



The Critical Masses: The Rise of Contemporary Populism and Its Relation to Solidarity, Systems, and Lifeworlds

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary spread of populism across the globe. We argue that populist movements worldwide are responses to the colonization of lifeworlds by increasingly opaque knowledge and regulatory systems. The complexity of the systems that regulate and control the day-to-day life of individuals from afar makes these systems alien and incomprehensible, and consequently perceived as illogical and oppressive. To regain a sense of autonomy, actors have reasserted a way of thinking and acting contrary to the organic web of global interdependence, seeking independence from communities outside the known lifeworld via revitalized community control and an emphasis upon qualities resembling mechanical solidarity. We evidence this claim by comparing two contemporary phenomena which seem to be distinct events until interpreted in this way: movements against international humanitarian law and the French *Gilets Jaunes*. We conclude by discussing the implications for those interested in contemporary populist events in the USA and abroad and the role of scientists in communicating our findings.

Keywords Populism · Lifeworlds · Expertise · Phenomenology · Systems · Community

Recently, a global wave of movements and political leaders, perceived as outliers in the political landscape, have called for radical changes in social systems under the guise of representing the people against elites. They appeal to “common sense” politics, challenging governance norms and etiquette. Pundits have increasingly used “populist” to describe these movements, be they right-wing, left-wing, authoritarian, or democratic. Academics have followed suit, increasingly discussing populism, especially surrounding the successes of Viktor Orbán, *Rassemblement National*, Podemos, Syriza, the

Brexit campaign, and Trumpism. Many wonder why populism seems to be in vogue. To this, academics have wrestled with what seems to be a perennial question: what exactly is populism? It could be that media and academics have entered a moral panic about contemporary politics, especially as the populist label is often used to discredit movements and politicians (Pollock, Brock, and Ellison 2015).

We propose a conceptualization which complements seemingly disparate understandings in the field. This perspective also explains some unique elements which make this populist wave distinct from past manifestations. We argue that this wave of populism is a response to frustration and helplessness with the increased complexity of international systems that govern people’s day-to-day lives. The excess differentiation and complexity results in system logics colonizing lifeworlds, which is commonly perceived as the increasing power and prevalence of abstract, expert knowledge over our lives. Experts’ increasing mediation of the social world, resulting in our reliance on their interpretations of the convoluted web of interdependencies, has generated a sense of helplessness and frustration among individuals that strive for a more recognizable reality.

Earlier analyses treated populism an ontic category; a thing with objective qualities, sometimes associated with stable political beliefs. Hofstadter (2008[1952]) famously identified

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anti-intellectualism and right-wing beliefs with populism. Though still present in some analyses (e.g., Müller 2016), this approach has generally fallen out of favor as analysts identified heterogeneity among and within movements that could be classified as populist, including left/right political ideologies (Booth and Baert 2018; Mouffe 2005; Ramiro and Gomez 2017), democratic/authoritarian (Goodwyn 1978; Jessen 2017; Tang 2016), or intentions towards the past/future (Jaster 2020). Analyses of Trumpism and the Brexit campaign, two notable recent populist movements, have yielded multiple, contradictory accounts regarding whether these movements are primarily motivated by race/immigration (Bhambra 2017; Goetz et al. 2019; Shaw 2022) or broader economic trends (Farley 2019; Rosenberg and Boyle 2019). The Trump coalition seems to lack a consistent political ideology (Smith 2019; Gibson and Shaw 2019). Historically, the American Populist Party included those who wanted to preserve small-community-like ways of life (McMath Jr. 1993) and progressives who embraced centralized organization (Postel 2007). These analyses show important facets of populist movements but do not unify scholarly understandings of the broader phenomenon. Either the concept is used inconsistently, or these analyses do not strike to the core of the populist phenomenon.

Moving beyond the perennial debates about populist ontology, contemporary discussions focus instead on populism as a political logic, discourse, or phenomenology. Laclau (2005; 2011[1979]) asserts that populism is a political logic based on antagonism between the unfulfilled demands of an explicitly vaguely defined people and unresponsive power. Populist leaders play the role of an empty signifier: their emptiness is what allows them to represent the people against systems whose failure produced cracks in hegemonic understandings.

Building on Laclau's conceptualization, a pattern of key defining features of populism has emerged. First there is a claim by leaders of the movement that they represent the people against elites or outsiders, representing vertical or horizontal dimensions, respectively (Brubaker 2017). There is also a tension between the demands of the population for leadership's responsiveness to their demands and power holders' understandings of this responsibility (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). This tension can be the result of conflict over the production and communication of knowledge (Brewer 2020; Ylä-Anttila 2018), or in the understandings of the foundations of legal systems (Blokker 2019). These friction points can produce a sense of resentment and desire for redemption of a broken system which foment populist movements (da Silva and Vieira 2018, 2019; Yi, Phillips, and Lee 2019).

These new approaches share a common perspective, but often clash on specifics. Like the ideological analytic strategy, there are multiple facets. However, unlike the ideological approach, the discursive/logic/phenomenological approach has

yielded much more consistent results despite the heterogeneous movements discussed. This indicates that it may be striking at a core of the populist phenomenon. However, these papers tend to describe the phenomena, and not explain it (c.f. Brubaker 2017). In response to Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2018) observation that populist theories tend to exist in isolation of one another, we offer a common foundation to seemingly disparate ideas. The tendency of contemporary populist scholarship to focus on the phenomenal experience of society's division of understandings and communicative action indicates that Durkheim and Habermas may be important additions to populist theory. These scholars may provide a common theoretical foundation to the concept and help us understand how contemporary populism parallels, and differs, from other historical epochs.

