

Chapter 44

Populist Hype¹

Jana Goyvaerts

Department of Communication Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel jana.goyvaerts@vub.be

Katy Brown

Department of Media Studies, Maynooth University

katy.brown@mu.ie

Aurelien Mondon

Department of Politics, Languages & International Studies, University of Bath

A.Mondon@bath.ac.uk

Jason Glynos

Department of Government, University of Essex ljpglyn@essex.ac.uk

Benjamin De Cleen

Department of Communication Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel benjamin.de.cleen@vub.be

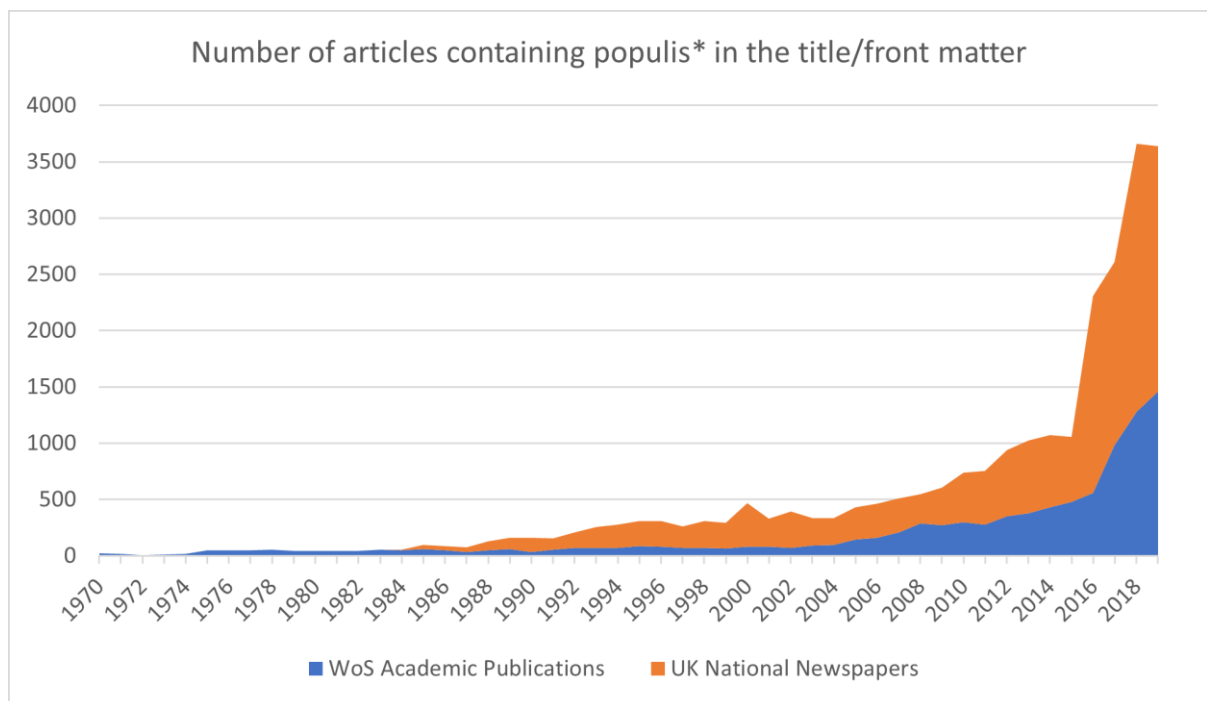
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Abstract: Going beyond an exclusive focus on populist politics, attention to the signifier ‘populism’ helps elucidate the character and effects of discourses *about* populism. The aim of this chapter is three-fold. First, we foreground the pivotal role played by politics, media, academia and their dynamic inter-relations in elucidating the character and effects of discourses about populism. Second, we argue that while this has so far been analysed productively in ideological terms, there are good reasons for supplementing these accounts by appealing to factors which go ‘beyond ideology’. Third, we approach the ubiquity of discourses about populism through the concept of ‘populist hype’, showing how its character and ideological effects are a product of processes that go beyond ‘mere’ ideological motivations.

