

Matthew's Design Spine: Initial Version

GOALS FOR THE DISSERTATION

- 1) Theorize/conceptualize populism in a more accessible way for sociologists;
- 2) Understand how this theoretical/conceptual construct helps us to make sense of social organizations and their motivations/goals;
- 3) Understand how social organizations (e.g. the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, ACORN Canada) construct antagonistic publics around them using populist truth-claims (discourse/style/ideology)
- 4) Understand how tensions in democratic architecture fuel individual motivations

RELEVANCE TO (CANADIAN) SOCIOLOGY

While many journalists, policy reports, etc. have referred to Donald Trump (and those like him) as a “populist” or a “demagogue”, these labels invoke the popular, morally-infused version of the term. The sociological/analytical meaning of the word is severely underdeveloped and scholars have only begun to explore this in the last couple of years—we need a way to de-mystify the forces that bring such individuals to power

Political theory has all but a monopoly on the term when it has clear sociological relevance (Knight 1998; Jansen 2011; Moffitt & Tormey 2014)

Kevin O’Leary recently announced bid for Conservative Party leadership – will this tap into analogous forces in the Canadian context?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A wide variety of approaches taken to studying populism, each with strengths/disadvantages. While the form of study varies, all can agree on some basic features: this includes a “them vs. us” set up; usually a leader positioning themselves as “outside the system”; makes reference to “the People” in some way; is an inherent feature of democratic architecture itself; orthogonal to the left-right spectrum

Approaches include populism-as-ideology; populism-as-logic; populism-as-discourse; populism-as-style/practice

What most literature takes for granted is that populism is located in “big P”, state-centred politics, rather than small p, civil society-based politics

A paucity of sociological approaches try to diffuse populism by calling it populist mobilization, discussing how it can be routinized (Knight 1998, Jansen 2011).

A new fresh conceptualization of a “small p populism” could be applied to social organizations and the moral entrepreneurs within them

METHODOLOGY

Looking at maximum case variation: want to investigate how organizations as wholes and their specific workers draw on populist techniques to articulate truth-claims

Possible cases: CTF (right-wing populism); CCPA/ACORN Canada (left-wing populism)

Ideal setup: qualitatively-dominant, simultaneous/integrated mixed/multi-method design drawing on components of Hall and Ryan’s (2011) investigation of educational accountability in U.S. schools
Short surveys (can use existing populist scales) and document analysis: used to evaluate populism at the organizational level

Narrative approach/focus groups (depending): populism at the level of the micro, making sense of own lives and involvement

WHAT I WANT TO ULTIMATELY WRITE ABOUT

1. How organizations as wholes continuously generate antagonistic publics using populist strategies/discourses/styles, and in doing so, construct themselves;
2. How people draw on populist strategies/discourses/styles to make sense of their own involvement in these organizations, and how this might be applicable to Canadians, the Canadian identity, etc.

Number 2 is particularly important to me, because it can reveal something about how and why people become animated by populist discourse. This can set up a platform for future research discussing how it becomes tapped into by particular political leaders.

If populism is generated from the architecture of democratic systems, we should expect to find it in other places (i.e. not just self-identified politically right or left-leaning organizations) as well!

VERY ROUGH, POSSIBLY LEADING, TENTATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How can we think of populism a tool—available to all democratic citizens—for moral entrepreneurship?
2. How do populist tools, conceived of as under (1), factor into the organizational life (recruitment, campaigning, truth-claims) of social organizations engaged in moral entrepreneurship?
3. Expanding on (2), how and why are populist discourses and styles deployed by members of morally entrepreneurial organizations to make sense of their own participation?

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Recent discussions of populism are overwhelmingly theoretical (but see e.g. Pollock, Brock and Ellison 2015)

Discussions of populism as discourse or style are primarily done in the US or Europe; in Canada, populism-as-ideology monopolizes the discussion and is typically reduced to discussions around Social Credit in Alberta (e.g. work by David Laycock)

“Diffusion” of “small p” populism has yet to receive any kind of empirical treatment, namely because of conceptual difficulties