

Populist conceptualization of the elite: Why populist party leaders are not elite?

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Abstract

Theoretical approaches to populism often emphasize that populists have a double standard when determining the elite. Namely, they treat the elite as an arch enemy, but their own leaders, who economically often belong to the elite, do not consider them as such. We consider this question by using Bourdieu's cultural stratification scheme. The reason is that, for the populists themselves and their followers, cultural markers are more important than economic ones, just as cultural uncertainty is more important for the development of populism than economic ones. The article is divided into three parts: in the first part, the issue of how to determine the elite is presented; in the second part, the cultural stratification scheme is presented; and in the third part, arguments are given that populist leaders, from a cultural point of view, behave as part of the people, and not as part of the elite.

Keywords: Elite; Leadership; Populism; Stratification; Bourdieu

1. The paradox of populist political leadership

Populist movements and ideologies depend on how they define their leadership and establishment. Populism is characterized by charismatic leaders. Populists usually reject a bureaucratic, precisely regulated, and limited form of leadership and rely on charismatic leaders who are in direct contact with their followers, which introduces a thread of authoritarianism among them (Taggart, 2003). As Mudde (2004: 545) notes, there is a tendency for populist movements and parties to develop strong leadership and direct and immediate communication between them and their followers. Heinisch and Mazzoleni (2016: 2) also note that populist parties are parties of charismatic leaders, centralized leadership, strong loyalty to the leader that strengthens party cohesion, weak organization, and a small bureaucratic apparatus. Populism is characterized by moralizing politics, rejecting bureaucracy in party life, seeing populist leaders as a messiah with superhuman characteristics, mistrust of intellectuals, the establishment as a whole, and opposition to socio-economic inequality (Tarchi, 2016). Populist leaders like Geert Wilders, Thaksin Shinawatra, Hugo Chavez are better known than their parties. Individual populist movements and regimes were identified by their leaders. Thus, we have poron-ism, chairm-ism, and trumpism. The immediate relationship between the leader and followers is the result of a lack of relevant formal organizations. Judging by the fact that populist movements and parties have mature and charismatic leaders, it seems that the relationships between leadership and followers are elitistly structured, but populists compensate for this by the fact that party leadership develops close, immediate, and informal relationships with their followers. Populist leaders do not try to educate, teach, and change their followers and voters, but follow their desires and will. The ideal of populist leaders is to implement the will of the people (Mangset et al., 2019: 206). Populist leaders are usually considered part of an elite that is marginalized or marginalized and identified with ordinary people, trying to change the ruling elite with their help (Ştefănel, 2016). Populists and their leaders are morally superior to the corrupt elite. Populism relies on the moralistic imagination of politics projected by populist leaders, implying that they are morally pure and authentic (Prentoulis, 2020: 99). The followers of populism themselves do not consider their leaders to be part of the corrupt elite, although economically a significant number of populist leaders belong to the establishment. Engelstad et al. (2019: 3) state that populists' attitudes towards the elite are paradoxical. On the one

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hand, the elite are a relatively small group of individuals who are united and homogenous in order to exploit people. On the other hand, populists perceive their own leaders, who, according to objective criteria, belong to the elite, as part of the people and not of the elite. Someone who belongs to the elite according to objective criteria is expected to protect the interests of the people (out group), to deal with intermediary elites, institutional obstacles, bureaucratic procedures that make people's lives difficult, to be their voice in politics, and to protect their interests, against the interests of the group to which they objectively belong. The question arises as to why this is the case. This question can be answered in two ways. One answer lies in what counts as elite. Usually, due to the great influence of Marxism in the social sciences, the elite are associated with economic criteria, but the cultural determination of the elite can help a lot in understanding the reasons why populists do not consider their leaders to be part of the elite. The second explanation lies in the authoritarian tendencies of populism, whose supporters are ready to support a leadership that has immediate, direct contact with them, independent of their social. It seems that authoritarian tendencies can be observed among populists, which are reflected in the development of liberal democracy when such formations come to power, but this does not answer the question of why the supporters of populists do not consider their leaders to be part of the elite. In this sense, the answer must be sought in the cultural determination of the elite. To do so, it is first necessary to define how populists define the elite. Next, we move on to the cultural definition of classes, especially the upper class, according to which the populist elites are not elites in the cultural sense, although they are in an economic sense. Finally, we will dwell on the typical behavior of populist leadership and ask whether it corresponds to the typical behavior of the elite in a cultural sense.

