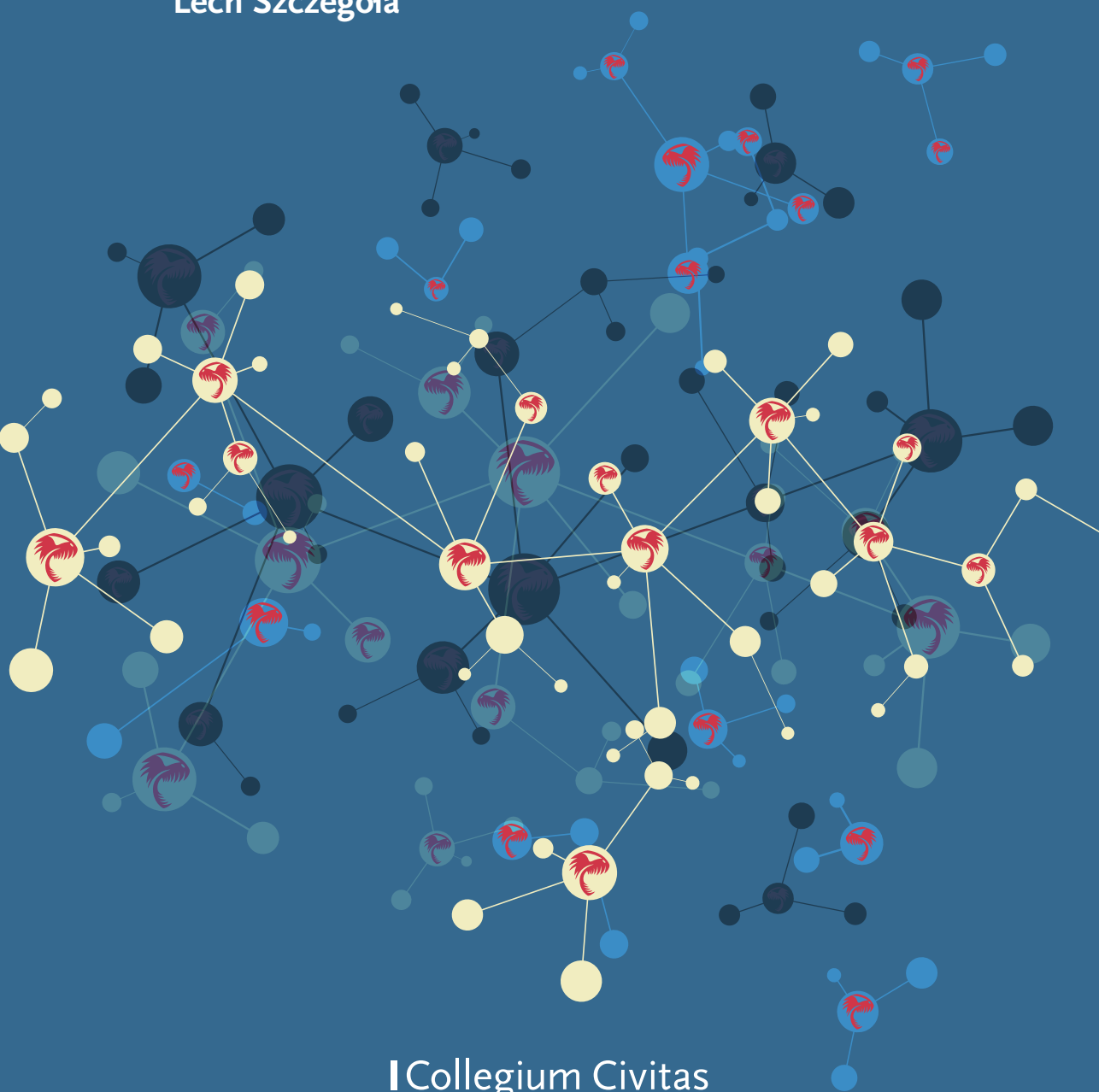


Populist retrotopia: On the road to culture war

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Abstract

The subject of the article is the phenomenon of successes of right-wing parties and their leaders. The contemporary rise of radical populism and its geopolitical scope are reflected in the discourse of its new features. Such a discussion offers a wealth of concepts and notions. Most of them describe practices of “dismantling” democracy, threats of dictatorship or even fascism. The presented analysis focuses on the question of the ideological identity of cases that can be specified as consolidated populism. The thesis I advance shows that the source of the durability of electoral support is a specific narrative based on a thinking style which Zygmunt Bauman termed “retrotopia.” This popular world view functions as a legitimizing myth, which the process of limiting democracy hides in the form of culture war. I conclude that the concept of retrotopia adds little to the distinction between today’s different varieties of populist movements and political leaders.

