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How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism

A focus on crisis is a mainstay of the literature on contemporary populism. However, the links between populism and crisis remain under-theorized and undeveloped. This article puts forward a novel perspective for understanding this relationship, arguing that crisis does not just trigger populism, but that populism also attempts to act as a trigger for crisis. This is because crises are always mediated and 'performed'. The article presents a six-step model of how populist actors 'perform' crisis, drawing on empirical examples from Europe, Latin America, North America and the Asia-Pacific region. It explains how the performance of crisis allows populist actors to pit 'the people' against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership. It ultimately suggests that we should move from thinking of crisis as something purely external to populism, towards thinking about the performance of crisis as an internal core feature of populism.

'Crisis' being a vague term, it is easily coined and devalued. Thus it is not difficult to associate 'populism' (or almost anything else) with 'crisis'. There is also a tautological tendency to impute populism (or anything else) to 'crisis', as if 'crisis' were a discernible cause, when, in fact, it is often a loose description of a bundle of phenomena. Disaggregation sometimes reveals that it was not 'crisis' which generated populism (or mobilisation, rebellion, etc.), but rather *populism (or mobilisation, rebellion, etc.) which generated crisis.* (Knight 1998: 227, emphasis mine)

IT APPEARS THAT WE ARE WELL AND TRULY LIVING IN THE AGE OF CRISES. THE global financial crisis has entered its seventh year; the eurozone sovereign-debt crisis is threatening the very existence of the European Union; and more widely, we are allegedly suffering from a crisis of faith in democracy (Crouch 2004; Zakaria 2013). In such a situation, it would seem that the stage has been set for populists to sweep in, appeal to 'the

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people' and enjoy great success by capitalizing on a general loss of faith and disaffection with politicians, the elite and representative politics in general.

To some extent, this has occurred: Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) made a stunning political debut in Italy, capturing approximately a quarter of the overall vote in the 2013 federal elections; populist parties in Scandinavia have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity, while in Latin America, Rafael Correa has been re-elected for a third term as president in Ecuador, and Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro will continue to fly the Chávista flag as a follower of former president Hugo Chávez. Yet elsewhere, populists are not doing so well in these times of crisis. The US Tea Party is flailing following the humiliating defeat of a number of their star candidates; despite her best efforts, Australia's Pauline Hanson has not been able to gain political office since the late 1990s; and in many countries allegedly undergoing crises, populist challengers have simply not emerged. This mixed evidence from across the world suggests a need to challenge the received wisdom regarding the causal relationship between populism and crisis, which tends to argue that crisis acts as either an external trigger or a necessary precondition of populism.

In this light, this article offers a new perspective on the relationship between populism and crisis, arguing that rather than just thinking about crisis as a trigger of populism, we should also think about how populism attempts to act as a trigger for crisis. This is due to the fact that crises are never 'neutral' phenomena, but must be mediated and 'performed' by certain actors. It argues that populist actors actively participate in the 'spectacularization of failure' that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit 'the people' against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis. In making this argument, the article suggests that we should move from a conception of crisis as something that is purely external to populism, to one that acknowledges the performance of crisis as an internal feature of populism. In other words, if we do not have the performance of crisis, we do not have populism.

To put this position forward, the first section of this article examines accounts of the relationship between crisis and populism in the contemporary literature on populism, demonstrating that most dominant approaches continue to posit crisis as external to populism,

and outlining some of the problems presented by this conception of crisis. The second section examines the concept of crisis, arguing that any definition of the phenomenon must take account of the necessary role of mediation, performance and spectacularization. The third section then presents a six-step model of how populist actors go about performing crisis, drawing on empirical examples of populists from across the world and explaining how this differs from other forms of 'crisis politics'. In doing so, this article seeks to fill a significant lacuna in the literature on populism – the fact that no journal article, to my knowledge, directly addresses the relationship between populism and crisis as its central focus.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO POPULISM AND CRISIS

Approaches to the role of crisis in contemporary populist literature can be viewed on a spectrum. There are those authors who clearly draw a link between crisis and the emergence of populism, those who are unsure about the causal link and a small few who actually argue that there is little to no link at all between the two phenomena. What connects each of these approaches is a persistent conception of crisis as external to populism. These positions are outlined below.

