# “Populism” versus “Popular”: A Response to Ziarek’s “Populism: A Crux or Crisis of Politics”

*Tijen Demirel-Pegg*

Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis

**Abstract**

This article discusses two main issues Ziarek highlights regarding populist social movements. The first one is the exclusionary stance populist movements take when contending for power in a democratic society. The second one is the repressive response to contenders when populist movements are in power. The underlying characteristic in both issues is that populists movements assume an anti-pluralist stance against other contending alternatives. Therefore, the distinction between “popular” and “populist” is an important one.

***Keywords:*** populism, social movements, repression, contention, popular

---

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Demirel-Pegg, T. (2019). “Populism” versus “Popular”: A Response to Ziarek’s “Populism—A Crux or Crisis of Politics?” Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 102(23), 152–157. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/730497

The recent rise of populist leaders around the world has attracted widespread attention among practitioners and scholars. The election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016 is among the most notable "anti-establishment" or, as often called, "populist" victories. The former president of Venezuela Hugo Chávez, the president of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former leader of the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party Nigel Farage, the Italian Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte, the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, and the Russian president Vladimir Putin are other examples of leaders who have adapted populist rhetoric. Despite the prominence of populist leaders, the term "populism" still remains a vague concept. While we might have a hunch as to what all these leaders have in common, as Jan-Werner Müller (2016) states, we do not know when exactly political actors turn "populist." The broader issue is, we do not have a coherent theory of populism that explains the difference between a leader who wants to serve the population and one that is populist (Müller 2016:2) Ewa Plonowoska Ziarek's article "Populism: A Crux or Crisis of Politics" tackles this question from Laclau's viewpoint and discusses how it relates to Arendt's (1970) notion of democratic plurality.

One good starting point in terms of understanding populism is whether or not a populist movement is in power. This is a crucial point because the dynamics and the interactions with the "establishment," the supporters of the establishment, or any other group that does not endorse the populist view are different when the populist movement is in power. Tilly (1978) explains these interactions in his Polity Model quite clearly. Accordingly, the political system consists of a government and a number of contenders seeking to increase their access to state power. Government refers to "an organization which controls the principal concentrated means of coercion within the population." Contender, on the other hand, is defined as "any group which, during some specified period, applies pooled resources to influence the government" (Tilly 1978:58). Members of the polity enjoy the privilege of easy access to power while challengers outside of the government do not. Thus, the

challengers seek to enter the polity to maximize their power. The core of the political process, therefore, is the contention between the members of the polity and their challengers to maximize their respective access to power. This struggle for power is the essence of all forms of contention. The Polity Model, therefore, suggests that contentious interactions are a consequence of the power struggle between the members of the polity and their challengers as well as the shifting coalitions formed to maximize institutional resources.

Ziarek's discussion highlights important issues that surface when populists both contend for power and hold power. The first one is the difference between "popular" and "populist" movements. This issue is particularly relevant to contention. Populist movements, according to Laclau (2005a, 2005b, 2006), are an important dimension of democracy. When contending for power, populist movements form a common identity that is constructed through performing together. As political actors come together, perform the same actions, and repeat antagonistic rhetoric directed toward "others," participants' fears and beliefs are continuously reaffirmed. This is different than the formation of friendly alliances among political actors who embrace their own identities and, yet, coordinate or act in unity. In populist movements, however, differences are suppressed. Through performative acts, common identities are formed and those who are outside of that particular identity are excluded.

This aspect of Ziarek's discussion underscores the difference between "popular" and "populist" movements during the contention process. Popular movements that have the support of a large segment of the society also perform together to influence the government to achieve their common goals, and they also begin to form a common identity the more they perform together and learn from each other (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, Nepstad 2015, Schock 2005). Nonetheless, these movements embrace different identities because the expansion of participation to different social groups enables the movement to exert more pressure on the government. An incumbent regime feels more insecure when workers, the military, businesses, teachers, civil servants, and students all unite and try to

influence the government. The inclusion of diverse groups also increases the possibility of confronting the government via different means and tactics. While workers might strike, the business community might be negotiating with government members behind the scenes. The plurality of different types of pressure will make the regime more vulnerable, and might increase the chances of an outcome that favors the contenders. During this process, it is also very likely that common identities are formed among these different forms; but these identities are not exclusionist like populist ones are. As Müller (Müller 2016:3) states, "populists are always *antipluralist"* and they claim that "they, and they alone, represent the people."