Towards a Theory of Contemporary Populism

To understand the populist angst against complexity, we start with Durkheim's description of social cohesion. Durkheim focused on the transition from less socially variegated societies to more complex ones. Earlier societies were generally marked by similarity. This similarity, mechanical solidarity, must be enforced as it is a condition of social cohesion. Smaller distinctions were tolerated, but excess difference was largely a threat to the group: recognition of oneself in others marked who was and was not part of the community (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 61).

As society developed, people specialized. Durkheim focused on the division of labor, but specialization also entails a certain amount of phenomenal differentiation: people will have different experiences and knowledges (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 85). As difference became increasingly preponderant, organic solidarity developed. What binds societies united by organic solidarity is no longer similarity, now lacking, but a knowledge of interdependence. As people become more individualized and specialized, they rely on each other to make up for underdeveloped skills (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 85). Organic solidarity's development is associated with weakened mechanical solidarity.

As individualism and a variety of experiences flourish, mechanical solidarity remains in a weaker but more generalized state (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 84, 122). It never disappears. Durkheim (2001[1912]) argued that homogeneity in collective thought makes collective representations possible (pgs. 175–176). We regularly need to reaffirm common feelings, unity, and the collective personality to maintain group cohesion (Durkheim 2001[1912]: 322–327). Though society will become increasingly complex, there remain vestiges of a need for similarity embedded in our phenomenal experience.

The mechanisms of this process are crucial. As society differentiates, individuals' and organizations' actions increasingly

require independence from normative contexts. Collective enterprises need to be coordinated without having to rely on common understandings and experiences. As specialization becomes more prominent, linguistic communication becomes more difficult: we rely on means such as money and power to bypass communicative processes (Habermas 1985[1981]: 183). The lifeworld, the common lived experience of an individual and community rooted in normative understandings, is no longer needed to coordinate action. Abstract systems do the work instead. This process can result in the technicizing of the lifeworld, where social subsystems begin to operate independently of common experiences. Oil prices, public health instructions, and traffic regulations, things that directly affect personal experiences, are dictated by abstract distance forces. Decisions and actions can be made without reference to the muddled process of creating common meaning: this reduces the impact of contingent communication and its associated risks. Things are or are not: there is less debate, and the system can operate regardless of your beliefs on the matter (Habermas 1985[1981]: 183–185). Coffee farmers' hardships and experiences are irrelevant to our purchasing the drink.

We accept means of coordination divorced from communicative processes, such as money and power, because the new system is a net benefit; we recognize our interdependence. However, these systems can interfere in areas of our lives that are generally managed by interpersonal negotiation constituting part of the construction of common understandings of the world, i.e., communicative action. Differentiating systems are not just outside of our experience: systems can become so complex that their logics begin to colonize lifeworlds (Habermas 1985[1981]: 155–197). Colonization begins when “subsystems of the economy and state become more and more complex as a consequence of capitalist growth and penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1985[1981]: 367), including areas such as family relations and lifestyle choices (Habermas 1985[1981]: 356). For instance, we reduce human life or community vocational cultures to monetary valuations when deciding if they are worth preserving.

We can see this not only in money and power systems, but also expertise, key to our focus on contemporary populism. Because actions can be coordinated without communication between people of different experiences, “increases in complexity achieved at the expense of a rationalized lifeworld cannot be identified as costs” (Habermas 1985[1981]: 186). If systems become too complex and are not integrated into the communicative rationality of lifeworlds, which focus on inclusive discussions of common meaning based in experience, then systems will be unable to identify what people will react negatively to. Systems will prioritize coordination at any cost, potentially invading the lifeworld and prompting a reaction; against expertise divorced from everyday experience.

The gap between expertise and everyday lived experience relates to the concept of a risk society. Discourses on risk have shifted from understandable clear and present dangers to more nebulous risks that are largely invisible in the here and now; the effects may remain hidden from direct observation or may not manifest until later (Beck 1992[1986]: 27). Risks now expand beyond borders and provincial understandings of ourselves and society. The increased complexity of social structures and interactions also produces multiple risks. The more delicate and convoluted the system, the higher the likelihood of something failing, and with it a potential cascade of unintended consequences (e.g., how COVID-19 affected global logistical chains and led to shortages of essential materials worldwide). To avoid these types of risks, we increasingly need specialists to help us understand just how interconnected our world is; people trained to identify these hidden logics which control our world and present both risks and opportunities (Beck 1992[1986]: 23, 36–37). For example, we need regulatory experts to tell us if our child's toys are poisonous.

The specialization and increased complexity of the knowledge and social systems pluralized and multiplied our understanding and the interpretation of risk. But social and natural sciences do not monopolize these understandings of risk. Actors are forced into dialogue with one another: there are multiple competing stakeholders, victims, beneficiaries, etc., all with their own understandings of whether something is worth the risk given their understandings of the benefits. Risk is thus a mixture of more objective probabilities and political-moral debates which operate in the more subjective (communicative) realm of the social and societal. Risk is more than the probabilities and systems logics that dominate the sciences: it is about subjective evaluation and normative debate (Beck 1992[1986]: 29–33).

This has prompted a reaction from society. Systems became too divorced from our lived experience, making their effects unrecognizable for non-system experts. Contemporary critique of sciences “indicates that the cultural premises of acceptability contained in scientific and technical statements on risks *are wrong*. The technical risk experts *are mistaken* in the empirical accuracy of their implicit value premises, specifically in their assumptions of what appears acceptable to the population” (Beck 1992[1986]: 58). Like systems, the very people trained to understand risks from the systematic perspective, scientists and technocrats, have become alienated from lay lifeworlds. They no longer understand and work within people's everyday understandings of risk. People therefore react to this discrepancy and challenge the experts' worldviews, replacing them with personal interpretations of risk (Brubaker 2017).

