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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POPULISM: THE TRIBAL THREAT TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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The first two decades of the 21st century were marked by a remarkable phenomenon: the largely unexpected rise of radical populist political ideologies in both well-established Western democracies and less-developed nations (Fournier, 2016). This book represents an integrated attempt to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying recent populist movements. Contributors include leading international researchers from the fields of social and cognitive psychology as well as political science, who seek to shed light on the psychological processes and dynamics of political populism.

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Understanding the mental precursors of populist ideation is especially timely today, when populist movements increasingly represent a credible threat to what has been arguably the most successful civilization in human history, liberal democracy combined with market capitalism (Pinker, 2018; Shuster, 2016). Understanding populist movements requires a systematic exploration of how people think, feel, and mentally represent political reality. The idea that political systems are fundamentally constrained by human nature and are expressions of human psychology was first mooted two thousand years ago by Plato in his classic *Republic*. The same core idea was reaffirmed by John Stuart Mill's famous dictum that 'all phenomena of society are also phenomena of human nature' (Mill, 1947). Our book is predicated on the assumption that understanding political movements like populism above all requires a psychological explanation of the mental representations of its followers.

The Populist Challenge

Liberal democratic parties are currently under sustained attack by new populist formations, from both the left and the right. The specter of becoming ungovernable

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haunts several major democracies. In Germany, new populist parties decimated voter support for both the SPD and the CDU/CSU. In France, the traditional center parties have been replaced by Macron's new movement, closely followed by Le Pen's populist party. In Italy, fragile governments alternate, and in Britain following Brexit, populism has become mainstream. Spain saw repeated inconclusive elections in recent years. And, of course, Trump's 2016 victory turned the US political establishment upside down. Everywhere, the old certainties of traditionally centrist parties and the values of civility, tolerance, and open debate are challenged.

There are several reasons for these developments. In many liberal democracies, there is a growing sense of resentment against the 'elites', a defining feature of populism. The rise of emotional, identity-based politics is replacing the old norms of rational, analytical, and pragmatic decision making. Consensus and compromise are supplanted by implacable animosity and tribal hatreds. On many issues, the established parties are no longer able to channel voter preferences, so the rise of various populist parties is inevitable.

Towards a Definition

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Populism is a rather nebulous and hard-to-define term. Its current juxtaposition with democracy can be confusing, since both democracy and populism actually mean the same thing, rule by the people (*demos* in Greek, and *populus* in Latin). Then again, populist leaders are identified as demagogues, using the Greek vocabulary. Whereas democracy as an ideology is supported by over two thousand years of cultural evolution and refinement, populism remains a rough and superficial or 'thin' ideology (Mudde, 2004), focusing on the perceived conflict between the romanticized concept of the *people*, who are good, virtuous, and kind, and an opposing *elite* seen as corrupt, immoral, and exploitative.

Democratic systems throughout history evolved increasingly precise and refined mechanisms to translate popular will into executive power. In contrast, populism mostly remains a simplistic and emotional tribal credo emphasizing the moral superiority of the people betrayed by those ruling over them (Rooduijn, 2015; Krekó, this volume). Populist ideologies typically offer cognitive certainty and simplicity, a positive identity, moral superiority, and the promise of collective redemption (Kruglanski, 2004; see also Krueger & Gruening; Kruglanski et al.; van Prooijen, this volume). Rather than offering realistic and rational explanations, populist leaders like Trump, Putin, Orbán, or Kaczyński describe their opponents as enemies of the people or evil. The kind of tribal animosity exploited by populists is also deeply rooted in human needs and values, especially the universal desire to identify with meaningful and positive valued groups or collectives (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000; Hogg & Gøetsche-Astrup, this volume).

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Anti-Individualism and Collectivism

Several chapters here argue that a key feature of populism is its fundamentally collectivist and anti-individualist character. This presents a major challenge to the individualistic and humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment that informs liberal democracies. Democracy assumes that the basic units of society are free and autonomous individuals who can determine their fate. In contrast, populism is a collectivist tribal ideology proposing a return to the romanticized pre-Enlightenment communal paradigm where the collective rather than independent individuals reign supreme. Populism assigns no inherent autonomy to the person, seen as a subordinate unit of the group they belong to (nation, race, religion, etc.).

Classic and well-articulated populist ideologies such as Marxism offer a clear illustration of such a thoroughly collectivist and deterministic system, where a person's status and even consciousness are externally determined by their economic circumstances and class membership (Koestler, 1952). Those who lack the required class consciousness are seen as suffering from a dysfunctional 'false consciousness', or in in Jost and Banaji's (1994) more recent neo-Marxist terminology, a system justification bias. Contemporary identitarian 'social justice' movements also emphasize a strict collectivist and anti-individualist ideology, where group membership is the primary source of a person's values and preferences. Individual deviations from the assigned norms of the identity groups are not recognized as valid. Examples abound: a black person who happens to be conservative (e.g. the economist Thomas Sowell) is not really 'black', a gay person who deviates from LGBQT ideology is not really gay (e.g. Douglas Murray), and a feminist who challenges current orthodoxy is not really a feminist (e.g. Germaine Greer; Murray, 2019).

