



Cristóbal Sandoval Rojo

***The Multi-scalar Dimension of Populism.
Explorations Beyond Methodological
Nationalism***

POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 17

**Thessaloniki
June 2024**

POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS

Cristóbal Sandoval Rojo

The Multi-scalar Dimension of Populism. Explorations Beyond Methodological Nationalism

There is not just one Leviathan but many, interlocked one into another like chimera, each one claiming to represent the reality of all, the programme of the whole.

Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, 1981

It is perfectly possible to constitute a 'people' in such a way that many of the demands of a more global identity are 'universal' in their content and cut across a plurality of ethnic identities. When this happens, the signifiers unifying the equivalential chain will necessarily be more truly empty and less attached to particular communities — ethnic, or of any other type.

Ernesto Laclau, 2005

Introduction

Methodological nationalism is a reality in the Social Sciences (Chernilo, 2020). Comparative politics and sociology regularly use nations as cases without reflecting on this category and rarely explore other explanations based on local or international dynamics. In the case of the study of populism, this problem is even more evident (De Cleen et al., 2020). The relationship between populism, on the one hand, the idea of national-popular regimes in Latin America and, on the other hand, ethno-nationalist parties in the global North shows how populism, as a discursive political logic, is regularly articulated with some form of nationalism. However, populism is not related to any content except for the appeal of the people against the elites although it contingently articulates various political discourses and social demands (Stavrakakis, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

The study of populism is dominated by explanations centered on the national context and its cultural, economic, and institutional characteristics (Germani 1978; Urbinati 2014). This approach underestimates other arguments centered on the local level (Zaslave 2011) and explanations focused on the international level, including the connections that permit the diffusion and global circulation of populist discourse (Rydgren 2005; Van Hauwaert 2019; Aslanidis 2019). According to some scholars, the risk of abandoning methodological nationalism and adopting an interdependent approach to understanding populism is the so-called 'Galton problem', indicating a situation in which 'national political

systems can no longer be treated as independent of each other' (Börzel and Risse 2022, 368). Especially for quantitative studies, this problem makes it difficult to elaborate explanations in terms of structural independent and dependent variables. However, by defining populism as a multi-scalar phenomenon, it is possible to address the tensions presented by methodological nationalism and complexify the empirical analysis of the phenomenon. Hence, theorizing local, international, and transnational populism offers different levels of analysis and new explanations for populism, identifying political agents and institutions where populism is identified.

Additionally, in the last 20 years, the notion of scale or geographical scale has been problematized and reframed in human geography, providing an innovative theoretical framework for analyzing social and political phenomena. Nowadays, some critics of the concept argue that scales represent a hierarchical and vertical understanding of social relations and propose an alternative 'flat ontology', in which there are no preexisting categories as a preferred scale with more explanatory power than others (Martson, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Legg 2009). These approaches are based on the theories of authors such as Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, and Manuel DeLanda. Their main critique is that scales, in a traditional understanding, are rigid and vertical categories that do not correctly explain the more complex dynamics of the social and political.

However, in the study of populism, scholars have not considered the role of scales in articulating populist discourse. With a few exceptions, closer to the Marxist-Gramscian approach (Hart 2013) or human geography studies (Agnew 1995), ideational and discursive approaches to populism do not reflect on the multi-scalar dimension of populism. In this paper, I assume a poststructuralist approach to populism and scales. Thus, even when the paper attempts to establish a dialogue between diverse contributions, ontologically it is conceptually anchored in Ernesto Laclau's (2005) work and the political-discursive approach of populism as a political logic that constructs antagonistic relations between the 'common people' and the elites.

To analyze the situated dimension of populist discourse, this working paper follows Bruno Latour's (2005) approach to the formation of networks of association or assemblage of human and non-human actors that can be related to a specific space and multiple scales. In other words, discursive articulations are situated within networks forming different scales, from the local to the global, that traverse the social and are linked through translation processes. Overall, populism is a multi-scalar phenomenon that operates across different scales and its complexity operates on multiple levels involving various discourses that aim to represent the interests of the 'common people' against the elites. These discourses may come from different ideological positions and may or may not be able to work together. Thus, this working paper seeks to introduce a scalar axis or typology relevant for contemporary politics into populism studies following a poststructuralist approach to scales (Collinge 2006), not as pre-existing entities, but rather as contingent and discursively constructed categories that articulate the empty signifier of the 'common people' in opposition to economic, political, and/or cultural elites, situated within a particular context.

In methodological terms, the paper draws on a conceptual analysis of the scale concept and its relationship with the political-discursive approach to populism. This working paper explores the concepts of local, national, international, and transnational populism using illustrative cases of populism from different ideological positions and contexts of the global South (Latin America) and North (Europe and North America), based on secondary sources. In addition, the paper problematizes the genealogy of populism by examining the scale dimension. Thus, populism is understood as a multiscale phenomenon that exceeds the national scale and articulates a wide variety of political discourses, demands, and policies such as new municipalism, ethnonationalism, socialism, and conservatism, among others, depending on the socio-political context of its emergence.