2. What populists mean by elite

Populism divides society into ordinary people and elite. The elite controls government, business, banking, and reproduces itself through privileged access to education and influential positions in politics, business, and public administration (Eichengreen, 2018: 1). Populists believe that politics is a conspiracy produced by the elite that works against the interests of ordinary people. Hence, the elite is an antithesis to the people. Unlike ordinary people, according to populists, the elite are corrupt and decadent (Vossen, 2016). By definition, populism is an anti-elitist ideology based on a stratified understanding of major social transformations (Engelstad et al., 2019: 203). The question arises as to what criteria determine the elite. It includes income, wealth, family background, education, and other socio-economic factors. For populists, the only valid criterion that distinguishes ordinary people from the elite is morality. Even viewed by democratic standards, according to the views of the semi-lists, people who are morally superior are the majority in relation to the elite and have the right to manage public affairs, but the elite, through manipulations, manages to usurp power and establish ideological (cultural) hegemony. The sharp division of in and out groups, the a priori labeling of one of the groups as morally inferior, indicates a tendency towards authoritarianism, with an attempt to monopolize the power of the representatives of the morally superior entity, abolishing intermediaries between the government and the people, and endangering pluralism in society (Martinelli, 2018: 17). The elite originates, is generated by ordinary people, but does not protect their interests, but fights for their own narrow-minded, selfish interests, to the detriment of the interests of ordinary people.

The pluralist theory of elites indicates that there is not one homogeneous elite, but that there are several types of elite that compete with each other. Only the first part of the pluralist theory of the elites can be applied to populists. Populists are divided into different segments, but in each segment, there is no competition between the elites, but the group that makes up the elite is homogeneous. Populists not only criticized the political establishment (politicians) but also criticized the economic elite (company owners, managers, bankers), the cultural elite (producers, artists, media workers), and the intellectual elite (professors and teachers). While political and economic elites are observed to at best ignore them, and at worst, work against the interests of ordinary people, the cultural elite, intelligentsia, and experts are observed to manipulate the facts protecting the interests of the political and economic elite (Balcere 2017:29). One remark about the intellectual elite that is not of central importance, but which populists put at their disposal, is that intellectuals are arrogant (Wodak, 2018). All kinds of elite leaders of political parties, bans, employers' organizations, and unions fall under the criticism of populists.

Depending on whether they are left- or right-oriented, populists define the elite they are fighting against as economic in the first case, and cultural and political in the second case (Wirth et al., 2016: 9). Left-wing populists in Latin America and southern Europe, such as Syriza and Podemos, as well as political leaders, such as Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, are seriously criticizing economic elites, which produces significant inequalities in social life. Populists especially target financial elites, and more specifically, the banking sector. Although the yellow-vests movement cannot be unequivocally claimed to be left-wing populism, it had serious criticism of the economic elite, demanding the renewal of taxation on wealth, more redistributive taxation, and greater economic justice in society (Roberts, 2017: 290). Populists are critical of political parties and political institutions in general and prefer loosely organized political entities with the characteristics of political movements. They also have remarks about the elite regarding people in academic

