomfort felt by the hard-working "silent majority" in the face of immigrants who "misuse our freedom" to act in ways that are "not normal." And he called on immigrants to "behave normally or leave." [63] By selectively and strategically deploying populist tropes, as Rutte did, mainstream parties may be able to defeat populist challengers—in this case Geert Wilders, whose party had been leading in the polls in the run-up to the elections.

Secondly, while populism thrives on crisis, and while crisis often sells, it does not *always* sell. Just as populists perform crisis, other political actors—for example, Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron—can be understood as performing *non*-crisis. This is one way of thinking about Merkel's famous "we can do it" ("*Wir schaffen das*"), with respect to the acceptance and integration of refugees in 2015. In the battle between representations of crisis and representations of non-crisis, crisis does not always win. And of course the materials for cultivating and deepening a sense of crisis are not always equally propitious. The absence—as of this writing—of major attacks in France after the spectacular horrors of the Charlie Hebdo (January 2015), Bataclan (November 2015), and Nice (July 2016) attacks allowed Macron to project optimism and perform non-crisis. And the sharp reduction in arrivals of asylum-seekers in Germany after 2015 allowed Merkel to do the same.

The third and perhaps most important limit on populism is what I will call the "limits of enchantment." Populism depends on a kind of enchantment: on "faith" in the possibility of representing and speaking for "the people."[64] It depends on an affective investment in politics and specifically in the idea of popular sovereignty, of returning power to the people. At the same time, of course, populism thrives on the *lack of faith* in the workings of representative politics, on an affective *disinvestment* from politics as usual. The resonance of populist rhetoric depends therefore on a claim to *exceptionality*, a claim to be fundamentally different from politics as usual. But this claim can be discredited. The claim to exceptionality may be hard to sustain when populists come to power. The heady promise of returning power to the people may come to ring hollow, and the affective investment in politics may dissipate, leaving only cynicism and distrust in its place—cynicism and distrust that extend to populists themselves. The affective constellation that *sustains* populist politics can thus shade over into a constellation that *undermines* populist politics as much as it does other forms of representative politics. This offers no reasons for complacency: cynicism and distrust are scarcely grounds for a democratic public life. It is important nonetheless not to exaggerate the strength of populism, just as it is important to take populism seriously.

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[63] https://www.vvd.nl/nieuws/lees-hier-de-brief-van-mark/. Similarly, in an effort to reach out to voters sympathetic to the Alternative for Germany, Interior Minister Thomas de Mazière of the Christian Democratic Union—the senior partner in Germany's grand coalition—published a guest contribution in the largest-circulation Sunday newspaper reviving the call for a German "*Leitkultur*" or "core culture" and specifying certain key modes of behavior that define that core culture: "We say our names. We shake hands as a greeting.... We are an open society. We show our face. We are not burka [*Wir sind nicht Burka*]." *Bild am Sonntag*, April 29, 2017.

[64] See Canovan (1999), who locates the recurrent vulnerability of democracy to populist challenge in the tension between what Oakeshott called the "politics of faith" and the "politics of skepticism."

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