This emphasis on expertise increasingly separating from common understandings gives us clues into how Durkheim's theory on specialization can identify common threads among many contemporary populist groups.

Durkheim's theory of social development is teleological. But perhaps it should be understood as cyclical with dialectic properties. Within the process of differentiation and specialization, there exist internal processes which undermine the organic network and promote a yearning for a more mechanically united society rooted in similarity.

As professional norms and understandings localize in narrower communities via specialization, their authority becomes less influential because it is less universal (Durkheim 1984[1893]: 243). This is even more true in contemporary complex societies, which have an extensive division of labor between experts and laypeople. We increasingly rely on administrations indirectly steering people based on experts' mystical prognostications (MacIntyre 1984: 79–108). This can produce problems such as an overemphasis on coordination at the political administrative level when legislating, a systems-like focus, instead of focusing on moral and ethical problems (Habermas 1996: 320–321).

This is particularly problematic for governance systems that derive their legitimacy from popular consent and participation (Blokker 2019). Democratic governance systems are only legitimized when citizens feel like the system represents not only facts but commonly held norms. They must feel like they understand why regulations and laws exist, and feel like they can influence the deliberative process (Habermas 1996: 408). The constant push and pull of the growing complexity of systems and the lifeworld's requirement for a more unified common experience and understanding translates into a dynamic between complex legal administration and deliberative politics of democratic republican governance (Habermas 1996: 327). Specifically, experts' inability to articulate their understandings to nonexperts without resorting to increasingly alienated systems-jargon poses a problem for others' understandings, and consequently, their consent (Habermas 1996: 352, 386). Popular language cannot effectively convey the technically correct understandings and prognostications of social and natural phenomenon and trends; technical language is too abstruse for nonexperts to understand, limiting their ability to benefit from these prognoses and explanations.

To see the extent that we are interconnected, we need specialized understandings of complex systems that are paradoxically alien to our everyday understandings and experiences of how the world operates. It seems that the foundation of organic solidarity, specialization and experiences beyond the lifeworld, also threatens its cohesion. It only lasts so long as (a) we feel that we are interdependent on other people, and (b) their logics/experiences do not impose themselves on our own. Once these fail, organic solidarity fails. However, what replaces it? The vestiges of mechanical solidarity remain. In a world dissolving into incomprehensible systems, producing a vacuum of cohesion, people may yearn for the simplicity and effectiveness of similarity; a common community identity independent of those who just do not understand how we do

things. They may seek to congregate with others of similar viewpoints, affirming their experiences through self-selection, especially if they are contrary to what so-called experts say we are experiencing.

Linking Complexity, Systems, Lifeworlds, and Populism

What does this all mean in terms of contemporary populism? These movements may be products of societies burdened by complexity and systems logics. New threats are only truly comprehensible from a systems perspective. As laws and social systems more broadly increasingly rely on administrators and mediating experts, the legitimacy of the system is called into question as citizens compare how laws are supposed to be made, how they actually are made, and whether these rules are founded on popular sovereignty (Blokker 2019; Habermas 1996: 321). This is particularly true to the extent that paragonovernmental organizations increasingly influence our lives: removed bureaucrats who have no idea what everyday life is like may dictate how we live from beyond our national-political borders (Habermas 1996: 352).

As systems run amok, this can foment the desire to resist the colonization of lifeworlds (Habermas 1996: 371). Generally operating outside the institutional sphere, as populists are known to do (Doyle 2011; Goodwyn 1978; McNall 1988), these movements focus not on compensation, but instead on “defending and restoring endangered ways of life” (Habermas 1985[1981]: 392). In short, contemporary populism may be rooted in people-versus-elites discourses derived from lifeworld and system conflicts, but what makes many current manifestations unique compared to previous examples is how this is translated through understandings of interdependence and expertise.

To illustrate this point empirically, we follow Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2018) suggestion to compare populist movements across ideology and issues so that our theory is grounded in populism bracketed from specific contexts. Our cases focus on the laws of war and ecological policies. The heterogeneity of these cases helps highlight the core elements of contemporary populism across disparate contexts. This comparison should be interpreted as a parallel demonstration of theory, showing how theoretical processes work in the real world. By showing the deeper processes and meanings at play, we can more clearly see commonalities between events that *prima facie* appear to be unrelated (Skocpol & Somers 1980: 176). While the specific contexts of each of these movements differ, common themes unite them: frustration with an overly complicated world where interconnections are hidden, and with alien systems logics overruling people's experiential knowledge. This is associated with a desire to again have a say in how society operates, returning social rules to

something recognizable and phenomenologically tangible; popular opinion is more than law (Kammer 2011). Otherwise said, reviving lifeworld logics against hyperdeveloped systems logics.

When International Law Challenges Security and Identity Assumptions

States have the right to protect themselves against domestic and international threats. Yet, those prerogatives are not unchecked. The use of coercive violence against people and property is regulated by an international system of treaties, known as International Humanitarian Law (IHL). For example, the Geneva Convention demands proportionality in attacks and the Convention Against Torture prohibits degrading treatment of captives. IHL facilitates an international community's adherence to international norms which limit the use of violence and abuse against people. In practice, IHL significantly complicates military action. Armies constantly consider questions of proportionality and legality before actions. Often, military lawyers (technocratic experts) are who ultimately authorize or inhibit military actions, be they dropping a bomb, launching a campaign, or communicating with suspected terrorists.