circles, both in the social and natural sciences. For example, populists reject the positions of scientists in relation to global warming and vaccination during COVID 19, etc. (Jasanoff, 2010). Populists are critical of contemporary art, which according to them, has no authentic cultural value. For example, a Norwegian populist politician demanded that national theater be turned into a bingo hall (Mangset et al., 2019: 216). The situational factor is significant, for which the elites are criticized. Populists criticize different types of elites in different countries, political contexts, and for different reasons. Thus, in Western Europe and North America, the target of populist criticism is the cultural and political elite to be too liberal. For American right-wing populists, the elite consists of liberals who drink lattes, eat sushi, drive volvos, read the New York Times, and watch Hollywood movies (Mudde, 2017). In Central and Eastern Europe, the subject of criticism is primarily the political elite but also judges, journalists, civil society, and ex-communists. Populists have accused these elites of corruption. The elite mainly boast that they appropriated all the benefits of the transformation of society after the collapse of communism (Sadurski, 2019: 21; Engelstad et al., 2019: 203). The object of criticism in Latin America is the economic elite (Mangset et al., 2019: 205). As noted by Norris, Inglehart (2018: 4) on a rhetorical level, populists disqualify and delegitimize every kind of elite in society, so the media are "fake news," political parties "dysfunkcional," public sector bureaucrats "deep state," people from the intelligence community "liars and leakers," lobbyists "corrupt," intellectuals "arrogant liberals," scientists "who need experts?," the European Union "Brussels bureaucrats," the United Nations "a talking club."

According to populists, an establishment intentionally or unintentionally neglects the interests of ordinary people. He acts primarily in relation to them, thinking only about how to realize his own selfish interests (Wodak, 2018). Populist leaders charge that members of the business elite are willing to relocate their production to developing countries and close their factories in developed countries to make more profits, leaving many people without jobs and basic income. For example, Trump urged ordinary people to separate themselves from the elite, pointing out that the victories and triumphs of the elite were not the victories and triumphs of ordinary people (Eichengreen, 2018: 2). On any issue of public life, the people are right; it is the elite who make the wrong decisions. Not only are the elite arrogant and wrong-headed, but their values are also wrong. Hence, the biggest difference between people and the elite is that the elite is immoral and unethical, unlike people who may not have the education of the elite but have a sense of belonging to the community, respect tradition, religion, and customs. The sense of belonging to the community and its cultural characteristics is crucial for making the distinction between in-groups and out-groups and for experiencing populist leaders as part of the in-group, as part of the community that is threatened by the elite. Populists believe that the elite are selfish (Lasch, 1996). Members of the elite cut ties with the families and communities from which they come and live in the private world. They place families and communities on the margins in pursuit of wealth and status. The elite distanced themselves from the common people from whom they originated. She does not want to have contact with her, and she does not feel obligated to help them cultivate her. It is geographically, intellectually, and in every other way isolated from ordinary people. Hence, Lash writes about two cultures: elitist, individualistic, secular, intellectual, and economically prosperous. The second oriented towards the community, towards the family, religion, the common good, and the values of the middle class.

Among populists, a lack of ethics of responsibility can be observed as well as an underestimation of knowledge, expertise, and a tendency towards simple solutions (Martinelli, 2018: 18). Populists accuse the elite of unfairly controlling resources, welfare, and prosperity (Jansen, 2011: 83). Because of their anti-establishment positions, many felt that populists could not hold on to power for a long time. This would make them part of the elite they fight against. Even more than that, if the elite is corrupt and degrading, and ordinary people are necessarily superior, it could be argued that for populists, the real elite are the people, but the semi-lists have charged the term elite with a negative emotion that it has become a term used by opponents, not for their own group (Staykova et al., 2016: 110). What is happening in practice, starting from Slovakian Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is maintaining the anti-establishment rhetoric and when they are in power in some cases for more than 10 years, accusing the previous political establishment for corrupt activities, with a partial redefinition of what the elite is (Engelstad et al., 2019: 213). They claim that the real power is not in the hands of democratically elected political leaders, but in the hands of the oligarchy, which pulls the strings behind the curtains in an undemocratic way and wants to change the democratically elected government. Populists perceive the government as a tool for fighting the elite. When they go to elections from a position of power, they promise to continue to fight the elite. In that sense, the elite are associated more with economic dominance and cultural hegemony than with political power. Although populists are part of the power structure, in power in a certain country, they accuse the owners of big capital, the media, and the intellectual elite of working against the interests of ordinary people and sabotaging the legally elected government (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 12). This argument has been widely used by populists in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America. So, for example, President Chávez often blames the economic elite, because he does not allow Venezuela to "democratize." According to Muller (Müller, 2016: 4), when populists come to power, they try to establish total control over state and mass clientelism by giving material benefits or conveniences to their supporters who are transformed into their clients.

