

Pandemics as Crisis Performance: How Populists Tried to Take Ownership of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 pandemic dominating the agenda, it seems almost natural that it be associated with another buzzword: *populism*. As the pandemic advances, it seems that the prediction of populism surviving the pandemic due to its own diversity has been proved right, given the variation in responses by populists around the world. One common denominator stands out though: populists across the political spectrum understood the benefits of performing the COVID-19 crisis as a tool to strengthen their political positions. They tried to politicize the pandemic to increase the antagonism between *the people* and *the elites*. In this article, I introduce the notion of crisis as both a construct and a performance, and as a useful concept to analyze populist reactions to the pandemic. I argue that notwithstanding the attempts to politicize the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis ended up imposing its own reality. In other words: the crisis could not be owned by politics.

KEYWORDS pandemic, COVID-19, populism, crises, ontology, performance, politization

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. One and a half years later, the total number of reported cases has passed 240 million, and the number of Covid-related deaths worldwide hit 4.9 million (WHO 2021). The world slowly realized that the pandemics would not be a mere bump on the road ahead. Scholars took a pause to plunge deeper into the political, economic, social, and psychological effects of this unknown situation.¹ Not surprisingly, the pandemic evolved to be recognized as the third major shock to the global system in the 21st century, following 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis (SUMMERS 2020).² This major systemic shock occurs in a strange political climate that resembles the dark times of the early 1930s – when many governments opted for nationalistic, illiberal, and beggar-thy-neighbour policies, making it difficult for nations to cooperate to stop the virus (RACHMAN 2020). Indeed, over the past few decades, the world has grown more authoritarian, nationalistic, xenophobic, unilateralist, anti-establishment, and anti-scientific (Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Recep Erdoğan, Jair Bolsonaro and others come to mind). Therefore, it seems almost fitting that the pandemic be associated with another buzzword of our strange time: *populism*. While some claimed the pandemic would demonstrate the limits of populism as a method of government (WRIGHT – CAMPBELL 2020), others pointed out that populism would survive, given that populist leaders would not have a unitary response to the crisis (BOBBA – HUBÉ 2021; MUDDE 2020).

As the pandemic advances, it seems that the prediction of populism surviving the pandemic due to its own diversity has been proved right, given the variation in responses to the pandemic given by populists around the world. While Trump and Bolsonaro pursued policies bordering on negationism (HALLAL 2021; HILTZIK 2020), such as preaching for pseudo-treatments based on chloroquine and attacking masks (BRITO – DARLINGTON 2021; LONDONO 2021), leftist populists such as Maduro and Andrés Manuel López Obrador were hardly better in reacting to the pandemics, shying away from implementing strict lockdown and social distancing measures. In Asia, the right-wing politicians Narendra Modi (India) and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines) opted for aggressive lockdown measures (CNBC 2020; GETTLEMAN 2020). In Europe, Italy, one of the hardest-hit countries early in the pandemic, governed by a coalition of the centre-left Democratic Party and the populist Five Star Movement, imposed a strict lockdown for nearly two months and called for national unity against the virus (MODI ET AL. 2021).

One curious trait stands out as a common denominator though: populists across the political spectrum understood the possible benefits of performing the COVID-19 crisis as a tool to strengthen their political positions. They tried to politicize the pandemic to increase the antagonism between *the people* and *the elites*. In this article, I introduce the notion of crisis as both a construct and a performance (MOFFITT 2015; NABERS 2015, 2019; WELDES 1999), and as a useful concept for analyzing populist reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic (BOBA – HUBÉ 2021; LASCO 2020). More importantly, and based on recent studies comparing policy responses by populist leaders, notwithstanding the attempts by populists to politicize the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis ended up imposing its own reality. In other words: the crisis could not be owned by politics.

POPULISM AND THE PANDEMIC: WHEN CRISES BECOME AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PERFORMANCE

Populism has been at the centre of recent debates in political science and international relations scholarship. Recognized as a contested concept (WEYLAND 2001), and framed as a new global phenomenon (STENGEL – MACDONALD – NABERS 2019), populism emerged in the context of liberal democracies when political actors inflated social antagonisms by putting *the people* against *the elite*. Laclau (2005) conceives populism as a particular political (discursive) logic emerging from crisis. Similarly, Mouffe (2005) links populism to a crisis of political representation. Roberts (1995) argues that populism emerges most strongly in contexts of crisis or profound social transformation. Cas Mudde (2007), who defines populism as a thin ideology, points out that “[t] here’s nothing more important for populists than the perception of crisis” (QUOTED IN CEA 2017). Weyland (1999: 395) has argued that crises “trigger the emergence of neoliberal populism”. What they have in common is that they all point to crisis as a necessary precondition for the emergence of populism.³