Reciprocity is a key mechanism of IHL (Morrow 2007, 2008), but IHL effectively restricts the use of coercive violence between *nations*. Most conflicts today are fought against armed non-state actors, i.e., terrorist groups, insurgencies, and criminal organizations.¹ The international community is limited in policing non-state actors' actions (Bongard and Somer 2011). This further complicates security situations: state actions are monitored and constrained, but non-state actors are not. This leads to situations where governments facing bereaved families struggle to justify why protecting enemy rights is more important than protecting their own constituents due to obscure legal complexities.

Domestic critiques and battlefield challenges lead some to claim that IHL is divorced from reality, imposing foreign system logics on commonly understood local problems. For example, the phrases "Let the IDF [Israeli Defense Force] win" (תנו לצה"ל לנצח) and "Let the IDF kick ass" have become popular among Israeli militants and nationalist groups that view global liberal values embedded in secular Israeli jurisprudence as a threat and an unwelcome intervention in national affairs. The phrases refer to what everyday people see as the legal limitations that prevent the IDF from winning its battles with terrorists: soldiers are more concerned about IHL lawyers than the enemy they fight (Yuval 2019). These phrases have been printed on T-shirts and appeared in social media

accounts, usernames, and hashtags as many have become frustrated by the legal complexities of security, especially when the theater of conflict seems like an internal issue beyond the jurisdiction of international norms.

These sentiments erupted in 2016 when two Palestinians stabbed an Israeli soldier and were subsequently shot. One was wounded and lay on the ground. Ten minutes later, the soldier Elor Azaria, part of the response team that arrived after the initial incident, shot the assailant in the head. The commander at the scene reported the incident, and Azaria was charged with murder, which was subsequently reduced to manslaughter. At his trial, Azaria claimed that he was concerned that the assailant was wearing a suicide vest. However, a fellow soldier testified that he heard Azaria say that the stabber deserved to die. The human rights organization B'Tselem soon released a video of the shooting. The Israeli Chief of the General Staff and the Israeli Minister of Defense immediately condemned Azaria's actions, stating that this type of conduct did not reflect IDF values. The Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon summarized the event as "an irregular incident of a rogue soldier" (Buchbut et al. 2016), distancing Azaria's actions to reinforce that IDF soldiers follow international norms. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu concurred, stating that IDF soldiers are expected to act according to the rules of engagement dictated by IHL (Azulai, Ichner, and Kimon, 2016).

Before the trial started, a movement deemed populist by contemporaries arose (Mualem 2017). The city of Beit Shemesh, Azaria's hometown, organized a show of support "for the hero" a few days after the event (Yechezkel 2016), followed by multiple demonstrations across the country which raged for months. Protesters claimed that they pushed for common sense. Killing a terrorist could not be a crime: he threatened the common community and deserved brutal corporal punishment, resembling a rationale grounded in mechanical solidarity. Supporters latched onto the straightforward justification of Azaria's fear of a suicide vest as evidence that no crime was committed. B'Tselem was portrayed as a traitor organization promoting foreign values and distorting justice. To counter the IHL logic, the demonstrators referenced the primacy of religious and national texts, shared experiences contra abstract IHL law created by people unfamiliar with life in conflict areas. Israeli radical right organizations took the lead in the demonstrations, delivering the message that Azaria was a victim of an international justice system far removed from everyday experience (Shabtai and Buchbut, 2016). Prominent Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu called for praising Azaria (Nachshoni 2016). An online support campaign raised about \$120,000 in 12 hours (Ofar 2016). Politicians felt pressure from the public outcry and pivoted to reflect these claims founded on common sense. Knesset member Avigdor Liberam assumed the popular justification of self-defense, stating that it is better to have a mistaken soldier than a dead

¹ The authors' review of active conflicts using The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project shows that over 95% of conflict involves nonstate actors.

soldier. A few days after the incident, the Prime Minister essentially adopted Azaria's supporters' narratives, stating "IDF soldiers, our children, face murderous terrorist attacks from terrorists that come to kill them. They have to decide on what to do in real time, in the field, under stress and uncertainty." Further anchoring the narrative in the popular lifeworld, Netanyahu personally called Azaria's father to state that he understood and identified with the distress he felt (Walla News Editorial 2016).

The populist movement was an expression of public frustration with abstract IHL rules limiting responses to experienced existential threats. Surveys throughout the trial showed overwhelming support for Azaria, indicating that those sentiments were not limited to fringe radical right activists but a broadly supported populist movement. Figure 1 captures 14 news surveys that examined the support or opposition to his actions. It illustrates that the general population supported Azaria and his actions and opposed his prosecution for over a year, peaking at 74% in March 2016.

IHL system logics overcame populist outcry: Azaria was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months in prison. The protesters worked to make public opinion more than law. A failed campaign for clemency began prior to the verdict. The Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon's critique of Azaria cost him his job, and his replacement, Avigdor Liberman, personally petitioned for clemency from the President. After the rejection, fifty Knesset members signed a petition urging the President to reconsider (Azulai and Chai 2017). Supporters of clemency included prominent left-wing politicians who saw Azaria as the scapegoat of the larger problem: the occupation of the West Bank. Eventually, the General Chief of Staff reduced Azaria's punishment to 14 months in prison. Azaria left prison as a hero with wide support.