Accusations of corruption often do not hit populist parties very well because their followers distrust the media, which they believe works in the interest of the establishment. They believe only in their own political leadership. The second reason is that even when corruption is evident, supporters of populist parties often behave as clients who see their own narrow material interests and not as citizens who vote based on the aging of the public interest.

3. The cultural determination of the elite

That they make the distinction between the people and the elite on the basis of morality, which is related to the honor held by the people but not the elite, indicates that populists conceptualize these two antagonistic groups more as status than as class groups. Stratification cannot be reduced to the struggle for scarce economic resources. It encompasses the competition for symbolic recognition, supremacy, and honor among groups that live in a certain area and are thus part of the competition, knowingly or unknowingly included in it. In "Class, status and party" as a chapter of *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1968), Weber states that divisions in society are not only the result of economic inequalities that crystallize in class, but also of prestige that crystallizes in status. Unlike classes in which individuals are grouped based on economic determinants, status groups are differentiated based on honor, that is, prestige. Status groups differ in the prestige that society attributes to them, which is related to lifestyle (Gerth and Mills, 1958: 187). Lifestyle is based on habitus, habits, upbringing, and education, and social stratification is based on cultural criteria. It is related to the everyday choices that individuals make about whether to spend more money on books or clothes, whether to spend money on a new car, buying stocks in the stock market, and so on (Berzano and Genova, 2015: 8). The specific way of life, that is, A specific lifestyle is a manifestation of the belonging of a certain individual to a given status group (Sobel, 1981; Sobel, 2013: 8). The lifestyle of the status group marks its boundaries and reinforces the honor/prestige system on which it is based. Status groups expect members to share the same lifestyle. Members of status groups recognize each other by using certain markers and symbols that reflect their lifestyles. People are morally pure, honest, naive, and benevolent, and elites are not.

The possession of wealth is generally considered the primary evidence of the success of individuals, and thus, the dominant basis for respect expected from society. Additionally, each type of consumption is not equally respected. Namely, there is a hierarchy of tastes related to the prestige of those who managed to internalize them (Bourdieu, 1984). Symbols have a structural form of prestige, and lifestyle is their manifest form. Taste is a measure of the quality of the lifestyle. The transformation of wealth into visible symbols of prestige and respect is imperative for individuals who have managed to establish themselves materially. Many researchers have accepted that lifestyle is the most significant form of social stratification in today's postmodern society. The segmentation of society according to lifestyle differs from that performed according to social classes. When determining a class, income is usually considered as a criterion. In determining lifestyle, individuals are segmented based on cultural preferences and tastes that facilitate the symbolic communication of those who have the same lifestyle, although their economic positioning may differ significantly. Lifestyle is constituted by symbolic boundaries that constitute differences between groups. Social boundaries are expressed through patterns of behavior and consumption, and given social contexts can be associated with given symbolic codes that carry their own meaning (Katz-Gerro, 2007: 645). Symbolic stratification appears to be rooted in the habitus of individuals. Unlike models of stratification that use economic criteria and view individuals as rational social agents, Bourdieu points out that stratification can operate at the level of routinized patterns of behavior and choices that individuals make in their daily lives (Binkley, 2007: 648). This is how tastes work, defined by Bourdieu as the ability to evaluate the aesthetic value of things. Tastes are not only related to the income of individuals or the needs satisfied by making consumer choices, and are therefore not markers of class but lifestyle. They indicate the social conditions in which individuals lived in the past as well as the conditions in which they currently live, but are also inextricably linked to social and cultural capital. Possibly, associating mustaches exclusively with income reduces them to the financial means of individuals and ignores the more significant cultural dimension rooted in tastes (Peterson and Kern, 1996).

