

Is populism a social pathology? The myth of immediacy and its effects

European Journal of Social Theory

1–18

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13684310221094762

journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Justo Serrano Zamora** *University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands*

Abstract

This article argues that populism, both in its left-wing and right-wing versions, is a social pathology in the sense contemporary critical theorists give to it. As such, it suffers from a disconnect between first order political practices and the reflexive grasp of the meaning of those practices. This disconnect is due to populists' ideal of freedom, which they understand as authentic self-expression of 'the People', rejecting the need for mediating instances such as parties, parliaments or epistemic actors. When enacted in political practices and institutions, this ideal creates the conditions for undermining different forms of political freedom, including populist's own ideal of collective self-expression, which they erode by fostering expressive domination. This all makes populism a self-defeating political ideology and bad candidate for advancing democracy in times of crisis. The article ends with a consideration of the advantages of this view compared to existing approaches to populism.

Keywords

Democracy, expressive domination, freedom, populism, social pathology

Liberal democracies are experiencing their greatest crisis since the end of WW2. Social inequalities keep growing, citizens feel more and more distant from representatives and experts and authoritarianism, racism and sexism are on the rise in many countries all over the world. What is the role of populism in this context? Scholars provide contradicting answers to this question. Some argue that populism is inherently problematic, often

Corresponding author:

Justo Serrano Zamora, Faculty of Philosophy, Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 52, 9712 GL Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: j.serrano.zamora@rug.nl

anti-pluralist and anti-democratic, and that it is part of the problem, rather than a solution to the current crisis of democracy (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Lipset, 1981; Oxhorn, 1998; Taggart, 2000; Urbinati, 2019, Kaltwasser, 2012). Others claim that, while it carries some authoritarian dangers with it, populism can also contribute to democratic revitalization. Populism is seen as 'a democratizing force, since it defends the principle of popular sovereignty with the aim of empowering groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 18). A third group is less ambivalent about populism's democratic value. Its members think that the most effective way to fight neoliberal globalization is by promoting left-populist movements that can effectively challenge the current regime (Canovan, 1999, 2004; Laclau, 2018; Mouffe, 2019). This article belongs to the first group of views. It argues that populism, at least in many of its left- or right-wing versions, is a social pathology (Honneth, 2009, 2014) that undermines people's capacity to conduct a free life and concludes that we should reject it as a part of any project for advancing democracy in times of crisis.

More concretely, my aim is to show that populism is a pathological phenomenon due to the problematic understanding of political freedom at its core. Populism is a pathology of freedom which, while aiming at political freedom, generates the very conditions that undermine it. To show this, I draw on what I take to be populism's core normative stance: its idea of popular sovereignty, understood as the expression of the authentic identity and will of 'the People'. In contrast to other available versions of the idea that democracy *expresses* the preferences and identities of citizens, populists reject the presence of mediating vehicles that stand between the People and the expression of its will. The list of mediating instances includes parliamentary institutions, parties, tribunals, mass media and scientific institutions.

My goal is to show that this (false) understanding of authentic expression as immediate, when embodied in populist social practices and institutions, sets the ground for various forms of political unfreedom. I focus on one form of political unfreedom that I call 'expressive domination'. It refers to the unequal influence dominant groups can play on how citizens articulate their own identities and their political preferences. For example, by reclaiming popular referenda as an immediate form of people's self-expression, populists conceal the very ways in which the terms and the rules of a referendum are formulated, thereby excluding citizens from the possibility of participating in the determination of those 'mediating' elements. Drawing on this notion, I show that populism's normative ideal of freedom as immediate expression of the People is self-defeating, since it generates the conditions for the expressive domination of powerful groups against the expression of ordinary citizens.

This article is divided in four sections. In the first section, I draw on the existing literature to provide a characterization of populism as a project of political freedom, understood as authentic self-expression of the People. In the second section, I introduce the notion of social pathology which, following Christopher Zurn (2011), I understand as a kind of second order disorder in which there is a fundamental gap between citizen's primary practices, on one hand, and their reflexive grasping of the meaning of those practices, on the other hand. In the third section, I apply this definition of social pathology to characterize populism as a second order disorder that has at its core a distorted notion of political freedom. Finally, in the fourth section, I show how this

characterization of populism as a social pathology of freedom can contribute to current debates on the democratic value of populism.

Populism and populist politics

Characterizing populism is not an uncontroversial task. Available approaches differ in many aspects including its defining traits, its normative value, its political status, as well as the social phenomena we should characterize as populist. Most of them agree, however, in that populist leaders, parties and movements have a way of understanding and shaping political institutions and practices that is distinctive from other political ideologies. First, populism is a ‘thin’ ideology because, contrary to ‘thick’ political ideologies, ‘it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent program for the solution to crucial political questions’ (Stanley, 2008, p. 95). As it happens with other thin ideologies such as nationalism, populism is open and flexible enough to cohabit with thicker ideologies like conservatism, liberalism or socialism (Stanley, 2008, p. 100).

Beyond its many variations, authors agree that populism has an ideological core. This core includes three main elements: the People, the elite and the idea of popular sovereignty (see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). Populism’s approach to the first two elements is well known: Populists see political life as pervaded by an antagonistic relation between two homogeneous unities, the People and the elite. Populists often combine three senses of the People: The People as the sovereign subject, the People as the majority of ordinary citizens– the ‘silent majority’– and, often, the nation (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). Importantly, in all three cases populists understand the People as a homogeneous unity. It has one will, one common sense, and, often, one national or ethnic identity. In its turn, the elite refers to a social minority that includes not only political representatives but also the group with economic, cultural and mediatic power. Often ethnic and economic minorities are seen as protected by the elite and thereby, excluded from the People. Importantly, populism’s distinction between the People and the elite is also a moral one: while the former is often depicted as constituted by morally pure citizens, honest workers and good neighbours, the elite is represented as a homogeneously corrupted social group with similar interests and power-strategies (Müller, 2016, p. 20).