To delve deeply into the scalar dimension of populism, the document is structured into five sections. Initially, it elucidates the global aspects of populism and engages with the concept of scale derived from human geography. Subsequently, I identify the local scale of left-wing and right-wing populism, particularly their articulation with regionalism and new municipalism. In the third section, the paper moves to the national scale and the linkage of populism with nationalism in Latin America and Europe. In the fourth section, I conceptualize the distinctions between international and transnational populism, complemented by illustrative examples from both right and left-wing perspectives. Finally, the working paper culminates with a conclusion centered on the potentialities of a typology for understanding populism, focusing on local, national, international, and transnational scales, including ideological traditions from both left and right-wing perspectives that populist discourse articulates.

The global dimension of populism and the scale concept

This paper aligns with the contemporary contributions of political-discursive approaches (Laclau, 2005; de Cleen, 2019) and the ideational approach (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira, 2017). Therefore, populism is characterized as a discursive logic or thin-centered ideology, which articulates two central elements: an appeal to the people as the articulation of unfulfilled demands and anti-elitist components (Stavrakakis, 2017). In essence, instances of populism are those political discourses that depict a society divided between the people and the elite, with the former being portrayed as the ultimate source of political legitimacy (Canovan, 2008). However, unlike other political discourses, populism, as a contingent discursive articulation, lacks a specific content or program. This explains the existence of left and right-wing populisms, which are contingent upon the context within which they emerge. In summary, populism is a formal logic wherein certain central elements – the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, facilitate the articulation of a series of demands and meanings from other discourses.

Complementary, populism is a political phenomenon with global characteristics. For example, Latin American cases have been configured around three major waves (Mudde and Rovira, 2017). The first was between 1929 and 1960, with charismatic leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón and Getulio Vargas. The second was carried out by leaders called neopopulists (because of the contingent articulation between neoliberalism and populism), such as Carlos Menem or Alberto Fujimori. Finally, the third wave of populism was led by

leftist governments and leaders such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and Evo Morales. Similarly, Cas Mudde (2013) identifies four waves in the study of right-wing populism in Europe that have gone hand in hand with the development of radical right-wing political forces at different times. Furthermore, authors such as Benjamin Moffitt (2016) emphasize the global dimension of populism by identifying political forces with populist discourses on the five continents.

While there is literature on the global dimension of populism, there has been limited reflection on the spatial and scalar dimensions introduced by various social science authors in understanding the multi-scalar dimension of populism. The insights from the so-called spatial turn, such as Henri Lefevre's (2009) theory on the role of space in the production and reproduction of a capitalist logic of domination, are pertinent to understanding the socially constructed nature of the notion of space. In simple terms, the logic of capitalism would shape and socially construct space on a global scale. Consequently, space, even when associated with the social relations of production and ownership of specific lands and territories (Elden 2010), would be a socially constructed category that facilitates a better understanding of the dynamics of global capitalism and contemporary societies.

Similarly, and in connection with the concept of space, the notion of scale has become increasingly significant in the Social Sciences. Works such as those by Neil Brenner (2001) have shed light on the socially constructed nature of this category. Traditionally, it has been perceived as a given category, grounded in other spatial concepts like place, locality, territory, and space. Brenner, however, focuses on the social production and re-scaling of scales across three dimensions. Firstly, he focuses on the uneven and combined development of capitalism. Secondly, he examines the geographical shifts in state power, political regulation, and socio-political identities. Lastly, he explores the strategies and organizational structures of unions, political parties, and social movements. Consequently, we can identify two distinct notions within the politics of scale. On the one hand, there is the concept of a singular scale, which perceives scale as a boundary that generates and reconfigures aspects of socio-spatial organization within specific geographical areas, producing a vertical ordering dimension of the social. On the other hand, there is the notion of plural scales, which concentrates on more intricate processes of scale production across various geographical territories and spatial units. These two elements, singularity and plurality of scales enable us to comprehend the processes of hierarchization and re-hierarchization, as well as the multidimensional nature of social and political spatiality.

For example, the work of Halvorsen and Torres (2022), rooted in human geography and Marxist perspectives, examines the local dimension of Kirchnerism in Argentina and delves into the multi-scalar aspect of populism. However, from my perspective, the center of the analysis should be the discursive dimension of populism (Laclau 2005) rather than the articulation of class and non-class elements (Laclau 1977). Consequently, instead of discarding the notion of scale as suggested by some scholars (Martson, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Legg 2009), I approach scales through a poststructuralist lens (Collinge 2006), which views them as products of populist discourse in specific contexts and networks of meaning. In essence, scales are not pre-existing entities but contingent and discursively

constructed categories that articulate the concept of the ‘common people’ in opposition to economic, political, and/or cultural elites, situated within a particular context.

Contrary to the primacy of time over space in Ernesto Laclau’s theory (1990), my approach, following Yannis Stavrakakis (2011), acknowledges the formation of political subjectivities and identities as processes of spatialization. In essence, scales function as a political discursive spatial inscription because ‘every political dislocation and antagonism requires some sort of spatial inscription; every new political articulation that follows such a dislocation will also have to be spatially registered’ (Stavrakakis 2011, 318). Therefore, when a populist discourse designates a particular space or territory, creating a social divide between the ‘common people’ and the elites (populist contextualization), it is possible to observe the development of a hierarchical structure within the populist discourse. Empirically, one can recognize local, national, international, and transnational expressions of populist discourse. However, the notion of scale is marked by a constitutive lack because it is always open to re-scaling to a smaller or larger degree, thus being a partially constituted open category.