Keywords

right-wing populism, ideology, retrotopia, cultural war

The issue of the relationship between populism and radicalism has a long tradition. It is probably older than either notion, or any systematic reflection on the roots of these two phenomena. In the past, the relationship had various forms, political characteristics, and consequences. Today, it is absolutely necessary to return to the questions about the nature of this relationship. Radicalism of opinions, attitudes, and demands is becoming widespread. The electoral effectiveness of the populist offer, and its language of sharp criticism of the status quo, is beyond doubt.

The radical presentation of reality has always had the status of an important indicator of the formation described in the political and media discourse as an emanation of populism. From a theoretical perspective, it emphasizes rhetoric built around the conflict between the people and the elites (Müller 2017). Its function is important: mobilizing the electorate around radical changes and “repair” of the political and social order. This is the basic knowledge about populism. It is also known that the concept of *populism* is imprecise. In the public discourse, its empirical framework has been defined by the mainstream. The radicalism of words, promises, or plans does not always have real consequences. The rhetoric of polarization, discrediting, or the “betrayal” of the elites is a typical electoral instrument used by new political initiatives to gain a position in the party system.

Even populists who are effective in implementing this plan often become actors in normal politics. The parties of Silvio Berlusconi (Italy) and Andrej Babisz (Czechia), as well as a large family of parties in Austria, Benelux, and Scandinavia, are examples of this “normalization” process. Participation in governance plays, in this case, the role of a factor that moderates the originally radical message. Until recently, it was justified to say that in stable democracies, radicalism was only on the margins of the political arena. The long existence of the Le Pen family formation was an exception. Today, this “margin” has a growing social resonance and is successful in elections.

According to Samuel Huntington, a continuous “surge” of populism is noticeable. In several places around the world, it has triggered a process of de-democratization of the political system. In some other countries, it is a force that reduces the level of democratic consolidation. This diagnosis describes the condition of liberal democracy, even in its Anglo-Saxon heartland. The subject of this brief analysis is the ideological component of this change.

Contemporary populism is successful not only in expanding and mobilizing the electorate; some of its versions have a lasting impact on political culture. Today’s radical criticism of the elite, the party system, and the mass media discredits the procedures and values of democracy. In several cases (Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and the USA), populism is a mask for attempts to revise the system of checks and balances. Even if Trump or Bolsonaro lose their re-election bids, the electorate that accepts this type of aspiration is growing. Political leaders whose names today symbolize the wave of populism offer more than rhetoric and radical form. *Erdoganism*, *Orbánism*, *Trumpism*, *Kaczism* – these are terms that function in the discourse as synonyms for this style of governance and the political orientations of its supporters.

This style has characteristics that are more typical of authoritarianism than of populism. The accumulation of personal power over the party and the state provokes the following question: What is popular in this type of populism, when its leaders are recruited from the establishment and have a long history of presence in politics? The simplest answer may be the profile of the electorate. It comprises, in its mass, inhabitants of areas located far from cities, elderly people, and people with a lower socioeconomic status. This observation leads to a further question: Why do many modern societies support leaders who openly question the rules of the liberal model of democracy? They offer the cult of “strong form”; that is, leadership based on strong authority that interferes with practically all areas of the social order. The rhetoric of polarization, first used for election purposes, becomes a political

manifesto. It can be described as a strategy of “searching for fields of conflict.”

The characteristic outlined above is not (yet?) common. It helps to find the lines of similarities and differences that exist on the broad geopolitical map of contemporary populism. It seems important to pay attention to the mechanics of the process that enables the consolidation of populism. The popular thesis that every populism is a product of the specificity of the social context and historical situation is becoming a thing of the past. In the past, the success of populism was only local and transitory.