At the individual level, lifestyle is related to individuals' self-expression, taste, and identity (Featherstone, 2007). At the group level, lifestyle indicates the common preferences and tastes of the members of certain strata of the population, which are reflected in the behavior patterns, in what kind of relationships they establish with the environment, how much and what kind of food they consume, how they arrange their own home, what kind of music they listen to, whether, how much, and what kind of media they follow. For example, Trump's actions (immediacy, directness, brutality), relations he establishes with the environment, the food he consumes like hamburgers and drinking Coca Cola, following and actively participating in reality programs, show that according to cultural markers, he is closer to people and their pop culture than to the elite. Similarly, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, with his interest in the opposite, especially football as a folk sport, which can be seen on his Facebook page, presents himself as part of the mass, not an elite crowd. Although he formally belongs to the upper middle class, Nigel Farage, pointing out that he regularly goes to pubs and shows cultural markers that bring him closer to the working class (Hakola et al., 2021: xii; Macaulay, 2022: 16). An important

characteristic of persuasive leadership, to be considered a part of people, is direct, immediate contact with the audience. To be in direct contact with people, Orbán gives an interview on the radio every Friday, the show *Aló* functioned with a similar purpose as *Presidente*, where people could call to ask questions about Cháves. In Trump's case, direct communication with people works through social networks, such as Twitter, renamed X. Lindstaedt (Lindstaedt, 2021: 174) is of the opinion that the populist leaders completely transformed the role of the media in politics and in the public space. Overcoming people's wishes is often an object of manipulation by populist leaders in the sense that leadership sells its own views of politics as the demands and wishes of the people.

Populist leaders are usually part of the economic elite, as in the case of Berlusconi and Trump. The stereotypical way of thinking that derives from the traditions of Marxism is that the base affects the superstructure, namely that material reality affects working conditions through the way of thinking and symbolic reality. However, Habermas showed that material and normative cultural reality can be independent of each other (Habermas, 1984; Sharlamonov, 2024: 67). Thus, despite the fact that according to objective and economic criteria, Trump and Berlusconi belong to the elite, the two leaders were accused of being vain, authoritarian, and involved in sex scandals, etc. Therefore, according to cultural markers, the two leaders are ranked very low and belong more to the lower strata than the elite (Mangset et al., 2019: 216). Both are icons of popular culture, constantly in front of the media: one is the owner of a large media empire and the other is a participant in reality shows (Drache and Froese, 2022). The political leaders of populists are accused of sending simple messages to their voters and of being scandal-masters in the public space, thus attracting a lot of media attention that they use to promote their political ideas. These characteristics show that culturally speaking, populist leaders are more part of the popular culture of the lower strata than of the elitist culture. That is why populist leaders are seen by their potential voters as a part of their culture and not as part of the elite, although economically they belong there. This situation is similar for media elite. Right-wing populists target left-wing media as part of the elite, but they do not view right-wing media empires in the same way. In the USA, for example, populists do not consider Fox television to be part of the elite, just as populists in Austria do not consider the tabloid *Die Kronen Zeitung* to be part of the media elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 12). Moreover, populists consider *Die Kronen Zeitung* to be the true voice of ordinary people. This is because, according to cultural markers, according to the way they communicate with the audience, these media are closer to the culture of the lower layers of the population (Tripathi, 2023: 19).