Many of the criticisms directed to populism have in mind these constitutive elements of populism’s ideological core. The populist view of the People and elite has been considered problematic from the point of democratic pluralism. According to Müller (2016), populists’ understanding of the People turns it into an exclusionary form of identity politics. Populist groups ‘do not claim “we are the 99 percent”. What they imply instead is “We are the 100 percent”’ (Müller, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, the idea of antagonism between two pre-identified political poles has been taken to be at the ground of pathological forms of collective identity formation. Hirvonen and Pennanen (2019) argue that ‘*the stark oppositional logic of the distinction [i.e., between the People and the elite, J.S.Z.] obstructs the recognition of the “other” as something else than just a pre-identified other*’ (p. 38, authors’ emphasis). This ‘*limits the possibility of social progress by ossifying identities*’ (p. 39, authors’ emphasis).

While recognizing the relevance of these criticisms, this article does not focus on populism's problematic view of the People and its direct consequences. Hence, even if populists were to defend a different, more pluralistic and less oppositional and reified notion of the demos, they would still have to face a further challenge. This challenge concerns the third element of populism's ideological core, namely, its idea of popular sovereignty.

By reclaiming popular sovereignty, populists appeal to the normative core of modern democracies, which they perceive as fundamentally unfulfilled (Müller, 2016, p. 6). In contrast to other political ideologies, however, populists articulate this ideal in a particular way, namely as the immediate and authentic self-expression of the People (Canovan, 1999; Stanley, 2008, pp. 104–106). Authentic self-expression as an ideal of freedom has its roots in Romanticism. In its original version—first formulated by J. J. Rousseau and expanded by J. G. Herder—it refers to a form of freedom that consists in the capacity of an individual to realize its true self through a long process of reflection in which it is appropriated and articulated (Honneth, 2014, p. 33; Taylor, 1992).² Its contrary is alienation, which blocks the possibility to see oneself reflected in one's own life and deeds (Jaeggi, 2014). Herder's idea is that each individual has an original and true 'self' that is naturally pre-given. This self is realized during her life through the vehicle or 'medium' of language in a process of self-discovery and self-appropriation. In Herder's view, a successful self-realization can be measured according to the extent to which an individual's life is able to reflect its inner, natural self. Importantly, language as the medium for self-realization does not distort one's own identity and will. On the contrary, the use of language is an essential condition for becoming 'what I am' (Herder [1778] 2002, p. 212). According to this model, then, the measure of my individual self-expression is the extent to which I reproduce in the outside (my words, my actions) what I am already in the inside (my inner preferences, my true self) in the medium of language.

In their idea of popular sovereignty, populists apply a version of the romantic ideal of self-realization to the collective subject they identify as the People. Democracy represents the set of institutions and practices by which the will and the identity of the People come to their authentic self-expression. Here language is not the only vehicle of self-expression: in its political form, the People and its will are to be realized through political practices and institutions, and reflected in material supports such as laws, judicial decisions, artistic products, news and knowledge. However, while Herder could identify a medium (i.e. language) that does not distort the expression of our true selves, populists are particularly worried that any vehicle or mediating instance may distort the will and the identity of the People. Populists perceive language, institutions, practices and spaces of mediation as the interstices from which the elite expands its power—and, often, without being seen. Considering this worry, populists adopt a radical position: mediation itself is seen as a problem; it is considered the source of the lack of political freedom that modern democratic societies suffer from (Gerbaduo, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). As Canovan (1999) puts it, populists have a 'strong anti-institutional impulse: the romantic impulse to directness, spontaneity, and overcoming of alienation' (p. 10).

Populism's ideal of popular sovereignty as the non-mediated self-realization of the People can be illustrated by many well-studied examples. It is famously embodied in the figure of the populist leader, whose relation to the People is constructed as immediate,

and hence, as non-distortive (Urbinati, 2019; Weyland, 2001). The immediate relation between the People and the leader is performed in many ways: by using ordinary ways of talking, by pursuing physical proximity, by direct appeals of the leader to its (family-like) connection with ordinary people or by using Facebook or Twitter as means of direct communication between the leader and the People (Auyero, 2001; Gerbaudo, 2019). We can also identify populist's rejection of mediating dimension in the rejection of parliaments, constitutions, traditional parties, judicial institutions and bureaucracy, as well as in the attempts to institutionalize more direct forms of democracy, such as popular referendums (Rosanvallon, 2020, pp. 173–195). Often the populist ideal of self-expression of the People goes beyond the limits of political institutions and rejects the epistemic mediation of scientists and other forms of expertise, as well as epistemic institutions such as universities, laboratories and professional journalism. Sometimes their position is so radical that they reject the need to process information and experiences in rational procedures, since there are suspicious of their abstract and distortive capacity (Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Motta, 2018; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). They appeal then to citizen's common sense and immediate experiences, as forms as undistorted knowledge about the processes and the problems that affect citizen's lives. These and many other examples (see, for example, Dubiel, 1994) are in line with the idea that populism rejects mediation as inherently wrong, as endangering the very possibility of living in a democratic regime that expresses the will and the identity of the homogeneous unity of ordinary, self-governing, people.

