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## Bringing People Back in: Democracy's Well-Being in the Age of Populism

### **"Populism and the Future of Democracy"**

Conference Summary by Bo Yun Park  
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Tufts University European Center  
*Talloires, France*  
*June 15-17, 2018*

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Group photo of attendees of the 2018 Talloires Conference. *Photo credit: Sarah Banse*

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# Bringing People Back in: Democracy's Well-Being in the Age of Populism

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By Bo Yun Park, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, Harvard University

## INTRODUCTION

Populism has emerged as one of the most important threats to the well-being of our democratic systems. Not only have populist leaders provided a narrow and binary view of the political reality, but they have pitted citizens against one another in a way that promotes antipluralist politics. Research has shown that “populist governments have deepened corruption, eroded individual rights, and inflicted serious damage on democratic institutions” (Mounk and Kyle 2018: 1). Given its widespread political impact in recent decades, scholars have paid close attention to the phenomenon in different corners of the world (see Berezin, 2019; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Bale et al., 2011; Panizza, 2005; Mudde, 2004). Some have tried to accurately define what populism is (see Bonikowski and Gidron, 2013; Moffitt and Tormey, 2013; Pauwels, 2011); others have tried to understand the reasons behind the rising support for populist leaders (e.g., Gidron and Hall, 2017); many have been preoccupied with the consequences of populist and radical politics (e.g., Houle and Kenny, 2016).

While scholars have yet to reach a definitive consensus on how to conceptualize the term, Bonikowski and Gidron (2013) have pointed out that populism can be defined in three different ways: 1) populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004; Kaltwasser 2012), 2) populism as a discursive style (Kazin, 1995; de la Torre, 2000; Panizza, 2005; Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009) and 3) populism as a form of political mobilization (Roberts, 2006; Weyland, 2001; Jansen, 2011). Looking at populism as a form of ideology, Mudde (2004: 543) defined populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” Others, like de la Torre (2000: 4) have conceptualized populism as a “rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between *el pueblo* [the people] and the oligarchy.” Finally, sociologists and political scientists have defined populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland, 2001: 14).

Building on these overarching definitions that commonly revolve around the centrality of people, researchers from different social science disciplines have investigated the potential causes behind the rising support for populism on both ends of the political spectrum. It was about a year ago that thirty-four eminent scholars and practitioners gathered in Talloires, France, to examine the causes of—and threats posed by—the rise of radical politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than engaging in definitional struggles or protracted debates about the primacy of one causal factor over another, the goal of this conference was to mobilize cutting-edge research toward a clear and accessible discussion concerning the future of democratic politics in Europe and the United States. These topics were explored from multidisciplinary angles: political scientists like Herbert Kitschelt and Peter Hall reflected on the institutional dynamics and structural impacts of party politics; sociologists, such as Michèle Lamont and Bart Bonikowski, examined the role that collective identities, group boundaries, and migration played; and historically-oriented scholars like Daniel Ziblatt and Mabel Berizin drew lessons from past periods of radicalism to better understand our current struggles.

Although their thorough analyses of the different facets of populism significantly enhanced our understanding of populist politics, these were actually not enough to put out a clear prognosis of what is to be done about populism—from both the scholarly and practical standpoints. In the hope of contributing to the still ongoing dis-

cussions, I here would argue that it would be crucial to closely examine how different age groups—ranging from the Millennials to their elders—actually perceive the rise of populist leaders and the spread of populist politics in order to better understand the causes and consequences of populism. Without understanding how differently (or similarly) different cohorts perceive the rise of populist leaders, the need (or lack thereof) of populist politics, and the effects that populism brings, scholars would only be able to see a limited section of the whole picture. While macro- and meso-level analyses of the economy, the party structures, and the role of the media are indeed helpful in understanding populism, one cannot have a full grasp of the on-going phenomena if we do not bring the people—of different age groups—back in in our studies of populism.

In this article, I primarily aim to 1) retrace historical precedents of populist and radical politics, 2) examine the potential causes of populism that have been identified, and 3) describe the possible solutions that scholars have been about to diagnose thus far—based on the discussions from Talloires. Throughout the different sections, I will call for more micro-level (and cohort focused) analyses of people's perception of populism and populist leaders with the hope that they will help us better understand the causes and consequences of populist politics.

