

## Nationalist Populism: Preliminaries<sup>1</sup>

### *I. Questions:*

Nationalist populism (or is that populist nationalism?) reflected in different ways and to different extents in Modyism, Orbanism, Putinism, Salvini-ism, Trumpism, Xi-ism, and other instances, is the political phenomenon of the era that most calls out for explanation. What are its defining features? And what explains its rise in many places at the same time? What are the specifically economic - or political economy - aspects that unify it, if any? In the following I put forward some preliminary ideas for discussion, as a step in the development of a larger project.

### *II. Methodological queries:*

#### *a. Core and Family Resemblance*

The concept of a family resemblance may be applicable to Nationalist Populisms. The notion that they are a single phenomenon is challenged since there are important characteristics that individual instances have in common with other instances that do not appear to be common across all of them. On the other hand such variation is compatible with there being other features that are present in common across all the cases. The latter features are candidates to be thought of as defining.

For example, whereas illiberalism (a lack of commitment to fundamental liberties) and majoritarianism (seeking sanction and legitimacy in the purported will of majorities, for actions that include riding roughshod over previously values such as dignity or liberty of the individual) may be features of all of the movements, resentment at the loss of relative economic position or security due to structural

---

<sup>1</sup> Sanjay G. Reddy, [reddysanjay@gmail.com](mailto:reddysanjay@gmail.com) ; October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 VERY INITIAL AND INCOMPLETE draft, prepared for the fellows' seminar of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University.

changes such as deindustrialization is a feature that appears in some countries - for instance the United States, France and Italy - but not in others, for instance India and China. Determining which features are constitutive and which are conditional or contextual is part of the task.

The idea of a family resemblance is pointed to by Umberto Eco in a famous essay on “Ur-Fascism”<sup>2</sup> in which he describes the many ways in which phenomena commonly described as “fascist” in fact differ from one another. On the other hand, he identifies a specific set (of fourteen, no less!) elements that he understands as “typical” of “Ur-Fascism or eternal fascism”. He does not refer to these features as defining, recognizing that they may even contradict each other, but asserts that fascism should be seen to “coagulate” around one or more of them, for which “it is enough that one of them be present”. This is not quite the same as identifying a shared “core” of fascisms, and for that reason it is unsatisfying. Such a coagulative approach may seem to beg the question of definition that is essential to making coherent use of a term. But it may provide a beginning to understanding the unity in diversity of instances of the phenomenon.

Nationalist populisms are sometimes thought of by their boosters as containing common elements, even forming a single popular front that can fruitfully unite across countries in pursuit of common aims (however surprising that may seem in light of the particularist nature of nationalism). For instance, the Trumpist strategist and ideologue Steve Bannon has promoted a “neo-nationalist international”, while Viktor Orban and Vladimir Putin have openly associated themselves with a philosophy (if it can be called that) of “illiberal democracy”. Whether such ideas contain a conceptual or empirical core of nationalist

---

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, „Ur-Fascism: Freedom and liberation are an unending task“, *New York Review of Books*, June 22nd, 1995. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>

populism that allow one to move beyond a coagulative approach remains too a question for investigation.

Since we have mentioned fascism it may be important to note that among the burdens of definition that are faced in trying to understand nationalist populism is that of differentiating it from fascism, if it should indeed be differentiated. Many of the features of today's nationalist populisms (such as a proclaimed loyalty to tradition, a cult of action, an equation of disagreement with treason, a fear of difference shading into racism, the appeal to a frustrated middle class, the privileging of birth upon a soil, the obsession with plots - possibly international, a view of life as permanent warfare, contempt for the weak, machismo, a rejection of individual rights, an antagonism to "rotten" parliamentary governments, and an "impoverished vocabulary" and an "elementary syntax") appear to be on Eco's list of elements around which fascisms can coagulate. Where then do nationalist populisms end and fascisms begin? Are the distinctions merely quantitative or are they qualitative too? Eco

*b. Complexity and Holism*

Nationalist populisms requires an analysis that crosses the trenches of the accustomed academic divisions of labour. This is because their political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects are braided together. These aspects can be distinguished but they cannot be disentangled. Moreover, to understand any of their aspects requires understanding their others, and in particular the nature of the braiding that is present. For instance, it is impossible to understand their appeal in electoral politics without entering into the socio-cultural tropes that they employ when mobilizing voters, or to understand their use of these tropes without understanding the economic interests they seek to promote, and so on.