These dynamics of popular objection and challenging IHL's outsider influence are not unique to Israel. In 2011, a British marines patrol in the Helmand Province in Afghanistan identified

a wounded Taliban fighter. They dragged him outside of the observation mission range to conceal their actions and the marine Alexander Blackman shot the man in the chest, killing him (Akam 2021). Conscious of his transgression of IHL, Blackman stated "I just broke the Geneva Convention" (Morris 2013). The entire event was recorded on one of the marine's body cameras and discovered by civilian police a few months later. The events that followed paralleled the Azaria case. As the details of the incident became public, the military and political authorities responded harshly, condemning the soldier's actions. Blackman was charged with murder and was quickly trialed. Found guilty, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, making him the first British soldier since WWII to be convicted of murder on the battlefield. Deputy Commandant General Royal Marines Bill Dunham stated, "What we have heard over the last two weeks [...] should not have happened, and it should never happen again" (Dunham 2013).

The public disagreed. Demonstrations supporting Blackman spread across the country. Polls repeatedly indicated that most objected to the punishment (Kemp 2013; Yemini 2016) and online social groups and petitions showed support of Blackman (The Telegraph, 2013). "Free Sergeant Alexander Blackman" protests gained further popular legitimacy as veterans and military service member started taking part (Gutteridge 2015). Protestors carried signs saying, "if killing the enemy is 'murder', then you should arrest me too!" and "Free Marine A [Alexander Blackman]. Let Down by the Government". Again, mechanical solidarity style justice dominated the discourse. Soldiers defied orders not to participate, and demonstrations were described "a sea of green" (Wallop 2015). Prince Henry, a veteran himself, criticized the verdict as ludicrous (Farmer 2015), and the Chief of Defense Staff argued that "Blackman was thrown to the wolves by cowards" (Kemp 2013). Over 100,000 people signed an online petition calling for Sergeant Blackman's immediate release, arguing that the soldier had been condemned

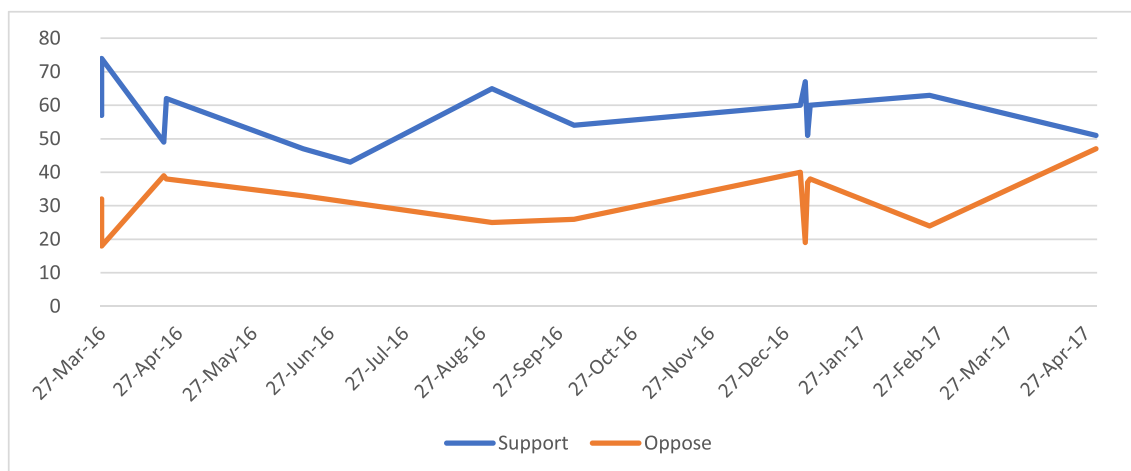


Fig. 1 Popular support and oppose in Elor Azaria across news surveys

for defending his country. Again, politicians bowed to popular pressure against formal IHL logics. The British Parliament discussed the affair, the judicial process, and the verdict (UK Parliament 2015). Eventually, the charges were reduced to manslaughter and his punishment was reduced significantly. The protests claiming to represent the people's logic wrested control from norms they perceived to be divorced from the everyday reality of conflict.

The Israeli and British cases suggest that contemporary populism may be a reaction to colonization of the lifeworld via complex systems alien to communities' experiences. Though the colonization promoted progressive norms rooted in claims to universalized understandings of justice and human rights, communities can reject the process because such claims are interpreted as hostile. These soldiers' actions violated international laws and norms which dictate what soldiers can do: enemies have rights and protections. The populace, unfamiliar with why and how such systems arose and their logics, rejected them. Distant bureaucrats across the world could not understand what it meant to live under threat of terrorism every day or to face battle conditions; what justified so-called international legal experts' control over a national issue? For these protesters, it was simple: these soldiers protected their communities through direct action. They did what must be done to enemies. Threats to the community should be eliminated and cannot be conditional or nuanced, resembling mechanical solidarity. Community protectors are heroes, not criminals. The criminal justice system's expectations of equality before the law contradicted the populace's indifference to the nuances of IHL, instead emphasizing common community: soldier versus alien terrorist (Harduf 2017). For the people, debates about legalities, enemy rights, or proportionality would make self-defense unnecessarily complicated. They already knew how justice should work through their shared experiences. Reciprocity and mutual norms seemed alien to simple life or death, right or wrong, situations. Complex understandings of risk and legal definitions of norms had no place here. Democratically elected politicians felt pressure to represent popular sentiments: deny the influence of international norms and absolve the soldiers, or at least lessen their punishments, under the banner of a simpler, clearer understanding of risk and punishment; one that everyday citizens could control based on their lived experiences and understandings.