By examining the populist contextualization of the common people and the elite situated in space as a scale, we can gain insights into the global nature of the phenomenon. Elements of global capitalism’s logic, such as the dynamics of colonial domination by the global North over the global South, play a significant role in shaping populism’s spatial configuration. This is evident in the tendencies for inclusionary types of populism in Latin American countries and more exclusionary or radical right phenomena in Europe and the contemporary United States (Mudde and Rovira 2013; Filc 2015). Observing various expressions of political phenomena linked to populism, from local to transnational, allows us to understand how spatial and scalar dimensions are intertwined, highlighting the mosaic configuration of populism’s global landscape. While ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are key discursive elements of populism, it’s important to note that identifying escalation or re-escalation requires that ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ must be discursively constructed on different scales from the national one.

Local Scale: Populist Regionalism and New Municipalism

Contrary to other approaches that view populism as a regime aiming to dominate the nation-state (Germani 1978; Urbinati 2014), this working paper acknowledges populism’s discursive nature, which forms contingent articulations with a broad range of political discourses, identities, and demands. In this vein, it is feasible to identify contingent articulations with regionalist or local discourses, enabling discursive configurations that diverge from traditional national-popular expressions of populism and ethnonationalism. The contributions of regionalism and new municipalism provide instances where populism surfaces on scales other than the national, ranging from rural and urban populism to new municipalism and regionalism, each with varying positions on the left-right spectrum. Hence, local populism can be defined as those populist discourses that focus on locally situated definitions of ‘the common people,’ typically associated with a city or a specific region, in opposition to centralist elites in other regions, cities, or countries.

The genealogy of populism has raised the questions of the notion of scale since its beginning. The first political movements identified as populism were the locally based People's Party in the United States and the Narodniki in Russia. Some scholars, such as Argentinian historian Federico Finchelstein (2010; 2017), posit the emergence of pure populism as a process of transatlantic diffusion from Italian fascism to South America, particularly to former fascism supporter General Juan Domingo Perón, who governed Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s. Finchelstein considers earlier expressions as 'proto' populism; however, why are local expressions of populist discourse considered less populist than the national appeal of Perón's discourse? From the perspective of this working paper, the non-fascist origins of populism (Vergara 2019, 2-8; Jager 2022), specifically Russian and American populisms, reveal aspects of the local scale of populism that are crucial to understanding its empirical complexity. In these initial expressions, the distinction between rural and urban populism explains why farmers' organizations and political parties in Russia and the US had a more local appeal than Peronism, which incorporated the new urban and industrial classes through a national scale discourse.

In contemporary populism, the dynamics are more complex than rural and urban differences. On the one hand, studies of the populist radical right, following Andrej Zaslove (2011) and John Agnew (1995), have emphasized the national dimension of such discourses, particularly ethnonationalism. However, the case of Lega Nord in Northern Italy exemplifies regionalist populism with a strong appeal to the 'common people' of Northern Italy against the elites in Rome and the established parties that have dominated the political arena since the end of World War II. Andrej Zaslove describes how this regionalist populist gradually consolidates an articulation with populist radical right discourse, incorporating anti-immigrant and anti-EU rhetoric and a robust defense of conservative values. This political discourse demonstrates how the discursive boundary between the people and the elites can be constructed locally, centering on the Northern or Lombard people as a homogeneous community against the metropolitan elites in Rome, Southern Italy, immigrants, and the European Union.

On the other hand, Matthew Thompson's (2020) contributions to new municipalism highlight the defense of democratic autonomy of municipalities in their economic and political life. This approach seeks to reform the State at the municipal level to articulate post-capitalist or eco-socialist discourses. In this context, new municipalism responds to the neoliberal austerity experienced in recent years. The 2008 economic crisis and the ensuing cycle of mobilization triggered the articulation between new municipalism and left-wing populism, along with the idea of integrating social movements into the State. These movements aim to challenge the neoliberal logic through policy experimentation and the re-municipalization of what neoliberalism has privatized. As an illustrative case, the author investigates Barcelona's city council and the Barcelona en Comú platform as instances of local populism, while the international forum Ciudades Sin Miedo ('Cities Without Fear') also serves as an example of international new municipalism.

The case of Barcelona en Comú and Ada Colau, the former mayor of Barcelona, particularly during her first term, exemplifies how populism can be configured at a local or municipal scale. This is achieved through the construction of a municipalist platform that

articulates a series of local demands into a political project aimed at challenging neoliberalism from a municipal perspective. As previously mentioned, the platform was formed through its relationship with the radical left-wing populist party Podemos (via a coalition called En Comu Podem), former member of the government coalition in Spain. This allowed for the interaction of different political forces from various ideological traditions (Thompson 2020). In this context, I suggest that populist discourse forms a heterogeneous people, where different local groups such as social movements and Catalan parties become articulated against not only Spanish national elites but also against Catalan elites, the financial capital of Catalonia (la Caixa), and traditional Catalan parties. It's important to note that other municipal and regional forces, such as former Podemos member Iñigo Errejón's Más Madrid, or Compromís in the Valencian Community, also articulate populist discourse at a local level.

