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Populism as Peripheral *Resentment*?

Emotions, Narratives and Sliding Processes

Summary

The claim that the great surge in populism across the USA and Europe is carried by *modernization losers* has recently taken a *spatial turn*: the populist wave is said to be driven by the *resentment* of *peripheral* dwellers: those who live in the countryside, small towns or “broken provincial cities” (Collier 2018), who feel left behind by a process of *metropolization* that benefits a (increasingly cosmopolitan) class of global city dwellers.

The *peripheral resentment thesis* consists of two claims: that the emotional state of *resentment* drives populism (1) and that this emotional state is fueled by the image of a *periphery-metropole cleavage* and the ways in which this image is *narrated* (2). In the theoretical part of the project, we aim to make innovative contributions to the populism debate by clarifying these two claims. Drawing on the rich literature in the *philosophy of political emotions*, we conceptualize resentment as an emotion between the impersonal and *progressive* emotion of *indignation*, and the personal, reactive, vindictive and *regressive* sentiment of *ressentiment*. Importantly, we also model the ways in which *sliding* between these emotional states (and their narrative anchors) may take place. This allows for new answers to the question of how to *evaluate* the phenomenon of populism, which stands at the center of the debate in political theory. Second, we contribute to the *spatial turn* literature in the debate on populism by turning our focus from material-economic structures or fixed cultural identities to the *processes* of *narrating* periphery-metropole cleavages: *in which ways*, across divergent contexts, do populist agents draw on the narrative of being at the losing end of a process which sees “metropolitan elites” skim *economic* gains and take control in both the spheres of *politics* and *culture*? Are such images expressively connected to emotions of indignation, resentment or *ressentiment* and how do shifts between these distinct emotional states (and their narrative anchors) take place?

In a complementary empirical part, our qualitative approach aims to concretize and contextualize our conceptual innovations. In both narrative interviews and focus groups we investigate not only which kind of narratives our study participants draw on – narratives expressive of peripheral indignation, resentment or *ressentiment* – we also look at whether and how sliding between these different narratives (and the emotional states they are expressive of) occurs. We conduct interviews to trace long-term biographical sliding and focus groups to trace short term sliding. We also look at variations across divergent structural contexts, by gathering data in both centralized and decentralized countries in Western Europe, and variation in the use of narratives across divergent communicative contexts, by organizing homogeneous focus groups, which include only populists, and heterogeneous groups, in which populists and non-populists interact.

Main Field: Political Theory; Subfield: Qualitative Social Research