THE COTERMINOUS RISE OF POPULISM & SUPERFLUOUS POPULATIONS?

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OBJECTIVES & OUTLINE

- To consider and theorize the interactive relationship between populism and superfluous populations.
- I will focus on right-wing populism and argue that it is a seedbed for the germination of one or more superfluous populations.
- I will suggest that superfluous populations are not just structurally determined, but are socially constructed and, thus, can be “talked into existence” via strategic framing and identity work.
- I will also argue that the degree of population superfluity and how “that problem” is dealt with is contingent on several intervening conditions: the existence or development of abeyance systems, and the expansion or contraction of cultural spans of sympathy.
- Last, I will consider alternative ways in which superfluous populations might be dealt with, referencing some historical examples, and then raise the question of whether there is an elective affinity between populism and the emergence of superfluous populations and the manner in which they are dealt with strategically.
A Movement, a Strategy, a variant of Fascism, or what???

Anti-elitism and anti_pluralism are two of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of populism.

Key defining characteristic is its antipluralism (Müller 2016), especially since the derogation of elites is not peculiar to populism. To be anti-pluralist is:

- To claim exclusive representation; to not recognize any opposition as legitimate

For populists on the right, this antipluralism takes the form of a Manichean project that provides dualistic contrast conceptions, albeit often coded, between “the People” and “the Others”, which almost always includes some configuration of “elites”

Suggests a triadic conception of right-wing populism -- “rightwing populists champion the people against an elite they accuse of coddling a third group” (Judis 2016: 15).
Two factors give right-wing populism its potency:

- Its anti-pluralistic, demagogic construction of a scapegoat or combatant – refugees/immigrants, ethnic/racial minorities, welfare recipients, selected sexualities that the elites are seen as coddling and favoring; and
- Its religious-like character, of which there are two elements:
  - Its cultish nature in the sense of adherents comprising an insular and passionate social collectivity tied together by devotion to a leader elevated to prophetic and near divine status who is thought to possess special knowledge, such as divine revelations.
  - Franklin Graham’s comparison of Trump to flawed biblical prophets and patriarchs such as Abraham, Moses, and David
  - The comments of an Ohio pastor with ties to the Trump campaign: “I believe he receives downloads that now he is beginning to understand come from God.”
Populism continued:

- The “messianic” tenor of the leader’s pronouncements: Provides a sense of expectancy not only of better days to come but of a collective transposition somewhat akin to what Jesus’s told his disciples when they asked about the prospects of a wealthy young man getting into heaven: “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16).
  - Pat Buchanan, who ran in the presidential primaries of 1992 and 1996, claimed that he would “make this country what it used to be—God's country.”
  - Trump has made numerous messianic, transpositional claims, as when he said, in one of his unrelenting flow of “tweets” while campaigning in Wisconsin in April 2016: “If I win, all bad things in the U.S. will be rapidly reversed.”
    - As one journalist observed, many of Trump’s voters are “motivated by a kind of faith: They believe in the man and that all their losing will come to an end.”
- These cultish and messianic elements congeal into something akin to what Arendt called the “Fuhrer-principle” in her assessments of Hitler and Stalin, noting that both “exercized a fascination to which allegedly non was immune.”
- Given this constructed, usually binary division, another way of conceptualizing populism is as an exclusionary form of identity politics.
TWO KEY MECHANISMS UNDERLYING THIS POPULIST, MANICHEAN PROJECT

- **Identity Work**
- **Framing**, particularly Frame Amplification and Frame Transformation

- **Identity Work** – the range of activities individuals and/or collectivities engage in to signify and express who they are and what they stand for in relation or contrast to some set of others.

- **Identity Work manifests itself in at least 4 ways or modalities:**
Types of Identity Work

(1) Procurement or arrangement of physical settings & props – decoration, cars, bumper stickers, signs, protest placards

(2) Cosmetic face work; arrangement of personal appearance - makeup, body ornamentation, hair styles, dress

(3) Selective association with other individuals & groups - cliques, gangs, friends, networks

(4) Identity talk/discourse -- verbal construction and avowal and attribution of personal or collective identities via framing
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- Of the 4 types of identity work, identity talk/discourse via framing is most relevant to understanding populism.

- Why?