Introduction

‘Populism’ has become a central notion in political, media and academic accounts of a variety of political developments and events, whether that be Donald Trump’s election and presidency, the outcome of the Brexit referendum or the political effects of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. Echoing its supposed rise as a societal phenomenon, we have also witnessed the growing popularity of ‘populism’ as a label, concept and insult. A search of the Web of Science and Lexis databases for articles within academic publications and UK national newspapers containing populis* (populism, populist, etc.) in the title or front matter demonstrates this clearly: from 1069 academic and 1487 newspapers articles published in the ten-year period 2000-09, to 6482 academic and 11319 newspaper articles in the subsequent decade 2010-2019 (see Graph 1). Most of these references have appeared in the second half of the 2010s, with more articles published in both cases between 2015-19 than in the entire 40-year period prior to that.



Graph 1: Uses of ‘populis*’ in Web of Science and Lexis searches

It is therefore hardly surprising that in 2017, ‘populism’ was declared ‘word of the year’ by *The Cambridge Dictionary*, for which it represented ‘a phenomenon that’s both truly local and truly global, as populations and their leaders across the world wrestle with issues of immigration and trade, resurgent nationalism, and economic discontent’ (University of Cambridge 2017).

There is no doubt that all the talk about populism in media, politics and academic work is partly a response to political events. However, it would be too easy to see the scope and intensity of debate about populism as a mere *reflection* of political developments. The *Cambridge Dictionary* rationale for selecting populism as its ‘word of the year’ already indicates that the word does not serve as a mere linguistic mirror of the ‘*phenomenon* of the year’. The selection can also be understood to be a product of a set of ‘second order’ effects in which the talk *about* populism itself plays a rather prominent role in the further intensification of debates about populism. Populism has become an increasingly widespread framing device through which to understand a complex range of phenomena, rather than merely a label for certain political and societal developments.

As has been argued elsewhere (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018), populism can function as both a concept and a signifier. Approached as a *concept*, populism should be judged by its capacity to capture a particular dimension of social and political reality, a capacity that relies heavily on analytical precision. A sizable body of work has proposed, criticized, refined and combined a range of definitions of populism (for an overview, see Katsambekis 2020; Moffitt 2020). What interests us in this chapter, is not the relative advantages and disadvantages of these conceptualisations, but the politics of the use of the *signifier* ‘populism’ across politics, media and academia.

Approaching populism as a signifier turns our attention to questions such as: why is the term ‘populism’ used so frequently? How does it acquire different and competing meanings in different discourses? What is its function in such discourses? What are the dynamic interrelations between different discourses about populism? And what is the politico-strategic and ideological significance of a focus on populism in politics, the media and academia? In discussing populism as a signifier, we draw on a growing body of work that asks critical questions about the ideological motivations underpinning discourses about populism. Going beyond ideological considerations informing much of this work, however, we also point to other intentional and unintentional factors that can account for the character of discourses about populism, including their dynamic interaction and propagation.

Populism, anti-populism and anti-anti-populism: a question of ideology

In the last decade or so, as discourses about populism have become more widespread, there has been a growing awareness of the politics of the *signifier* ‘populism’. This includes critical reflections about how academic conceptualisations of the term contribute to delegitimizing populist politics and defending mainstream political forces (e.g. Eklundh 2020; Goyvaerts 2021; Hunger and Paxton, 2021; Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017), how politicians use it to denounce their opponents (e.g. Brown 2023; Elmgren 2018), how journalists have used it, and how – in a series of feedback loops – these uses have had an impact on each other (e.g. Bale et al. 2011; Brookes 2018; Brown and Mondon 2020; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020; Herkman 2017; Thornborrow et al. 2021).