As these examples show, populists' rejection of mediation takes place according to two main mechanisms, which often go together. First, especially when they are in power, populists transform institutions, eliminating, reducing or by-passing what they perceive as distorting instances of mediation (Urbinati, 2019). This is the case when populist parties introduce the intensive use of digital platforms in their internal organizations thereby eliminating party 'cadres' that would otherwise mediate between the leader and his or her followers (Gerbaudo, 2019), or when they strengthen the role of plebiscites in the democratic system, reducing the political significance of parliamentary politics (Rosanvallon, 2020). This goes hand in hand with the fact that populists attribute to certain instances the faculty to immediately express the will and identity of the People. This is the case of many populist leaders and public figures, as well as of many mechanisms of decision-making such as referendums and plebiscites. Accordingly, the populist rejection of mediation then means either transforming institutions to eliminate or reduce their mediating power and/or projecting onto certain entities the ability to reproduce in a one-to-one relation people's will and identity.

In this section, I have provided a characterization of populism, putting special attention on the ideal of popular sovereignty that is at its core. Populism reacts to a perceived unfulfillment of democracy's promise (popular sovereignty) by putting forward an ideal of freedom, understood as authentic self-expression of the People. In contrast to other available versions of this ideal, populism rejects mediation, assuming that there can be an immediate relation between the will of the People and its political and cultural expression. Very often, it does it by abolishing instances of mediation and by attributing to some instances the faculty to reflect people's will in an immediate way. In the next section, I present the notion of social pathology. This will provide the background for my

main claim developed in the third section, namely, that populism's political ideal of immediate self-realization makes its unsuitable for the project of advancing democracy.

Social pathologies

Characterizing populism as a social pathology can help us to understand the role it can play in the context of democracy's crisis. The notion of social pathology has recently found an echo in contemporary critiques of society (see Freyenhagen, 2015; Harris, 2019; Honneth, 2009, 2014; Laitinen & Särkelä, 2019, 2020; Laitinen et al., 2015; Neuhouser, 2012, 2020; Särkelä, 2017; Thompson, 2016). However, the notion is not uncontroversial. Some of its versions, particularly those drawing on Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, have been criticized both for their limitations in providing a radical critical analysis of society (Freyenhagen, 2015; Harris, 2019; Thompson, 2016). Indeed, there are alternative understandings of social pathology in the literature, which do not share many of Axel Honneth's recognition-theoretical premises, but which nonetheless draw on the Critical Theory tradition of the Frankfurt School (Harris, 2019; see Fromm, [1955] 1963).

My aim here is not so much to contribute to these more fundamental debates but rather to explore the advantages of characterizing populism as a social pathology by drawing on its underlying conception of freedom. Despite the availability of competing understandings then, here I will use Christopher Zurn's (2011) understanding of social pathology, which in its turn draws on Honneth's work and has been very influential in the debate. While I share with authors like Freyenhagen (2015) and Harris (2019) that Zurn's view is unable to characterize all forms of social pathology, and that his view focuses too much on the cognitive dimension of many pathological manifestations, I will show that, in the case of populism, his understanding of pathology as a second-order disorder is particularly productive. This is so because it helps us to spell out how a wrong comprehension of the sort of freedom that is at stake in political practice leads populist practices to undermine the very conditions that make political freedom possible. This makes possible an immanent critique of populism and of its emancipatory promises that should be compelling even for those who do not share the pluralist critique of populism.

According to Zurn, many pathological manifestations of modern societies have the structure of second order disorders. This structure is characterized by the presence of 'a constitutive disconnect between first-order contents [i.e., experiences, practices, or beliefs, *name deleted*] and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused' (Zurn, 2011, p. 346). To understand this rather abstract characterization, it is useful turning to the example of Axel Honneth's study on social reification, which he sees as a fundamental pathology of modern, capitalist societies (Honneth et al., 2008). According to Honneth, we can distinguish two basic stances that individuals might adopt towards others, themselves or the world around them. The first stance, more fundamental both in an ontological and conceptual sense, is one of interested involvement. The second one involves 'detached, cognitive objectivation' (Zurn, 2011, p. 354) towards others, one-self and our environment. According to Honneth, we find a case of pathological reification when 'an objectivating stance to others, the world, or the self is adopted, while simultaneously

forgetting the constitutive connections that such objectivating stance has to our practical, interested, and normatively laden interactions with others' (Zurn, 2011, p. 355, author's emphasis). Forgetting the ontological and conceptual priority of interested involvement in the relation towards others, oneself and the world around us brings us often beyond the limits of a 'morally delimited sphere of permissible objectivation of others' (Zurn, 2011, p. 355). Reification has then a second order structure: because we become unable to grasp the real meaning of our interactions with others, with ourselves and with the world around us—namely, one of interested involvement—we relate to these three instances in distorted, problematic ways—namely, in objectifying modes. In the analysis of social pathologies, the failure at grasping the real meaning of our practices explains why we fail at the level of our first order content, namely, in our practices, experiences and cognitions.³

The case of reification exemplifies what are often called pathologies of recognition. Hirvonen and Pennanen (2019) have shown that populism can be characterized as a pathology of recognition where what is at stake is the possibility of non-pathological forms of collective identity formation. With this, the authors make a valuable contribution to the study of the democratic potentials of populism, based on the notion of social pathology. However, the aim of this article is to show that we can also identify social second order disorders concerning the (wrong) understandings of freedom that populist actors take to be at stake in democratic self-governing.

Indeed, Honneth (2014) has argued that many social pathologies central to modern societies have their origin in the colonization of certain spheres of social interaction by understandings of freedom that do not belong to those spheres. For example, in modern societies, intimate relations, where freedom is realized in the form of the recognition of the other's needs and desires, are sometimes experienced from the point of view of legal rules. Honneth gives the example of the process of divorce of a young couple depicted in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. The movie shows how, once the divorce process starts, legal requirements colonize the relation a man and a woman have to each other as well as to their common child. In this and similar cases, intimate relations are often pervaded by a wrong understanding of the kind of freedom that is at stake—the freedom of intimate relations—constituting a specific form of the pathology: that of the juridification of social spheres that do not belong to the legal world. According to Honneth, when social actors participate in intimate social spheres from the point of view of the legal consequences of their actions, they reduce their capacity to articulate their needs in ways that go beyond typified schemata of needs (Honneth, 2014, p. 90–92). When legal freedom becomes the model of all forms of freedom, we can experience in our social life, including the freedoms lived in our intimate relations, then we can speak of a pathological distortion of spheres of social relations and of the kinds of freedom these spheres are meant to realize.