### **I. LEARNING FROM THE PAST: GOING BEYOND MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSES**

Scholars like Daniel Ziblatt, Mabel Berezin, and Herbert Kitschelt have argued that past waves of populist and radical politics could help us understand our current struggles better. Examining the different factors that contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions in past periods of political instability, Daniel Ziblatt, the Eaton Professor of Government at Harvard University, provided a historical account of party structure in Europe, particularly highlighting the major continuities and parallels found in Germany in 1892 and during the interwar years. Demonstrating how strong party organization mattered, he argued that the democracy emerged where robust and well-institutionalized conservative parties were in place, thereby contributing to the stability of the democratic system. In fact, the well-being of a democracy depended on how well-structured right parties were and how much they distanced themselves ideologically from the radical impulses that were always there. Ziblatt more closely looked at the strategies of mainstream parties, the role they played in politics, and the ways in which they could have contributed to the development of new populist right-wing parties. He presented two options: one could possibly 1) blame the Left—when the Center Left became “neoliberal” and geared more toward the Center, some voters were left behind and they went to the extremes—or 2) blame the Right, as they did not ideologically distance themselves enough from the Far Right.

In the meantime, Mabel Berezin, professor of sociology at Cornell University, called for a focus on other moments that mattered and had historical resonances, and analyzed the Nationalist Right in the context of multiple pasts. In order to do so, she looked at different historical narratives with a particular focus on: 1) the 2009 southern debt crisis in Europe, 2) the 2015 Charlie Hebdo event in France, and 3) the “interaction of the distant and current pasts.” According to Berezin, the first period marked the decline of a traditional Left, the attenuation of security, and the popular resistance against the pace of Europeanization. The second period paved the way to the nationalist rise in Europe, allowing Marine Le Pen to go to the second round of the 2017 presidential election in France. Third, the juxtaposition of the distant and current pasts forced us to see that we need to take the Right parties for what they are rather than talking about them as prisons of their past in fascist terms. In fact, Berezin argued that World War I and World War II analogies could be helpful, but it was necessary to come out of this framework: “The events of the coming year will not be shaped by the deliberate acts of statesmen, but by the hidden current, flowing continually beneath the surface of political history, of which no one can predict the outcome.”

Similarly, Herbert Kitschelt, the George V. Allen Professor of International Relations at Duke University, assessed 1) the usefulness of historical comparison of radicalisms, 2) the analytical takeaways from past episodes, 3) and the sources of vulnerabilities of existing democracies. Asking how we could define 'radicalism' in the first place, he called for a consideration of both 1) the structural economic crisis that brought about a situation in which people's interests are no longer being realized and 2) the ideas that mattered. In fact, he explained that while people act according to their interests during "normal times," they also tend to follow ideas that lead to radicalism as interests do not help much when "faced with the horizon of the unknown." Drawing insights from the Weberian debate over the economic vs. cultural mechanisms that trigger social innovation, he argued that both the self-interests determining the actors' strategies and the ideas coming in to reinterpret interests and/or the cognitive understandings of how to pursue them mattered. Keeping in mind that interests are socially constructed, one ought to explore the ideas that emerged prior and during the crises. In fact, scholars should focus not on crises symptoms, but on the underlying fundamental generating principles of crises.

The common denominator that brings all of these historical analyses together is the fact that they take on a macro- or meso-level approaches to the study of populist politics. This also means that they pay less attention to the micro-level perceptions of populism across time and space. More specifically, historical accounts of past waves of populist and radical politics do not systematically consider how different age groups would make sense of populism: how do young voters make sense of populist leaders? How do the baby boomers perceive the resurgence of populist politics? How the interactions between the different generations and age groups affect each others' attitudes vis-à-vis populism?

## **II. EXPLAINING THE RISE OF POPULIST AND RADICAL POLITICS: PARTIES? IDENTITIES?**

Micro-level analyses of people's understandings of populism could also be very helpful in better understanding the causes of the rising support for populist politics both in the United States and Europe. As Michèle Lamont pointed out in Talloires, scholars ought to focus on what people think "who should have access to what" and pay attention to how individuals experience a sense of group positioning. One could reasonably expect that these perspectives on deservingness would vary depending on which generation you belong. Thus, research focusing on these questions at greater length could well complement the existing studies on the effects of 1) the party structures and the internal conflicts of political parties, 2) the evolving (partisan) identities and the disidentification phenomena, 3) the deteriorating perceptions of social status and/or relative deprivation, 5) the changing demographics, as well as 4) the fluctuating role that media, on the rise of populist leaders.