The possibility of distinguishing aspects of a phenomenon without being able to disentangle them is intrinsic to “complex” phenomena or systems. Their complexity derives precisely from the unavoidable interdependence of their elements. Moreover, which features are present and in what way may vary across instances, as we have already discussed.

Complexity of this kind can make explanatory analysis challenging, and even make it difficult to offer a definitive description of the phenomenon. A phenomenon that is complex in this sense requires, by its very nature an analysis that encompasses the interdependent aspects that make it up. It must therefore be holistic in the sense of encompassing different elements, for instance the economic, political and socio-cultural. A holistic analysis aims to capture the properties or features of a system that result from their interaction.

Realistically, we may aim for a picture of nationalist populism rather than a theory [Sraffa]. A picture is a predecessor to a theory, but more than a mere description. To count as a picture it ought to provide an analytical purchase on the whole. We might ask that it give some sense of content as well as form, cause and consequence as well as content. Is there yet a social scientific *picture* of nationalist populism? A picture would take account of the *whole*, referring to causes, contents, and consequences, seeking not merely to describe but to explain, and attempting to cross and connect domains (e.g., economic, political, cultural, etc.). Such an analysis may require [Deleuze and Guattari] ‘going down to the ganglia’ but also ‘going up to the trade balance’. The demand for such a simultaneously specific and integrative approach goes against the grain of the detailed division of labour in the social sciences. Gramsci’s analyses of Italian questions (and perhaps most famously, the Southern Question) are

exemplary in that regard, presenting a holistic and yet differentiated picture, conceptual and yet empirical, thrown up by the press of circumstances and the demands of activism. A picture of a phenomenon is an aide to action, and so it is not surprising that the search for such a picture is often linked to engagement in the world. But activist engagements are also often fractured as a result of the prevailing division of labour, no less so than are the academic social sciences.

### III. In Search of a Picture: Observations on Nationalist populisms

In the spirit of Eco, we can present some observations, initial and non-exhaustive, around which a picture of nationalist populisms might begin to congeal.

1. *Nationalist populism's appeals to a "people" as expressly distinguished from an elite, but this "people" is notional. The "people" is a sign rather than a referent. This sign is constituted by the phenomenon itself. The role of party and personality is to provide a focus of mobilization and thereby to constitute the "people" to which it appeals. The "people" do not precede party and personality. Party and personality precede "people".*

Nationalist populism employs a dyadic architecture, in which the *caudillo* - the strongman - who 'alone can fix it' interprets and embodies the people's will. The myth of the caudillo is that he is an event-making man<sup>3</sup> whose personal qualities make it possible for a nation to make a decisive turn in its history. The caudillo, however, is nothing without the people. Although the caudillo projects that the people, and their need, precedes him, in fact he magics the people up: the "people" objectively possess diverse identifications and interests, but subjectively they crystallize politically around his person, personality and party, reflecting the alchemy of politics. Nationalist populism involves the suturing or stitching

---

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Hook, 1955.

together of groups and persons possessing diverse identities and interests that they might “become” one<sup>4</sup>.

2. *Nationalist populism does not exclude outsiders so much as it insists that they be kept in an appropriate place.*

Nationalist populism’s central socio-political proposition is that the nation is owned by its real citizens, to which the corollary is that others, although they may be tolerated, must *know their place*.

There are evident tensions between this idea and the premises of democracy. Nationalist populism may claim a majoritarian mandate even if the ‘majority’ that supports it is in fact a minority as long as they are a majority of those who count. Counting is less important than those who count. This is all the more important if there is demographic change. The real citizens can remain a majority when they become a minority only if the outsiders remain a minority when they become a majority. Contrary ‘democratic’ arguments are for nationalist populists merely efforts at usurpation.

