"Concluding remarks: appealing to the people"

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CITE THIS VERSION

Breeze, Ruth ; Zienkowski, Jan. *Concluding remarks: appealing to the people*. In: Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze, *Imagining the peoples of Europe: populist discourses across the political spectrum*, John Benjamins Publishing Company : Amsterdam 2019, p. 363-371 <http://hdl.handle.net/2078.3/218820> -- DOI : 10.1075/dapsac.83.15bre

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

This is a contribution from *Imagining the Peoples of Europe. Populist discourses across the political spectrum*.

Edited by Jan Zienkowski and Ruth Breeze.

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Concluding remarks

Appealing to the people

Ruth Breeze and Jan Zienkowski

This volume was intended as an exploration of the new political order arising in Europe and its immediate neighbours in the wake of the crisis of 2008, with a particular focus on the way ‘the people’ is being represented in the discourses of parties that challenge the established order. The range of countries covered – United Kingdom, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Romania, Hungary, Germany, Turkey – serves as evidence of the way in which ‘the people’ is indeed a central point in current debates, acting to anchor identities and project antagonisms in a multitude of settings, and thereby fixing a political logic that is driven by an up/down opposition between the elite and the people. These chapters examine the extent to which this focus is unique to so-called ‘populist’ parties, and explore the degree of commonality in people-centred discourses across (or at both ends of) the political spectrum, questions that most previous accounts equating claims to stand for ‘the people’ with radical politics on the right or left have failed to account for satisfactorily. This book thus represents an attempt to revisit the issue of populist discourse in the context of cases emerging across today’s fraught European landscape. The range of methodologies applied, and the tensions between different analytical approaches and different understandings of populism, make this volume a stimulating contribution to current debates.

Benjamin De Cleen’s opening chapter set the scene for the book in broad strokes by explaining various current approaches to understanding populism and populist discourse (see Chapter 1, this volume). The association between discourse and populism inevitably evokes Laclau’s influential theory as to how discourse articulates diverse social demands with different aims and desires in a shared political project. However, this does not preclude the (often complementary) discussion of other approaches to populism, particularly those that question the different ways in which discourse and politics are interrelated (i.e. ‘thin’ populism as a political style versus ‘thick’ populism as a kind of politics that genuinely foregrounds the underprivileged), or the nature of populist ‘performance’ (Moffitt 2016) and its

overlap with theories of mediated representation. Moreover, analysis of populism in discourse naturally calls to mind evocations of the heartland (Taggart 2000), leading to an exploration of the borders between populism and nationalism, and the possibility of distinguishing between up/down and in/out narratives of identity and exclusion (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). In his conclusions, De Cleen located the essential core of populism in the relationship between ‘the people’ and others, most particularly the supposed ‘elites’ constructed as the people’s enemy. The question thus came to centre on *who* belongs to ‘the people’, *how* populist parties and politicians construct the categories ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and *how* they build their own claim to be the representatives of ‘the people’.

These questions then naturally led on in the chapters that followed to discussions about language, discourse, performance and representation. It was by addressing these questions in specific cases, using concrete evidence, that we sought to shed light on the workings of political discourses across the political spectrum, and the other chapters in this volume have gone some way to addressing these issues. In what follows, we will bring out some of the contrasts and tensions that run through this volume, highlighting some of the different ways that the authors have tackled these problems.