Such enquiries have revolved around the question of ‘how the term is used, by whom and why, and with what performative effects’ (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018: 652). Most of this work has been focused on the ideological and politico-strategic intentions and impacts of mainstream discourses about populism. The starting point for much of these reflections is an

explicitly critical position towards the way the term ‘populism’ is commonly employed across the mediatic, political and academic fields to delegitimize political opponents as ‘populist’. This pejorative use of populism has many shades and gradations, and exists in more and less nuanced forms, but usually converges around a view of populism as a threat to pluralism, liberal rights and democracy.

While the term ‘anti-populism’ was already used in the 1980s to capture recurring features in the critique of ‘populism’ (e.g., Folkerts 1984), it has gained prominence from the late 2010s as some scholars turned what they consider the mainstream anti-populist position into an object of critical analysis in its own right (e.g., Jäger, 2017; Kim 2018; Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017a; Venizelos and Galanopoulos 2019; Zúquete 2018). Going against the predominantly negative evaluation of populism in academic work, scholars also argue that ‘populism and anti-populism mutually constitute each other’ and that it is ‘impossible to effectively study the first without carefully examining the second’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 12). The most frequent ideological critique of anti-populist discourse is that it constitutes a defence of a problematic status quo through the delegitimization of democratic alternatives as threats to democracy. Anti-populist discourse, the – usually left-wing – critique goes, uses the term ‘populist’ to delegitimize political alternatives to a status quo characterized by neoliberal socioeconomic policies implemented in a technocratic and post-political manner that marginalizes genuine democratic choice. Moreover, these critiques of populism are said to strategically lump together left-wing alternatives and far-right forces as one single populist threat to liberal democracy (e.g., Cannon 2018, 486; D’Eramo 2013; Goyvaerts 2021; Jäger 2017; Katsambekis 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017, Stavrakakis 2018). Whilst much of these ‘anti-anti-populist’ (Zúquete 2018) reflections have been formulated from within a left-leaning, critical, often poststructuralist discourse-theoretical tradition – and in some cases also by authors on the

(far)right of the political spectrum (e.g., Furedi 2018) –, concerns about the problems with antipopulist positions have recently also gained some traction in more mainstream academic perspectives on populism that are characterized by a negative attitude towards populism, with some scholars extending their critique of the ‘moralizing’ and antagonistic nature of populism to the anti-populist position (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1683).

Others have remarked that the use of the term populism – despite its oft-pejorative meaning – has helped mainstream the far right by diverting attention away from the (much more problematic) ideological core of the far-right project and by euphemising ultra-nationalist exclusion and racism as ‘populism’ (e.g., Collovald 2004; Mondon and Winter 2020; Rydgren 2017). In response to the critique that they are populist, we have seen far-right figures such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Steve Bannon embrace the term. Their explicit ‘populist’ position effectively acknowledges populism as a term that is less stigmatising than other labels for the far right, suggesting also a readily exploitable proximity to ‘the people’. Indeed, the populism label has – again, despite dominant anti-populist intents – contributed to accepting the far right’s claim that they represent ‘the people’. The far right is criticized as ‘populist’ for appealing to racist and other problematic prejudices among ‘the people’. This, in practice, lends credence to their claim that they say what people think or want to hear (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2021), and it contributes to viewing ‘the people’ narrowly as the ‘white working class’ or ‘left-behind’ who are supposedly represented by the far right (Mondon and Winter 2018).

Attesting to the ‘complex choreography between populism and anti-populism’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 3), the strength of anti-populist discourse has also played a role in stimulating the production of discourses defending populism (see Zúquete 2018). These range from the abovementioned critiques of anti-populism to more outspoken pleas for the development of a

populist strategy. The latter have most prominently been formulated by left-wing authors who consider a populist strategy the only viable one to respond to both the populist far right and post-political technocratic neoliberalism (e.g. Mouffe 2017). Contesting the dominant pejorative connotation of populism, these authors aim to reclaim the signifier ‘populism’, stressing populism’s democratic potentials, and sometimes even questioning whether the ‘populist far right’ is really populist at all (e.g. Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