The model of colonization, however, does not exhaust the diagnosis of social pathologies of freedom. The failure in the reflective grasp of our practices and experiences can also be merely due to a wrong interpretation of what freedom means and implies. Charles Taylor (1992) provides an example of this kind of pathology. Taylor agrees with several sociologists that modernity goes hand in hand with several malaises, many of them being related to the modern ideal of self-fulfilment or self-expression. Hence, this ideal, and

the relativistic and individualistic consequences it seems to carry with itself, seems to be at the ground of the loss of meaning, lack of purpose and political apathy many modern individuals experience. Taylor, however, argues that self-expression is a valuable ideal that is intrinsic to the modern experience of freedom and that what is wrong about this ideal is a specific understanding of it, which is hegemonic in modern capitalist societies. This interpretation goes hand in hand with two main denials: that of the intrinsic dialogical— that is, social and linguistic— nature of the self whose expression is at the core of this ideal freedom, and that of the self-transcendent dimension of self-fulfilment. This interpretation of the ideal of freedom is self-defeating (Taylor, 1992, p. 28) since its embodiment in practice de facto makes individual self-expression impossible, since it undermines the necessary conditions of its realization, thereby generating a society of unfree individuals who aim to be free.

Both in the case of the juridification of intimate relations and the pervasiveness of non-dialogical and non-transcendent understanding of the ideal of self-expression, we are dealing with second-order disorders by which a wrong understanding of the meaning of certain practices leads to new form of social unfreedom. As I aim to show, this is also the case of populism's ideal of popular sovereignty, which, as I already mentioned, involves the romantic ideal of the self-realization of a collective subject, the People, without the action of any instances of mediation.

In this section, I have presented the notion of social pathology, understood as a second social disorder by which social actors fail to properly grasp the meaning of the practices, experiences and cognitions in which they engage. I have also shown that we can distinguish at least two kinds of social pathologies that follow this second-order structure: pathologies of recognition, on the one hand, and pathologies of freedom, on the other. Within the latter group, I have distinguished between pathologies derived from the application of versions of freedom that are not adequate for the social context, and those derived from a wrong understanding of freedom *tout court*. The aim of the next section is to provide a characterization of populism as a social pathology of freedom of the second kind. As in the case of Charles Taylor's diagnose, this pathology is related to a specific (wrong) interpretation of the ideal of collective self-realization which populists hold.

Populism as a social pathology of freedom

As I suggested in my introduction, at the heart of my characterization lies what I described as a problematic understating of the idea of political freedom, understood as authentic self-realization of 'the People' that rejects mediation in the sense I have specified in the second section. According to my view, this understanding of political self-realization is problematic, not only because *it draws on a wrong understanding of the conditions that are necessary for self-realization to take place at all, but also because its adoption makes problematic forms of political unfreedom possible, one of them being expressive domination*, thereby generating a second-order disorder. In the rest of this section, my aim to substantiate these two claims.

Let's start with the first claim. Is the ideal of freedom as unmediated self-expression wrong? This claim amounts to arguing that populism is self-defective because it negates the constructive role played by the vehicles through which a particular content (self, will,

identity) comes to be expressed. While there are several reasons that support this claim, here I will ground my view on what James Bohman calls the ‘indeterminacy and open-endedness’ of social phenomena (1994, p. vii; Hiley et al., 1991). Briefly, my argument is this: (self-) expression is always a constructive process since the content— in this case: the will and identity of the People— that is to be expressed is always indeterminate to some degree in relation to its full expression. In other words, the content to be expressed never offers sufficient elements to determine how exactly it should be expressed. Rather, this involves the processes and the vehicles of expression, which, therefore, are to be seen as playing a constructive role in the expression of the People.

According to this expressivist view, in passing a new law a parliament or a political leader does not simply make explicit what was already implicit in the will of the People: instead, they put in place procedures, use categories, interpretations of values, specific formulations and so on. which specify the preferences of citizens in ways that cannot be predetermined. By characterizing something as a collective problem, we do not only sum up the experiences of individuals but go through collective processes in which problems are defined, the meaning of values and norms is interpreted, the relevant facts are selected against other facts and so on. One reason why this is the case is that social facts are never ‘raw’ but are always interpreted facts (Taylor, 1989). In the same manner, due to their abstract character values and norms are also in need of interpretation, which makes them into essentially contestable elements of the social world (Bohman, 1991). The same happens with collective identities and preferences, the constitution of which consist in open-ended processes in which different criteria and interpretations are in place (Inazu, 2012). In other words, what societies are, do and want, is always open to interpretation. Certainly, ‘[w]hile such interpretative indeterminacy cannot be eliminated, it can be handled by clarifying various purposes to which different types of interpretation can be put and by making explicit the evidence for favoring one interpretation over another’ (Bohman, 1991, p. 233). Centrally, ‘handling’ interpretative indeterminacy is what we do when we participate in political processes. Both our actions and the supports by which we handle interpretative indeterminacy determine the ‘final shape’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 374) that identities and preferences adopt when they are expressed. In sum, there is no self-expression to a content without vehicles and processes that *play an active role in giving full expression to the content*, since the social world is not ‘fully given’ or determinate previously its expression in laws, customs, art and so on. In this regard, populism is self-deceptive.