The strongest advocate for linking crisis to populism is Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b), whose work presents populism as a particular political logic. For Laclau, populism simply cannot emerge without crisis: in his earlier writings he argued that 'the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse, which in turn is part of more general social crisis' (Laclau 1977: 175). More recently he has argued that 'some degree of crisis . . . is a necessary precondition for populism' (Laclau 2005a: 177). Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that a number of historical figures would have remained sidelined without crisis paving their way:

Without the slump of the 1930s, Hitler would have remained a vociferous fringe ringleader. Without the crisis of the Fourth Republic around the Algerian war, De Gaulle's appeal would have remained as unheard as it had been in 1946. And without the progressive erosion of the oligarchical system in the Argentina of the 1930s, the rise of Perón would have been unthinkable. (Laclau 2005a: 177)

More widely, Laclau (2005a: 139) claims that 'the crisis of representation . . . is at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst'.

Put bluntly, for Laclau, populism does not emerge or succeed without crisis spurring it into existence.

Those analysts of populism influenced by the work of Laclau (often working under the Essex School approach to discourse)[1] take a similar tack, tending to see crisis as offering a 'break' in hegemonic discourses, thus opening a space for counter-discourses (such as populism) to emerge. For example, Yannis Stavrakakis (2005: 247) argues that 'the emergence of new discourses and new identities is always related to the *dislocation* or crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders . . . this is also the case with populist discourses', and traces the emergence of a religious populist discourse in Greece in the early 2000s to a sense of crisis around Greece joining the European Economic Community. In a similar sense, Chantal Mouffe (2005a, 2005b) links populism to a crisis of political representation and the emergence of 'post-politics', while Sebastián Barros (2005: 269) links Menemism to a sense of terminal crisis.[2]

Strong causal links between crisis and populism are also evident in the contemporary literature on Latin American populism, particularly among those who view populism as a mode of organization or strategy. For example, Kenneth Roberts (1995: 113) argues that populism 'surges most strongly in contexts of crisis or profound social transformation, when pre-existing patterns of authority or institutional referents lose their capacity to structure the political behaviour and identities of popular sectors', and he has linked Chávez's rise to a 'crisis of Venezuelan democracy' (Roberts 2012: 138). Others have specifically focused on the role of crisis in neopopulism: Kurt Weyland (1999: 395) has argued that crises 'trigger the emergence of neoliberal populism' and, in reference to the cases of Argentina's Carlos Menem, Brazil's Fernando Collor and Peru's Alberto Fujimori, argues that 'absent deep crises, these candidates would have had little chance to win government power'. Elsewhere, Steven Levitsky and James Loxton (2012: 165) have claimed that 'Fujimori's rise from obscurity to the presidency was rooted in a triple crisis' – crises of popular representation, the economy and security. These authors see external crises as providing an opportunity for populist politicians to step in with their charismatic authority, flex their muscles and undertake extensive and dramatic reform in order to 'sweep away the detritus of the past and usher in a new social order' (Roberts 1995: 113). They posit crisis as a necessary (or at least extremely conducive) precondition for the emergence of populism.

Less sure about the link between crisis and populism are those authors working within the ideological 'minimal' approach to populism. The key advocate of this approach, Cas Mudde (2007: 205), has acknowledged that 'emphasis on the vital role of "crisis" is a constant in studies of both historical and contemporary nativism and populism'. However, he criticizes this literature on the grounds that 'most authors do not bother to articulate what constitutes a crisis', meaning that the concept has remained vague and imprecise, and thus of limited analytic value. Nonetheless, Mudde does not believe that the concept should be rejected, as there does seem to be some significant correlation between variables we might associate with crisis – for example, economic instability, unemployment and political dissatisfaction – and the electoral success of European radical right populists in the empirical literature. However, as Mudde (2007: 205) notes, 'the key problem in this literature is the relationship between these variables and the overarching concept of crisis' – that is, these variables do not automatically equal crisis. More so, Mudde reminds us that nearly every modern political era has been alleged to be in crisis: for example, the 1950s and 1960s saw the 'end of ideology', the 1970s experienced a participation crisis, the 1980s saw the crisis of political parties, while the contemporary period has been marked by a crisis of political faith or trust, linked to cartelization, clientelism and corruption. If crises are a permanent fixture of contemporary politics, it makes it difficult to make claims about populism being an extraordinary phenomenon that only arises periodically during crisis. Overall, Mudde remains relatively agnostic on the question of crisis and populism.