Moffitt (2015: 190) also explored the relationship between populism and crises, arguing that rather than just thinking about crisis as a trigger of populism – e.g., a crisis of representation being the trigger of populism – instead we should also think about how populists engage in constructing – even intensifying – the “spectacularization of failure” that underlies the said crisis. It is through the performance of crisis that populists build up social antagonism. They address popular grievances and frustrations

in an attempt to unify and mobilize support against supposedly unresponsive political elites that are blamed for social troubles. Traditionally, they pit *the people* against a dangerous other – the elites, immigrants, criminals, foreigners – and advocate in favour of a strong leadership and quick political action in order to stave off, or solve, an impending crisis.

Moffitt argues that the literature on this relationship has demonstrated that crisis is never merely a neutral phenomenon that is experienced objectively when talking about populism. *“Rather, crisis is a phenomenon that is mediated and performed, and experienced culturally and socially”* (MOFFITT 2015: 195). Therefore, populist leaders perform crisis by elevating failure to the level of crisis – what Moffitt calls the *“spectacularization of failure”*: they *“divide ‘the people’ from those who are responsible for the crisis, present simple solutions to the crisis and legitimate their own strong leadership as a way to stave off or bring about an end to the crisis”* (MOFFITT 2015: 198).

What strikes us from Moffitt’s notion of populism as a crisis performance – which will have important implications for the pandemic as an opportunity – is how crisis is understood here not as an exogenous trigger but rather as structurally constitutive of the social. This is a shift from traditional understanding of crisis, in which it is mostly conceived in terms of something that happens – an unexpected event – and has to be managed, and where *“interventions are both possible and plausible”* (HAY 1996: 425).⁴ This description seems to fit an overwhelming body of literature that deals with crisis.⁵ Indeed, most of the literature produced during the Cold War was very much concerned with crisis perceptions and decision-making, policy responses to crisis,⁶ as well as crisis management;⁷ this is an approach that favours agency over structure, and which implies that crises are self-evident phenomena waiting for political intervention by policymakers.⁸

Jutta Weldes was one of the first authors to break from this traditional understanding of the ontology of crisis. Claiming that crises are cultural artifacts – and hence not objectively identifiable – she argues that when particular events threaten the identity of a state, they become constituted as a crisis, which, in turn, helps consolidate, reaffirm, transform, and/or appease a particular writing of a state identity. As a result, there is no ontology of crisis to be grasped beyond the practices that generate

the said crisis in the first place. There is no objective status of the crisis that would require a governmental response to it or its containment and/or management. Instead, she claims, “*events that are ostensibly the same will in fact be constituted as different crises, or not as crisis at all, by and for states with different identities*” (WELDES 1999: 37).

Today, instead of depicting and representing crises as *exogenous shocks* to which decision-makers react (i.e., agent-centred approaches), a growing number of works emphasize them as *endogenous constructions*, where ontological questions about the relationship between agent and structure are integrated and thus problematized.⁹ Recent works by Dirk Nabers reject the focus on crisis management at the expense of more structural accounts of the nature of crisis. “[C]risis represents a situation in which our everyday beliefs of how the world works are thoroughly disrupted by an event that is out of our control” (NABERS 2015: 44). He proposes that the very notion of crisis only makes sense as a “*permanent attribute of the social*” “*produced entirely in discourse*” (NABERS 2019: 265). The likely result of this disruptive process would be social change in the form of community (re)building, and the construction and/or transformation of a (new) collective identity. Therefore, crises should be understood as dislocations in discourse that disrupt subjectivities, and sit at the base of any kind of social change.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, where a sense of threat, uncertainty, and emergency has pushed *normal* politics into the realm of politics of crisis (LIPSCY 2020), populists have actively engaged in creating a spectacularization of failure – of science, institutions, experts, and governments – vis-à-vis the virus. According to Bobba and Hubé (2021), the pandemic fits perfectly into this framework. Populists act on failures (or tipping points, using their terminology) and perform them into crisis in order to give them a discursive reality. Issues such as mask mandates, lockdown measures, compulsory vaccination, medicine effectiveness, and vaccine certificates become politicized, that is, they are taken from *normal* politics and made contingent and controversial (PALONEN 2005). As a result, populists bring the politicized issues into their black-and-white, antagonistic vision of society, and present themselves as the only ones capable of dealing with the crisis.