- Because its telltale sign is the verbal construction and differentiation of at least two antagonistic groupings, and it fertilizes the soil for the other types of identity work.
Comparing Obama and Trump’s Inaugural Addresses

### Word usage in Obama and Trump’s inaugural addresses

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<th>Obama</th>
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### Usage of “people” in Obama & Trump’s inaugural addresses

<table>
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<td>The American people</td>
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<td>The American people</td>
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<td>God’s people (1)</td>
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<td>A people (1)</td>
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<td>People of the world</td>
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<td>Other peoples (1)</td>
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<td>Its people [referring to Iraq] (1)</td>
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<td>Your people [other countries] (1)</td>
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<td>The people of poor nations (1)</td>
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TRUMP EXCLUSIONARY TWEETS (FRAMES) ON IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES, BORDERS & WALLS

- Everybody is arguing whether or not it is a BAN. Call it what you want, it is about keeping bad people (with bad intentions) out of country! 2/1/2017
- Do you believe it? The Obama Administration agreed to take thousands of illegal immigrants from Australia. Why? I will study this dumb deal! (2/1/2017)
- If the ban were announced with a one week notice, the "bad" would rush into our country during that week. A lot of bad "dudes" out there! (1/30/2017)
- People say my wall idea is crazy. China built a wall, and guess how many Mexicans they have. (1/4/2016)
- One of Paris terrorist came as Syrian refugee. Donald Trump is right again. BOMB THEIR OIL – TAKE AWAY THEIR FUNDING” (11/15/15)
- We MUST have strong borders and stop illegal immigration. Without that we do not have a country. Also, Mexico is killing U.S. on trade. WIN! (6/30/2015)
- The border is wide open for cartels & terrorists. Secure our border now. Build a massive wall & deduct the costs from Mexican foreign aid! (3/30/2015)
As these Trump tweets suggest, right-wing populism engages in exclusionary identity work entailing the identification of a collective, antagonistic other that is framed as the beneficiary of governmental programs and resources, and thus as the coddled others.

Who are these coddled others? According to Hochschild (Strangers in Their Own Land 2016), they are the metaphoric “line cutters.” As she writes in her composite summary sketch of the diagnostic view of her informants:
“Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you! You’re following the rules. They aren’t. As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches, and they hold a certain secret in people’s minds…. Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers – where will it end? Your money is running through a liberal sympathy sieve you don’t control or agree with. These are the opportunities you’d have loved to have had in your day – and either you should have had them when you were young or the young shouldn’t be getting them now. It’s not fair” (Hochschild 2016: 137).
Thus, the right-wing populist message pits the rightful but neglected “people” – hyphenated White-Americans in Trump’s case – against some set of underserving “negative Others,” and some configuration of enabling elites.

And for Trump, as we know daily, and for other right-wing populists as well – such as Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, and Kaczynski in Poland – the divisionary framing is constantly forthcoming.

But what is the connection to superfluous people?
Dictionary definitions of “superfluous” include: exceeding what is sufficient or required; not necessary or relevant; serving no useful purpose. Any of one of these overlapping definitions implies surplus, redundancy, and expendability.

Arendt emphasized in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: human populations sometime come to be defined as superfluous and may thus be conceived as expendable, and thereby as candidates for various of forms social exclusion and liquidation. As she wrote:

“Today, with populations and homeless everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous…. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous (p. 439).

But what exactly did she mean by superfluousness?

Here she is only marginally helpful by conflating “uprootedness” and “superfluousness”

To be uprooted is “having no place in the world that is recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous is not to belong to the world at all” (p. 475).
Drawing on the work of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (Purity and Danger), superfluous people might be thought of as ‘unclassifiables.’ She postulated an almost universal cognitive block regarding things out of place:

- **Unclassifiables**, she argued, “provoke cognitive discomfort and reactions of disgust, hence negative attitudes to slime, insects, and dirt in general.”

- Being **out of place** in this way renders people redundant and expendable – particularly so in difficult times when claimants for resources or places exceed or drain the availability of those resources or places.

- A fundamental accoutrement of being out of place is the **contraction of cultural spans of sympathy/compassion**.

- Examples of such potentially superfluous people, for whom there are fluctuating spans of sympathy, include today’s hundreds of thousands of uprooted people: refugees and asylum seekers from various parts of Africa and the Middle East, and in the Americas from some of the conflict-torn countries of Central America. Other examples include the homeless and border-crossing migrants in search of a greener pasture.
By 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis had become the dominant movement of displaced persons. More than a million people have arrived in Europe, and a similar number in South Africa. Despite political fears, the US remains almost a non-player on the global stage.

2001 saw roughly 500,000 refugees fleeing primarily Middle Eastern countries, such as Afghanistan, and African countries, such as Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide

22.5 million
Refugees

10 million
Stateless people

189,300 Refugees resettled in 2016

Where the world’s displaced people are being hosted

16% Americas
11% Asia and Pacific
26% Middle East and North Africa
30% Africa
17% Europe

55% of refugees worldwide came from three countries

South Sudan 1.4m
Afghanistan 2.5m
Syria 5.5m

Top hosting countries

Ethiopia 791,600
Uganda 940,800
Islamic Republic of Iran 979,400
Lebanon 1.0m
Pakistan 1.4m
Turkey 2.9m

28,300 people forced to flee their homes a day because of conflict and persecution

10,900 staff
UNHCR employs 10,900 staff (as of 31 May 2017)

130 countries
We work in 130 countries (as of 31 May 2017)

We are funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions, with 87 per cent from governments and the European Union.