What becomes clear is that the struggle between the critics and proponents of populism is driven by ideological, not merely conceptual-analytical, considerations. Moreover, the increasingly reflexive discussion about the ideologically-invested politics of the signifier populism, has itself contributed to the ubiquity of debates about populism. Despite opposing positions as to the desirability of populism – or indeed, because of them – all voices in this debate are part of a dynamic that continues to propel the expanding production of discourses about populism, to which this chapter itself can also be said to contribute. To grasp more fully such dynamics and the character of discourses about populism and their effects, we need to turn our attention to factors that go beyond ideology.

On the dynamic emergence and interaction of discourses about populism: moving beyond ideology

Whereas ideological and strategic intentions are certainly central to understanding the nature and ubiquity of discourses about populism, the complex manner in which politically opposed voices emerge and interact in these debates already indicates that to grasp the growth of discourses about ‘populism’ as well its effects, we also need to look beyond such intentions. Newspapers publishing special sections on populism, prominent dictionaries calling populism the ‘word of the year’, the plethora of academic conferences, books and special issues, or the

endless warnings by politicians against the dangers and threat of populism cannot be explained by appealing to their ideological investment in populism or anti-populism alone.

In part, we are dealing here with rather straightforward, yet not insignificant, ‘institutionalist’ explanations for the abundant production of discourses about populism. In the academic world, for example, some of the obvious explanations for the fact that ever more academics started to work on populism would be the ‘bandwagon effect’, propelled by the perceived need to address a pressing issue, turbocharged by associated publications and funding opportunities.²

Yet there are also other, more complex and less tangible mechanisms and logics at play, with all who speak about populism being part of the *dynamics* of scholarly, media and political debate not reducible to political intentions or agent-centred calculations. To account for the character, scope, intensity, and effects of the production of discourses about populism more adequately, we need to look at these dynamics within and across the spheres involved in that production. Many types of actors produce discourses about populism, but we can say that the most important ones in terms of impact on the wider public political discourse are politics itself, the media, and, to a lesser or less direct extent, academia. Here it is important to emphasise the need to find a language with which to characterise not only the *general* nature and significance of such dynamics, but also the socio-historical and institutional complexity and variety of their constitution. This means we need to look at *intra-sphere* processes of discursive production specific to academia, media, and politics, for instance citation networks among scholars. But we also need to look at *inter-sphere* processes that operate across these three spheres, such as academic commentary in media articles. Ideology and political strategy crosscut these three spheres, but they interact with the dynamics specific to each, as well as with the more complex dynamic interactions between them.

We can find in the recent literature some concepts that point to and attempt to capture the general character and significance of such dynamics. Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) and Anton Jäger (2016) consider discourses about populism through the lens of Anthony Giddens' concept of 'double hermeneutics'. This concept aims to grasp the mutual interactions between concepts used in the social sciences and the concepts used in broader society: 'Social scientists [...] tend to shape the very objects they propound to observe' (Jäger 2017: 13) as their concepts impact on the self-understandings, discourses and practices in that society. This also implies that academic research analyses societal discourses and practices that have to an extent integrated academic concepts, knowledge and perspectives. Jäger and Stavrakakis mainly focus on the ideological dimensions of this: they use the notion of double hermeneutics to show the connections between the negative connotation of populism in academic work and in the broader fields of politics and media (Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017). However, the notion of double hermeneutics can also help us understand the ubiquity of the concept of populism *per se* as it points towards a dynamic where 'all producers of discourses about populism operate in a house of mirrors, where academics, politicians, and journalists reflect and further reinforce each other's focus on populism' (Glynos and De Cleen 2020: 189).