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Unlike sophisticated systems of democracy, populist ideology is often simple and indeed simple-minded, showing lack of subtlety and emphasizing moral absolutism, certainty, collectivism, leadership, and authoritarianism (Krueger & Gruening; Kruglanski et al., this volume). One of the core messages of this book is that populism has a tribal character and presents a collectivist challenge to the ideals of the Enlightenment, such as individualism, humanism, pluralism, and rationality (Krekó, this volume).

Antecedents of Populism

Typically, in a democracy populist movements flourish when significant portions of the population feel that the political elite no longer properly represents their values and needs (Bar-Tal and Magal; Huddy & Del Ponte; Marcus, this volume). This often occurs when economic crises, social changes, racial or ethnic rivalries or pandemics destroy existing social conditions, and create frustration, uncertainty, anger, fear, and resentment. In fact, all of these conditions have occurred

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in the first two decades of the 21st century, so the current rise of populism is not all that surprising (Fukuyama, 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016; Hogg & Gøetsche-Astrup; Ditto & Rodriguez, this volume). A less tangible trigger of populist revolt is the perceived threat to a group's cultural identity, when traditions, values, and way of life are undermined by cultural changes and immigration (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Murray, 2018; Zakaria, 2016; Golec de Zavala et al., this volume).

However, these challenges are not in themselves sufficient for populist movements to arise. What is also critical is a persuasive narrative that can turn dissatisfaction into a political force (Part IV; Cooper & Avery; Crano & Gaffney; Vallacher & Fennell, this volume). There is good evidence that support for populist politics is stronger among people with a well-articulated sense of perceived relative deprivation, grievance, and resentment (Fukuyama, 2018). Thus, the potential for populism is triggered by aversive economic, social, and cultural conditions, yet populism does not reliably arise in response to such social stressors. Historically, humans mostly lived in abominable conditions, yet populist revolts were rare (Harari, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Pinker, 2018). Over time, people can accept extremely adverse conditions without triggering revolt as long as they had enough time and latitude to adapt (Vallacher & Fennell, this volume).

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Despite mostly abject conditions throughout history, humans were generally able to symbolically justify their existence as long as the conditions were stable, reliable, and offered a coherent explanation for one's life (Harari, 2014; Ditto & Rodriguez, this volume). It is only when a previously stable context is disrupted by rapid changes undermining one's sense of stability and certainty that people become receptive to populist narratives, exploiting the psychological states of uncertainty, frustration, fear, anger, envy, and resentment (Crano & Gaffney; Gelfand & Lorente; Kruglanski et al., this volume).

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The main purpose of our book is to offer a social psychological analysis of the circumstances that promote populist political movements. One fruitful approach to understand how deprivation turns into populism is by analyzing the various human needs, goals, and values that have been challenged (see Part I). There are many taxonomies of such needs, goals, and values, and when they are frustrated a populist narrative may be adopted (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fiske, 2010; Higgins, 2012; Maslow, 1943; Crano & Gaffney, this volume). The need for certainty, dignity, status, and identity are especially important, and the higher a person's need for certainty and closure, the higher is their support for populism (see Part II). From the perspective of the individual, populism offers a collectivist response and a solution to perceived deprivation.

Populism on the Left and on the Right

While for historical reasons populism is most often identified with right-wing, nationalistic, and nativist political ideologies, many of its psychological features

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are equally characteristic of left-wing radicalism (Cooper & Avery, this volume). The contemporary concern about the rise of political populism was largely elicited by events such as the election of Trump, Brexit, and the rise of right-wing populist parties with illiberal, nationalist, and fascist ideologies in countries like Germany, Austria, Russia, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland. However, these movements did not emerge in a vacuum, at least in Western democracies. Similarly close-minded, absolutist, and authoritarian left-wing populist movements have long been a feature of the political landscape in many Western countries. It just so happens that the appearance of right-wing populism is more likely to trigger alarm in many observers.

Left-wing populism in contrast is often not accurately recognized, and is frequently disguised by misleading, utopistic, and idealistic rhetoric. We are more likely to give the benefit of doubt to extremist radical left-wing movements, and assume that although possibly misguided, they are nevertheless committed to improving the human condition. For obvious historical reasons, right-wing populism is much less likely to escape adverse attention.

Yet, as several chapters here show, there is a close similarity in beliefs and strategies between radical left-wing populism as manifested in the intolerant excesses of political correctness and identity politics, and right-wing populism leading eventually to the success of Trump, Brexit, and the AfD (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The worrying rise of right-wing populism is partly explicable as a reaction to the intolerant and autocratic ideologies of the radical left such as identity politics and political correctness (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Murray, 2019).