Source: UNHCR / 19 June 2017
But are these displaced persons superfluous? Clearly they are uprooted, but Arendt neither specifies the conditions that connect uprootedness and superfluousness, nor identifies clearly other factors that might generate superfluousness in the absence of uprootedness.
Dictionary definitions commonly refer to a pattern of temporary activity or suspension, as in “Let's hold that problem in abeyance for a while.”

Sociologically considered, abeyance has been conceptualized and examined historically most thoroughly in Ephraim Mizruchi’s book titled, Regulating Society: Beguines, Bohemians and Other Marginals.

For Mizruchi, abeyance is a holding process, a process that occurs within and between organizations, typically when there is a surplus or redundant population.

Formulaically, abeyance systems or structures arise when there is a mismatch between available positions or statuses in a society (too few) and the supply of potential claimants to those positions or statuses (too many).
Abeyance cont.:

- A form of social control that involves two phases that are often interactive: expulsion and absorption.
  - Expulsion involves the involuntary movement of people to create spaces or positions for a more select population or program.
  - Absorption involves attempts to control surplus populations, particularly when seen as out of place and threatening.
HISTORIC ABYEYANCE PROCESSES

- WPA
- Auschwitz
- Beguine/Convent
- Homeless camp in Honolulu
- Refugee container camp in Berlin
- Refugee camp of 5,000+ known as the Calais Jungle
Superfluousness is a situation in which some people find themselves rather than a characteristic of the persons so situated. It is a social condition rather than a social type.

The Superfluous are in a state of abeyance -- they are people for whom there are no available slots or places or for whom the abeyance process has been suspended.

If so, then superfluousness is partly a result of the nonexistence, breakdown, or suspension of societal abeyance processes that exist to absorb and control surplus and potentially troublesome people.
STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH POTENTIALLY SUPERFLUOUS POPULATIONS

1. **Absorption/Incorporation** via (a) expansion of societal/structural vacancies – e.g. WPA, (b) construction of abeyance structures – e.g., abbeys/monasteries, or (c) or through conversion/assimilation

2. **Structural confinement and isolation**
   - Soft – out-of-the-way/out-of-sight shelters in case of homeless
   - Hard – imprisonment – Japanese internment camps during WWII

3. **Population transfer/expulsion**
   - Superfluous populations in Nazi Germany
   - Cherokee “Trail of Tears” in the U.S. in the first third of the 1800s

4. **Liquidation/annihilation**
   - Regarding liquidation, Arendt provides the following warning toward the end of the Origins:
     - The Nazis and Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, and economic misery in a manner worthy of man (p. 459)
Returning to where we started, I have suggested that there is a kind of elective affinity between right-wing populism and the emergence of superfluous populations and the manner in which they may be dealt with strategically.

By superfluous people we mean – based on our integration of the work of political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958), anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966), and sociologist Lewis Coser (1969) – social categories for whom there is not a niche or place, whether for social structural or constructionist reasons, and who therefore are seen as redundant and expendable populations who fall outside of the cultural span of sympathy.

Linking these constructions of right-wing populism and superfluous people, we have argued, that right-wing populism is likely to be associated with two strikingly different and oppositional superfluous social categories: the “worthy People,” who have been framed as forgotten and superfluous to the existing elite but now as a deserving candidates for populist rescue and resurrection, and the “negative Others,” who are framed as unworthy and superfluous, and thus out of place or in a place that makes them candidates for various forms of social exclusion or worse.
This is not to say that populists necessarily generate superfluous populations, but they often nurture the soil for that possibility by engaging in their Manichean identity work and politics by exploiting certain existing trends, like the flow of uprooted peoples and migrants.

But we also need to exercise caution by assuming that there is a direct, linear relationship between escalating trends, like the refugee flow, and the rise of populism. To do so would be to ignore the fact that “populists have often distorted or even invented fact in order to make their case” (Zakaria 2016: 15), as Mr. Trump is given to do.

However, we have also cautioned that whether populations targeted by right-wing populist rhetoric become fully superfluous is likely to be contingent on at least two other factors: the collapse or contraction of the abeyance process and the associated cultural span of sympathy.

Last, we have called attention to a continuum of ways in which populists may strategically deal with superfluous populations of “the negative Other” variety, with both abeyance processes and fluctuations in the cultural span of sympathy also functioning as important intervening factors in this dynamic.
THANK YOU!
But as you leave, chew on the timeliness of these two complementary observations.

In the present day just as much as in the past, we see society constantly creating sacred things out of ordinary ones…If it happens to fall in love with a man and if it thinks it has found in him the principal aspirations that move it, as well as the means of satisfying them, this man will be raised above the others and, as it were, deified.

-- E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1915

Fascination is a social phenomenon…Society is always prone to accept a person offhand for what he pretends to be, so that a crackpot posing as a genius always has a certain chance to be believed. In modern society, with its characteristic lack of discerning judgment, the tendency is strengthened so that someone who not only holds opinions but also presents them in a tone of unshakeable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong.