

Populism and Democratic Theory

Workshop

University of Vienna

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Convenors: Birgit Sauer and Manon Westphal

Confirmed Keynote Speakers: Oliver Marchart, Chantal Mouffe, Martin Nonhoff

In recent years, populism has become one of the most intensely discussed topics of political scientific research. Political developments in Western Europe and in the United States have made it an obvious task to investigate the new rise of especially right-wing populism and to develop assessments of how it affects, or may affect, democratic politics and the future of liberal democracies more generally. While the field of research on populism has expanded, there is still an important lacuna: democratic theorists have invested comparably little work on the topic. Thus, a theory-grounded definition of populism is still missing. This means that populism still lacks the shape of a distinct concept of democratic theorising and that the diversity of democratic thinking is reflected only dimly by assessments of the relationship between democracy and populism. We believe that this lacuna should be filled and want this workshop to contribute to this task.

In order to understand the role of populist actors in contemporary politics, it is essential to gain knowledge of the practices of populist parties, their policies and political strategies, as well as voters' motives for supporting populist parties. Providing such knowledge is largely the task of empirical research, and much has been accomplished in that field. However, in order to develop critical assessments of populism, theoretical reflection is indispensable. Empirical findings do not speak for themselves but require conceptual classification and interpretation. For instance, which actors and what sorts of political practices are chosen for research on populism depends on what is taken to characterise populism as a political phenomenon. What populism is and how can it be distinguished from other political phenomena is a disputed question – and the answer that one gives determines which aspects of politics get into view. Also, one of the most important questions about the normative implications of populism, namely whether populism is dangerous or potentially productive for democracies, is closely

connected to respective understandings of democracy. However, like the nature of populism, the nature of democracy is deeply disputed. Because even the question what populism *is* cannot be disconnected from notions of what democracy is (each definition of democracy implies a certain understanding of 'normal' democratic politics and thus also defines characteristics of deviating, 'populist' forms of politics), the debate on populism should recognise the different perspectives and disputes in democratic theorising. So far, this has been done insufficiently. Definitions and assessments of populism that are to be found in the literature often remain in some distance from democratic theorising, i.e. are unclear about their presumptions of the nature and purposes of democracy as well as the contested nature of their respective presumptions.

Some political theorists have already demonstrated what it may mean to theorise populism from a democratic theory perspective. Margaret Canovan (1999), for instance, argues that populism emerges from a tension between two "faces" of democracy. Ernesto Laclau (2005) theorises populism as a radical democratic form of politics. Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2018) interprets populism as a reaction to an overly consensual form of politics (right-wing) or a possible remedy to it (left wing). Approaches of this sort are worthwhile because they make explicit how assessments of populism are interwoven with conceptions of the political and democracy. We believe that the debate on populism would benefit from a diversification and development of such attempts. The aim of the workshop is to probe the tasks and prospects of such an agenda for democratic theorising.

We invite papers on topics such as the following.

The nature of populism: More or less every definition of populism emphasises the *people vs. elite* opposition. However, beyond that consensus there is disagreement on the features of populism. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of minimal and thicker definitions of populism? What is the 'politics' of conceptual definitions, e.g. what are the implications of specific definitions for assessments of the relationship between populism and democracy? How do the differences between the perspectives of democratic theories play out in what is considered to be characteristic of populist politics?

The relationship between populism and democracy: Is populism a phenomenon that is exterior to democracy? Is it connected to (certain features of) democracy? In what sense(s) do answers to these questions depend on the specific understanding of democracy that is

presupposed? To what extent do answers differ depending on whether a liberal, republican or agonistic understanding of democracy builds the basis of reflection?

The dangers and potentials of populism: What is considered to be a dangerous or (potentially) positive and productive political effect of populism largely depends on the understanding of democracy that is presupposed. To what extent do democratic theories imply different assessments of the dangers and potentials of populism? Do certain effects that are considered to be dangers for democracy from one perspective appear even as valuable political effects if considered from the perspective of a different democratic theory?

Responses to populism: To what extent can the reflections of democratic theorists provide answers to the pressing political question for appropriate reactions to (right-wing) populism? Do their assessments of dangers and potentials of populism imply concrete recommendations for how democracies should react to populist parties and movements in the given circumstances? And if so, who is to be addressed by such recommendations – the established political parties, (new) political movements, or the citizenry more generally?

We invite papers on these or related topics. Abstracts of no more than 500 words should be sent to birgit.sauer@univie.ac.at and manon.westphal@uni-muenster.de by **15 November 2018** at the latest. Subject to available funding, the travel and accommodation costs of paper presenters will be covered.