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In our age, playing with identity as a political strategy is a very dangerous game (see Part III). In the late 1960s, left-wing movements were among the first to invoke identitarian ideologies in the alleged pursuit of social justice and equality, and to use strategies that violated the classical values of liberalism, individualism, and tolerance in pursuing these goals. It was perhaps inevitable that weaponizing group identity based on gender, sex, race, or ethnicity eventually produced a populist backlash by those groups singled out for attacks (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

What may differ between left-wing and right-wing populism is the kinds of narratives and value framing strategies employed to justify intolerant and absolutist practices (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Cooper & Avery, this volume). Right-wing populism historically embraced a nativist ideology where threats to the in-group and narcissistic beliefs in the group's greatness were employed to justify authoritarian practices and leadership. As Albright (2018) suggested, strategies first invented by Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, and Salazar are now routinely employed by dictators like Erdogan, Putin, Orbán, and others (see Part IV).

Left-wing populism has slightly different roots. Perhaps the most enduring populist ideology on the left is Marxism, featuring the same degree of authoritarianism, dogmatism, and intolerance also found in right-wing totalitarian movements (Koestler, 1952; Popper, 1945). According to Marxist ideology, social progress is the outcome of necessary and inevitable group conflict. Assignment to

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antagonistic groups (classes) is objectively determined by economic factors with no place for individual choice. Unrelenting group conflict is considered as the necessary engine of progress and social justice, a political strategy that has changed little since Lenin's days.

Contemporary identity politics, perhaps the most influential recent reincarnation of Marxist ideology, instead of 'classes' defines antagonistic identity group membership in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, or minority status. The theory of intersectionality further refines these group categories and assigns individuals to privileged (e.g. White, male, heterosexual) vs. oppressed (non-White, female, homosexual) identity groups. As in Marxist theory, conflict between these antagonistic groups is expected to drive the next phase of history.

Populists at both ends of the political spectrum also differ in the kinds of grievances they focus on and the kinds of moral justifications they employ, while displaying a similarity in terms of their tactics, strategies, and modus operandi (Part IV; Cooper & Avery; Crano & Gaffney, this volume). Left-wing populists are typically concerned with economic, ethnic, and racial injustice, while right-wing populists tend to emphasize the importance of order, structure, predictability, and the values of nationalism, authoritarianism, and conservatism (Feldman; and Huddy & Del Ponte, this volume). Left-wing populist programs advocate state power and redistribution (e.g. Roosevelt's New Deal, Chavez' Bolivarian revolution, etc.), while right-wing populism emphasizes 'tribal' and nativist values, promoting xenophobia, nationalism, religion, and conservatism (e.g. Trump, Berlusconi, Salvini, the Tea Party movement, Erdogan, Orbán and Kaczyński, etc.; Kruglanski et al., this volume).

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Marx' traditionally populist class struggle ideology lost its attraction by the late 1960s as the horrors of the soviet communist system finally became recognized. Many of its Western adherents turned to either postmodernism or 'social justice' movements as their new preferred system critical ideology (Murray, 2019). It is paradoxical that Marxists who originally believed in the absolute truth and determinism of their system, once it became unsustainable, went to the opposite extreme and now believe equally fervently that there can be no truth at all. What Marxism and postmodernism do still share is a strongly critical attitude to Western liberal values, a romantic attachment to anti-Enlightenment communalism, and a cold-eyed focus on power as the major social issue of interest.

Features of Populism

Although by its very nature populism is an elusive construct with rather fuzzy boundaries, there are several key features that theorists commonly identify, such as anti-elitism, moral absolutism, tribalism, and utopistic ideation. We shall briefly consider these features next.

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Anti-Elitism

Anti-elitism is often suggested as one of the key features of populism. However, this theoretical notion is challenged by some research that shows that after populists acquire power and become the new 'elite', the movement may continue unabated, driven mostly by the tribal allegiances and moral fervor of its followers rather than anti-elitism (Forgas & Lantos; Krekó, this volume). Nevertheless, there are many instances when ascendant populist movements can capitalize on the notion that the 'elites' have betrayed the people by pursuing policies and values that are not fully representative of the population at large.

There may even be some truth in this claim. Part of the reason for the growing cleavage between 'elites' and many voters may be that the political agenda has become increasingly dominated by various activist minority intellectual movements that carried far more weight than their numerical support would justify (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). When such a gap between the elites and mainstream voters becomes too wide, new populist movements inevitably arise to channel resentment, as was the case in countries like Germany (AfD), Austria (FPO), France, Britain (Brexit), and the US (Trump).