One of the central divisions highlighted in many current studies on populist discourse could be seen as reflecting the polarity of right and left. Much recent research in Europe has focused on right-wing populist parties, with the corresponding neglect of their left-wing counterparts. Three of the chapters in this volume have addressed a major gap in the recent literature by investigating European populist parties on the left. The first of these, by Arthur Borriello and Samuele Mazzolini (see Chapter 3, this volume), offered a fruitful cross-country comparison, focusing on the discourses of the new populist parties in Spain and Italy, and bringing out a number of strong similarities between these two rather different political formations. The propagation of a new vocabulary that reframes actors and events (‘la casta’, ‘turnismo’) is used to discredit the mainstream political parties and to draw sharp dividing lines between ‘the people’ and the powerful elites who constitute its ‘antagonists’. The lines of division identified here are located within society (the leader of Podemos spoke of “digging trenches in civil society”), rather than between ‘the people’ and some external, often abstract entity (debt, unemployment, crisis). Podemos and M5S seem both to construct a populist discourse in dichotomising the social along a sharp frontier, but they differ in their attempts to constitute a new political subject: Podemos articulates a more coherent set of social demands on behalf of working class people, migrants, globalisation and its ‘losers’, and the people(s) of the Iberian peninsula in general, while M5S assumes a vague and all-inclusive people is ‘always already there’. Taking up this theme in their more detailed study of Podemos, Nicolina Montesano-Montessori and Esperanza

Morales-López examined how Podemos sought to carve out a discursive space for itself – and for ‘the people’ – using spatial and temporal metaphor (see Chapter 5, this volume). By re-imagining Spain as its people, Podemos’s discourses seem to offer an alternative to an abstract, centralized and constrictive state. Interestingly, as well as applying the classic up/down spatial model of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, Podemos uses temporal metaphors to create a dichotomy between traditional parties locked in an outdated logic and its own imagined identity as a flexible, future-oriented alternative. However, as these authors have pointed out, Podemos seems also to face some of the pitfalls that befall hybrid entities: as a relatively new phenomenon, in terms of structure and self-presentation it still wavers between being a representative party and a social movement, and this identity crisis affects the understanding of the extent to which the party is, embodies, or merely stands for ‘the people’. Also centring on left-wing populism, Óscar García Agustín has charted the populist turn of a Danish left-wing party, the Red-Green Alliance (RGA), which has changed its discourses in an attempt to create a space “to the left of” Danish social democracy and thereby wrest populism away from the radical right. This required two particular moves: first, the search for “nodal points” that could bind together populist discourses on the left around a sense of “community” using narratives to build a cohesive “us” – “ordinary wage earners” and “Danes” – as subjects of equality and freedom; and second, the articulation of antagonistic relations with identifiable “others” (here, neoliberal and European discourses) to displace the “them” of the radical right (generally associated with xenophobic or “civilizationist” discourses). His conclusions suggested that the “populist moment” is likely to generate different kinds of “populist hybrids”, and that the true interest lies in exploring whether populism has space for the values of an inclusive community framed in opposition to “elites”, rather than to members of out-groups defined in ethnic or nationalist terms (see Chapter 6, this volume).

Several chapters covered the more familiar territory of right-wing European populism, doing so in a way that sheds new light on this phenomenon. Taking the example of Hungary, Peter Furko built an analysis of populist discourses in parliamentary speeches on a combination of De Cleen’s understanding of populism as a political logic (this volume) and Wodak’s (2015) typology of discursive strategies, particularly linguistic manifestations of positive self-representation and negative other-representation (see Chapter 13, this volume). In particular, Furko mapped the way key identity terms (‘Hungarians’, ‘the nation’) are characteristically placed in counterposition to outgroups such as ‘the EU’ and ‘Brussels’, the analysis of which brings out some of the overlap between populism and nationalism. Starting from the position that populism itself is a discursive strategy rather than a “thin ideology”, Samuel Bennett discussed how ‘the people’ is brought into being by those who claim to represent it, looking at the case of the Brexit referendum (see