In Latin America, local and national scales of populism are intertwined. Halvorsen and Torres' (2022) study suggests that Kirchnerismo, a populist discourse with a national-popular appeal, can be articulated with various political identities and social mobilizations in Argentina. This includes Indigenous and neighborhood movements such as the Organización Barrial Tupac Amaru (OBTA) in the Jujuy region of northern Argentina, as well as the center-left political party Nuevo Encuentro (New Encounter, NE) in Buenos Aires, which align with traditional Peronist left ideologies. These diverse local expressions illustrate populism as a complex phenomenon in scalar terms. Even though Peronism and Kirchnerismo had national-popular appeal, there are numerous scalar translations between local realities and national-scale political projects. Consequently, scales are permeable, and populism manifests in hybrid forms that re-scale from local to transnational levels and vice versa.

Another manifestation of locally situated populism in Latin America can be seen in neighborhood movements in Santiago de Chile, such as the Partido Igualdad (Angelcos, Jordana, and Sandoval 2018), Movimiento Pobladores en Lucha, and Ukamau. These movements originate from the housing demands of the urban poor (pobladores) and community-based organizational structures. These organizations articulate a potent populist and Manichaean rhetoric that equates the history of 'pobladores' as a plebeian political subject with the 'common people', against economic and political elites perceived as a corrupt oligarchy that oppresses the people. Despite these movements sharing many demands and discursive and organizational characteristics, they employ divergent strategies such as local mobilization and incorporation into municipal and national governments; however, they do not coordinate with one another. These movements can be associated with new municipalism, which emphasizes the city's space over regional identity.

Consequently, it is feasible to identify the emergence of populist discourses at local or regional scales, which can ultimately shape municipal-popular or regionalist-popular projects in response to neoliberal reforms and the progression of globalization. In this context, on the one hand, we can observe the intersections between left-wing populism and new municipalism. On the other hand, we see the convergence of right-wing populism and regionalist political discourses. However, the example of Barcelona en Comú and the Spanish party Podemos illustrates how the municipal scale is intertwined with the national

scale, indicating a re-scaling process between local and national levels. This is similar to the relationship between local and national expressions of Kirchnerism in Argentine politics. For their part, Lega Nord has transitioned their discourses from a purely local populism to a more nationally appealing and 'traditional' right-wing populism to govern at a national level.

National Scale: Nationalism, the National-popular and Ethnonationalism

The national scale is the dominant perspective in populism literature. This leads to methodological nationalism in populism studies (De Cleen et al. 2020), as evidenced by the labeling of Latin American populist governments as national-popular regimes and the distinct ethnonationalist character of European right-wing populisms. However, as previously noted, populism as a political-discursive logic is not inherently tied to a national-statist project. Instead, it can contingently manifest at various scales, articulating different discursive elements and social demands. Nevertheless, what is the relationship between populism and nationalism, and how does this configure populism on a national scale?

Following De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), there is a conceptual confusion between populism and nationalism in the context of Europe and the global North. This confusion often leads to the assumption that populism inherently possesses a nationalist dimension. From a political-discursive theoretical perspective, the primary distinction between these two concepts lies in the nodal point or privileged signifier that organizes the discursive elements in each case. Therefore, the term 'the people' is the nodal point of populism, while for nationalism, it is 'the nation'. In essence, both types of discourse aim to construct subject positions that shape a community. However, these notions of community adhere to different logics. Nationalism is defined as,

a discourse structured around the nodal point 'nation', conceived as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and linked to a certain space, and that is built through an in/out the opposition between the nation and its outside groups. (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 108-109).

In other words, nationalism seeks to build an idea of community linked to a space and culture, where specific subjects would be members and others would not be, establishing an inside/outside border. The authors emphasize that even when nationalists can refer to the people, they will do so from this inside/outside border. On the other hand, populism is,

a dichotomous discourse in which 'the people' is juxtaposed with 'the elite' along the lines of an above/below antagonism in which 'the people' is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to 'the elite'. Conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics claims to represent the 'people' against an 'elite' that frustrates their legitimate demands and presents their demands as expressions of the will of the people. (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 111).

Consequently, populism centers its attention on the discursive construction of ‘the people’ as a signifier, in opposition to some sort of elite. This establishes a discursive antagonism delineating ‘above’ and ‘below’, where the ‘above’ represents a minority group perceived as threatening the interests of the majority ‘below’, those who are disenfranchised due to the actions of those above. Therefore, the type of community that populism aims to construct differs from that of nationalism. However, an interaction exists between the significant concepts of ‘people’ and ‘nation’, which must be registered to discern how national scales shape populist phenomena.

As previously noted, both left- and right-wing populism exemplify a direct interaction between ‘the people’ and the concept of ‘the nation’. In this context, populism is bound to a specific space or territory where ‘the people’ can identify with the notion of a ‘nation’. However, the configuration of the ‘inside/outside’ border of ‘the people’ will ultimately determine whether populism leans towards inclusionary or exclusionary types (Mudde and Rovira 2013). In the cases of the radical right-wing populism in the global North, the integration of nativist elements in the construction of the ‘people-nation’ is directly tied to a territorially defined ‘nation’, often associated with specific racial and cultural characteristics, where non-natives are excluded from the political community. Conversely, Latin American populism also constructs an idea of ‘people’ and ‘nation’, but the nativist component is not central in community construction. Instead, anti-imperialist, protectionist, and statist components take precedence (de la Torre 2017a). In essence, Latin American populisms—from Juan Domingo Perón to Hugo Chávez—incorporate nationalist components as they exclude entities such as North American imperialism. However, they do not exclude non-native inhabitants of the territory.