My second claim, which is central my argument, is that by putting in practice its wrong ideal of popular sovereignty, populist actors do not only deceive themselves about the nature and the underlying conditions of their practices, but they also generate first-order forms of political unfreedom. I use this term in a very general sense, since populism’s rejection of mediation can have several anti-democratic consequences, ranging from the emergence of authoritarian figures (Gerbaudo, 2019) to the enactment of various forms of manipulation and deception (D’Ancona, 2017). However, here my focus is on how populism violates the political ideal of freedom as authentic self-expression of the People. The key idea is that by rejecting mediation, populists undermine their own ideal of popular sovereignty.

Let me explain why this is the case. It follows from the previous considerations that, when populists reject mediation as distorting, they do not eliminate *by fiat* its constructive dimension. Rather, those instances to which populist attribute the faculty of immediately expressing people's will and identity continue to determine the full expression of citizens' will and identities. Nonetheless, they modify the relation citizens have towards mediating instances. Concretely, they make their ineliminable constructive task invisible to the political community and become immune to public scrutiny (Gerbaudo, 2019). Influenced by populism, citizens become unaware of all the possible ways in which a leader de facto constructs the People and its collective will. In the same manner, populists believe that popular referenda directly express people's will (Rosanvallon, 2020, pp. 173–196). However, popular referenda are mediating instances that are *constructive* through deeply political choices involving, for example, the exact formulation of the questions citizens will have to decide about, the voting procedures, the geographical distribution of the voting polls and the interpretation of results. By eliminating scientific practices and institutions as mediators in collective processes of knowledge-production and sharing, populists aim at giving voice to people's immediate experiences and views about the world. By doing this, they make invisible all the processes by which people's knowledge is interpreted and transmitted.

In wrongly denying the constructive role of populist leadership and popular referenda, in eliminating epistemic procedures and infrastructures, populists block citizen's capacity to take democratic control over those constructive processes. In other words, they block the possibility of citizens exercising their *expressive powers*. By this term, I understand the power to influence the social processes and to mobilize material supports that, in giving expression to citizens' will and identity, also give them their full shape. These include processes that interpretate and define the terms in which we formulate our individual and collective identities and will. By making mediation invisible, populists erode democratic control of these processes, making it possible, ironically, that privileged social groups and individuals (including populist leaders) have a dominant role in constructing the identities and preferences of citizens. Populists sustain and reinforce the presence of expressive domination, which is particularly problematic for populism, whose main aim is that the People's will is *expressed* through its political, social and cultural institutions. What populists do not seem to understand is that there is nothing like 'the authentic will of the People' if citizens cannot not actively participate in the constructive processes that mediates their collective identities and will. To use Rahel Jaeggi's (2018) distinction, to be politically free in an expressive sense, a democratic political community does not only have discover itself, but it also must make itself.

Let me present two examples of expressive domination generated by populism's rejection of mediation that I draw from ethnographic studies.⁴ They concern (1) the definition of gender roles and (2) the participation in online decision-making.

The first example refers to what Auyero (2001) calls the performance of gender. In his classical ethnography of local Peronist networks of support for the poor in the 90s, Auyero analyses how members of the Peronist party— which he calls 'brokers'— established and reinforced their power positions. In line with populism's myth of immediacy, local Peronists leaders gained power by displaying a public image of themselves that

negated their role as mediators in different ways: they were always available (also at home), they were spontaneous, they avoided using secretaries, they got personally implicated with those needing help and so on. In the case of many of the female brokers, Auyero analyses, a sense of immediacy was created by generating a sense of family, of care-relations, of personal sacrifice and of naturalness. The particular gendered form in which they displayed lack of mediation contributed to their position of power in the local community. This power included aspects such as authority, relations of dependence, and opportunity hoarding. Moreover, by displaying immediacy, local female brokers reproduced a traditional understanding of women's role in society:

Being a Peronist woman in politics “naturally” implies taking care of or mothering the poor, doing social (as opposed to political) work, and collaborating with the man who makes the decisions. Thus, through performance, not only do brokers do politics, but also they “do gender” by proposing their own cultural construction of sexual difference in politics. (Auyero, 2001, p. 148)

Briefly, female leaders of those local communities concealed and reinforced their position of power by generating a perception of immediacy through the display of a chosen (and traditionalist) construction of gender. At the same time, they acted as expressive dominators since from their position of power they gained an enormous influence on how other women could legitimately experience the expression of their identity as women.

The second example concerns the emergence of what Paolo Gerbaudo has called ‘digital parties’ (2019). By this term, Gerbaudo mainly refers to new parties such as *Podemos*, the Italian *5 Stelle* or *La France Insoumise*. These parties rely on digital technologies to realize their democratic ideals, which often include a radical criticism of representative democracy and the defence of democratic participation as the main democratic value. Gerbaudo's analysis shows that, despite their claims to direct democratic participation, digital parties have shown ambivalent political developments regarding the formation of authoritarian and hierarchic structures. Often in these parties, political power is concentrated in the leader and its entourage while citizens become reactive and display forms of ‘passive democratic engagement’ (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 17) that are distant from the ideal of active citizens participating in political deliberation and decision-making. Importantly, digital parties' prioritization of participation is problematic because

it tends to obscure [...] the continuing presence of power structures. [...] The discourse on platforms tends to obfuscate the continuing presence of biases and power dynamics. This can lead to an illusion about the complete spontaneity of online democracy, overlooking the fact that decision-making is constrained by a number of rules embedded in software design and processes of management and moderation of collective discussions. (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 91)

As in the previous case, populism's rejection of mediation contributes to concealing different forms of power and domination (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 184) that include, but also

go beyond its expressive dimension. To the extent that the ‘biases and power dynamics’ present in digital platforms contribute to shaping citizen’s identity and collective will, expressive domination can be said to be at play.