Starting with the party dynamics in the United States, Julia Azari, associate professor of political science at Marquette University, looked at the internal conflicts of American political parties prior to the 2016 US presidential election. Based on a historical comparison retracing party conflicts since 1844, she pointed out that the formal and informal mechanisms that parties used to have to select candidates (e.g., informal mechanisms such as a charismatic political figure with party stature that can smooth out conflicts) were no longer there. These changes might have contributed to the rise of populist figures.

Looking at political parties in Europe more specifically, Sheri Berman, professor of political science at Barnard College, asked if we could hold the social democratic parties responsible for the rise of the radical parties. Pointing at the strong link between the decline of the Center or Social Democratic Left with the rise of populism and increasing democratic dissatisfaction, she called for a consideration of 1) the economic changes that came with globalization and 2) the sociodemographic and cultural changes that we observed. Berman argued that the social democratic party lost the insight that the primacy of politics and the government's job is to control—or at least

contain—potentially destabilizing changes. In other words, they lost the battle vis-à-vis how much power and ability the Left had to mitigate or contain change. As a result, there has been a growing sense that the party was limited—if not unconcerned—about what they could do regarding their worries and their fears. As people believed that the government and political parties were unresponsive, they would go to the Far Right.

Focusing more on the trends in American partisan identity, as opposed to party structures per se, Lilliana Mason, assistant professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, demonstrated that Republicans are dominantly white, Evangelical, conservative, and rural. Democrats, on the other hand, are nonwhite, non-Evangelical, liberal, and metropolitan. She drew from insights from social psychology and investigated the ways in which these two groups defaulted to a winning-versus-losing rationale in party politics. She ultimately showed that nowadays people adhere to the following ideas: 1) out-groups feel more distant, 2) compromise with the other group feels more dangerous, 3) stakes of elections feel higher, and hence, 4) action feels more important. These evolving attitudes might have facilitated the support for populist leaders.

In turn, Cybelle Fox, professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, studied the changing demographics in the United States and their impact on the rise of radicalism. She argued that “demographics is not destiny” based on an assessment of the changing ethnic demographics for the period of 1965–2065. While there has been a growing diversity in the country, with substantive immigration from Asia and Latin America, there has been no evidence that diversity is to blame: in fact, there is no consistent effect of diversity on social trust; no consistent relationship between diversity/demographic change and attitudes toward immigrants and immigration; no consistent relationship between diversity and the adoption of anti-immigrant policies; and no consistent relationship between diversity and spending on social welfare. Yet, she still found that out-group antagonism and prejudice among white Americans predicts support for: immigration restriction and anti-immigrant policies, conservative social policies, the Tea Party, and Trump. In fact, exposure to information about the changing demographics of the country led white Americans to express greater anxiety and more anger and fear toward racial minorities.

Tracing the different trends in news media, Jonathan Ladd, associate professor of public policy and government at Georgetown University, investigated people’s confidence levels in US institutions. While doing so, he particularly focused on the trends in internal and external political efficacy. He also considered people’s sense of corruption and the sentiment that the government is run by a few big self-interested entities. In his presentation, he showed the historical trends of people’s confidence in the news media. For instance, in 1938, a low percentage of the American population believed that newspapers were fair; in 1956, Republicans had more confidence in newspaper coverage. He ultimately showed that Liberals and Republicans reacted differently to various media outlets. For both sides, however, the loss of confidence in institutions would make the take over of outsider politicians easier (by way of the nomination system and negative partisanship).

Additionally, scholars studying Europe—such as Juan Díez Medrano, Daphne Halikiopoulou, or Daniel Kelemen—have asked whether the rise of the populist radical right was a consequence of the European Union (EU)’s politics. In fact, they have considered the different institutional reforms undertaken by the European Union as well as the role that the European identity (or lack thereof) would play in promoting the rise of populist and radical politics. For instance, Juan Díez Medrano, professor of sociology at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, looked at the issues of identification and sovereignty to understand the support to the Far Right. Still looking at the rise in support for the Far Right, Daphne Halikiopoulou, associate professor in comparative politics at the University of Reading, explored the rise of the Far Right at times of crisis. She ultimately

argued that good governance, along with welfare policies, significantly mattered in these circumstances. She ultimately concluded that good governance makes it less likely to have Far Right expansion as governance mediates the effect of insecurity on different social groups.

While all these different perspectives have greatly contributed to our understanding of populism and the rise for populist leaders, it would be important to not forget that neither political parties, partisan groups, nor the media, and even less the European Union, are homogeneous units. Given the different interests and points of view that these various entities encapsulate, it would be primordial to take on more meso- or micro level analyses to complement the blossoming macro-level ones. For instance, considering the importance of group-level exposures and the role that social networks play could be a place to start.