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, another key advocate of the ideological approach, has also expressed reservations about how easily crisis can be linked to populism. He suggests that the 'crisis' view of populism fits snugly into what he calls the 'liberal approach' to populism. Within this approach, populism is viewed as a democratic pathology, with Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 186) noting that the concept is framed similarly to the view of crisis in the European nationalism literature – as something that only emerges when democracy falters. Yet, as he notes, the types of 'modernization losers' hypotheses (for example, Betz 1994; Kriesi 1999) that argue that votes for populists come from those who suffer from the 'objective indicators' of crisis often do not stand up to empirical analysis: 'populist radical right parties have shown a great success precisely in those regions of Europe where the structural prerequisites for their rise were hardly

existent' (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 188). As such, a conception of crisis within populism cannot only be structural, but must also refer to more subjective indicators, such as feelings of status loss (Lipset 1960) and moral collapse (Taggart 2000). Overall, while the adherents of the ideological approach do acknowledge the role of crisis in 'setting the scene' for populism, they do not see the relationship between the two as necessarily causal.

The third group of authors are those who reject outright the link between crisis and populism. Alan Knight (1998: 227) argues that crisis is 'a vague, promiscuously used, under-theorised concept which defies measurement and lacks explanatory power', and that the link between populism and crisis 'may often be historically valid, but it does not afford a robust etiology . . . this association is at best a rough tendency or correlation'. Benjamin Arditi (2007: 63) is equally suspicious of the link between populism and crisis, arguing that 'the reference to "crisis" also narrows down the scope of the populist experience to moments when politics fails to address participatory, distributive or other demands . . . the emphasis on the exception does not allow us to differentiate populist politics in opposition from populism in government'. He is interested here in how populist actors, especially when in positions of power, are able to govern without an 'external' crisis to trigger their appeal within the electorate.

Despite their differences, all of these approaches – whether arguing for strong, weak or no causality at all in regard to the relationship between crisis and populism – perceive crisis as external to populism. That is, crisis is considered as a phenomenon that does (or does not) cause, spur on, pave the way or affect the development of populism. Indeed, this view of crisis as an external variable is the mainstream view in political science, whereby we look for causal relationships between discrete social or political phenomena.

However, there are two central problems with this view when it comes to crisis. The first is that the relations between crisis and populism do not lend themselves to simple causal explanations. This is due to crisis being a contested phenomenon that lacks clear and distinct boundaries; the fact that crisis itself is a product of complex causality (Byrne and Uprichard 2012); and the aforementioned difference between crisis and the variables we associate with crisis (Mudde 2007). The second problem is that we cannot truly conceptualize a 'neutral' or 'objective' crisis that populism can be measured against. This is not to say that there is 'no such thing' as crisis, but rather to

acknowledge that we hit something of an ontological brick wall when using the concept: we cannot separate 'crisis' from the words we use to describe the phenomenon. To more widely invoke Slavoj Žižek's (1999) reading of Lacan – there may very well be a Real in which crisis operates, but we cannot access it because our language remains at the level of the Symbolic. As such, crisis is very much what we make of it.

Given these ontological tensions, it is productive to move away from ostensibly 'objective' notions of external crisis, and instead towards a view of crisis as a phenomenon that can only be experienced through performance and mediation, whereby a systemic failure is elevated to the level of perceived 'crisis'. In this light, the performance of crisis should be seen as internal to populism – not just as an external cause or catalyst for populism, but also as a central feature of the phenomenon itself. This means that populist actors actively perform and perpetuate a sense of crisis, rather than simply reacting to external crisis. Moreover, this performance of crisis allows populists an effective way to divide 'the people' and their other, and to legitimate strong leadership by presenting themselves as voices of the sovereign people.

There are traces of this argument of seeing populism as internal to populism in the work of Paul Taggart (2000, 2002, 2004), who has stressed that a *sense* of crisis is what the analyst of populism should be interested in, rather than an objective notion of crisis itself. The question of whether there 'really is' a crisis is not important – rather, the key focus should be on populist actors' ability to create a sense of crisis and how they 'use that sense to inject an urgency and an importance to their message' (Taggart 2004: 275). Carlos de la Torre's (2007, 2010) work on Latin American populism also acts as an antecedent to this approach. Arguing against structuralist explanations that see populism as a transitory developmental stage caused by economic crises and upheaval, de la Torre (2010: 122) argues that the appeal of populism 'cannot be explained by the recurrence of a reified notion of crisis . . . economic crises are experienced through common people's values, norms, and prejudices. The economy is always culturally mediated.' Both Taggart and de la Torre's perceptive accounts of crisis and populism demonstrate that crisis is never merely a 'neutral' phenomenon that is experienced 'objectively'. Rather, crisis is a phenomenon that is mediated and performed, and experienced culturally and socially.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT CRISIS

Let us take a small step back, and make clear what we are actually talking about when we use the term 'crisis'. The term obviously has a long history within the social sciences, with some of its better-known theorists being Karl Marx (1981), Joseph Schumpeter (1942), Jürgen Habermas (1975) and Antonio Gramsci (1971: 276), who viewed crisis as the situation in which 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born'.