The examples show that populist’s rejection of mediation has negative effects on citizen’s political freedoms. To this extent, populism represents a pathology of freedom that has to do with a wrong interpretation of what it means for a collective to achieve self-realization through democratic institutions and practices. Instead of spelling out all the forms of political unfreedom, here I have focused on how populists promote expressive domination, where members of dominant groups take full control of the constructive dimension inherent to the self-realization of the political community. Populists systematically block the possibility of having democratic control over definition of problems, interpretation of values and norms, the formulation of individual and collective political preferences and so on. In short, by denying the constructive dimension of politics, they leave this constructive function to an uncontrolled appropriation of dominant groups.

In this section, I have argued that populism is a social second-order disorder and that this is due to the specific ideal of political freedom at its basis. It is a second-order disorder because it involves an inherent disconnect between first order contents and the reflexive grasping of these practices. Short, populist actors are unable to understand what the conditions of political freedom are— namely, democratically controlled instances of mediation,— thereby making possible the creation and reproduction of spaces of political unfreedom, like for example, in the use and control of socially valuable knowledge or the formation of authoritarian structures. Spaces of unfreedom are made possible by populists’ rejection of mediation, which become particularly evident when populist actors come to power. Here I have focused on a particular kind of unfreedom, which I have called ‘expressive domination’, which involves the power to influence the constructive processes by which citizens express their authentic identity and will. The examples I have presented show different ways in which populism’s invisibilizing of mediation sets the ground for different forms of political domination, including the expressive domination of privileged groups in society.

Can populism advance democracy in times of crisis?

In his last section, my aim is to explore to what extent my analysis of populism as a pathology of freedom contributes to the current debate on the democratic value of democracy. Inspired by Kaltwasser (2012), I distinguish three main positions in the debate: positive, ambivalent and negative. In contrast to his interest in their descriptive differences, however, my concerns are fundamentally normative. Here, my claim is twofold: on the one hand, I argue against positive and ambivalent accounts that populism is not a promising option for the project of renewing democracy in times of crisis. On the other hand, I argue that liberal rejections of populism fall short in their analysis, and that one of the reasons is that they fail to take into account the risk of expressive domination.

Positive approaches hold that populism, at least in some of its versions, represents a promising alternative to the problems of (neo-)liberal democratic regimes. Some alleged reasons for this optimism are that populism encourages ‘folk politics’ over ‘institutionalized politics’ and privileges ‘the lived experience of local neighborhoods over an

abstract, distant state; and that it might serve as a means to realize popular sovereignty, over and above institutions and constitutional rules' (Urbinati, 2019, p. 2). More recently, defenders of populism see it as a 'legitimate call for power by the ordinary many' and an attempt to 'rejuvenate democracy' (Urbinati, 2019, p. 2). However, positive approaches have to address one main challenge: the People for which they want to reclaim sovereign power is always partial, understood in opposition to a minority, often the elite, but also involving further lines of demarcation between those who belong and do not belong to the People.

To this challenge, defenders of populism often respond with an understanding of the sovereign subject that points to its weak ontological status. Authors 'underscore the temporal and open-ended character of 'the People,' often seeking to incorporate a check on the exclusionary logic by which any description proceeds' (Butler, 2015, p. 164). Aware of the exclusive logic that goes hand in hand with the notion of the People, defenders of populist who worry about this issue contend that we need an open notion of the People, one that sees the People as the result of a continuous process of definition:

Political identities are not given. They do not respond to rigid essences; rather, they are being constantly constructed. This dynamic and antiessentialist approach to politics, as establishment of the frontiers and constitution of identities, is one of the keys for understanding Podemos' political strategy and its goal: constructing one people. (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015, p. 8, own translation).

This characterization seems to respond not only to the worry of exclusion and partiality, which I will not discuss here, but also to my previous claim that populism's orientation towards immediacy sets the conditions for expressive domination. Hence, by conceiving of the emergence of the People as an open, constructive process, this version of left-wing populism seems to avoid the most fundamental aspect of my critical characterization: the idea that populism conceives politics as immediate expression of the People (see Laclau 2018: 98-99). In my view, however, this is not the case. The reason is that even a short view on the way these authors understand the process of construction of the People shows how the ideal of immediacy is also at play. Hence, the kind of Laclauian populism the authors have in mind involves elements like the 'empty signifiers', which work as rhetorical tools, making the construction of the people into a quasi-automatic phenomenon (Serrano Zamora and Santarelli 2020). Understanding the construction of the people as a rhetorical and quasi automatic process justifies the worry that the amount of expressive power left to citizens to influence their self-definition as the People must be very limited. Indeed, Laclauian populism is open to the possibility suggest that a minority, say, a party avant-garde, is mainly responsible for steering the rhetorical processes that construct the People by virtue of its 'emancipatory' purposes.

The idea that populism, by virtue of its normative core, systematically contributes to the concealment of excessive forms of use power— including expressive power— cannot be defended by an open or non-exclusionary view of the People. Hence, even when populists support pluralism and have an inclusive and open notion of the demos, the myth of immediacy, in its application, still creates the conditions the abuse of power. This becomes clear in populist's understanding of the construction of the People. This is

particularly problematic if one thinks of democracy as a set of practices, institutions, and material supports that promote collective self-expression. Hence, in a populist regime, the will of the People is not merely expressed, rather it is systematically constructed by dominant groups. Regardless of the ontological status given to the People, in populism, collective self-expression becomes collective self-alienation.