Analogous to the global North is the recent rise of populist radical right leaders and parties in Latin America, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Jose Antonio Kast’s Partido Republicano, and Javier Milei’s Partido Libertario, among others (Kestler 2022; Zanotti and Roberts 2021; Zanotti and Rovira Kaltwasser 2022). In all these instances, authoritarian (law and order policies) and nativist (anti-immigration policies) components play a significant role. However, populist radical right discourses adapt to different contexts, varying in the degree of people-centric and anti-elitist rhetoric, as well as explicit xenophobic elements. Interestingly, unlike historical Latin American populism, these cases do not defend the idea of the nation as a statist and protectionist economy. Instead, influenced by neoliberal and libertarian ideas, they advocate for a reduction of the State against the political and cultural elites that administer it. Rather than employing anti-imperialist rhetoric, they construct a discursive antagonism between the people as nations and cultural communities against global or international elites, particularly the United Nations and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals or 2030 agenda. Thus, instead of ethno-nationalist populism that views the people as a homogeneous nation, language, or religion, they focus on a national and cultural community of the ‘common citizen’ in broader and more heterogeneous terms.

For their part, Custodi and Padoan (2022) identify a form of non-nativist nationalism within left-wing populist discourses from Southern Europe. This is evident in parties such as Spain’s Podemos, which constructs the nation as a motherland, or ‘patria’, from a left-wing perspective. This concept is intertwined with the welfare state and a plurinational

understanding of the nation, acknowledging the existence of multiple national identities and languages within Spain. In this context, Podemos positions the ‘common people’, or ‘la patria’, in opposition to the ‘anti-patriotic’ economic and political elites. On the other hand, the Italian Five Star Movement also exhibits elements of nationalism. Despite their ambivalent stance on immigration, they advocate for a sovereign nation-state model, opposing elites who seek to further globalization and neoliberal policies in Italy. Therefore, it is possible to identify instances of non-nativist nationalism in Europe. This reveals a more nuanced relationship with the national scale in the European context, extending beyond simple ethnonationalism.

In summary, it is possible to discern a relationship between populism and the national scale. The term ‘national’ refers to a geographic space inhabited by discursively constructed people, delineated by borders that define the concepts of above/below and outside/inside. Although populisms in both the global North and South often contain a nationalist component, the configuration of these borders varies depending on the context. For instance, the exclusion of non-native populations differs from the exclusion of North American imperialism. In Latin American populism, interestingly enough, the construction of the people as a nation occasionally extends beyond the national territories of individual countries. This notion expands throughout the continent in opposition to U.S. imperialist policies (de la Torre 2017a). Such characteristics raise questions about whether the national scale could be extended to broader scales.

International and Transnational Scales: Emulation, Cooperation, or Hybridization?

Once we comprehend the local and national scales of populism, we can examine instances where national borders are transcended. This section explores the continental manifestations of populism, specifically the various waves experienced in Latin America. And the connections between political forces from the global South and North. As well, it contemplates the potential for a transnational populism that blurs the national scale and its spatial boundaries.

First, as previously mentioned, in the case of Latin America, it is possible to identify three waves of populism. These waves illustrate processes of emulation and learning among various political forces and governments on a continental scale. For instance, Carlos de la Torre (2017b) examines the diffusion of Bolivarianism from Hugo Chávez in Venezuela to other South American countries during the third Latin American populist wave. De la Torre identifies a series of emulation, learning, and influence processes that enabled countries like Ecuador and Bolivia to adopt a model of left-wing populism. This model is characterized by constitutional changes, state intervention in the economy, and anti-imperialism. Therefore, de la Torre acknowledges a process of continental diffusion, in which countries with eroded democratic institutions and representation crises were more likely to incorporate these elements. This contrasts with countries with more stable liberal democratic institutions and institutional political cultures, where leaders and political parties did not emulate left-wing populism.

In Europe, as well, we can observe the rise of a group of radical right-wing populist parties, which have emerged through processes of diffusion such as emulation or learning in various countries, including France and Austria (Rydgren 2005; Van Hauwaert 2019). The combination of ethnonationalist populism and anti-elitist elements circulates within networks of political agents in Europe and other countries in the global North, such as the United States (Ramos 2019). A notable example is Steve Bannon, former advisor to President Donald Trump, and his campaign for an international radical right populist movement (Kuyper and Moffitt 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that populism operates on a 'continental' scale to the extent that various discursive elements of populism, along with related discourses and public policies, disseminate among different countries. However, this continental scale neither supersedes the national scale nor is it associated with a specific type of populism that constructs 'the people' and 'the elite' on a regional scale.

