Matthew's Design Spine: With More Elaboration

Populism & Secrecy

Goals for the dissertation

1) To theorize populism in a theoretically sophisticated, yet empirically accessible way, since literature tend to pick one or the other;

2) Make sense of recent events including 'secret terrorist attacks' (e.g. Bowling Green Massacre), Trump's antagonism toward the media, particular aspects of Brexit, while also de-sensationalizing the concept and not just using it under extraordinary circumstances

3) To distill the strengths of different approaches into a novel approach: that of generative secrecy (Dean 2001, 2002)

4) Empirically ground this theorization of populism using case studies that show how populism is an antagonistic political tool used by both leaders and organizations

Relevance to (Canadian) Sociology

'Populism' largely neglected by contemporary sociologists (but see Jansen, 2011); used by journalists and some academics in derogatory ways, adding confusion

This is problematic because despite its connotative flexibility it something real that is difficult to pin down; this is a theme throughout historical literature (Worseley, 1969; Canovan, 1981; Arditi, 2007; Freeden, 2017)

We see similar political actors trying to tap into analogous forces in the Canadian context (e.g. Kellie Leitch, Kevin O'Leary) but at the same time, Canadian social organizations and unions have also been characterized as populist (Thomas & Tufts, 2014)

Despite this spread, little effort has gone into clarifying populism, especially one useful in the Canadian context, beyond the narrow theorizing around Preston Manning's Reform Party (e.g. Laycock, 2012)

Theoretical Framework: Where we are now

Three main approaches to the study of populism, each with strengths and criticisms

1) Populism as thin-centred ideology: first hinted at by Worseley (1969) and developed further in the 2000s (Meny & Surel, 2002; Albertazzi, 2008); remains popular today (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pollick et al., 2015; Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016)

Helpful because it tries to locate ideational content of populism such as apocalyptic theorizing, antagonism for social elites (academics, government people, 'the 1%'), etc.

Criticized because it largely ignores other conceptualizations while drawing on Michael Freeden's work on ideologies (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Freeden himself has recently critiqued this approach, delivering quite a blow to its analytical utility (Freeden, 2017)

Also criticized because it tries to 'pin down' populism according to its ontic content, which has been criticized in highly sophisticated ways by Laclau (2005) among others; static form of populism when we need a dynamic one to afford any analytical purchase

2) Populism as political logic: the influential work of Laclau (2005) building off his former work of populism-as-hegemony (1977)

Helpful because it supplies us with the aforementioned dynamic view; populism is not something that is, it is something that does; 'the People' are not pre-existing and activated but constructed through the very discursive architecture and crystallization of equivalental links, often around a leader. It hence de-reifies 'the People'

Criticized because of conceptual slippage across Laclau's work, which is supposed to be cumulative (Arditi, 2010).

Further, criticized because it seems to equate politics with populism, and this is visible in Panizza's (2005) volume of Laclauian application where authors simply read Laclau's work into whatever cases interest them; anything can be populist in this framework

1) Populism as political style or discourse; two camps in this approach
The first: political scientists who operationalize populism as a kind of rhetoric capable of mobilizing followers with particular sociodemographic features, such as the less educated and economically insecure. Highly empirical approach (e.g. Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016)
Helpful because populism is often poorly operationalized for empirical analysis, and these scholars at least attempt to make it measurable despite flaws
The second: informed by political sociology, sees populism not as mobilizing already-insecure individuals but calling into being subjects that rally behind a charismatic figurehead (Jansen, 2011; Moffit & Tormey, 2014)
Criticize first approach for reification of 'the People' and over-simplifying populism's ontology, not unlike Laclau's criticisms of ideological approaches
Helpful because it sheds insight on how political actors/leaders can tap into tensions in democratic architecture (Canovan, 2004; Rosanvallon, 2008)
Key contribution of both halves in this camp: populism does not need a structural or economic crisis to exist. It can exist in much more mundane times (Knight, 1998; Jansen, 2011; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016)
However, focuses narrowly on leader-follower relationships when it has been implied by some scholars that populism can be relatively acephalous or institutionalized (Knight, 1998); this is highly evident in organizations like the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation and movements such as the Occupy movement
Some common ground in all three camps: populism is anti-elitist, focus on 'the People', results from real democratic tensions and is not some superficial discourse

Theoretical Framework: Where I want to go
Distill the strengths of each approach into Jodi Dean's conceptualization of the secret, which is the ontological prior of the public. The public exists only through 'finding out' secrets

Can articulate the positives of each to this approach.
Ideational/ideological approach: populist secrecy generates insecure, antagonistic publics capitalizing on intrinsic democratic tensions
Laclauian approach: it de-reifies 'the People' and locates it as a fantasy rather than as having a pre-existing form (see Dean, 2001, p. 43).
Stylistic approach: it can be used by leaders to call into being a desirable kind of 'public subject'.
Populism thus becomes a specific type of secret that exists by virtue of its publicization, and hence, allows actors and organizations to construct antagonistic publics around them by wielding the fantasies of a public/People

Methodology
Sticking to maximum case variation: how this 'tool' is used by organizations and individuals seeking to construct antagonistic publics
Possible cases: CTF (right-wing populism); CCPA (left-wing populism)
Qualitative or qualitatively-dominant design showing how this particular kind of secret operates at both individual and organizational levels—looking for the secretive discursive form that links individuals and their organization into a set of 'strong repertoires' (Tilly, 2008)
Also, need to illustrate that this can also link leaders and followers by calling into being kinds of subjects through the secret.

Trump's clumsy attempts at using the secret: e.g. media 'covering up' terrorist attacks, publishing lists of crimes by unauthorized immigrants, and so forth; can have racial, class-based, gendered components

Concerns

Need to sufficiently distance myself from Jansen's (2011) approach while building on it; he conceives of populism happening in 'episodes' whereas I want to 'mundanize' it
He hints at getting away from leader-follower dynamic, but does not push that envelop enough
Current design is thin; I want to talk with people, but not sure how to illustrate concept's utility