Ambivalent approaches are aware of the dangers of populism for democracy but also value what they take to be its positive democratic function. To bring up a central argument in the literature (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Kaltwasser, 2012; Urbinati, 2019, p. 7), defenders of populism argue that the capacity of populists to bring the voice of ordinary people to the centre of the political arena represents a positive contribution that can compensate for other risks populism brings with it. This would amount to supporting populist movements, if only to a certain extent and under limited conditions. However, the present account of populism as a social pathology of freedom contributes to undermining this sort of claims. Hence, the idea that populism generates spaces of expressive domination challenges the claim that it gives a 'voice' to citizens. Hence, according to what has been set, citizens can only be said to have a voice when they also have a say about the ways in which their views and experiences are interpreted or constructed. But, as we have seen, this is precisely what populism systematically undermines since in populist practices constructive processes of mediation are systematically concealed as non-existent.

Finally, negative approaches believe that no positive function of populism (if any exists) can compensate or reduce the risks it brings to democracy, and that, accordingly, we should reject it for any project of renewing democracy. Most authors coming from liberal tradition focusing on political representation, individual rights and pluralism hold to this view (Müller, 2016). For them, populism represents for them a democratic anomaly that should be corrected by strengthening liberal institutions. They argue that populism represents a reaction to liberal democracy's malfunctionings and to its inability to deal with global social structural transformations, such as digitalization, economic transformation and mass migration. From a normative standpoint, liberal approaches see in populism the danger of a tyranny of the majority and the risk to undermine all the values they stand for. Defenders of populism often respond that their attack on liberal institutions in the name of the People is not an attack to democracy itself. Liberals argue that democracy and liberal institutions cannot be separated: that liberal rights such as freedom of expression are themselves a condition of a democratic regime that deserves that name. Undermining those liberal elements amounts to undermining democracy.

The problem with liberal approaches is that they are not successful in confronting many forms of domination that arise in liberal democratic regimes, including expressive domination. Here it is impossible to discuss all the different ways in which liberalism fails this critical task. If we focus on expressive domination, however, we can identify one fundamental reason that stands behind liberalism's limitation: most liberals take political communities and their problems as merely 'given', thereby contributing to the invisibilization of the processes that contribute to constructing them. In other words, while liberalism is very much concerned about the need of mediating instances between citizens' preferences and experiences and democratic governance, less attention, if any, is directed towards the way the press, knowledge institutions, parliaments and so on are

pervaded by relations of domination that determine the way collective problems, preferences and identities are articulated.

An example for what I mean here is provided by John Inazu's (2012) study on freedom of assembly. According to Inazu, in the last decades freedom of assembly 'has become little more than a historical footnote in American law and political theory' (Inazu, 2012, pp. 1–2). The right has been progressively substituted by two liberal rights: the right of expression and the right of association. One of Inazu's main claim is that this substitution is problematic since 'we fail to grasp the connection between a group's formation, composition, and existence and its expression' (Inazu, 2012, p. 2). One particular aspect of social groups that the right of association is unable to capture, and which is particularly interesting here is that 'the meaning [of a group, *J.S.Z.*] is subject to more than one interpretive goals' (Inazu, 2012, p. 161). This interpretative openness generates two kinds of question: 'who decides what counts as the message of the group?' (Inazu, 2012, p. 161) and what is the actual meaning of the group? According to Inazu, 'the expressive assembly recognizes that multivalent meaning is inherent in a group's expression and cautions that interpretations imposed by outsiders on the group maybe epistemologically biased and constrained' (2012, p. 162). This possibility of expressive domination is precisely what a liberal right to association cannot take care of.

Conclusions

In this article, I argued that populism can be characterized as a social pathology, that is, as a second-order disorder in which there is an essential disconnect between first order contents— in this case: political practices and institutions— and second order understandings of these contents— in this case: a wrong conception of the kind of freedom that is realized through those practices. This creates forms of political unfreedom that undermine populism's own project of getting back popular sovereignty. Among others, it generates forms of expressive domination, that is, of unequal influence in the processes in which citizens construct their identities and their will. I have presented two examples: gender performance among local members of the Peronist party in the 90s and authoritarianism in digitally organized populist parties, but there are many more. At the core of my analysis lies the populist ideal of freedom as authenticity without mediation, which, when enacted by populist actors, involves the creation of spaces where the abuse of (expressive) power by dominant groups can easily take place.

I have also considered what the present analysis adds to current debates on the democratic value of populism. After critically engaging with three main positions regarding populism's democratic value, I have argued that my approach provides convincing reasons to reject populism for any attempt to advance democracy, since far from delivering the political freedom that it promises (namely, political self-realization), it systematically undermines its very possibility. I have also argued that rejecting populism does not mean uncritically accepting liberal approaches to democracy. The reason is that liberalism is unable to provide tools to address relevant forms of domination that take place in liberal democratic regimes, including expressive domination.

Finally, I did not aim at discussing the full implications of the ideal of collective self-expression for democracy as well as the problems that go with it.⁵ However, my reflections create a path towards conceiving this ideal in a less problematic way, namely, as involving the democratic control of mediating political practices and institutions in ways that can guarantee the equal distribution of citizens' expressive power.

Acknowledgements

My thanks for suggestions and criticisms go to Lisa Herzog and Marc Pauly as well as to the members of the Department of Ethics, Social and Political Philosophy at the University of Groningen who participated at the 'Grundlegung' session where my article was discussed. I also would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their constructive comments and suggestions. I have written this article with the financial support of the DFG-ANR project "Demofutures."

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is funded by deutsche forschungsgemeinschaft.