The exclusionary aspect of populist movements is, therefore, the main feature of populist movements that distinguishes them from popular social movements. When contending for power, populist movements appeal to those who share the same kinds of frustrations and beliefs. Their antipluralist stance is often what allows frustrated segments of the society to blame those who are not like them particularly during periods of economic or social instability. One recent striking example of such a dynamic is the rise of right-wing populist movements in Germany, particularly the Alternative for German Party (AfD). German Chancellor Angela Merkel's willingness to open Germany's doors to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa unleashed a harsh anti-Merkel and anti-refugee rhetoric-based campaign by the AfD. The AfD is using social media and the press to mobilize support, build alliances across a variety of organizations, and strategize about when and where to use certain types of tactics; but what differentiates them from other popular movements is their exclusionary stance, particularly toward immigrants.

The second theme Ziarek brings up is about the meaning of political demand. According to Ziarek, Laclau's portrayal of political demand is a negative one that is unfulfilled. Yet, Ziarek argues that populists portray their demands as universal to the population. Therefore, the demands of minority groups are marginalized. While Ziarek addresses the issue of political demands from the contention side,

the ways in which populist governments respond to demands when they are in power is also important. Populist movements are able to mobilize support, voice their frustrations with the government, make demands, and use their rights to contend for power because democracies embodies pluralism. Subsequently, they try to eliminate it once they are in power (Müller 2016:5). Thus, they cultivate their rhetoric that they are the only representatives of the people. Therefore, they are able to justify their repressive attempts to eliminate pluralism or any kind of opposition that might challenge their authority.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a master practitioner of this strategy. In 2013, a group of activists protested the government's attempt to replace Istanbul's green space in Gezi Park with a multi-use complex modelled on a 19th century Ottoman barracks. When the police responded with teargas and water cannons to disperse the activists, protests quickly escalated. Within a few days, thousands of people were demonstrating on the streets, asking the then Prime Minister Erdoğan to step down. A broad segment of the society participated in Gezi Protests, including workers, teachers, businesses, unions, women, LGBT groups, and Kurdish groups. These groups formed an alliance as protests escalated against the Erdoğan regime and its supporters. In response, Mr. Erdoğan repeatedly humiliated the protesters as "looters" (*çapulcu*) and claimed that the activists that occupied Gezi Park engaged in immoral and unethical behavior in the tents that they had put up (Gürcan and Peker 2015, Özen 2015). The forceful repression that the government used against the protesters and the subsequent legal charges accusing them of being terrorists were indications of a populist agenda that dismissed the opposition as not representative of the Turkish people, but as those who wanted to harm Turkey.

A more recent example is India where Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to strip four million people of citizenship in the northeastern state of Assam. Assam is an ethnically heterogeneous society which has also witnessed large scale immigration from many parts of the subcontinent

(particularly East Bengal) over the last hundred years. The rapid population growth in the region and the shrinking proportion of Assamese Hindus in comparison to Muslim immigrants has long threatened the Assamese Hindus (Baruah 1999, Baruah 2005, Kimura 2013). In fact, ethnic Assamese organized a nonviolent protest campaign in the early 1980s, and a violent insurgency in the mid-1980s (Baruah 2009). Stripping four million Assamese residents of their nationality is in line with President Modi's populist regime that claims India to be the natural home of the Hindus.

These examples show that populist regimes also assert their identities to be the common identity of the population they claim to represent regardless of their contender or power-holding positions. When they are contending for power in a democratic regime, they take advantage of a pluralist system which grants them the right to organize and mobilize. Once in power, however, they block democratic outlets for other contenders. Moreover, they justify their actions, democratic or not, on the basis of the people's interests (Müller 2016), which further reinforces their populist agenda.

The task of crafting a theory of populism is surely going to take a lot of scholarly thought, rigor, and time. Ziarek's article is a fine contribution to this challenging task and moves the discussion in the right direction.

Works Cited:

Arendt, Hanna. 1970. *On Violence*. Boston: Harcourt.

Baruah, Sanjib. 1999. *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Baruah, Sanjib. 2005. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi ; Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Baruah, Sanjib. 2009. *Beyond Counter-Insurgency: Breaking the Impasse in Northeast India*. New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gürcan, Efe Can and Efe Peker. 2015. *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Kimura, Makiko. 2013. *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005a. *On Populist Reason*. London ; New York: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005b. "Populism: What Is in a Name?" Pp. 32-49 in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, edited by F. Panizza. London: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2006. "Ideology and Post-Marxism." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11(2):103-14. doi: 10.1080/13569310600687882.

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. 2015. *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Özen, Hayriye. 2015. "An Unfinished Grassroots Populism: The Gezi Park Protests in Turkey and Their Aftermath." *South European Society and Politics* 20(4):533-52.

Schock, Kurt. 2005. *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.