Gilets Jaunes: Returning to the Lifeworld in Hypermodernity

France has steadily transformed since the 1980s. These changes are associated with increased emphasis on symbolic divisions against traditional forms of solidarity, e.g., increased individualization and decreased social support (Lamont & Duvoux 2014). This process is also associated with

technocratic rule, which has a particularly strong tradition in France: graduates from the *Grandes écoles* may have helped legitimize neoliberal reforms even though such reforms never had particularly strong popular support (Masquelier, 2021). When Emmanuel Macron was elected president, he framed his victory as the French populace wanting something different. However, his campaign and policy preferences largely continued these broader neoliberal trends and his cabinet was filled with more technocratic elites: the 2017 election was marked by significant protest votes (Hewlett 2017; Masquelier 2021).

Following economic theory regarding carbon taxes as a means of combatting climate change, Macron's government proposed a domestic tax on the consumption of energy products (*taxe intérieure sur la consommation des produits énergétiques*) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; attempting to impose the tax without including the input of everyday people under the banner of experts knowing what is best. This prompted a wave of protests not seen since 1968 (Bantigny 2019; Todd 2020; Manche, 2020). In November 2018, several hundred thousand people wearing yellow waistcoats (*gilets jaunes*) blocked roads at roundabouts and toll stations. By some estimates, more than 287,000 participants engaged in 2,000 events. These actions were prompted by a May 2018 online petition "For a drop in fuel prices at the pump!," which quickly received over 200,000 signatures, eventually reaching over 1 million (Collectif sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019: 869; Blavier 2020: 219). Protests continued weekly at roundabouts, farmers' markets, and places of government representation such as town centers and offices for the disabled (Collectif sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019: 869-870).

This protest group seemed to represent the masses: a heterogeneous collection including workers, active or retired, public service workers, teachers, artists, private sector managers who had been retrained, farmers, young craft and building workers, young people in precarious employment, home help aides, catering workers; workers writ large (Fillieule, Hayat, and Monchatre 2020: 2).² Most of the Gilets Jaunes

combine several jobs and atypical working schedules. Others are self-employed (*autoentrepreneurs*) and it's even worse. All of them claim their modest social origins. Many come here out of solidarity with the youngest, such as pensioners or single mothers who came "to fight for better living conditions and for the future of their children" or even their "grandchildren" (Gwiadzinski and Floris 2019: 2).

Initially, they demanded the cancellation of the proposed tax, but these claims soon broadened to topics like purchasing

² Not truly extreme right-wing demonstrators (Shultziner and Kornblit 2020; Mahfud and Adam-Trioian 2021).

power, social justice, and democracy. This heterogeneity of demands gave rise to contradictory interpretations of the mobilization, including populism (Winnie 2020). Like many populist movements, heterogeneity led to a plethora of analytic conclusions (Blavier 2020). Were they a jacquerie against the State (Vermeren 2019); an anti-fiscal movement akin to the 2014 Red Bonnets (Winnie 2020; Wilkin 2018; Spire, 2018); democratic (Marlière, 2018; Riot-Sarcey, 2018; Wahnich 2020; Zancarini-Fournel 2020); a symptom of a wider crisis articulating social and environmental issues (Latour, 2019); revolutionary (Mazeau, 2018); or popular municipalism (Jeanpierre 2019; Collectif sur les Gilets Jaunes 2019)?

Instead of focusing on the ontic ideology of the movement, understanding the populist dimension requires looking at the relationship between the impetus, form of protest, and language of demands: the process of their politics. The worlds of the *Gilets Jaunes* were organized in small communities, each fixed on its own roundabout. The key dynamic was the creation of common understandings and solidarities between people, restructuring relations and helping create an emerging collective identity (Chédikian, Guillibert, and Gallo Lassere 2020: 878, 881; Fillieule, Hayat, and Monchatre 2020: 12). Roundabouts became veritable agoras over a few square meters (Gwiazdzinski and Floris 2019: 4; Bendali et al. 2019: 167; Kipfer 2019: 216). When these assemblies communicated with one another, they gradually developed demands for purchasing power or direct democracy. Through this process of returning to shared common space, of simplicity, and collective well-being, the occupants sharpened their arguments and nuanced their stated grievances.

These communities facilitated the critique of the imposition of alien institutional logics using arguments based on a logic built by sharing lived experiences. Why tax diesel fuel? This causes difficulties for the poorest but leaves larger polluters (French industries; richer households) comparatively unaffected. Why can't European technocracy do anything about tax evasion to help redistribute wealth? Why is nothing being done to prevent someone who has a regular job from falling below the poverty line? The academic and political-legal answers to these questions were too complex and unacceptable for the *Gilets Jaunes*. Such academic discourses seem far removed from everyday life; unrecognizable by those struggling to get by. The vest became a powerful symbol. "It allows familiarities based on a presumption of resemblance, it is enough to make possible a mechanical solidarity based on the common belonging to the France of the forgotten and the invisible" (Le Bart 2020: 60-61). The vest lays bare a common community feeling abandoned by a system which no longer recognizes, even actively disregards, their lived experiences.

The critiques often focused on the state's shortcomings in maintaining solidarity, a key function of the lifeworld. Claims emphasized prerogatives such as the following: intervention in favor of the homeless, increasing the minimum wage, increasing the minimum old-age pension and the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (the basic income allowed by the State to unemployed), providing help for households to insulate their homes, banning glyphosate and harmful pesticides, protecting the French pension system, allowing legal retirement age to 60 for difficult jobs, abolishing tax benefits for certain companies (*Crédit d'Impôt pour la Compétitivité et l'Emploi*), properly receiving asylum seekers, etc. (Confavreux 2019: 115-119). In short, "it is a question of returning to a 'before', which is a 'before' of neoliberal reforms to restore a pact between the State and society that has been betrayed" (Bantigny, Hayat, and Gaudillière 2019: 16). A recognition that the common community had become fractured by political-economic impositions, or rather retreats, under the guise of economic efficiency while the state demanded more compliance of atomized individuals to battle societal challenges.