3. *Nationalist populism starts with a premise of victimhood.*

Nationalist populism promotes the politics of resentment on the part of its supporters, even as it rejects it in others. It constitutes a form of identity politics just as it decries identity politics. It stokes resentment and the attitude of victimhood. It makes symmetry arguments to justify asymmetry. A basic hypothesis is that there has been aggression to which there must be a response. There is always already grounds for resentment, and comity is imagined to be possible only possible when the other retreats, so that the wound has been salved. Nationalist populism understands the people as peaceable, innocent, and long-suffering but also projects the people as being, under its own leadership, virile, worldly and

---

<sup>4</sup> Laclau and Mouffe.

ready to defend its interests. The people are “reasonable” but others are not. Nationalist populists insist that “they” won’t be permitted to take advantage of “us” anymore. Nationalist populism depends on its others to exist. If they did not exist it would have to create them.

4. *Nationalist populism presents itself as conservative but is radical insofar as it seeks to weaken the constitutional order (including democratic institutions and individual rights). Where the “bourgeois revolution” sought to give rights to the people, nationalist populism seeks to diminish these rights. The primary end of this diminishment is to enhance oligarchic privileges.*

Nationalist populism favours the weakening of constitutional machinery in the interest of achieving objectives which are illegitimately obstructed by the rotten present order. The hall mark of this approach is its promotion of presidentialism, the doctrine of unrestrained powers of the caudillo. Nationalist populism accepts checks and balances as long as they do not get in the way of the ‘right answer’. Contrary to classical conservatism, which sees such checks and balances as limiting tyranny, whether arising from the monarch or the demos, nationalist populism conceives of unlimited presidential power as providing for the projection of the will of the demos against the obstacles of the contrarily minded, e.g. eggheads and special interests. The caudillo stands in a rapturous relation with the demos, and therefore expresses the general will.

Despite its insistence on being representative of the popular will, nationalist populism focuses on implementing policies that enhance oligarchic interests and rule<sup>5</sup>. Nationalist populism obscures the distinction between popular and oligarchic interests. It does so in part by opposing specific oligarchs, in particular those who have shown opposition to its program, while protecting and promoting oligarchy. Nationalist populism is not opposed to undermining the rights of oligarchs in the larger interest of

---

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Winters, Oligarchy.

oligarchy since it holds little store by individual rights. This is an ironic reversal of the historical process of rights formation, as reflected for instance in the Magna Carta, in which the protection of the individual rights of the nobles in relation to the king advanced the collective interest of the nobility. Here, the protection of their collective rights requires the sacrifice of their individual rights<sup>6</sup>.

5. *Nationalist populism is in essence power politics. It downplays the need for justification and it therefore also thrives on its opponents' failures to justify. Nationalist populism rejects symmetry and consistency as principles of reasoning. It uses argument as a form of rhetoric without being bound by the rules of argument.*

Nationalist populism justifies its actions in terms of declared imperatives. It refuses to be bound by rules and indeed sees its willingness to overthrow them as vitalizing. On a day to day basis, it fights a war of position, or engages in cheap talk - appearing to recognize specific bounds, only later to flout them. Nationalist populism creates and refers to an atmosphere of emergency to justify its actions, but the need for detailed justification is downplayed in light of the urgency of the presumed imperatives. 'Justification lite' is rationalized by pointing to others' previous failures of justification. Nationalist populism projects back-room deals as having been pervasive, suggesting that all public arguments are a self-indulgent sham. This is taken to justify its own unconcern with traditional forms of justification.

The communities of justification which are represented by experts and their expertise (both in academia and outside of it) are conceived by nationalist populism as engaged in a systematic and self-serving

---

<sup>6</sup> It would seem that nationalist populism provides a clear instance of the formula of Marx and Engels: "*the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie*" (Communist Manifesto).

charade of societal deception. This does not only undermine the specific perspectives of such experts, but the need to provide justification as such.

Populist nationalist rhetoric is heavily laden with ethical language (most often involving accusations of wrong-doing and assertions of virtue). Nationalist populists reject the idea that moral propositions must be universalizable (that they must hold for me if they hold for thee) [R.M. Hare]. They can do this since they also hold that there is a difference in type between thee and me. Virtue inheres in persons rather than in actions. If there are any universalizable moral propositions, their scope is very limited. Public morality is collapsed to a narrow field, supporting the universal exercise of national self-regard.