Migration is a good case in point. Many voters in liberal democracies have growing reservations about uncontrolled migration that might change their familiar local culture too much and too fast. Yet, political elites in most European countries have been unable to articulate this voter sentiment (Murray, 2018). There now exists a conflict between the concerns of voters that conflict with the dominant values of political elites informed by moral and ideological rather than pragmatic considerations (Cooper & Avery, this volume). Virtue signaling, political correctness, and the influence of identity politics constrain the elite's ability to respond to popular concerns. The long-lasting inability of the EU to develop a coherent migration policy has been directly responsible for the rise of populist movements in Europe. As philosophers like Roger Scruton and public intellectuals like Douglas Murray (2018) argue, the political class in most Western democracies has become captive to the ideological left and inclined to promote more left-wing policies than the beliefs of the electorate at large.

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Moral Absolutism

One of the defining hallmarks of populist movements is moral absolutism and intolerance of open debate and different views. This Manichean stance is based on the notion that representing 'the people' is unquestionably virtuous, and any opposition is evil (Krekó, this volume). Populist intolerance stands in stark contrast to the Enlightenment values of open, rational debate, and acceptance of divergent opinions as the best way deal with reality. Even when in power, populists question the legitimacy of any opposition (Forgas & Lantos; Krekó, this volume).

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On the right, the moral imperatives are usually rooted in religious, nationalistic, or ethnic value systems. We do know from social psychology how easy it is to fire up such tribal sentiments in the service of political objectives (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). This pattern of moral absolutism is a recognizable feature of earlier populist movements led by Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and several latter-day autocrats, like Putin, Orbán, Erdogan, and others. Orbán, for example, after losing a democratic election in Hungary in 2002, declared that the motherland (i.e. him and his party) cannot be in opposition (Forgas & Lantos, this volume). In a similar manner, when Democrat politicians in the US label Trump's voters 'deplorables', they also display moral absolutism, introducing a degree of *ad hominem* irrationality and intolerance into political discourse that precludes reasonable compromise.

But tribalism is not the exclusive property of right-wing populist movements. Left-wing ideologies, such as Marxism, are also replete with claims about absolute moral superiority. An interesting historical example of this majoritarian and fundamentally anti-democratic ideology can be traced to the classic conflict between the Bolsheviks (actually meaning majority in Russian) and the Mensheviks (actually meaning minority) during the Russian revolution. Bolshevik strategy, shaped in no small measure by Lenin, asserted that anyone disagreeing with the Bolshevik cause is an enemy of the people and must be vanquished (and many indeed were). Some of the strident social justice movements that increasingly dominate the political ideologies of the West also share the populist hallmarks of moral absolutism, unquestioning belief in the righteousness of their cause, and the conviction borrowed from Foucault that the struggle for power and dominance is morally justified. The growing pattern of 'wokeness', detecting and taking offence at opinions one disagrees with, and 'cancelling', or silencing and persecuting people who express contrary opinions, are examples of absolutist populist intolerance incompatible with liberal values (Murray, 2019).

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In essence, populism represents a fundamental threat to democracy because it denies the legitimacy of any view other than its own. The cause is absolute, and those who fail to join the pre-ordained collective struggle are cast out. Fascists and Marxists had no difficulty morally justifying mass executions of people classified as traitors and enemies. Today, populist leaders like Trump, Putin, Orbán, or Erdogan habitually deprecate, humiliate, and sometimes poison perceived enemies, just as social justice warriors have no compunction about silencing and harassing individuals who dare to question their ideology (Murray, 2019).

In the current increasingly polarized clash between morally absolutist left-wing and right-wing zealots, reasonable, rational, Enlightenment liberalism has little chance to reassert itself. Populism is dangerous because it appeals to the baser, emotional dimension of the human mind (Koestler, 1967). Those caught in the middle between these warring camps, hoping to engage in rational discourse, are either attacked from both sides or ignored. The liberal preference for open debate and compromise is fundamentally incompatible with populist ideology that denies the legitimacy of differing opinions. Given the aggressive,

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authoritarian, and irrational political culture of both left-wing and right-wing populists, we are in danger of losing the ability to communicate with each other as public life becomes increasingly polarized. It is in this sense that populism represents a tribal challenge to liberal democracy, as the next section will discuss.

Tribalism

Populists at both ends of the political spectrum also share a propensity for tribal hatreds. In addition to reducing self-uncertainty, the powerful urge for group identification has deep adaptive and evolutionary origins and offered important survival benefits to our ancestors (Tajfel & Forgas, 2000). The ability of humans to identify with many fictional and often absurd belief systems throughout history served to reduce uncertainty and helped to integrate social groups (von Hippel, 2018). It is the uniquely human capacity for symbolic thought that allows almost any belief system, however bizarre, to serve as a powerful anchor for a tribal group identity (Harari, 2014).