Recent research shows that while some populists have tried to take advantage of the crisis to advance their own political position, they did not reap benefits due to the impossibility of “*taking ownership*” of the COVID-19 crisis (BOBBA – HUBÉ 2021: 134). Instead, they had to adjust their policies to fight the pandemic. For instance, the research has shown that populists in Europe have tried to exploit the pandemic crisis to foster their own legitimacy as the leaders who speak for *the people* by assigning blame (to China, the WHO, Big Pharma, or immigrants), but eventually failed as the number of deaths escalated. At the end, the pandemic imposed its harsh reality, as the virus could not be *owned* that way. What is more, to Bobba and Hubé (2021: 7), pandemics are like natural disasters: “*difficult to politicize since they are caused by events beyond human control*”.

In another interesting study, but focusing on cases outside Europe, Lasco (2020) uses the concept of medical populism¹⁰ to analyze the responses to the pandemic in Brazil, the Philippines, and the United States. Despite variation in how they responded to the pandemic,¹¹ Lasco found parallels in the ways Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Trump engaged in “*spectacularising the crisis*” (LASCO 2020: 1423). At first dismissing the pandemic, then making (false/misleading) therapeutic claims, and later invoking the discourse of individual freedoms to attack – or defend, in the case of Duterte – stricter measures against the spread of the virus. What they had in common is that all of them tried to use the pandemic to forge divisions between *the people* and *the elite* (represented by academics, health experts, and the press). Moreover, they demonstrate the validity of the concept of medical populism in thinking about the binary opposition between a technocratic response to the pandemic that tries to “*soothe the public outcry by letting experts and institutions of accountability take over*”, and a “*populist response which further spectacularises the crisis and pits ‘the people’ against [a] failed and untrustworthy establishment*” (LASCO – CURATO 2019: 1).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in March 2020, many analysts expected it would expose the contradictions of populist leaders for it was expected that they would mishandle the response to the pandemic. As the events unfolded, it became clear that they reacted differently from case to case. After all, it is not only that populism is a complex, heterogeneous

phenomenon, but the pandemic hit countries in asymmetric ways. The common element that stands out, though, is how populists attempted to use the pandemic to engage in crisis performance in order to advance their own political positions.

By understanding the COVID-19 crisis as both a construct and a performance, one is able to highlight how populists saw the pandemic as an opportunity for building social antagonism. Across the political spectrum, they attempted to use the pandemic to engage in crisis performance, although the virus ended up imposing itself as deaths and infections escalated. Populism thrives when new controversial issues appear, and the handling of the pandemic certainly has been controversial. And the pandemic offered a fertile ground for politization. It is likely then that not only will populism survive the pandemic, as Mudde warned us, but it will be rekindled. The challenge is to acknowledge the need for a new social contract in the post-pandemic period, so that those who feel abandoned by their own political institutions might be able to rebuild their trust in politics. Until then, populism will remain central in our future.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For special issues on the pandemic, see *Survival* (2020), *Foreign Affairs* (2021), and *Global Public Health* (2021).
- 2 Drezner (2020) argues that COVID-19 will not have transformative effects on world politics.
- 3 For a counterargument, see Rovira Kaltwasser (2012).
- 4 For Herman (1969: 414), crisis is (1) a situation that threatens high-priority goals of the decision-making unit, (2) that restricts the amount of time available for response before the decision is transformed, and (3) that surprises decision-makers by its occurrence.
- 5 Carr (1939), Gilpin (1981) and Allison and Zelikow (1999) are good examples of this literature.
- 6 For a review of this literature, see Stern (2003) and Boin (2004).
- 7 For a review, see Kouzmin and Jarman (2004).
- 8 This approach survived the end of Cold War. Dayton (2004) and Widmaier (2007) are good examples of it.
- 9 In a way, scholarship on 9/11 helped the shift towards this new ontology. See Croft (2006) for a sample.
- 10 Also building on the scholarship on populism and crisis performance by Moffitt (2015), Lasco and Curato (2019) developed the concept of medical populism to characterize the political style used by political leaders in health emergencies.
- 11 While Trump and Bolsonaro rejected social distance and masks, Duterte imposed a strict lockdown.

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