What ultimately united these groups was their anger about the functioning of democracy and feeling excluded, as partially evidenced by the form of protest. A strong sense of social cohesion marked the experience of the roundabout: it was *felt*. The almost permanent presence of a brazier encouraged people to huddle around the fire, reducing distances between people. U-shaped arrangement of the tables, chairs and the rest of the equipment encouraged face-to-face exchanges. The space of protest became an identity ("I am from the roundabout"; "I feel at home"; "my roundabout"), but this identity expanded to others based on shared experience ("our roundabout") (Gwiazdzinski and Floris 2019: 3-4).

The roundabout was thus a concrete symbol of solidarity. "There is always an outstretched hand, a word of welcome and a coffee to break the ice and warm up. The site is open and the signs at the front invite motorists to stop" (Gwiazdzinski and Floris 2019: 4). Solidarity extended beyond the site itself. During the couple months of demonstrations, farmers, restaurant owners, and shopkeepers donated food, helping sustain the movement and signaling a broader societal base of support. Various funds and monies were collected via social networks or in the physical world to help finance legal costs and financially sustain full-time activists (Jeanpierre 2019: 99-100). A common experience was constructed and shared even by those not taking direct action: people could see and understand their link to the cause; see the resemblance.

Roundabouts became places where diverse, fragile, and isolated people met, but who have nonetheless identically suffered the colonization of their world by the economic system (part-time work, income of the precarious self-employed or of the young medical assistants, etc.) or by the bureaucratic system (administrative control of the unemployed, increased taxation on SMEs, etc.). Against this faceless violence, these

people returned to forms of community sociality which allowed them to hold out “together.” By organizing barbecues on roundabouts and equipping them with braziers or Christmas trees, the *Gilets Jaunes* intended to remind us of *their* simpler way of life, which they valued. The testimonies converge in many surveys, and one glimpses “the values that make up the community and whose invocation participates in the legitimisation of the movement: solidarity [...], hospitality, authenticity, the truth of basic things [...].” (Le Bart 2020: 58).

This politicized identity formed through roundabout actions explains why *Gilets Jaunes* often refused approaches by trade unions and political parties: they did not need elite outsiders because they already had their own form of solidarity in the immediate area (Royall, 2020). The links of proximity and the resources anchored in territories constituted the matrix of a mechanical solidarity that reactivated the political dynamic in the lifeworld, i.e., the local. Working with representatives from instituted structures like national parliament and party leadership would legitimize outsiders’ claims to leadership; claims derived from complex, inaccessible logics, the very things that the least powerful organized to resist (Castel 1995). To include these forces in the construction of the demands would betray the idea that the majority had a powerful voice and a worthy perspective, one outside of the influence of, and capable of affecting, the elite minority.

It was the *Gilets Jaunes*’ ability to invert this very de-powering system which may have given their critiques so much power. The movement emphasized everyday activists’ very lack of influence on the government (Camell Galí, Polleri, and Puletti 2020: 867-868). Such an action is often political in democratic governments as it re-politicizes understandings of who deserves to lead society (Rancière 2014[2005]). It was only after activists built their solidarity and sense of understanding over many weeks, rebuilding a *vox populi*, that they demanded that the state reengage with the very institutional solidarity that experts and complex neoliberalism logics undermined over 30 years. A shift from a world governed by technocrats to a sense of mechanical solidarity.

The *Gilets Jaunes*’ initial demands gave the impression of a movement exclusively worried about seeing their petty-bourgeois and individualistic living conditions deteriorate. But careful attention to the symbolism and the emotions mobilized refers at least as much “to a pre-modern nostalgia, that of pre-institutional community times. Paradoxically, then, the pre- and post-institutional periods come together here” (Le Bart 2020: 65). The roundabout, the very symbol of individualistic urban fluidity, was transformed into a place of respite, of (re)forming bonds through everyday actions like talking, sleeping, eating. In other words, re-establishing a lifeworld based in mechanical solidarity, ungoverned by systems which disregard their impact on lifeworlds for the sake of control, coordination, and standardized experiences, in the name of exalting public opinion over proposed law.

Conclusion

To return to a main question of this paper: why populism now? To answer that we first need to understand what it is. As many other scholars have noted, and we support here, populism should not be understood as a fixed category. As the cases surrounding IHL and security situations and the *Gilets Jaunes* illustrate, these movements can be understood as populist but have very different politics, come from starkly different social contexts, and have different normative implications that are associated with their claims. Instead, it might be better to think of populism as a logic, a discourse, or, rather, a political process of engaging with the social world. It is along these lines that these two apparently disparate movements find common ground. The cases capture reactions and claims against what we can describe as Habermasian system logics colonizing lifeworlds. Communities sought to re-establish a more communicative political system to challenge the technocratic system which used legal or economic power to operate without their understanding or their input. Across the cases, people revolted against what they identified as social injustice contrary to their common sense: an injustice rooted in an alien technocratic logic divorced from reality on the ground.