The subordination of the individual to the interests of a group, real or fictional, thus appears to be a human evolutionary universal. It was only very recently during the Enlightenment that that the universal pattern of communal bondage was broken in Western civilization as a result of the revolutionary rise of individualism and humanism, with spectacular results for human flourishing, well-being, health, wealth, and tolerance. However, the long established evolutionary human needs for status, identity, and meaning that can be derived from immersion in a primary group continue to have a visceral attraction that populism exploits. Many anti-Enlightenment political and romantic philosophical movements hark back to this primeval need for idealized communal engagement. Both fascist and Marxist ideologies are fundamentally collectivist in idealizing the group ('folk' or 'class') and questioning the primacy of individual freedom and choice. It is surprising that whereas fascism as a credible ideology has few remaining adherents, Marxism still retains an attraction for many Western intellectuals.

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Utopian Thinking

Populist political movements often adopt a millennial ideology, invoking the prospect of some final decisive battle or revolution which will usher in a golden age for the 'people'. Hitler's thousand-year empire, or Mussolini's claims to recreate the greatness of the Roman empire, share the same utopian mindset. In a similar manner, the Marxist prediction that the coming and inevitable proletarian revolution will usher in a utopian communist society had very strong appeal for many people, including many Western intellectuals. The prediction of utopian bliss and the restoration of the true greatness and autonomy of 'the people' appear irresistible siren calls for adherents of populist movements. White supremacist movements in the US, ultra-nationalists in Russia, Turkey, or Hungary, or left-wing radicals share in this utopistic vision of their glorious imagined future.

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In addition to the partly overlapping features of populism we considered earlier—and the list is by no means exhaustive—there are also several recurring narratives and propaganda strategies that populist leaders and movements regularly employ. We turn to this issue next (see also Part IV).

Strategies of Populist Leadership and Propaganda

Leadership

As many of the chapters here argue, leaders play a critical role in populist movements, and leaderless movements rarely persist irrespective of the legitimacy of their cause (Crano & Gaffney; Hogg & Gøetsche-Astrup, this volume). Successful populist leaders are often charismatic, exude self-confidence and certainty, and are unwilling to allow disagreement. The more extreme the group, the more likely that the leader exhibits these qualities (Petersen at al., this volume).

Populist leaders typically function as both the symbolic embodiment of their cause and the ultimate arbiter of the group. Groups led by more than one leader rarely succeed, because all communications central to group identity and entitativity need to be articulated consistently (Albright, 2018). To be effective, populist communication must be persistent and unwilling to backslide or compromise, as message consistency is a necessary feature of almost all successful persuasive communication (Crano & Gaffney, this volume). Populism succeeds because it offers epistemic certainty and simplicity in response to complex challenges (Kruglanski et al.; van Prooijen, this volume). Inconsistencies are typically explained as unavoidable in response to unforeseen outside threats, conspiracies, fake news, and attacks by out-groups.

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Another common populist leadership feature is an endemic disrespect for the truth. Appealing to lies and innuendo, conspiracy theories, and other propagandistic tactics work well with the faithful, and are a key feature of the armamentarium of populist leaders. As many populist movements have illustrated, convenient half-truths and outright lies remain unchallenged if consistent with long-term positions. Trump has told thousands of untruths with no serious consequences. Perhaps because of their close-minded allegiance to absolute and superordinate moral values, populist leaders are less constrained by the normal standards of honesty and suffer no shame or censure when dishonest behavior is uncovered (Cooper & Avery, this volume), unlike mainstream leaders who often pay a large price when caught.

Populist Narratives and Propaganda

Populist movements share a key feature—the ability to identify and mobilize the causes of popular dissatisfaction and articulate the 'injustices' and sense of

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deprivation (Ditto & Rodriguez, this volume). Narratives of grievance, feelings of anger and fear, and assigning blame is a winning formula of many populist leaders (Marcus, this volume). The Nazis identified Jews as the cause of economic hardship, Trump blames the Washington 'swamp', Orbán blames Jewish financiers and the EU—playing to emotions and popular fears and resentment is more important than truth. The emphasis is on unfairness and deprivation and identifying a common enemy, drawing together an amorphous mass of complainants into a cohesive, entitative group. The dissemination of such propaganda messages today is powerfully facilitated by the widespread availability of the internet.

Populist group narratives often display a narcissistic sense of unrecognized greatness and oppression by hostile adversaries (Golec de Zavala et al., this volume). To sustain a viable and entitative movement, there should be 'others', an opposing out-group (Hogg & Gøetsche-Astrup, this volume). Inter-group conflict is typically presented in absolutist, Manichean terms, as a life-and-death struggle for justice and survival (Krekó, this volume). Populist groups typically see themselves as unquestionably virtuous (vs. the 'moral majority', Black Lives Matter, Antifa, the Tea Party movement), fighting against a corrupt and evil power structure. Rectifying real or imagined past injustices and grievances and nostalgia for returning to an idealized past are also common narrative features, especially for right-wing populists.