### **III. ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF POPULIST AND RADICAL POLITICS: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

At Talloires, scholars have tried to find solutions to the challenges posed by populism by focusing on three main agents: 1) the Center Right, 2) the Center Left, and 3) the media. In fact, researchers have examined what factors might prevent the Center Right from moving further right by adopting radical measures in response to the rise in support for populist leaders, and whether the Far Right should be left out or rather be incorporated. They have questioned what the Center Left could do to deal with the crisis of social democracy in Europe, and have asked what role the media should play in this era of social media, fake news, and diverging trends in media consumption.

Looking at the Center Right, Tim Bale, professor of politics and international relations at Queen Mary University of London, considered the different ways that political parties could deal with the Far Right: he explained that they could potentially 1) avoid the radical right parties, as German and Swedish parties did; 2) embrace them through their platforms, as French and Danish parties more or less did; or 3) give them votes of confidence and cooperate with them, as parties did in Italy and Austria. Bale argued that none of these alternatives have been particularly successful, and called for a consideration of the shrinking size of the electorate and as well as the self-defeating economic policies that could further exacerbate the circumstances.

Turning to the Center Left, Berman claimed that the age of party democracies has passed by citing Peter Mair: "Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning." She then asked if democracies could work without political parties and what were to be done about 1) leaving key issues (economic social and cultural change) unaddressed and thereby undermining faith in responsiveness and efficacy of democracy, 2) opening electoral and programmatic space for populism, 3) hindering formation of stable governments, 4) declining political parties, which key institutional support of democracy, and 5) leaving democracy to be dominated by the politics of fear. Berman suggested that we should remind ourselves of what made the social democratic parties successful and take lessons from the interwar years.

Focusing on the role of social media in promoting populist politics, Kari Steen-Johnsen, sociologist and research leader for the Political, Democratic and Civil Society Group at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo, examined the case of Sylvi Listhaug, the Norwegian justice minister who had to resign because of her controversial Facebook post that sent populist messages. Highlighting that Norway is not immune to populism despite the popular belief that the country is an exception to the rising trends of populism, Steen-Johnsen calls for a closer look at the mechanisms of agenda setting and boundary drawing that result in the displaying of confrontational logics.

While the studies on party politics both in the United States and Europe—as well as the research on the role that media plays in facilitating populist and radical politics—are absolutely necessary, they ought to be complement-

ed with the studies on the individual perceptions of the party politics itself. Nowadays, people on both sides of the Atlantic seem to have a different approach to party politics at its core: in fact, the election of President Macron in France shows us that people even question the Left versus Right dichotomy of the political spectrum. It might actually be the time to consider the need for a New Left and a New Right standing on radically different terms. Yet, such endeavor cannot be done without a consideration of the age variable, the generational gap between the different segments of the population, and the cohort effects that naturally draw us apart. How could we find the solution to increasing social cohesion without properly mapping the different segments of the population and understanding how they perceive their positionality vis-à-vis other groups?

## CONCLUSION

At Talloires, scholars agreed that we need to avoid overly simplistic historical comparisons, identify mechanisms, consider different cycles and the long-standing precursors of politics. Researchers also need to take culture seriously and closely analyze narratives, frames, people's sense of dignity and worth, or fairness, along with issues of identity and boundaries. The role of media should also be given a lot of attention, especially in its mobilization of national cleavages. European scholars like Virginie Guiraudon also called for more transatlantic exchanges regarding these subject matters. Considering what is at stake, fruitful exchanges between scholars and practitioners also seemed more necessary than ever. Ironically, neither group should forget that we should bring people back to the center of our attention while studying what populism is about.

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## Agenda for “Populism and the Future of Democracy”

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This year’s conference will consider the causes of—and threats posed by—the rise of radical politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than engage in definitional struggles or protracted debates about the primacy of one causal factor over another, the goal is to mobilize cutting-edge research toward a clear and accessible discussion concerning the future of democratic politics and equitable social relations in Europe and the United States. These topics will be explored from multiple disciplinary directions: political scientists will reflect on institutional dynamics (and solutions), and the structure of party politics; sociologists will bring to the discussion research on collective identities, group boundaries, and migration; and historically oriented scholars will draw lessons from past periods of radicalism.