Another notion that captures the dynamic interaction between different, often competing, discourses about populism is that of a 'speculative bubble'. In his book *The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on 'the People' in Late Modern Democracy*, Péter Csigó (2016) develops the argument that in a time where the more institutional and organic vertical ties between political parties and their constituencies have been eroded, we can observe what he calls a 'neopopular bubble' made up of academics, journalists, commentators, politicians, political strategists and other professional producers of discourse. In this 'bubble', he argues, different voices 'speculate' on what it is 'the people' think and want, and about how they relate to politics, but they end up referring mainly to each other. Whilst most of Csigó's argument does

not explicitly engage with discourses about populism, his appeal to financial speculation bubbles to frame his approach to politics is of clear relevance for understanding the nature and sheer ubiquity of discourses about populism as well as the relations between academic, journalistic and political discourse.

Another concept that has recently been used to study the role of these top-down processes in constructing ‘the people’ and legitimising and mainstreaming certain types of politics, is that of ‘mediation’, building on Roger Silverstone’s work (2002; see also Brown and Mondon 2020). As Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2021) note, ‘knowledge of our political context is always based on a mediated process. It would simply be impossible for any of us, no matter our level of education and access to knowledge, to hold an objective and complete view of all matters pertaining to local, national and/or international policy and politics. Political decisions must therefore be based on the limited and selective knowledge we acquire through others, whether these be politicians, the media, religious communities, trade unions, the workplace, family etc’ (see also Block 2013; Couldry 2003; Brown 2022). These studies link to Csigó’s argument inasmuch as they seek to highlight how politics, often thought of as emerging through bottom-up processes and attributed to ‘the people’, is the result of far more complex mechanisms in which top-down mediation and the discursive interactions between different types of elite actors play a crucial role.

A fourth concept with which to approach the dynamics fuelling the emergence, interaction, and effects of discourses about populism beyond ideology is that of ‘populist hype’ (Glynos and Mondon 2016). In the following section we aim to strengthen its conceptualisation and flesh out some of the consequences the ‘populist hype’ has had, before teasing out a move ‘beyond populist hype’ in the conclusion.

Populist hype

The noun ‘hype’ is typically used to indicate a situation in which the degree of intensity of the publicity or attention for something (typically a product, idea or event) is considered extravagant and seen to exaggerate the importance, relevance and/or benefits of that which is hyped. The term ‘populist hype’ captures the way politicians, as well as journalists and academic commentators: (i) exaggerate the significance of populism through the sheer volume of content devoted to its discussion; (ii) present a simplistic picture of the ‘rise’ of populism (with that ‘rise’ feeding and legitimizing the hype), for example on the basis of selective and decontextualised uses of electoral results and polls; and (iii) exaggerate the political and societal impact of populism *per se* (to the detriment of the substantive ideologies of different populist actors), usually by characterizing populism as such as an acute threat to democracy (see Glynos and Mondon 2019).

‘Hyping’ has a dynamic of its own, incorporating complex feedback loops that amplify the focus on a certain phenomenon within and across different spheres. In the case of populism, it is mainly politics, media and academia that interact with and influence each other to amplify the focus on populism. In the political sphere, for example, we have seen heated interventions against populism, with major politicians decrying the dangers of populism across political campaigns, book publications, and media interventions. To give just one example among many, in 2015, then EU President Herman van Rompuy famously called populism ‘the greatest danger for Europe’ (in Stabenow 2010). Such claims stimulate further production of discourse about populism as media cover these statements, but also through the funding of conferences, debates and initiatives aimed at monitoring and fighting populism.

In the media sphere, we have seen a remarkable rise in attention to populism. Whilst such coverage is typically framed as a response to the force of populism in the political landscape,

it is at least as much the result of media's involvement in a hype they have significantly contributed to, even though this is often not acknowledged. One good example of this can be found in one of the first articles published to launch a *Guardian* series on the 'New populism' in 2019. It was titled 'Why is populism suddenly all the rage?' with the standfirst reading 'In 1998, about 300 Guardian articles mentioned populism. In 2016, 2,000 did. What happened?' This question renders invisible *The Guardian's* own agency in this process, with its editors failing to acknowledge the fact that it was ultimately their choice to publish 2000 articles mentioning populism in 2016 (and to devote a whole series to the 'new populism'). Instead, the reader is led to think that something external had led to this situation, whether it was the rise of 'populist' parties and 'populism', however understood, or demands from their readership to read more about 'populist' parties and 'populism', however understood (see Brown and Mondon 2020).