Chapter 9, this volume). His theoretical background also links Laclauian understandings of populist discourse with a strategy-based focus, in this case informed by the discourse-historical approach (Krzyżanowski 2016), looking at how key concepts are defined and sharpened by contrast to counterconcepts ('Gegenbegriffe'). His analysis of UKIP's Twitter account around the EU referendum date explored the way anti-intellectualism and appeals to 'common sense' are blended with informality to simulate a 'popular' discourse designed to appeal to broad sectors of the population that might otherwise be attracted by left-wing politics. His study brought out the way UKIP exploits a highly polarised vision of class warfare, activating working class topoi in the services of the Leave campaign. By exalting the qualities of the in-group, fomenting a sense of exploitation and betrayal by elites, and activating underlying xenophobic mental models through implicature, these tweets create a heady cocktail of anti-EU and anti-migrant propaganda. For his part, Andreas Önnersfors illustrated how the German far-right PEGIDA movement used the notion of 'crisis' as a driving force to construct and represent 'the people' as a political actor, building a performative stage for the expression of diffuse political positions on the (North European) new right (see Chapter 7, this volume). These positions are infused by racism and ethno-nationalism, containing echoes of the fascist past, but they are also influenced by strategic thinking and reflect the need for such groups to 'rebrand' themselves as people's movements. In particular, Önnersfors has shown how PEGIDA was able to operationalise latent tensions and frustrations in East German society after the "Wende" to its own ends. In another view of the German right, Miguel Ayerbe took a closer look at the terminology used to refer to 'the people' in the manifesto, bulletin and Twitter accounts associated with Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), outlining the main terms used for and characteristics attributed to 'the people' in AfD's discourse (see Chapter 11, this volume). He explicated the role of certain types of people-centred discourse in legitimating AfD and delegitimising those currently in power. By detailed analysis of concrete instances, he has shown how AfD carves out a discursive position for itself as the only viable alternative for *politics as usual* and as the only true representative of the 'German people'. Importantly, however, he has also shown how the use of different terms (e.g. 'Bürger' (citizens)) may be part of a strategy to appeal to different segments of the electorate. By co-opting the vocabulary of liberalism ('citizens') in the official manifesto, AfD achieves a more neutral style of address than it habitually uses in, say, its Twitter account. Finally, also at the right of the spectrum, Hayriye Özen's chapter took on the under-researched issue of populism in Turkey. Her approach started from Laclau's notion of the "empty signifier", focusing on the notion of "the people" in the discourse of the Turkish ruling party Justice and Development (AKP) (see Chapter 4, this volume). She documented how this term was originally used to create a chain of equivalence which would

rally certain groups with unfilled social demands. However, importantly, she then shows how this term gradually underwent a process of transformation in which it was appropriated by the AKP to signify Islamic/conservative demands.

Other chapters in this book have taken a more distanced approach to the notions of ‘populism’ and ‘the people’, bringing to light emergent tensions between populism and people as descriptors and as objects of study. Chiara Degano and Federico Sicurella bridged the gap between theoretical enquiry and empirical analysis by looking into discourse *about* populism in the British and Italian press, asking how populism is socially understood and how populist identities are framed in the media (see Chapter 2, this volume). Using corpus techniques, they identified *definitional-evaluative clusters* surrounding the notion of populism and populists, finding clusters such as “populism as a threat”, “justified grievances” and “populism as identity politics”, which are all often linked in some way to the notion of the failure of mainstream politics. This approach enables opinion writers to “condemn populism while acknowledging the concerns on which populism thrives”. Argumentative topoi in this context include the need to reject populism while addressing the underlying social demands, which are perceived as being related to the ongoing processes of globalisation. These authors pointed out that while academics are eager to reach a robust definition of populism, journalists adopt a “common sense” or “taken for granted” view of what populism is in a given context. Interestingly, though, commentary on populism can be seen to involve a more or less calculated (re)negotiation of the notion in each instance, so the way that a journalist frames populism – which is usually negatively connoted – forms part of his/her representation of the socio-political phenomenon itself.

