


Stavrakakis, Yannis (2024).
Populist Discourse–Recasting Populism research.
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Given the rapid growth of studies on populism, political research urgently requires a book of this nature. In *Populist Discourse–Recasting Populism Research*, the political theorist, Yannis Stavrakakis critiques the uncritical and oversimplified application of the term “populism” in political research, advocating for a more nuanced discursive approach. He engages with Laclau and Mouffe’s theories to explore populism as a complex phenomenon rather than a mere label.

The author repeatedly emphasizes throughout the book that much of the existing research on populism lacks analytical rigor. A contributing factor is the continued use of outdated and biased conceptualizations, frequently associated with fascism and the far right. Stavrakakis addresses these shortcomings by presenting a genealogy of populism from the anti-populism standpoint, demonstrating how the concept has been shaped and distorted by research rooted in anti-populist assumptions.

The book also fosters a healthy and enlightening dialogue with the ideational conceptualisation of populism, which, I argue, should be essential for every researcher working in the field. The second half of the book is devoted to presenting a discursive perspective for researching populism. *Populist Discourse* encourages reflection on our own research and aims to demystify the discursive theoretical approach to populism initiated by Laclau in the 1970s, particularly in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, and further developed in Laclau’s solo work, *On Populist Reason* (2005). However, readers familiar with Stavrakakis’s Lacanian approach or anticipating a stronger emphasis on affect might find these dimensions underdeveloped, since they are only briefly addressed. On the other hand, the book succeeds exposing Laclau to a broader audience, effectively countering the frequent criticism that his work complicates the study of populism.

Stavrakakis opens the discussion by questioning the use of populism to characterize politicians and movements as distinct as those of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. He highlights an ongoing concern in academic research on populism, arguing that the “populist hype” in academia influences and exacerbates public anxiety about the future of democracy. Stavrakakis asserts that “poor scholarship merely reproducing obsolete and biased stereotypes should rather be avoided” (p. 2).

The book is structured around the objective to “highlight and explain (...) in a straightforward and accessible way” (p. 21) the “main pillars of a discursive approach to the populist scandal” (p. 21). Still in the introduction, Stavrakakis provides a concise socio-political analysis of the contemporary emergence of populism. He investigates the post-democracy movement where market sovereignty prevails over popular sovereignty, fostering the persistent rise of populism, since its demands are frustrated by systemic forces that prioritize their own interests, disparaging any attempt at popular representation and inclusion. In a context of increased polarization, “the two camps utilized all available means and resources to enrich the argumentative appeal and advance the emotional investment of their supporters” (p. 13). This investment generates an anti-populist wave which Stavrakakis uses to present as a negative portrayal of populism in chapter 2.

Turning to the origins of populism, Stavrakakis highlights two formative cases: tsarist Russia and the United States in the late 19th century. According to the author, these “two phenomena mark the emergence of «populism» as markedly egalitarian and democratic project” (p. 34). This historical exposition is crucial for understanding Stavrakakis’ arguments against the “widespread misconception reducing «populism» to the far right” (p. 34). The author also reviews cases of populism in Latin America, including Argentina (Peróns and Kirchner), Brazil (Getúlio Vargas), Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), Bolivia (Evo Morales), Chile (Salvador Allende and Pinochet) and Ecuador. Stavrakakis argues that the populism expressed in Latin America is more closely associated with “the historical background of the phenomenon” (p. 40); while from a Eurocentric perspective, populism has been associated with movements and parties with far-right authoritarian tendencies.

Having outlined this historical and geographical overview, Stavrakakis turns to academic research. According to him, a 1955 work by Richard Hofstadter played a decisive role in shaping and disseminating the pejorative notion of populism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This text influenced the conceptualization presented by Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser. The text in question and other American works from the 1950s onwards, are based on the idea that populism is a threat to the theory of modernization. This approach established an anti-populism framework, representing populism as a threat to democratic progress, argued in the following: “Not only has Hofstadter introduced the strong pejorative meaning of populism in academic discourse, he has also managed, notwithstanding the abject failure of his project in intellectual terms, to export it to many peripheral and semi peripheral countries, leading to a naturalization feeding the anti-populist myth” (p. 70).

The analysis then moves to a critical assessment of what Stavrakakis refers to as “important representatives of the new mainstream”, who, like Hofstadter, appear to base their analyses on a fundamentally moral interpretation of populist discourse.” (p. 73). He provides a gentle critique of Mudde and Kaltwasser, among the most cited authors on populism, whose work is in contrast to that of Jan-Werner Müller. Despite his criticism of the moralistic and ideational model proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser, Stavrakakis sides with them, arguing that the authors effectively distinguish between liberal and democratic traditions, avoiding the common conflation of democracy and liberalism contained in Müller’s argument (p. 77). The dialogue among the four authors continues, with Stavrakakis discussing the relevance of popular sovereignty within a democratic context. To this end, he includes Laclau in the conversation to substantiate the argument that popular participation in decision-making relies on a populist movement that leads people to this democratic moment (p. 81).

Shifting from this critical engagement with existing theories, Stavrakakis then introduces the discursive approach as an alternative perspective that provides theoretical and analytical tools for a “rigorous and critical re-interpretation of populism” (p. 95). But before discussing discourse, he examines the emergence of populism within representative democracy. He argues: “(...) populism seems to respond to two challenges: the failures in/of representation and the still-vibrant promise of ‘popular sovereignty’ as a preeminent regulating socio-political ordering” (p. 106). He maintains that these movements manifest themselves not only through “language and political communication” (p. 106), but also through the understanding of “populism as a type of discourse” (p. 107) as described by Laclau. From this point on, the works of Laclau and Mouffe become central to Stavrakakis’s analysis. He also helps readers unfamiliar with their theories by revisiting classic concepts, such as the notion of discursive structure as an articulatory practice (p. 108) and society as an “impossible object” (p. 109).