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A danger of this 'us-vs.-them' narrative is that it almost guarantees resistance from the adversarial out-group that often leads to costly group conflict (Golec de Zavala et al., this volume). Inter-group conflict necessarily involves pain and suffering, often justified by the promise of a brighter future. Marxism is again a good example of just this kind of 'the end justifies the means' populist ideology. The promise of a perfect communist utopia just around the corner justifies almost any sacrifice for its achievement (such as tens of millions of dead in Stalin's or Mao's mindless campaigns). The manner in which populist groups achieve ascendancy is understood reasonably well, but we know much less about why, once in power, regression to the status quo ante frequently occurs (Crano, 2012; Forgas & Lantos; Krekó, this volume). History indicates that populist success is more likely to be long-lived if the leader is capable of persistently narrating the group's sense of moral superiority.

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Populist narratives often employ simple, forceful, and controlling language choices. Whereas low-controlling language uses phrases like 'perhaps', or 'possibly', highly controlling language is definitive. Successful populist leaders often use controlling and even militaristic language, and use messages that are 'explicit, clear, and efficient; however, it can be perceived as threatening, thus risking rejection' (Staunton, Alvaro, Rosenberg, & Crano, 2020, p. 369). The language of irony and deprecation is also frequently employed. Irony seems to diminish reactance on the part of recipients, and in the case of controlling language makes a command seem 'softer', and hence more easily accepted (Crano & Gaffney, this volume).

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Repetition is another key tactic of populist leaders. The message must be repeated continually, with conviction and no retraction, as advised by the master propagandist Goebbels (Albright, 2018). Social psychology experiments suggest that the credibility of a message is increased almost as much by simple repetition as by hearing the same message from several independent sources.

The 'Big Lie'

A particularly perverse populist tactic is the 'big lie' strategy, as exemplified by Adolf Hitler: the more implausible a lie, the less likely people believe that it could have be invented. The big lie of blaming the Jews in justifying the Holocaust is one of the most powerful historical examples (Herf, 2005, 2006). In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler stated that

> in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because . . . / people/ themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.[1]

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Truth in this case becomes irrelevant. Big lies abound in human history; indeed, many successful religions also appear to benefit from the 'big lie' strategy, creating myths and describing events that are so extraordinary that their very implausibility inhibits skepticism (e.g. virgin birth, resurrection, hell, heaven, etc.).

Combatting the big lie is made more difficult by the fact that nobody likes to see themselves as stupid and gullible. Changing one belief has implications for many other, cherished beliefs that may even threaten the definition of the self. Leaving the tribe of 'true believers' also produces epistemic uncertainty (Krueger and Grüning, this volume). Faithful Nazis still believed in the final victory even when Russian troops were closing in on Berlin, and communist ideologues continue to believe in Marxist dogma even when its failures are uncontestable.

Not coincidentally, 'big lies' and conspiracy theories abound in human history, suggesting that there may be a human propensity to believe in tall tales, and that such stories may even have some adaptive value. Belief in the divine right of kings, the creation myths of many cultures, revealed religious doctrines, and many spiritual teachings fundamentally contradict our sense of reality yet survive for centuries. The more outrageous the story and the more contrary to everyday experience, the more likely that it will be effective in defining and bonding together an identity group. In a paradoxical way, human gullibility appears to be a universal feature of our species, perhaps because the survival value of a shared belief in outrageous symbolic myths is greater than is the cost of falsifying reality (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019; Harari, 2014; von Hippel, 2018).

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Fear

Arousing fear is also a common populist strategy, often combined with the big lie. To be effective, the threat presented may be linked to a solution only the leader can provide. One recent example was provided by Trump in his acceptance speech at the Republican presidential nomination convention: 'No one knows the system better than me', stopping to pause, smiling, then, 'which is why I alone can fix it' (Peyronyn, 2016). Propaganda campaigns by Hungarian populist leader Viktor Orbán have also played on this theme for years, casting the EU and liberals everywhere as mortal enemies of Hungary. In a similar way, Hitler not only blamed the Jews for economic privations and Germany's defeat in World War I, but also for their plans to take over the country, amplifying the populace's strong sense of relative deprivation (Petersen et al., this volume). However, fear-arousing communication needs to be handled carefully as it can easily elicit resistance and skepticism (Crano & Gaffney, this volume).

Conspiracy Theories

In order to bolster and maintain the narrative of unquestionable moral certainty and superiority, populist movements are particularly prone to invoke conspiracy theories to explain why their 'truth' is not yet universally recognized (van Prooijen, this volume). Conspiracy theories can be very effective in questioning the credibility of any idea or empirical fact that does not agree with one's preferred view of the world. Nationalist politicians are prone to blame any failure on hostile conspirators (Forgas & Lantos; Krekó, this volume). Combatting conspiracy theories is made more difficult by the fact that by their very nature, the alleged conspirators work in secrecy, so no reliable facts about their activities are publicly available. A good example is the durability of fake news about Jewish conspiracies that continue to circulate.