Regarding analytical approaches, four of the chapters in this book started with a strongly lexical focus centring on parliamentary discourse, and offering a comparative empirical approach to the use of terms like ‘the people’. Naomi Truan’s analysis of ‘the people’ in the parliaments of the United Kingdom, France and Germany confirmed the role of this term as a basic component of political discourse across the political spectrum, but also showed that the choice of vocabulary is influenced by historical precedents, and that references to ‘people’ often remain indeterminate (see Chapter 8, this volume). Contrasting parties rather than languages, Furko focused on Hungarian parliamentary debates, identifying keywords and concepts such as ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, ‘the will’, ‘us’ and ‘them’ (see Chapter 13, this volume). Furko found more lexical items that can be associated with populist strategies in the discourse of the right-wing Fidesz party. Again looking at parliamentary discourse in one language, Maarten van Leeuwen’s chapter offered a comparison of speeches by a populist and a non-populist in the Dutch parliament (see Chapter 12, this volume). He argued that the important point is not so much the frequency with which terms like ‘the people’ are used,

but the syntactic role that these terms play in politicians' discourse. Taking the example of two Dutch politicians, one populist and one not, he showed that the populist consistently foregrounded 'the people' and used it as subject, while the other politician tended to place 'the people' in relatively peripheral syntactic positions, rather than as subject or object of the core sentence. Moreover, the populist politician characteristically formulated his own ideas as "what the people want", while the non-populist seemed to envisage a mismatch between what 'the people' want and what he, his party or the establishment in general need to do. His chapter is proof that the relationship between 'the people' and populist discourse holds many nuances that are yet to be explored. Finally, Raluca Mihaela Levonian showed how the Romanian government tended to present 'the people' as the only agents responsible for their material well-being, while denying the possibility for them to influence the decisions taken in the political sphere (see Chapter 10, this volume). The Romanian opposition, by contrast, framed citizens as voters who have the democratic right to decide their rulers. Levonian brings in Laclau's notion of political logics to show how these politicians try to bind 'the people' together by creating a logic of equivalence that joins their claims and excites shared antagonisms. She then extended this to cover inclusive and exclusionary populisms (Filc 2015), considering how this might apply in specific ways to post-communist countries. She concluded that the opposition parties tend to be more 'populist' in presenting 'the people' as opposed to the political elite, but conceded that the line demarcating populist discourse from more traditional democratic discourses is not clear, and pointed to the fragility of such distinctions in countries where current political practice is still heavily marked by their communist past.

The meaning and function of these central terms poses another analytical challenge. As we have seen across these chapters, different strands of thought concerning the function of the signifier 'people' were interwoven in different ways. Some authors worked within a Laclauian perspective, considering 'the people' as a floating or empty signifier whose meaning is subject to considerable variation, or disentangling political 'logics'. For example, looking at Turkey, Özen showed how AKP's use of 'the people' evolved over time, mirroring a political shift towards conservative Islam (see Chapter 4, this volume). The logic of articulation originally roped in various underprivileged sectors, joining social dislocations, grievances and demands of many different kinds, in a shared antagonism towards the Kemalist political hegemony. However, after two terms in office, a subtle change became apparent: the "people" or "public will" became identified with the conservative/religious electorate of the AKP, whose "antagonist" became defined as all those opposing the government. Özen argued that the party's pragmatism gave it considerable flexibility in articulating its political discourse, and in exploiting the persuasive potential of the "empty signifier". For her part, in Romania, Levonian

provided a suggestive account of the way logics of equivalence might function in post-communist settings, prompting a stimulating contrast with Furko's account of the anti-European dichotomies established by Fidesz in the Hungarian parliament (see Chapters 10 and 13, this volume). Borriello and Mazzolini discussed the difficulties of defining 'the people' and its antagonists in the case of emergent political formations in Spain and Italy, pointing to glaring deficiencies in the logic developed by M5S and the greater coherence achieved by Podemos (see Chapter 3, this volume), while Montessori-Montesinos and Morales-López showed how the crucial element of time enters the scene in Podemos's discourse, providing a dividing line to organise the logic of "us" and "them" (see Chapter 5, this volume).