This perspective should not be interpreted as contradicting earlier discourse or logical models of populism; rather it should be interpreted as complementing them. Some examples may help illustrate this point. Da Silva and Vieira (2018, 2019) emphasize the role of Aristotelian resentment, but their conception largely only works for populism focused on internal elite/masses interactions. Much populism focuses on communities’ relationships to the external world (Brubaker 2017). The lifeworlds approach accommodates this: systems logics can come from outside or inside and attempts at broadening our lifeworlds via systems to accommodate other experiences is itself a process of establishing systems, typically headed by elites. For this reason, the lifeworld perspective also matches Brubaker’s emphasis on division discourses due to the impact of outside experiences. Indeed, this perspective helps explain both Brubaker’s horizontal and vertical dimensions of populism, as it will depend on what element of the lifeworld people will emphasize in their communications: ethnonationalist ones like the Israeli case which emphasize within/without dynamics (horizontal), or the French popular masses versus the elites dynamics (vertical). Laclau’s (2005) perspective is inherently based on lifeworld processes: the floating signifier is a two-way communicative process, not a homogenizing systems idea. Even Goodwyn’s (1978) movement culture fits here: it is about incorporating experience into practical knowledge, not relying on abstract principles. This may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the resonance of claims that the majority is being victimized by the minority.

This perspective also adds some much-needed emphasis on why populist protesters participate. It helps balance the overarching emphasis in the previous literature on populist leaders, which is a shortcoming when discussing something so rooted in majoritarian claims and social movement dynamics. While leaders may emphasize certain things, we need to link the claims to the lived experiences of the actual activists themselves. As shown here, research should focus less on the systems which use populism and more on these experiences so we can see whether the members of the movement actually agree with the broader claims by leaders or campaigns or whether it is all just rhetoric.

We may also use this to emphasize how contemporary populism is different from past manifestations. While populism may broadly be about resisting colonization of lifeworlds, the current wave of populism may be specifically related to the role of expert knowledge and communication. We agree with Brubaker's (2017) insinuations here. Contemporary knowledge has perhaps developed to the extent that it no longer helps show us how things are broadly related: the very problem that Lyotard (1984[1979]) gnashed his teeth over decades ago. For this reason, knowledge has become alien; it feels like experts are imposing rules and regulations derived from completely foreign worlds. One would think that mass communication would help science in this way. But, contrary to Habermas' hopes, public discourse may exacerbate trends. It tends to ignore nuance, flatten and objectify complexities, and rely on spectacle to win people over; this is quite far from the rational hopes of those who rely on communicative action (Adut 2018). Indeed, social media may exacerbate this process. We can pick and choose our narratives based on whether information fits with our experiences, essentially weakening our ability to see the interconnectedness that feeds organic solidarity and acceptance of systems while accelerating the rate to which mechanical solidarity and lifeworld logics take a phenomenological precedence in guiding our ways of thinking and relating to one another.

The overreliance on public discourse as a solution to social ills also points to a potential limitation of both Habermas' and Durkheim's hopeful teleology towards integrated yet differentiated societies. The process may not be teleological, but rather cyclical; an endless process of building and collapsing. Habermas' attempt to create a normative and descriptive understanding of society creating unity via rational discourse may be self-defeating. As systems overdevelop, they will necessarily implode due to how knowledge systems increasingly become separated from, and threaten, lived experiences. As such, there is no end in broader rationality. Just an endless parade of new beginnings. The periodic resurgence of populist nationalism on both the left and the right across the globe is an indicator of this continual process.

Experts should thus be cautious when they offer technical guidance for policies. If a system cannot accommodate a

lifeworld, then it can destabilize because it is beyond people's ability to learn from and adjust their everyday lives. The high-profile COVID19 face mask debate serves as an example: public health experts waffled and contradicted themselves as new information arose, contradicting individuals' stabler, everyday experiences with diseases. How much of contemporary system knowledge is capable of being incorporated into everyday understandings? More radically, how much contemporary knowledge more closely resembles a sort of neo-lifeworld constructed by experts, for experts? The unspoken assumptions, technical terms and processes, ability to communicate with one another, all deeply embedded in our understandings of how the world works from our very narrow technical experiences: this seems like a fractalization of lifeworlds within systems. Technocrats may thus build lifeworlds and surround themselves with others in those experiences, which makes communication to the masses, or even other experts, difficult if not impossible. Ironically, it was systems that were supposed to facilitate cross-lifeworld communication.

Importantly, we are not claiming that experts or protesters are more correct or morally superior. There is not a clear binary between knowledge and ignorance. Experts often utilize ignorance to justify their claims to influence or protect themselves from liability based on their knowledge of legal systems (McGoey 2019; Richter, Corder, and Brown 2021). We suggest that experts who wish to stave off populist revolts should think carefully about how the public understands their claims based on their knowledges. Nonexperts have challenged experts' claims of superior knowledge. Experts seem to decide who must be sacrificed for the system to function even though their so-called expertise cannot accurately predict economic downturns (Kelly and McGoey 2018), or, as we saw through COVID, experts can mislead, make mistakes, or even fall prey to misinformation. Experts' claims to facts seem imperialistic: we are forced to accept truths espoused by people who often admit that they do not fully understand the complexity of the world. Facts may not care about feelings, but people's feelings shape how they understand, identify, and react to facts.

If we are correct here, other scholars of populism should be able to recognize similar dynamics in similar contexts, but also identify unique elements in each. Modi and Bolsonaro's victories in India and Brazil respectively may have common themes with the cases here, but their circumstances and politics are quite different. Global trends and ideas are adapted to local particularities and understandings. What prompts different kinds of populism? Claims may lie in the lifeworlds that actors attempt to rebuild. We can also recognize what might not be populism. Not every protest is populist. Not every Habermasian reaction will necessarily be populist. As previous scholars have noted, there are other issues to consider as well, such as anti-institutionalism and majoritarianism. But the perspective we introduce should help open avenues of

research to see new parallels between populist movements across time and space and offer a non-pejorative framework with which scholars can analyze both movements they are critical of and those whom there is a strand of sympathy.

Data Availability The manuscript has no associated data.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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