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Another example touching on our discipline is the way right-wing populist autocrats like Orbán are on record of seeing social science in general and psychology in particular as a hotbed of liberal conspiracy to undermine the traditional values of religion, family, and nation. Paradoxically, on the left, some radical scholars also cast social psychology as a conspiratorial and reactionary enterprise privileging White men, designed to disempower other voices and 'knowledges'. As Fiedler (this volume) points out, populist thinking and conspiracy theories are also present in science. Some psychologists see a conspiracy and question the validity of any evolutionary evidence for the inheritance of human qualities when such evidence is incompatible with their social engineering strategies (von Hippel, 2018).

As this by no means an exhaustive list illustrates, there is a wide range of pragmatic strategies and narratives exploiting human psychological vulnerabilities that

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are used by populist politicians to propagate their cause (see also Part IV). Our book was designed to offer an overview of both the theoretical underpinnings, and practical operation of populist movements, as the brief overview of the volume presented next will illustrate.

Overview of the Volume

Beyond this introductory chapter, our book is organized into four complementary sections. The five chapters in Part I explore what populists want: the role of ***motivational and emotional*** factors in the spread of populism. Four chapters in Part II examine the complementary domain of the populist mind: ***cognitive aspects of populism.*** The five chapters in Part III turn to the one of the central psychological variables that drive populism: its ***tribal character*** and the key role of ***social identity processes*** in populist ideation. Finally, four chapters in Part IV address the pragmatic question of the social psychology of ***leadership, propaganda, and different narratives*** in promoting populist political movements.

Part I. What Populists Want: Motivational and Emotional Factors in Populism

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In Chapter 2, Ditto and Rodriguez propose that populist political movements gain power by leveraging ***feelings of grievance***. Evoking past grievances produces political mobilization, moral judgment, and inter-group conflict as aggrieved groups come to interpret past injustice as morally relevant and justifying 'payback'. Grievance-based political strategies escalate conflict and provoke a self-reinforcing cycle of animosity.

Bar-Tal and Magal (Chapter 3) seek to understand the motivational and emotional pull of populism from a Lewinian perspective. They suggest that social events in recent decades led to a ***deprivation of primary needs*** and values, producing feelings of frustration, dissonance, and mistrust of the political system. The human search for a meaningful worldview increases the appeal of populist and authoritarian leaders who offer anti-democratic strategies in their quest for power.

Petersen, Osmundsen, and Bor (Chapter 4) argue that one of the main drivers of extreme political discontent is ***motivations to achieve status via dominance***. Social status as an adaptive resource can be achieved either through service producing *privilege*, or through aggression producing *dominance*. Populist discontent often triggers aggression to achieve dominance. Research confirms that extreme forms of political discontent correlate well with indices of dominance through aggression.

Marcus (Chapter 5) suggests that support for far-right populist parties is driven more by ***anger and a sense of injustice*** than fear. He presents empirical data

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showing that threat and fear produce very different cognitive reactions than do anger and grievance. Whereas fear promotes more open and deliberative thinking, anger increases motivated reasoning and partisan certitude. Misinterpreting the emotional foundations of populist appeal as fear-driven may compromise effective responses.

Golec de Zavala, Dorottya Lantos, and Oliver Keenan (Chapter 6) argue that feelings of ***collective narcissism,*** the belief that one's own group is exceptional but not sufficiently recognized, is a key feature in the current wave of populism, promoting prejudice and group conflict. Collective narcissism driven by a frustrated sense of self-importance is exploited by populist leaders to justify the maintenance of group-based hierarchies, promoting homophobia, racism, and sexism. Despite its overt claims, populism does not intrinsically value social justice; rather, it is driven by a desire to feel better than others based on one's in-group's status.

Part II. The Populist Mind: Cognitive Aspects of Populism

Krueger and Grüning (Chapter 7) argue that populist ideologies exploit common failures of inductive reasoning, essentially ***offering certainties where none can be had***. The aversion to uncertainty may contribute to social projection, self-stereotyping, attributions of essence, and moralizing. Fighting populism requires the cultivation of a skeptical and tolerant mindset, and the realization that much of social perception, for better or worse, is biased.

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In Chapter 8, van Prooijen shows that the ***epistemic certainty*** and overconfidence of populist ideologies is based on the simplistic construal of complex social problems. He presents evidence that simple radical political attitudes held with high confidence are more resistant to change. As the internet provides enhanced opportunities to collectively validate simplistic populist beliefs, a reduction in systemic certainty is necessary before belief change can occur.

Kruglanski, Molinario, and Sensales (Chapter 9) identify common cognitive mechanisms that underlie populist politics and identify the *need for closure* and the need for personal *significance and mattering* as critical. The authors present empirical support for this prediction, reporting the results of two studies of populism in the US and Italy.

Fiedler (Chapter 10) argues that populism represents a fundamentally anti-scientific cognitive stance characterized by the simplification, emotionalized discussion style, and irrational rejection of analytical, logical, and evidence-based arguments. In that sense, some prevailing scientific practices also have a populist character, including emphasis on significance-testing, the ongoing debates about questionable research practices, and the persistence of some scientific myths. Fiedler points out that populism is not just a feature of public life, but may also be discovered closer to home in our own ranks.