The literature focusing on the diffusion of populism has developed the concept of populism as a 'master frame' or a linguistic/rhetorical pattern that enables various action frames to connect, unifying them around shared elements. In essence, a populist master frame is a broad category for attributing blame, setting goals, and proposing solutions (Aslanidis 2018), which can resonate in diverse sociopolitical contexts at local, national, and transnational levels. In this context, the global spread of populism is associated with the dissemination of strategies, styles, and policies such as right-wing populism in Europe (Rydgren 2005; Van Hauwaert 2019) and left-wing populism in Latin America (de la Torre 2017c). Additionally, populism involves the spread of social and political mobilization strategies or frames (discourses) that can be shared transnationally among social movements in various countries. For instance, the transnational mobilization of Occupy movements across different countries demonstrates new discursive frames and novel mobilization repertoires (Aslanidis 2018; Kuyper and Moffitt 2020). Therefore, populism reflects forms of mediation and representation of popular sovereignty and their demands in the political arena, as well as frames of organization and mobilization of social discontent.

Moreover, it is crucial to distinguish between international populism and transnational populism. There's a significant discussion concerning the potential and constraints of conceptualizing transnational populism (Moffitt 2017). To what extent can certain discourses construct a category of people that surpasses the boundaries of the nation-state? It's not sufficient for the elite of populist discourse to have a transnational dimension; the above/below discursive frontier of populism must also be framed on a transnational scale. Expanding on this, De Cleen et al. (2020) differentiate between international populism and transnational populism. The former refers to the ability of national political forces or populist governments to coordinate and cooperate at an international level. The latter, however, 'aims to move beyond this 'marriage of convenience' situation by attempting to transcend the specificities of separate national peoples and instead construct a 'people' that spans national borders' (Ibid., 8).

In this vein, transnational populism would not be a result of alliances between countries, such as the coordination among populist governments in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) in Latin America (de la Torre 2017b), or European movements like Now the People! (Garcia Agustín 2020). This also applies to groups within

the European Parliament, such as the Identity and Democracy Group, led by Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, and the European Conservatives and Reformists, led by the Polish party Law and Justice (McDonnell and Werner 2019). In all these instances, what we observe is international populism, where various populist actors, states, or parties at national levels coordinate and cooperate based on shared interests. Therefore, in these examples, the national borders that shape the actions of these agents are not entirely blurred.

However, just as with local and national scales, there is always the potential for re-scaling processes from an international to a transnational scale. This is exemplified in the case of Hugo Chavez (Kuyper and Moffitt 2020), who used international platforms such as ALBA, UNASUR, and the UN to discursively appeal to a transnational people. Using signifiers such as 'la patria grande' (the big homeland) or the people of the global South, he discursively constructed political subjects or 'audiences' that extended beyond state members to include all Latin American citizens and people from countries of the global South at a transnational scale. In this way, a discursive construction of a Bolivarian people and all subaltern countries in the world was created in opposition to North American imperialism and international elites defending their interests. Moffitt's performative approach to populism demonstrates how scales operate between different stages and audiences.

According to the literature on populism, the model case of transnational populism is the recently established Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM 25), led by former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis (De Cleen et al. 2020). This movement emerged in response to Greece's left-wing populist party (SYRIZA's) failure, the economic crisis, and the austerity measures imposed by the European Union. It recognized the need for a purely European strategy to address the effects of the economic crisis that began in 2008. Consequently, DiEM 25's discourse aligns with transnational populism, as it does not merely represent cooperation or coordination between populist actors from different countries. Instead, it is a European movement where antagonism is constructed between a European and global elite comprised of 'supranational institutions, transnational corporations and a group of national governments that deny their citizens sovereignty' (Ibid., 13), and a 'transnational European people' who must transcend their national borders to confront this elite through the establishment of transnational democracy. However, unlike international populism, there is here a tension between the existence of a singular European people and multiple European peoples. Therefore, there is potential for re-scaling from the transnational to the international scale, and even reverting to the national scale.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the discussion on the empirical and ethical potentialities and challenges of transnational populism (Moffitt 2017; Devenney 2020; De Cleen et al. 2020; Kuyper and Moffitt 2020). At the empirical level, it is important to acknowledge the existence of local, national, international, and transnational populism in both left and right-wing politics. This range of scales challenges the notion that local populism is predominantly right-wing, while left-wing populism has a broader international appeal. However, there are instances of locally situated left-wing populist discourses, such as those associated with new municipalism. Similarly, there are instances of international coordination and cooperation among right-wing populist parties, as well as transnational

appeals from the populist radical right, like the concept of an 'Iberosphere' that the Spanish party Vox uses to connect with the populist radical right in Latin America. On an ethical level, the question arises about the democratic potentialities of constructing transnational populist projects in opposition to the national-scale discourses of ethnonationalist right-wing populism. However, drawing a parallel between local/transnational and authoritarian/democratic is an oversimplification. Therefore, it's crucial to recognize that every scale possesses both democratic and authoritarian potentialities. These must be analyzed based on their relationship with political identities and their interaction with the State as a mechanism for exercising authority and power.

In a nutshell, populism can transcend the national scale, manifesting at continental, international, and transnational levels. This is because the discursive construction of 'the people' and 'the elite' is often situated within a space and territory associated with a particular scale. However, this discursive construction is never static and can always be re-scaled from local to transnational levels, and vice versa. As such, we underscore the socially and discursively constructed dimensions of the notions of space and scale about 'the people' and 'the elite'. It is important to note that these are not fixed or essential categories within populist discourses. Instead, they emerge from contingent articulations of demands and other discourses, depending on the socio-political context.