A hype about populism can also be discerned in the academic sphere. This becomes visible not only in the sheer number of articles, books and conferences about populism, but also in the tendency to focus on populism *per se*, most clearly illustrated by the appearance of a field of 'populism studies', with its own conferences, journal special issues, and even dedicated journals. Recently, this emerging field of populism studies has been the object of some critical scrutiny. The main critique here has been that the focus on the populist dimension has drawn our attention away from other, more important, aspects of populist politics. Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton (2021: 2), for example, in their study of over 800 abstracts of articles on populism published in political science journals, have drawn attention to the 'overstatement of populism at the expense of the host ideologies in the interpretation of research findings' (see also Dean and Maiguashca 2020; De Cleen and Glynos 2021; Rooduijn 2019).

It is true of course that hyping typically tends to be initiated by people who produce and promote a product or phenomenon, and who therefore also often stand to benefit from its promotion. In the case of populism, however, much of the observed hype comes from the massive attention trained on populism by voices *opposed* to populism. Though negative, this extensive attention also hypes populism, often with clear political and ideological effects, whether intended or unintended.

Populist hype, then, can be seen to function as a ‘political logic’. Logics are ‘constructed and named by the analyst’ to identify and understand the ‘rules or grammar of [a] practice’ under study (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 136). For example, the term ‘social logics’ aims to capture the norms that constitute a practice in their relatively stable mode of existence. ‘Political logics’ on the other hand comprise processes that seek to strengthen, defend, or contest those relatively sedimented social norms. Approaching populist hype as a political logic draws attention to how ‘the dominant “hyped” response to the populist conjuncture by politicians and the media [and much mainstream academic work] has served to pre-empt the contestation of some of the norms animating the regimes of “really existing” liberal democracy’, such as the norms of electoral democracy, and to contest other norms which many consider worthy of defence, such as the norms of presumptive equality, ethnic and otherwise (Glynos and Mondon 2019: 84).

At the same time, the notion of a populist hype – as a dynamic that goes ‘beyond ideology’ – also suggests that a heavy focus on populism can have political effects that are not reducible to the ideological intentions of the agents involved. Indeed, one reason for turning to the notion of ‘hype’ is that it points to a potentially open-ended range of political effects, both intended and unintended. Whilst typically driven by an ideological defence of liberal democracy against populism, this charged opposition to populism has also had the unintended consequence of strengthening the visibility and political impact of populist politics, thereby also risking wider

acceptance of populists' claims that they represent 'the people' (see De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2021).

Hype also draws our attention to how *all* participants in the debate about populism, be they anti-populist, anti-anti-populist or pro-populist, can contribute to the 'hying' of populism: '[t]alking about populism means approaching politics from a specific angle, reading the current political conjuncture in a particular manner, formulating populist and anti-populist strategies based on that reading, constructing and reproducing political cleavages on that basis, and then interpreting those through the lens of populism all over again' (Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020: 100). This is not at all to underestimate the very significant analytical and ideological differences between different approaches to populism, but merely to point out that these disagreements themselves can contribute to furthering the focus on populism and that this focus has (sometimes unintended) analytical as well as political consequences.

Some have noted that critical academics' focus on populism has led to a process of abstraction and deradicalisation of radical politics. In her feminist critique of populism studies, Bice

Maiguashca wrote that

while populism is ultimately about securing, widening, and radicalising democracy (read pluralising it); for feminists the struggle must move beyond calls for participation, representation, and the recognition of demands, important though they are, and encompass the quest to both overturn intractable relations of subordination/marginalisation and to build a world of social justice, in general, and 'gender justice', in particular (Maiguashca 2019: 779).