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Part III. The Tribal Call: Social Identity and Populism

Hogg and Gøetsche-Astrup (Chapter 11) apply uncertainty-identity theory to predict that self-uncertainty makes people more vulnerable to radicalization and joining extremist groups with autocratic leaders. Populist tribalism involves beliefs that the *sovereignty* of the people is actively subverted by outsiders (an *elite*). *Conspiracy theories*, *collective narcissism*, and narratives of victimhood are also important in populist tribalism. Empirical evidence confirms that self-uncertainty attracts people to populist groups and leaders who offer clear and often extremist identity narratives.

Forgas and Lantos (chapter 12) explore the psychological strategies used by populists, once in power, to install despotism and destroy democracy, using Hungary as an example. The chapter traces the process of dismantling of democratic institutions and the establishment of a one-party state, and offers a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role of ***damaged national identity***, feelings of helplessness, collective narcissism, and populist propaganda in Hungary's rejection of democracy.

Krekó (Chapter 13) suggests that populist attitudes can lose their anti-elitist character and become more tribal once populists come to power. He analyzes the attitudes of voters of ruling populist parties in Hungary and Poland, showing that once in power, populist voters are less anti-elitist than the liberal opposition. Instead of anti-elitism, ***'political tribalism'*** and a Manichean worldview now define ruling populist politics, focusing on divisive social identities and promoting antagonisms.

Huddy and Del Ponte (Chapter 14) discuss the role of ***nationalistic country-first propaganda*** in populist politics in the US. Based on data from the General Social Survey, they show that in the US nationalism and patriotism are positively correlated, stable, and equally prevalent among Blacks and Whites. However, the link between nationalism and Republican identification has increased over time among Whites but not among Blacks. The chapter suggests that although nationalism is stable, its political relevance has increased over time but only among White Americans.

Gelfand and Lorente (Chapter 15) propose that populist trends can be partially explained by a cultural and evolutionary analysis of the ***strength (tightness) or weakness of prevailing social norms***. Ecological and social threats call for stronger norms and leaders, and autocratic leaders harness the power of threat to gain voter support to instill tighter cultural norms. Data from the US and France confirms that people who feel threatened welcome tighter norms, explaining their support for autocratic candidates.

Part IV. Populist Narratives and Propaganda

Crano and Gaffney (Chapter 16) suggest that effective populist propaganda builds on perceptions of relative deprivation and insecurity to promote the struggle against oppressive elites. The chapter discusses the role of social identity

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appeals in populist narratives and analyzes how ***minority influence*** and different ***persuasion strategies*** shape partisan identities by creating cohesive groups whose power often exceeds their numbers.

Cooper and Avery (Chapter 17) suggest that populist support depends on how ***core values are framed***. When framed in universal moral terms, populism receives support from both the political left and right in the US. When framed as a nativist issue instead, support from the left diminishes. Research confirms that populist support for specific issues varied depending on framing them in moral (e.g. fairness) or nativist (my group first) terms. Liberals support for the same policies declined when presented in a nativist rather than a moral framework.

Vallacher and Fennell (Chapter 18) argue that populist discontent may remain unexpressed unless ***dynamic changes occur in the narratives*** producing a collective movement. Populism thus is not inherently linked to rational self-interest nor to specific ideologies; rather, its spread is attributable to dynamic processes that arise when salient equilibria of a social system are destabilized. This dynamic process model has implications for understanding, predicting, and perhaps managing the ascendance of populist movements.

Feldman (Chapter 19) examines the joint role of ***education and authoritarianism*** on public support for right-wing populist leaders. He argues that authoritarianism captures many of the core elements of right-wing populism: opposition to immigration, social/moral conservatism, nationalism, sexism, and ethnocentrism. Accordingly, people high in authoritarianism are especially sensitive to threats to group norms and status. Interestingly, a national survey of Americans finds that greater education does not reduce the effects of authoritarianism on right-wing attitudes.

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In summary, our aim with this book is to contribute to a better understanding of the nature and psychological characteristics of populist movements. We hope to highlight the fundamental threat that collectivist populist beliefs and strategies, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, present for the core values and the very survival of liberal democratic systems. We are confident that a psychological approach can contribute to a better understanding of this complex and intractable social problem. In this introductory chapter in particular, we tried to survey some of the most important psychological features of populism, to be elaborated in the chapters that follow. Contributions to this volume were selected to offer a broad and representative overview of recent research on populism. As editors, we are deeply grateful to all our contributors for accepting our invitation to contribute to this, the 22nd volume of the Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology, and sharing their valuable ideas with our readers. We sincerely hope that the insights contained in these chapters will contribute to a better understanding of the role of psychological processes in populist movements.

Note

1. Project Gutenberg of Australia—Mein Kampf tr. James Murphy. Archived from the original on 19 July 2020.

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