Concluding remarks

Having identified the relationship between the political-discursive approach to populism and the question of spatiality and scaling in the Social Sciences, as well as recognizing the various scales at which populism can emerge, we are now equipped to address the central question posed in this working paper. Spatial and scalar dimensions in populist discourses are articulated through the construction of 'the people' and 'the elites' across local, national, international, and transnational scales. Consequently, spatial dimensions can be associated with the territory where populism manifests and the geographical regions of the world in which it arises (such as the global South and North). Central to this discussion is the socially and discursively constructed character of these multi-scalar dimensions. These are never complete operations and are always open to re-scaling processes that shift from local to global scales, and vice versa.

Therefore, populism, as a global phenomenon, manifests in multiple spatial and scalar expressions associated with various social groups and demands. Populist discourses articulate the concepts of 'the people' and 'the elite' in varied ways. Consequently, populism aims to appeal to multiple subjects situated spatially within specific territories. However, based on the discursive construction of 'the people' and 'the elite', these subjects can identify with notions of community that are not necessarily linked to a national community. Examples include regionalism, new municipalism, or transnational populism. Similarly, the way discourses construct the antagonism of 'the people' across different scales reveals the existence of both local and global elites. These differ among themselves according to their degree of specificity or generality. Therefore, local populisms focus on local political demands and confront local people with local elites. In contrast, international and transnational populisms confront notions of a global people, constituted by a series of

demands that transcend national borders, against a global elite that threatens the sovereignty of the majority of the world's citizens.

In short, reflecting on the spatial and scalar dimensions of populism allows progress towards the construction of a typology of populism, which recognizes the existence of populist political forces, from the left or the right, in the global South and North, but also responds to a multi-scalar axis where different scales imbricate each other, in such a way that they cannot be separated from one another. Thus, the people can be understood as a local and global community simultaneously, as well as the elites. Similarly, it is also possible to relate populist discourses from the same scales, which interact with each other; for example, the interactions between populisms at the municipal level. In other words, different scales are overdetermined between each other, providing multi-scalar explanations that exceed the national scale.

Finally, the insights provided in this working paper enable us to advance toward a more nuanced understanding of the diffusion and global dissemination of populist discourse and the networks between different political parties, social movements, and leaders. It becomes evident that discursive constructions, such as 'the people' and 'the elite', circulate at a spatial level within the same continents (South-South; North-North) or between continents (South-North; North-South). Moreover, these diffusion processes also emerge across different scales, implying that the circulation can extend from local to global contexts and vice versa. Consequently, we can sketch in a more comprehensive way a global landscape of populism that decisively transcends the constraints of prevalent methodological nationalism in the Social Sciences and in populism studies.

Bibliography

- Agnew, J. (1995). The rhetoric of regionalism: the Northern League in Italian politics, 1983-94. *Transactions of the institute of British geographers*, pp. 156-172.
- Angelcos, N. Jordana, C. and Sandoval, C. (2019). Sólo en el pueblo confiamos: la estructura moral del discurso político radical de los pobladores en el Partido Igualdad, *Izquierdas*, 46, pp. 22-46.
- Aslanidis, P. (2018). Populism as a Collective Action Master Frame for Transnational Mobilization, *Sociological Forum* 33(2), pp. 443-464.
- Börzel, T, and Risse, T. (2022). 'Parties and Diffusion: The Way Forward'. In: Balt, Erik, Kosanke, Sven, and Pickel, Susanne. eds., *Parties, Institutions and Preferences: The Shape and Impact of Partisan Politics*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Brenner, N. (2001). The Limits to Scale? Methodological Reflections on Scalar Structuration, *Progress in Human Geography* 25(4), pp. 591-614.
- Burbano de Lara, F. (2019). 'Populist waves in Latin America: Continuities, Twists, and Ruptures', in C. de la Torre (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*. London: Routledge.
- Callon, M, and Latour, B. (1981). 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan; or How Actors Macrostructure Reality, and How Sociologists Help Them To Do So?' In K. Knorr-Cetina (ed.), *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Canovan, M. (2008). 'The People'. In: J, Dryzek, B, Honning and A, Phillips, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chernilo, D. (2020). Beyond the nation? Or back to it? Current Trends in the Sociology of Nations and Nationalism. *Sociology*, 54(6), pp. 1072-1087. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520949831>
- Custodi, J. and Padoan, E. (2022). The nation of the people: An analysis of Podemos and Five Star Movement's discourse on the nation. *Nations and Nationalism*, Online first.
- Collinge, C. (2006). Flat ontology and the deconstruction of scale: a response to Marston, Jones and Woodward. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31(2), pp. 244-251.
- Devenney, M. (2020). 'Populism, Democracy and the Transnational People: In Defense of Democratic Populism'. In: E, Eklund and A, Knott, eds., *The Populist Manifesto*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- De Cleen, B. (2019). 'The Populist Political Logic and the Analysis of the Discursive Construction of "the People" and "the Elite".' In: J. Zienkowski and R. Breeze, eds., *Imagining the Peoples of Europe: Populist Discourses Across the Political Spectrum*, Amsterdam: Benjamins Publishing Company.
- De Cleen, B. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and articulations: a discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism, *Javnost- The Public* 24, 4: 301-319.