Contemporary populisms are neither local nor ephemeral. They have an instrument in their repertoire, the lack of which was previously the source of their weakness. Their primary and new resource in communication with “the people” is a story about the crisis of Western civilization; not only democracy, but the entire model of social evolution. The narrative built around a complex of phenomena that are to illustrate the crisis of liberal political culture and the effectiveness of the state (or the egoism and alienation of its elites) functions as a catalyst for a wave of changes. This is the factor that explains why alt-right movements and national populism (Eatwell, Goodwin 2018) are the beneficiaries of the problems and challenges of development. The message that today mobilizes and integrates the emotions of dissatisfaction or frustration says little about the future. It is retrospective and “defensive.” It uses the image of “the good old days.” In its discourse, the key words *return*, *defense*, and *healing* are the pillars and the medium of the worldview.

This unique axiological matrix contains a diagram of the diagnosis of reality, a hierarchy of values, and a definition of “evil” and its representatives. This holistic worldview has a name coined by Zygmunt Bauman who, in his last work before his death, described the phenomenon of *Retrotopia* (2017a). To some extent, it was a prophetic study. As an analyst of modernity and its crisis, Bauman anticipated that the reaction would be a process of losing faith in a good future and the rationality of

the direction of changes. He described retrotopia as the state of social moods or nostalgia that is becoming widespread in the common consciousness. Cultural pessimism has always been present in the narrow circles of conservative thinkers. Today, it penetrates into the language of political communication in a more trivial form. It has become the message in the manifesto of the leaders who see their prospective success in the practices of deconsolidating the system.

In my opinion, the language that refers to the retrotopian vision of the world is the source of a specific bond between populist leaders and the electorate. It is the language that generates the effect of political persistence. It consolidates support for the authoritarian versions of leadership. In this sense, retrotopia is more than a narrative: it is a substitute for ideology. It gives its supporters a sense of rightness in the realities of cultural war – an acute conflict over the identity of the nation and its “substance”: tradition, faith, family, and so on.

The ideological impetus of national populism is, as already mentioned, its key resource and advantage factor in competing with liberalism or leftism. The new, alternative right wing has very skillfully accomplished something new in the history of populism when dealing with the moods of a large part of the “people.” Socioeconomic conflicts and the inequalities that the global economic system produces have been transmitted to a cultural platform. The discourse of values is more conducive to polarization than the discourse of interests. It raises strong emotions.¹ It is a zero-sum game, the victims of which in several countries are consensual orientation and social respect for pluralism.

An encounter between political radicalism and populism has always been a challenge for democracy. It is dangerous when the ideological vision of restoring the “natural” order is the basis of this relationship. The history of populism provides some examples, such as Italian and

¹ This topic is presented in an innovative way by authors who operate in the area where cultures meet: Sara Ahmed (2015), Pankaj Mishra (2017) and Michał P. Markowski (2019).

German fascism, which show how marginal formations and their ambitious leaders reach political hegemony. In this, the idea of the former glory and power of the state-nation reveals its potential. Then, a hundred years ago, this potential was a function of a deep economic crisis and a sense of defeat in the great war. Nowadays, it is considered to be the result of a sense of chaos and the accumulation of threats that are typical of existence in the reality of a *risk society*.

Some European sociologists, such as Ulrich Beck, Jürgen Habermas, and Anthony Giddens, have presented moderate optimism and faith in “difficult” progress. Bauman, who personally experienced totalitarianism in both its versions, the times of system liberalization, and its end, focuses on reading the “spirit of the times.” He describes the moment when the ideas of the restitution of the past, past order, or just normality (“as it used to be”) take the form of common opinion. They meet no restrictions. Today, retrotopia penetrates the social consciousness of the citizens of the USA, Great Britain, France, Italy, Russia, Poland, and Hungary. Contrary to what Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2020) claim, the thought suggesting that “the light failed” is not only the domain of post-communist democracies.

The phenomenon of synergy between populism, retrotopia, and support for an authoritarian political style has been widely discussed in the literature. Bauman formulated his observations cautiously as a potential threat (2017b). However, in publications by Madeleine Albright, Timothy Snyder (2018) and Jason Stanley, the warning against fascism (tyranny) sounds unambiguous. From their perspective, there is no doubt about the tendency towards proto-fascist evolution of the language and practices presented by a growing group of contemporary leaders.