That said, readers familiar with Stavrakakis’s work might be frustrated by Lacan’s minimal presence in the book. Stavrakakis has a longstanding analytical history with Lacan, bridging psychoanalysis and political science, primarily in research on democracy. Psychoanalysis is addressed in the book, especially in Chapter 3, through discussions of desire and enjoyment (p. 106), “negativity, experienced as lack” (p. 109), and particularly when the author describes discourse:

We arrive, thus, at a discursive framework consistent with the multi-level operation of human sociality, a framework involving a post-rationalist view of “discourse” bridging the gap between the symbolic and the affective, the subjective and the collective, agency and structure, utopia and realism/pragmatism (p. 110).

Stavrakakis seems to presume that readers are familiar with his earlier work on psychoanalysis, a field he has explored in other publications. In this book, however, references to psychoanalytic concepts are more subtle, often appearing in the footnotes, where he briefly revisits key ideas. While this may require closer attention from readers, especially those less familiar with the psychoanalytic tradition, it remains consistent with the book’s primary focus on populist discourse. After approaching discourse from a psychoanalytical perspective, chapter 3 transitions to an analysis of discursive materiality, culminating in what Stavrakakis understands as discourse according to “Laclau, Mouffe and their co-travellers” (p. 118): “It [discourse] operates at a broader psycho-social level, which encompasses articulation, structuration, investment and negativity” (pp. 118–119).

From this foundation, Stavrakakis proceeds to define populism as a phenomenon that seeks to denounce tyrannical powers and challenge the status quo. In this sense, Stavrakakis argues that populism should be understood not merely as a political strategy to discredit opponents and legitimize dominance, but rather as a discursive practice. His proposed toolkit begins with the definition of two criteria derived from Laclau’s earlier studies in the 1970s: people-centrism and anti-elitism. The former refers to the concept of nodal points, which originates from Lacan’s *point de capiton*, and is related to the “elevation of one particular signifier onto a central structuring position” (p. 124). The latter pertains to the logics of difference and equivalence developed by Laclau and Mouffe, drawing inspiration from Saussurean semiotics.

In order to “capture the operation of populist discourse” (p.125) Stavrakakis states that populism must be observed from dynamic and performative perspectives achievable only from a discursive research orientation. “A discursive approach manages to account in detail for the different moments involved in this process, highlighting the distinct levels involved in populist performativities” (p. 127). This orientation avoids a simplistic view of “the people”. In other words, “the people” are not the origin of populism, but rather a product, an effect of affective investment and performative linkages; it is dynamically constructed and not hypothetical.

Having defended the discursive perspective, Stavrakakis advocates for a classification and typology of populist and anti-populist discourses. The first distinction is inclusionary and exclusionary populism. When defending typologies of populism, he recognizes that while the populist canon is predominantly inclusionary and left-wing, the countless possibilities of associations between signifiers such as “populism”, “people”, “underdog” “under-privileged” cannot be ignored (p. 139).

Although Stavrakakis defends a typology of populism that emphasises its contingent and articulatory nature, he rejects the far-right’s hijacking of populist rhetoric (p. 141) –a position he had already developed in earlier works. Thus, he underscores that research on populist discourse should be carried out with utmost care and consider “the typical language game of the phenomena” (p. 141). This part of the analysis culminates in an intriguing question: “What is not populism?” (pp. 145-146). Stavrakakis argues that populism cannot be reduced to nationalism; it is not fascist, since fascists reject the idea of democratic rights; it is not clientelism; and it is not inherently linked to charisma. By contrast, populism is, by nature, inclusionary.

Building on this distinction, the author places strong emphasis on the democratic character of the populist promise, and its emergence as a precondition for a democratic future. Stavrakakis argues that the democratic potential of populism “lies in its ability to mediate the formation of a popular collective capable of antagonizing the established status quo” (p. 152). In regard to research on populism, the author consistently defends a more judicious approach. He proposes a discursive approach, which analyzes political phenomena as processes and not pre-established events. Stavrakakis advocates an epistemological, theoretical and methodological repositioning of the performativity of populism, demonstrating society’s decreased openness to collective political projects. This requires a reassessment of a series of concepts and their formations, such as subjectivity, politics, hegemony, and agency. The author concludes by highlighting the limitations of populist governments in power (p. 158).

Finally, the Lacanian perspective, which has been barely mentioned in the book, becomes more explicit as he proposes populism as a transitional object: “(...) would, once more, operate as vanishing mediator, as a signifier of the lack in the Other registering the impossibility of fullness and the irreducibility of social division but maintaining open the space for (committed) transformative political action” (p. 163).

Readers approaching this book may benefit from familiarizing themselves with the term *choreography*. Stavrakakis uses this metaphor to illustrate articulation, and at times, process. Prior familiarity with the author’s previous work is not absolutely necessary, unless Stavrakakis is essential to your research. The footnotes provide context for arguments referring to previous texts. However, the concept of fantasy, a complex element in Lacanian theory, could be better explained in the book, given its key role in understanding Stavrakakis’ development of the affective component of Laclau’s conceptualization of populism.

While the book’s chapters can be read independently, a full understanding of Stavrakakis’ argument requires a comprehensive and sequential reading. The first chapter presents a genealogy of populism, including a concise but insightful analysis of the Latin American context. To understand the dominant academic conceptualizations of populism, one may focus on the third chapter, where Stavrakakis engages with definitions proposed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. A direct engagement with the author’s theoretical proposal is developed across the third and fourth chapters, which should be read together for a complete understanding.

References

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