

Towards a Political Theory of Populism

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Abstract: This essay seeks to offer a theoretical account (and demarcation) of the phenomenon of populism. In particular, three claims are advanced. First, populism is not about a particular social base, nor a direct and predictable reaction to large-scale social and political transformations; rather, it is a form of political imaginary, a way of perceiving the political world which opposes a fully unified – but ultimately fictional – people to small minorities who are put outside the authentic (and potentially, but actually never, fully present) people. It is a hallmark of populism – and a structural one, not one dependent on any particular national context or particular policy issue – that it construes an ‘unhealthy coalition’ between the elite that does not really belong and marginal groups that do not really belong either. Second, what populism necessarily has to deny, is the pluralism of contemporary societies: there is, according to populists, no such thing as a legitimate opposition – which, after all, is one of the key features of liberal democracy, understood as a form of contained conflict between competing factions. Third, populism does not have to involve any actual popular mobilization, and it is a mistake to think that populism has to involve any demand for greater political participation: supporters of populism want to be represented by a proper populist elite; they are not necessarily against representative democracy as such.

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, Totalitarianism, Political participation, Claude Lefort.