While populism studies are not homogenous and serious disagreement can be found within this field of study, it remains the case that in these studies, power is often thought of largely in

liberal democratic terms, particularly regarding the primacy attributed to electoral politics. Paying attention to the political logic of populist hype thus enables us to see more clearly how it can reinforce not only a rather narrow electoral conception of democracy, but also how the hyping of a populist right-wing threat can – through the sheer volume of repetition – serve to weaken the hold of norms we value, such as the norm of ‘presumptive equality’ (Glynos and Mondon 2019). More generally, however, Maiguashca (2019: 784) points to how populism, as a concept, runs the risk of being co-opted by branches of academia that still place considerable faith in the tradition of ‘positivism and an exclusive commitment to streamlined definitions and impactful, empirical, and policy-related research’. In these branches of academia, ‘[t]hicker, historically and sociologically inflected, inductive forms of theorising, of the kind that feminists have argued for, do not seem to be part of the agenda’ (Maiguashca 2019: 784). Although recent work demonstrates how it is indeed possible to engage in the study of populism in a way that is compatible with a feminist impulse that is historically and sociologically informed (Biglieri and Cadehia 2021; Gunnarsson-Payne 2020), it is still relevant to consider the challenges posed by the logic of populist hype in helping to foreground issues of gender inequality.

Similar to the side-lining of feminism Maiguashca points to, the same could be said of more radical approaches to racism in the growing field of populism studies (see Mondon and Winter 2021). Just as the hyping effects of academic analyses and antagonistic media reporting of populism can inadvertently erode the norm of presumptive equality along the gender axis, we can see this political logic at work along the ‘race’ axis as well. While this is witnessed in political science more generally, and far right studies more specifically, the refusal to engage seriously with the concept of racism in the field of populism studies is striking as more often than not what is called ‘right-wing populism’ would in fact be better described as racism or white supremacy, a label that could encourage scholars to build on a much more developed and

sophisticated body of literature, theory and empirical work (see Mondon 2022). This would in turn prevent the creation of false equivalences between so-called left and right-wing populism as if both were equal threats to what is good, as many anti-populists are prone to assert, and many anti-anti-populists have refuted. The inclusion of all remains impossible without dismantling white supremacy and its prior acknowledgement and recognition. In the current context, the colourblind approach to populism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) understands racism as an aberration, something outside of the liberal hegemony and even opposed to it, rather than as something inherent to the current hegemonic constructions of ‘the people’.

Conclusion: Beyond populist hype

Moving beyond a focus on populist discourses, the ideological significance of discourses *about* populism has become an important concern in critical studies of populism. In recent years, the ideological and politico-strategic dimensions of discourses about populism, especially antipopulist ones, have been fleshed out and subjected to significant critique. At the same time, not much attention has been paid to the wider dynamics underlying and perpetuating debates about populism, although there have been some interventions which push in that direction, exploring (primarily) the ideological dimension of the character, scope, intensity, and significance of the performative effects of discourses about populism in politics, media and academia (e.g.,

Cannon 2018; Dean and Maignashca 2020; De Cleen et al. 2018; De Cleen and Glynos 2021; Eklundh, 2020; Glynos and Mondon 2016; Rydgren 2017; Stavrakakis 2017).

In this chapter we have argued that while it is crucial to better understand the ideological dimension informing discourses about populism, we need to also consider factors ‘beyond ideology’ if we are to understand their dynamic interactions and political effects across media, politics and academia. We briefly noted how the concepts of double hermeneutics, speculative

bubble and mediation have been used to elucidate these dynamics. These ideas point, respectively, towards the two-way interactions between academic work and the political phenomena they analyse, the tendency of discourses about ‘the people’ to get drawn into a self-referential bubble detached from the phenomena they describe, and the role of elite mediatic discourses in constructing ‘the people’ and its ‘will’. We then turned our attention to the notion of populist hype, showing in more detail how it can help us understand the ubiquity of discourses about populism and better appreciate their intended and unintended effects.