### Friday, June 15

4:00–4:15 Welcome: **Michèle Lamont**, Director, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs; Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies; Professor of Sociology and of African and African American Studies, Departments of Sociology and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

#### 4:15–6:15 **Session I | Lessons from Past Waves of Radical Politics**

- To what degree are comparisons with past periods of radicalism useful or misguided?
- What can we learn about the causes of the rise in populist right politics from past historical cases?
- What factors historically mitigated or exacerbated the erosion of democratic institutions during periods of political instability?

Chair: **Bart Bonikowski**, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University

**Daniel Ziblatt**, Professor of Government, Harvard University

**Mabel Berezin**, Professor of Sociology, Cornell University

**Herbert Kitschelt**, George V. Allen Professor of International Relations, Duke University

7:00 Reception and dinner at *Hotel de L’Abbaye*

### Saturday, June 16

#### 8:30–10:30 **Session II | EU as a Cause of—and Potential Solution to—Anti-Pluralist Politics**

- To what extent is the rise of the populist radical right a consequence of the EU’s own policies, democratic deficit or the thinness of European identity?
- How can the EU effectively respond to democratic backsliding in member states?
- What institutional reforms might the EU consider, if any, to dampen the demand for radical politics in Europe?

Chair: **Daniel Ziblatt**, Professor of Government, Harvard University

**Daniel Kelemen**, Professor of Political Science and Jean Monnet Chair in European Union Politics, Rutgers University

**Daphne Halikiopoulou**, Associate Professor in Comparative Politics, University of Reading

**Juan Díez Medrano**, Professor of Sociology, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

10:30 Group photo and break

11:00–1:00 **Session III | The Future of Immigration and Immigration Policy**

- To what degree is immigration itself—rather than discourse about immigration—a factor in the rise of radical politics in Europe and the United States?
- What distinct challenges do multiple migration streams—those of EU citizens within the Schengen Zone, of labor migrants from outside the EU, and of refugees—pose for Europe today? How does the composition of migrant streams affect immigration politics in the United States?
- How can democratic states effectively respond to the challenges posed by immigration?

Chair: **Michèle Lamont**, Director, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs; Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies; Professor of Sociology and of African and African American Studies, Departments of Sociology and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

**Virginie Guiraudon**, Director of the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Sciences-Po Paris

**Cybelle Fox**, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley

**Gökce Yordakul**, Georg Simmel Professor of Diversity and Social Conflict, Humboldt University

1:00 Lunch at *Le Prieuré*

2:00–4:30 Break

4:30–6:30 **Session IV | Responses of Mainstream Parties to Anti-Establishment Challengers**

- How can the center-left address the apparent crisis of social democracy in Europe?
- What mechanisms might prevent the center-right from adopting increasingly radical policies and discourse in response to populist parties?
- To co-opt the radical right, should the far right always be “kept out” of governing coalitions (i.e. grand coalitions) or should they be “mainstreamed” by including them?

Chair: **Alexander Görlach**, In Defense of Democracy Affiliate Professor at the Franklin Roosevelt Foundation at Harvard College’s Adams House; Senior Fellow, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs

**Tim Bale**, Professor of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London

**Julia Azari**, Associate Professor of Political Science, Marquette University

**Sheri Berman**, Professor of Political Science, Barnard College

7:30 Reception and dinner at *Le Cottage Bise*

Chair: **Michèle Lamont**, Director, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs; Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies; Professor of Sociology and of African and African American

Studies, Departments of Sociology and African and African American Studies, Harvard University

Keynote: **Peter Hall**, Krupp Foundation Professor of European Studies, Department of Government, Harvard University

“Economics, Culture and the Sources of the Populist Surge”

Sunday, June 17

9:00–11:00

**Session V | Media, Misinformation, and Polarization**

- How should the media cover populist politics in an era of “fake news” and persistent violations of political norms?
- What role have changes to the media landscape, including the growth of social media, played in the rise of radical politics—and what opportunities might they hold for resistance against democratic backsliding?
- Have media consumption practices become increasingly segmented and if so, to what degree is this a result of, or contributing factor to, partisan polarization?
- The position of the United States, the EU, and other major actors

Chair: **Steven Erlanger**, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, *The New York Times*

**Jonathan Ladd**, Associate Professor McCourt School of Public Policy and Government, Georgetown University

**Kari Steen-Johnsen**, Sociologist and Research Leader for the Political, Democratic and Civil Society Group, Institute for Social Research, Oslo

**Lilliana Mason**, Assistant Professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland

11:00

Closing remarks: **Bart Bonikowski** and **Daniel Ziblatt**

12:00

Lunch and farewell at *Hotel de l'Abbaye*