6. *Nationalist populists seek to avoid institutional restraints both to consolidate power and to allow politics to become a “multi-dimensional battlefield”.*

Nationalist populism projects active hostility to existing institutions, both national and international, if they threaten to restrain its program. Its rejection of national institutions and legal orders reflects its cult of presidentialism. Nationalist populism subscribes to decisionism<sup>7</sup>: the idea that the law is what the decider decides. and that the making and implementation of decisions, without obstruction (e.g. from courts or legislatures) is the highest legal imperative. Both in the national and the international setting, nationalist populism seeks to use power in one sphere to strategic advantage in another sphere, where institutions might otherwise obstruct tactical deployments. For example, military power can be used as a source of advantage in trade negotiations, or economic power can be used as a source of advantage in negotiations about military responsibilities. Domain-specific institutions and legal frameworks restrain such opportunistic uses of differential power but anti-institutionalism clears the

---

<sup>7</sup> Schmitt.

way for such contextual exercises of power. Nationalist populism seeks to exercise of maximal power in each bilateral relationship by using all available instruments intensely and in conjunction with one another. Nationalist populism brings into the political sphere the doctrine of the multidimensional 'battlespace' that has gained currency in military planning - a multidimensional alternative to the traditional 'battleground'. Anti-institutionalism reflects the embrace of tactics and the rejection of strategy. Nationalist populism views the long-term as a series of short-terms, and the best chance for the protection and promotion of power to be the sequential and endless pursuit of tactical advantage.

*7. Nationalist populists act as if identity politics are interest politics (but also use identities to deflect attention from other interests, in particular oligarchic interests).*

Nationalist populists decry identity politics but also trade in it (by identifying the nation with its 'real citizens'). The rejection of the identity politics of others is based on the idea that it demands special favours and in the process threatens the interests, material as well as immaterial, of real citizens.

Contrarily, nationalist populists demands the restoration of the place of real citizens, which requires both the proper allocation of the state's material benefits (e.g. to farmers or firms rather than to illegal immigrants) as well as the renewed centrality of real citizens in the symbolic order. Outsiders are a threat *both* to the material and the identitarian interests of real citizens and the identity politics of nationalist populism is a requirement for the protection of those interests. Nationalist populism rejects traditional conservatives, whom it sees as emasculated, precisely for failing to make this connection between identity and interests.

8. *Nationalist populism speaks an economic discourse that is paretian<sup>8</sup> rather than egalitarian. Its first commitment is to maintain and extend oligarchic wealth.*

Because nationalist populism protects and promotes the interests of oligarchy, it rejects egalitarianism and embraces paretianism (the idea that all, or at least the real citizens, who matter) will be made better off by its policies. It therefore is unembarrassed by, and even relishes, the idea that wealth is gained and possessed unequally. Nationalist populism rejects the procedural egalitarianism of (neo-) liberal democrats who emphasized starting gate equality, but are “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich” [Peter Mandelson of New Labour, who added “as long as they pay their taxes] and look forward to the creation of a socially diverse plutocracy. Instead, nationalist populists demand *substantive paretianism*, the idea that both procedural and substantive egalitarianism can be dispensed with as long as the system can be claimed to protect the vital interests of all “real” citizens, and better yet to provide some gains for all, however unequally.

9. *Nationalist populism’s economic policies reflect a greater commitment to protect and promote oligarchic wealth than to protect or promote industry or productive capabilities.*

Nationalist populism offers the theatre of a response to deindustrialisation rather than its actuality. Nationalist populism has little by way of an economic program. It favours such policies as tariffs, which can only partially compensate for the immense cost advantages of offshoring, and in more labour intensive industries, this will be quite insufficient to affect sourcing decisions. Tariffs can make a difference at most in marginal industries in which the decision to produce onshore or offshore remains close enough for them to matter. Nationalist populism does not propose a national economic project

---

<sup>8</sup> Paretianism is the idea that the situation is better when some are better off and none are worse off.

that restores industrial competitiveness, centred on an industrial strategy that includes suitable investment and supports for specific firms or sectors to build capabilities. This would require a realistic self-appraisal from which nationalist populism shrinks.