Stanley exposes in the most consistent way the deep **ideological structure** of the model of their operation. He defines it as ethnic, religious, and cultural “ultranationalism.” He lists Russia, Hungary, Poland, India, Turkey, and the USA as examples of the countries “dominated” today by

such formations (Stanley 2021: 27). His description begins with a chapter called “Mythical Past”; although Bauman is not quoted in it, the author develops an identical concept. Nostalgia, in which the image of the past is synonymous with normality, has performative power. It shapes the image of the present and “normalizes” radicalism (*Ibidem*: 195-199). The process of transferring views that were previously radical to the social and political center is a difficult operation. The social engineering of creating a broad camp, a “front” for defending national identity, requires a sense of community. In times of cultural and media pluralism, retrotopia is perhaps the only “material” which, when skillfully exploited, offers belonging to the category of “us”: patriots, defenders of truth and order, and so on.

Stanley’s analysis is also interesting for another reason: the author says nothing about populism. In his opinion, far-right nationalism is a unique separate category characterized by fascist strategies of action and the way of their legitimization. This suggests something diagnostically important. On the vast continuum of political forms that we perhaps initially define as populism, one can observe a model of a regime whose properties provoke the search for analogies with fascism. The case of Russia is obvious here; however, the cases of Poland, Hungary, and the USA raise questions. The intention of the researchers who show these analogies is clear, but there is an epistemologically unfavorable phenomenon of blurring the boundaries between *fascism*, *authoritarianism*, *populism*, and, last but not least, *radicalism*. There are empirical reasons for this state of confusion. Political leaders, their rhetoric, and priorities are constantly evolving.

Jan Werner Müller (2017) aptly notes that populism aspiring to power is ontologically (and ideologically) different from populism already in power. This is the first test of the intentions of a populist policy project available to analysts, though it is not sufficient. The second test is based on the observation of the activities of the leader of this project in the

face of electoral confrontation and the risk of defeat. However, the results of both observations can only show the diversity of operating models and political tactics; they add nothing new to knowledge about populism. Cases of the transformation of originally democratic emotions and claims of the people into dictatorial rule are widely known.

In order to overcome the cognitive impasse, one should perhaps carefully analyze “what the populists say,” or the structure and holistic dimension of their narrative. Despite the diversity of the context, there is today a kind of political family that sees the escalation of the culture war as the basic instrument of politics. This type of populism must lead to an ideological offensive – an attack on the opposition and the values and attitudes of its electorate.

In the face of the erosion of liberalism as a popular worldview and the multiplicity of offers that refer to the ideas of the left, retrotopia attracts the strength of everyday experience.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this short overview of the state of knowledge:

1. Nowadays, the language of retrotopia is commonly used in political disputes and campaigns. In Western countries, its popularity is fostered by the problems generated by the scale of immigration. Elsewhere, the migration crisis serves to illustrate the systemic weakness of liberal democracies. This message is not always based on a sense of threat to national identity and culture, especially in societies with deeply rooted religious traditions. Retrotopia connects the cases identified by Jason Stanley as examples of ultranationalism, facilitating the transmission of social emotions into a holistic worldview. This is the source of its sense of coherence and clarity.
2. *Populism* is a term that systematically loses its usefulness in scientific description and explication. Among the phenomena described as populism, it is worth distinguishing those forms of politics,


which in their narrative, emphasize the element of *patriotic morality*. The model of polarization built on this criterion directs the popular resentment towards circles critical of the practices of centralization of power as a condition for healing the state. This is perhaps an important indicator of the risk of transforming real sociocultural conflicts into a process of deconsolidation of democracy.

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Lech Szczegół, PhD, Associate Professor. Scientific interests: sociology of politics, political culture, democratic transition and consolidation in post-communist Europe. His most recent work includes: *Bierność obywateli. Apatia polityczna w teorii demokratycznej partycypacji* (2013) [*Passive Citizens. Political Apathy in Theory of Democratic Participation*]; *Droga do wojny kulturowej. Ideologia Dobrej Zmiany* (2020) [*Road to Culture War. The Ideology of Good Change*].

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

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