- De Cleen, B. Moffitt, B. Panayotu, P. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2020). The Potentials and Difficulties of Transnational Populism: The Case of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). *Political Studies*, 68(1), 146-166.
- de la Torre, C. (2017a). Populism and nationalism in Latin America. *Javnost-The Public*, 24(4), pp. 375-390.
- de la Torre, C. (2017b). A Populist International?: ALBA's Democratic and Autocratic Promotion. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 37(1), pp. 83-93.
- de la Torre, C. (2017c). Hugo Chávez and the Diffusion of Bolivarianism, *Democratization*, 24(7), pp. 1271-1288.
- Finchelstein, F. (2010). *Transatlantic Fascism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Finchelstein, F. (2017). *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Filc, D. (2015). Latin American inclusive and European exclusionary populism: colonialism as an explanation. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 20(3), pp. 263-283.
- García Agustín, Ó. (2020). *Left-wing Populism: The Politics of the People*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Germani, G. (1978). *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism*. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Halvorsen, S, and Torres, F. (2022). Articulating Populism in Place: A Relational Comparison of Kirchnerism in Argentina. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 112(8), pp. 2195-2211.
- Hart, G. (2013). 'Gramsci, geography and the languages of populism'. In M. Ekers, G. Hart, S. Kipfer, and A. Loftus, eds., *Gramsci, space, nature, politics*, pp. 301–20. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jäger, A. (2022). The Past and Present of American Populism. In Oswald, M (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, 31-47. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kestler, T. (2022). Radical, Nativist, Authoritarian—Or All of These? Assessing Recent Cases of Right-Wing Populism in Latin America. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 14(3), pp. 289-310.
- Kuyper, J. and Moffitt, B. (2020). Transnational populism, democracy, and representation: Pitfalls and potentialities. *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric*, 12(2), 27–49. <https://doi.org/10.21248/gjn.12.02.208>
- Laclau, E. (1977). *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, fascism, populism*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (1990). *New Reflections on the Revolution in Our Times*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

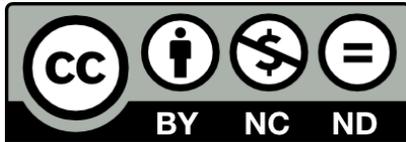
- Lefebvre, H. (2009). *Space and Mode of Production*. In: N, Brenner and S, Elden, eds., *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Legg, S. (2009). Of scales, networks, and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34(2), 234-253.
- Marston, S.A. Jones, J.P. and Woodward, K. (2005). Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (4), 416-432.
- McDonnell, D. and Werner, A. (2019). *International Populism: The Radical Right in the European Parliament*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Moffitt, B. (2017). Transnational populism? Representative claims, media and the difficulty of constructing a transnational “people”. *Javnost-The Public*, 24(4), pp. 409-425.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp. 541-563.
- Mudde, C. (2013). Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties in Western Europe: So What?, *European Journal of Political Research* 52(1): pp. 1-19.
- Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2013). ‘Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America’, *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp. 147-174.
- Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: OUP.
- Ramos, J. and Torres, Priscilla. (2020). ‘The Right Transmission: Understanding Global Diffusion of the Far-Right’. *Populism*, 3(1), pp. 87-120.
- Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Zanotti, L. (2023). ‘The Populist Radical Right Beyond Europe.’ *Journal of Language and Politics* 22(3), pp.285-305.
- Rydgren, J. (2005). Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party family. *European journal of political research*, 44(3), pp. 413-437.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2011). The radical act: Towards a spatial critique. *Planning Theory*, 10(4), pp. 301-324.
- Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Discourse Theory in Populism Research: Three challenges and a dilemma. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4), pp. 523-534.
- Thompson, M. (2020). What’s so new about new municipalism. *Progress in Human Geography*, online first.
- Urbiniati, N. (2014). *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Van Hauwaert, S. (2019). On far-right parties, Master Frames and Trans-national Diffusion: Understanding Far-right Party Development in Western Europe. *Comparative European Politics*, 17(1), pp. 132-154.

Vergara, C. (2020). Populism as Plebeian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Empowerment. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28(2), pp. 222-246.

Zanotti, L. and Roberts, K. (2021). (Aún) la excepción y no la regla: La derecha populista radical en América Latina. *Revista Uruguaya de Ciencia Política*, 30(1), pp.23-48.

Zaslove, A. (2011). *The Re-invention of the European Radical Right: Populism, Regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.

Cristóbal Sandoval is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Sciences at the Diego Portales University in Chile, an associate researcher at the Social Science Research Institute at the Diego Portales University (ICSO UDP), and a doctoral fellow at the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES). He was also a visiting doctoral researcher at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the POPULISMUS Observatory (November 2022-May 2023).



POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS



www.populismus.gr



POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project (2014-5) involved a comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS endorsed a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings and the continuation of its activities we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it put forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of consecutive crises.



ARISTOTLE
UNIVERSITY OF
THESSALONIKI
SCHOOL OF
POLITICAL SCIENCES



POPULISMUS is implemented within the framework of the Operational Program 'Education and Lifelong Learning' (Action 'ARISTEIA II') and is co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund) and national funds.