4. The behavior of cleanup leaders

Populist leaders use mannerisms, body language, accent, and a way of expression that members of the elite consider distasteful, undignified, uncultured, and threatening (Moffitt, 2016: 43). Populist leaders use direct, tabloid, emotional, and informal language based on political attitudes and slogans, simple wording, and ease of understanding. They simplify complex social problems and always find the culprit for problems in society and, as a rule, the establishment (Balcer, 2017: 158; Berlin et al., 1968). Populist leaders often use a communication style that scandalizes the public and creates tension in public spaces. They aim to strip away the subtleties of routinized political expressions and replace them with efficient, striking, and often misleading metaphors (Mangset et al., 2019: 212). Populist leaders do not refrain from insulting their political opponents, such as Marine Le Pen, who calls their political opponents pedophiles (Macaulay, 2022: 15). Moffitt (2016) believes that bed manners are part of the charisma of semi-lyric leaders. They claim that they speak the language that people use in everyday life, convey people's opinions and emotions, and that political correctness is a characteristic of the alienated political establishment (Demertzis, 2019). Some populist leaders, such as Kellie Leitch, at times went so far as to believe that political correctness threatened freedom of speech (Budd, 2019: 152). By behaving badly, populist leaders implicitly say that they are outsiders to political establishments. Trump's transgressive style of expression, for example, the politically incorrect vocabulary he uses, violates the norms of American political culture. His clumsy hand gesturing was more authentic than pretentious. His performance as a politician is the opposite of the elitist style promoted by political establishments (Manucci, 2022). Those who support political leaders are boring and self-sufficient. People feel alienated and underrepresented in mainstream politics. The bottle of expression, the image that populist leaders create for a part of the population, is fun. They behave in such a way that before the emergence of modern populism, it was unacceptable for someone, especially a politician, to behave in the public space.

In general, populist leaders exaggerate, dramatize problems, and use verbal radicalism (Bos and Brants, 2014: 706). They generate a sense of fear, anger, and a perception that there is a post-crisis in society even when there is no objective such condition (Rowe, 2023). Substandard manners and tabloid behavior, the use of slang, political incorrectness, cursing, and swearing at political opponents are characteristic of populist leaders. Through this behavior, populists show that they are an authentic part of people. They behave as an ordinary average person would behave, not someone who belongs to the elite, and has cultivated subtle manners. With the informal, non-standard behavior and rhetoric used by populist leaders, they identify with the people and show that they are part of them. For example, the long-term populist-oriented Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov, in an address to his sympathizers indicated that he is a

simple and straightforward person, just like his followers, so that is why they understand each other well. At the same time, populist leaders show immodesty and megalomania in their public appearances. So, for example, Thaskin Shinawatra in 2006 declared himself to be the biggest driving force in the government, and all others only help him, while Berlusconi declared himself to be Jesus Christ in politics, in the sense that he sacrifices himself to save all citizens. Similarly, Hugo Chávez claimed to be the reincarnation of Simon Bolívar (Moffitt, 2016: 71; Macaulay, 2022: 16).

With their rhetoric, populists touch on the emotions of ordinary people and often know how to manipulate them. A good example of how populist leaders' rhetoric works is climate change. It can be presented through the wording of economics, arguing how much each additional degree of global warming would cost on the one hand, and the prevention of such a problem on the other. However, this problem can also be simplified and moralized, and incompetent and corrupt elites can be blamed for it. One approach would be adequate for some international economic (elitist) summits, while the second could bring many votes in elections. For populist leaders, what is important is the story that is told, the speeches that are held, the public debates, and not the institutions that could be treated as the personification of the elite (Bonikowski, 2016: 14).

Populist leaders often overemphasize the cultural differences between people and outsiders. They do not refrain from verbally attacking minority groups and migrants for being favored by the establishment. Experts of populism claim that for the growth of populism, cultural differences and making a distinction between people and what does not fall under the category of people are more significant than economic factors related to the stagnation of the economy, its transformation with the loss of jobs in the industrial sector. This is how populists define the category of people with which they identify themselves, which often does not include individuals with different ethnic, national, and regional affiliations and citizenships from the country in which the populist party or movement operates. Spektorowski and Elfersy (2020: 53) indicate that right-wing populists are not as interested in redistributive politics as they are in favor of correcting policies towards immigrants, accusing them of using the resources of the host countries without paying the necessary contributions. Populist leaders who, according to cultural markers, are part of the people, overemphasize the threat from outsiders, pointing to a "cultural war" against them (Murray and Brux, 2023: 14). Hence, the importance of the concept of nativism to populist ideology, as well as the policies of the jid-building type to prevent illegal migration.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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