Whilst we have argued for the need to incorporate factors ‘beyond ideology’ to characterise this hype, including its dynamics of emergence, political logic and effects, it is still worth making some more targeted suggestions about how it is produced and sustained from a sociohistorical and institutional point of view. This might involve mapping out in a more precise way *social* and *fantasmatic logics* that produce and sustain this hype, both within and across each of the three spheres we have canvassed. Looking at the media and politics spheres and their intersections, quite apart from various ‘revolving door’ logics that see practitioners move within and across these spheres, there are other imperatives that sustain and amplify the hyped nature of discourses about populism. For example, it is arguable that more antagonistic and sensationalist forms of discourses about populism tend to be selected when journalistic practice and the logics informing the political economy of the media are underpinned by profitmaking imperatives (see Krämer 2014, 2017). It has also been argued that ‘the tenacity of populist hype – and its continued role as a political logic – indicates how it has successfully tapped into potent affective registers rooted in collective desires and fantasies’ (Glynos and Mondon 2019: 85).

Turning to the academic sphere, we could say that its omnipresent publication imperatives point towards a social logic that applies not only to ideals of publishing in academic journals and publishing houses but extends also to various forms of ‘knowledge exchange’ ideals. These

imperatives encourage academics to publish in prominent media outlets which generally demand arguments to be framed within the bounds of ideologically hegemonic mainstream language and debate. It also extends to various ‘impact’ ideals that encourage academics to put their ideas into practice by engaging with practitioners, including politicians and policy makers, again tending to favour work that does not depart too much from hegemonically sustained ideological bounds. Many of these imperatives, moreover, are increasingly embedded in reputational and career progression logics that, in turn, reinforce tendencies within and across spheres, thereby helping to sustain and further amplify the populist hype.

It is arguable that similar worries about hyping can be expressed in relation to other sub-fields in the social and political sciences. Consider gender studies, or nationalism studies, for example, where we can certainly see how the signifier ‘gender’ and ‘nationalism’ can become part of a wider set of discourses about gender, or about nationalism, whose intra- and intersphere dynamics – ideological and ‘beyond’ ideology – can produce corresponding hypes. Rather more so than gender and nationalism, however, the term ‘populism’ captures only one very specific and minimal dimension of otherwise substantively very distinct political phenomena – a view supported by a consensus in the literature on populism, ranging from the ‘thin ideology’ to the ‘discursive’ perspectives on populism. For this reason, it could be said that “populism is particularly unsuited to serve as the central nucleus of a field of study” in and of itself (De Cleen and Glynos 2021: 191). It implies that studies of populism are – and should be seen as – only ever partly about populism, and at least as much about more substantive ideological traditions (e.g. the radical left, the radical right) and about broader institutional or cultural norms (e.g. regarding democracy or equality) that are being promoted or contested.

In closing this chapter, we emphasise that the kind of considerations about the signifier ‘populism’ we have discussed do not undermine efforts to promote the relevance of the concept

of populism in capturing a particular aspect of political reality. Nor does our argument suggest that the considerable body of work on populism needs to be superseded by a new line of work centred around the signifier ‘populism’. The concept of populism certainly has a role to play in academic enquiry. Our chapter simply encourages a more self-reflexive stance that suggests scholars use the concept of populism in a precise and modest manner (as much good work on populism already does) but also foregrounds how the very use of the signifier ‘populism’ is not above, but part of, a much wider set of dynamic processes and effects that are both ideological and ‘beyond ideology’.

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² According to Google Scholar metrics, of the top 20 most cited articles published in the top 20 most cited political science journals over the last five years, 23 contained 'populis*' in their title. Ten of these were in the top three articles for the respective journal, and no less than five were the most cited of all. In the media sphere, meanwhile, populism sometimes seems little more than a catchy word in a headline (see Brown and Mondon 2020).