ORCID iD

Justo Serrano Zamora  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1744-4850>

Notes

1. See, for example, Arendt ([1958] 1998).
2. This view contrasts with the ideal of self-legislation, also formulated by Rousseau and appropriated and expanded by Immanuel Kant. According to this second modern ideal of freedom, we are free when we desire and act according to the law that we have given to ourselves. See Honneth (2014, pp. 30–41).
3. For Zurn (2011), as well as for many critical theorists, a fundamental aspect of the notion of social pathology is that pathology analyses always point at the social structures that are the source of the disconnect between first order contents and second order grasp of them. In the case of reification, this entails exploring the social-structural causes accounting for why we keep forgetting the ontological and conceptual priority of interested involvement, and thereby misunderstanding what it means to engage in relations with others, with ourselves and with the world of things around us. The aim of this article is not to answer the question about the structural causes of populist's pathological understanding of freedom. However, Helmut Dubiel's (1994) idea that populism's rejection of mediation is related to a more general modern disconnection between ends and means represents a promising starting point for this kind of analysis.
4. The studies I draw upon do not explicitly mobilize the notion of expressive domination, nor is their aim to focus on expressive aspects of populism. However, they represent invaluable resources for identifying.
5. For a brief discussion, see Honneth (2014, pp. 30–41).

Reference

- Abts, K., & Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus democracy. *Political Studies*, 55(2), 405–424.
- Arendt, H. ([1958] 1998). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Auyero, J. (2001). *Poor people's politics: Peronist survival networks and the legacy of Evita*. Duke University Press.
- Bohman, J. (1991). *New philosophy of social science: Problems of indeterminacy*. Polity.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Harvard University Press.
- Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), 2–16.
- Canovan, M. (2004). Populism for political theorists? *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 241–252.
- D'Ancona, M. (2017). *Post truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*. Ebury Press.
- Dubiel, H. (1994). *Ungewissheit und Politik*. Suhrkamp.
- Errección, I., & Mouffe, C. (2015). *Construir pueblo. Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia*. Icaria Editorial.
- Freyenhagen, F. (2015). Honneth on social pathologies: A critique. *Critical Horizons*, 16(2), 131–152.
- Fromm, E. ([1955] 1963). *The Sane society*. Trans. E. Rotten Rinehart and Winson.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2019). *The digital party: Political organisation and online democracy*. Pluto Press.
- Harris, N. (2019). Recovering the critical potential of social pathology diagnosis. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(1), 45–62.
- Herder, J. G. ([1778] 2002). On the cognition and sensation of the human soul. In *Philosophical writings*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 187–244.
- Hiley, D., Bohman, J., & Shusterman, R. (1991). *The interpretive turn: Philosophy, science, culture*. Cornell University Press.
- Hirvonen, O., & Pennanen, J. (2019). Populism as a pathological form of politics of recognition. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(1), 27–44.
- Honneth, A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. Trans. J. Ganahl Polity.
- Honneth, A. (2009). *Pathologies of reason: On the legacy of critical theory*. Trans J. Ingram Columbia University Press.
- Honneth, A., Butler, J., Geuss, R., & Lear, J. (2008). *Reification: A new look at an old idea*. Oxford University Press.
- Inazu, J. D. (2012). *Liberty's refuge: The forgotten freedom of assembly*. Yale University Press.
- Jaeggi, R. (2014). *Alienation*. Columbia University Press.
- Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Critique of forms of life*. Harvard University Press.
- Kaltwasser, C. (2012). The ambivalence of populism: Threat and corrective for democracy. *Democratization*, 19(2), 184–208.
- Laclau, E. (2018). *On populist reason*. Verso.
- Laitinen, A., & Särkelä, A. (2019). Four conceptions of social pathology. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(1), 80–102.
- Laitinen, A., & Särkelä, A. (2020). Social wrongs. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. Epub ahead of print 15 November 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1853435>

- Laitinen, A., Särkelä, A., & Ikäheimo, H. (2015). Pathologies of recognition: An introduction. *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 25. <https://doi.org/10.20919/sspt.25.2015.44>
- Lipset, S. M. (1981). *Political man: The social bases of politics*. John Hopkins University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2019). *For a left populism*. Verso Books.
- Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Neuhouser, F. (2012). Rousseau un die Idee einer pathologischen Gesellschaft. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 53(4), 628–745.Tag.
- Neuhouser, F. (2020). Geistige Gesundheit und kulturelle Pathologie bei Nietzsche. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 68(1), 1-27.
- Mede, N. G., & Schäfer, M. S. (2020). Science-related populism: Conceptualizing populist demands toward science. *Public Understanding of Science*, 29(5), 473–491.
- Motta, M. (2018). The dynamics and political implications of anti-intellectualism in the United States. *American Politics Research*, 46(3), 465–498.
- Oliver, J. E., & Rahn, W. M. (2016). Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), 189–206.
- Oxhorn, P. (1998). The social foundations of Latin America's recurrent populism: Problems of popular sector class formation and collective action. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11(2), 212–246.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2020). *Le Siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Särkelä, A. (2017). Degeneration of associated life: Dewey's naturalism about social criticism. *Transactions of the Charles S Peirce Society*, 53(1), 107–126.
- Serrano Zamora, J., & Santarelli, M. (2020). Populism or pragmatism? Two ways of understanding political articulation. *Constellations*, 28, 496–510.
- Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), 95–110.
- Taggart, P. A. (2000). *Populism*. Open University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, M. J. (2016). *The domestication of critical theory*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me the people: How populism transforms democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1–22.
- Zurn, C. (2011). Social pathologies as second-order disorders. In: D. Petherbridge (Ed.), *Axel honneth: Critical essays*. Brill, pp. 345–370.

Author biography

Dr Justo Serrano Zamora is postdoctoral researcher at the University of Groningen where he works in the DFG-ANR project 'Democracy and its Futures'. His most recent publications include *Democratizations and Struggles Against Injustice* (2021, Rowman & Littlefield International) and (with Lisa Herzog) *A Realist Epistemic Utopia? Epistemic Practices in a Climate Camp?* (2021, *Journal of Social Philosophy*).