*10. Nationalist populism is pro-business rather than pro-market. Its “Anti-globalism” is not anti-globalization.*

Nationalist populism is not against “neoliberalism”. The “anti-globalism” forcefully expressed by some populist nationalist ideologists does not necessarily reflect opposition to economic globalization, only an opposition to rule-based multilateralism. Nationalist populism favours (very loosely following Joan Robinson’s famous description of neoclassical Keynesianism) “bastard neoliberalism”, a doctrine which is an impure if recognizable version of the original. It welcomes international integration on selective terms, for instance seeking to attract foreign investment.

*11. Nationalist populism is pseudo-nationalist; it lacks a “national project”.*

Nationalist populism is defined most of all by what it rejects. It claims to right wrongs, by denying previous unfairness and aggression, thereby ‘negating negations’. But nationalist populism has little by way of a *national project*, understood as a positive formula, describing what kind of a nation it seeks to build, especially outside of the realm of culture.

*12. Nationalist populism is a phenomenon of post-traditional society, despite its invocation of tradition.*

Nationalist populism reflects, both in its style and in its substance, a disavowal of traditions, even as it invokes the past and the idea of restoration. It does away with traditional norms of behaviour, canons of propriety, indexes of status, and mechanics of form. Nationalist populists use a ‘jargon of

authenticity' [Adorno]. A cornucopia of civilisation is replaced by an empty vessel, and purported metaphysic.

Nationalist populism's rejection of experts and expertise, journalistic authorities, and established political arbiters and families reflects its post-traditional character. It substitutes its own charismatic leadership for the charismatic aura and authority of the past.

*13. Nationalist populism is a phenomenon of modernization of modernity. It reflects the possibility of modernization without rationalization.*

Nationalist populism is anti-modern insofar as it rejects many of the elements of modernity as conventionally understood in the sociological tradition (e.g. by Weber), for instance constitutional rules and procedures. It is a movement of selective rather than comprehensive scepticism, bringing processes, authorities and institutions under scrutiny. It is moreover made possible by the specific social, economic and political conditions of contemporary modernity, for instance "social media". It is therefore a movement born of the modernization of modernity but with anti-modern characteristics. Nationalist populism does not employ scepticism to refine its own practices of scepticism (reflexive scepticism), which is an essential practice of science. Instead, it is antagonistic to all scepticism of *its* forms of scepticism. Because of its lack of reflexivity, the direction in which it seeks to 'modernize' modernity remains un-modern. Nationalist populism is a practice without a theory.

*14. Nationalist populism is a creative practice of constructing a hegemony based on polarization.*

*This process is inherently unstable.*

Nationalist populism is an effort to construct hegemony by appealing to various constituencies that can form a coalition sufficient to gain and maintain power. Its prime political imperative is to suture together fragmentary interests. Flexible mobilization is necessary in order to make one from many ('e pluribus unum'). The psychic raw materials that are mobilized are drawn from the bric-a-brac of felt identifications, some conscious and some not. These are shaped and held together by the classical and contemporary political techniques of social mobilization, through which identities are constructed and interests perceived. But nationalist populism is therefore neither top-down nor bottom-up. It reflects the possibilities for capitalizing politically on what exist 'in the ganglia'. As a result, its policies and programmes are not fully explained by the ideas and perceived interests of the broader public that adheres to it, although they are made possible by those ideas and perceived interests. Nationalist populism is no different from most other political movements in which the interests of the electoral constituencies that favour them are not definitive, but elite interests are influential and often crucial to explaining policies and projects. The elements in the populist nationalist coalition can be picked off by appealing to specific identifications and perceived interests. Nationalist populism therefore faces threats from the left as much or more than from the right, and it is beset by potential instability.

Nationalist populism's stability can be enhanced by ideological work that shores up identifications with (for example, through the creation of identity-stoking and interest-perception-shaping provocations). Such efforts at routinizing crisis require keeping at the forefront exactly that which makes nationalist populism noxious to constitutional democrats. Nationalist populism of necessity does continuous ideological work to maintain its coalition. Nationalist populism conducts an 'everyday plebiscite' [Renan]

Nationalist populism's everyday work is less to provide a heroic last stand and more to keep the glands from which ideology is secreted [Althusser] active, and thus to sustain its supportive coalition.

Nationalist populism cannot be sustained without polarization, and crisis. Routine, and peace, are its enemies.