On the other hand, looking at similar evidence through the lens of a more traditional semantic approach grounded in corpus analysis, other authors came to interesting conclusions about the manipulation of lexical items referring to the people in populist discourse. Ayerbe showed how AfD modulate their use of partial synonyms (people, citizens) when addressing different audiences, the more 'populist' terminology being reserved for the social media (see Chapter 11, this volume). In the lexical dimension of his study, Bennett similarly found that strongly dichotomised discourse dominates particularly in the social media, engaging with previous societal discourses of privilege and resentment, and generating strong antagonisms (see Chapter 9, this volume). Using a similar empirical methodology, but working on speeches, van Leeuwen concluded that here it is not so much the actual terms used as their characteristic syntactic roles that enable us to distinguish between populist and non-populist discourses at text level.

One particularly rich aspect of this collection of chapters is to be found in the wide variety of corpora used and the combinations of analytical methods. While some studies were based on an eclectic set of articles, press interviews, campaign materials, parliamentary debates, etc. (Borriello and Mazzolini, García Agustín, Montessori and López-Morales), other authors worked with systematic corpora of manifestos and party bulletins (Ayerbe), tweets (Bennett), opinion articles (Degano and Sicurella), insider accounts (Önnerfors). Several made use of parliamentary debates and speeches (van Leeuwen, Truan, Levonian, Furko). A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods was often used (Furko, van Leeuwen, Truan, Levonian), providing accounts of the frequency with which key terms for the people occur, and information about their typical collocates, but also contextualised examination of the use of these words in context. The comparisons drawn were both cross-linguistic and cross-cultural (Truan), and between populists and non-populists (van Leeuwen), or government and opposition (Levonian). Although the interpretative perspective was Laclauian in some cases, this was operationalised in different ways. So, for example, García Agustín centred on the formation of nodal points, as a clear way of identifying and analysing populist

discourses. Özen took the view that the Turkish term ‘millet’ is an ‘empty signifier’, and showed how its meaning shifted substantially over the AKP years, moving from uniting a set of diverse social demands towards signifying Islamic conservatism. Other chapters avoided Laclau and approached the phenomenon of populism from positions informed by DHA (Ayerbe, Furko), or ‘conceptual history’ (Önnerfors), while some took a strictly empirical linguistic approach (van Leeuwen, Truan). Yet others integrated their analysis into a reflection on media effects and mediatisation (Bennett), or “symbolically mediated performance” (Moffitt 2016: 28) (Önnerfors).

The different chapters in the book have thus brought out particular aspects of how ‘the people’ are represented, and the ways they are woven into networks of association with other significant actors and motifs. These connections configure the particular imaginary of each political movement, and through this, the landscapes that they inhabit. Each of these discursive performances is different, as is the key notion of ‘people’, since it reflects the culture and history of the country where it is enacted – it is not the same to talk of ‘la gente’ in Spain and ‘das Volk’ in Germany, for example. At the same time, throughout this book, points of commonality have emerged from the dense interplay of associations, so that some articulations of the signifier ‘people’ can be seen to be more or less exclusionary, others more or less polarising. Importantly in all this, despite the pervasive association between ‘the people’ and radical populism at the far left and far right ends of the political spectrum, it is essential to observe that mainstream parties also appropriate discourses that foreground ‘the people’. This observation places a question mark over the frequent claim that talk about ‘the people’ is the distinguishing feature of populists. It prompts us to go deeper, to look in more detail, because as these authors have shown, there are insidious differences in the way politicians speak *for* and speak *about* the people that may well have a subtle influence on the way their messages are understood and accepted. Finally, we should also consider the fact that if ‘the people’ is a signifier that is very open to a great variety of articulatory practices, it is therefore likely to play a role in a multiplicity of ideological projects.

As de Cleen stated in Chapter 1, we must stress that the analysis of populist politics is never exhausted by the notion of populism. The chapters in this volume provide some insights into the different political agendas that are somehow being lumped together under the label of populism. The contributions here help to reveal something about why this is happening, and to illustrate the highly varied nature of political tendencies and projects that place this appeal to ‘the people’ at the centre of their discourse. But the true nature of the political projects that invoke ‘the people’ in these ways is obviously a subject for further enquiry. Nonetheless, we hope that this volume will shed new light on our understanding of political discourse across Europe and its neighbours in the present uncertain climate.

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