Reinhart Koselleck (2006) provides the most complete intellectual history of the concept, tracing its etymological development from its early Greek origins through Christian theology, French medical grammar, the philosophy of history, German idealism and Marxist theory among others. Put briefly, its initial Greek root, *krinō*, referred to a decisive moment – 'a crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck 2006: 358) – as well as the subsequent action of reaching a verdict. The key shift that Koselleck identifies in the term's development is the way that this initial concept of crisis became imbued with a sense of temporality in the late eighteenth century, meaning that crisis was not only that initial moment of decision, but also 'an expression of a new sense of time which both indicated and intensified the end of an epoch' (Koselleck 2006: 358). As such, crisis became the name of the situation that necessitates a vital decision that is seen as so significant and all-encompassing as to both change and delineate the course of history.

Janet Roitman (2011: online) captures the fusing of these two senses of crisis in her theorization of the concept: 'crisis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out a "moment of truth" or as a means to think "history" itself. Such moments of truth might be defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology.' However, these 'turning points' or 'moments of truth' are never clear-cut states of flux or change: as Roitman stresses (2011: online), 'evoking crisis entails reference to a norm because it requires a comparative state for judgment: crisis compared to what?' As such, 'there is not "crisis" and "non-crisis," which can be observed empirically'. The attempt to determine objectively what 'is' or 'is not' a crisis is thus a relatively fruitless exercise, as the concept relies on notions of normality and stability that are themselves both culturally constructed and specific.

In contemporary usage, the way that crisis is most usually signified is through linking it to failure – whether that be of the financial system, political system, public policy, democracy, representation, masculinity and so on – and thus the impetus to act (or make the vital decision) comes from the need to correct the failure and stem the crisis. Yet failure and crisis are not one and the same – as Colin Hay has argued, there is a need to analytically distinguish between the two. While failure may provide 'the structural preconditions for crisis' (Hay 1995: 64), crisis is 'a condition in which failure is identified and widely perceived, a condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated' (Hay 1999: 324). In other words, a crisis only becomes a crisis when it is perceived as a crisis – when a failure gains wider salience through its mediation into the political, cultural or ideological spheres and is commonly accepted as symptomatic of a wider problem.

If we take this distinction between failure and crisis seriously, we can see that those authors who claim that populism is spurred on by structural or institutional crisis are often actually talking about failure – they see populism as a result of a market failure or system failure, rather than of market crisis or system crisis. In these cases, the term 'crisis' has been used uncritically, seen as an objective indicator of disorder, chaos or breakdown. However, the symptoms and the diagnoses have been mixed up here – the difference between failure and crisis hinges on mediation. A failure does not automatically necessitate a demand to act with immediacy and decisiveness. This demand to act only emerges with crisis – that is, when the failure becomes culturally or politically mediated and gains an important temporal dimension. In other words, a crisis marks the spectacularization of failure – the elevation of failure to crisis, in which the crisis becomes the foci for a historical decision and action. As Taggart (2004: 282) notes, 'the idea of living at a turning point in history is an important one for populist ideas'. From this point of view, crisis is a phenomenon that is mediated and performed, and thus can be thought of as a key part of populism, rather than just as something external to it.

PERFORMING CRISIS

So how do populist actors actually go about performing crisis? How, in their language, framing and presentation, do they 'spectacularize'

failure? There are six major steps that populist actors use to elevate a failure to the level of crisis, and in the process, seek to 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. In reality, these steps do not necessarily proceed in this exact order, nor are they always discrete – however, they have been separated here for analytical utility.

These steps were discerned on an inductive basis, in which cases of leaders who have been accepted as uncontroversial examples of populist in the contemporary literature on populism were examined. The reason for this approach is that while there is wide disparity in the literature as to how to conceptualize populism, the actual cases of actors that are usually called 'populist' are relatively undisputed and tend to be repeated within the comparative literature. In other words, while authors might disagree as to what populism *is*, they do not tend to disagree about who populists *are* (Moffitt and Tormey 2013).

The model of the populist 'performance' of crisis is as follows:

1 Identify failure.
2 Elevate to the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension.
3 Frame 'the people' vs. those responsible for the crisis.
4 Use media to propagate performance.
5 Present simple solutions and strong leadership.
6 Continue to propagate crisis.

Identify Failure

The first step is to identify or choose a particular failure and bring attention to it as a matter of urgency. The ability to elevate a failure to the level of crisis will probably be more successful if the chosen failure already has some political salience. For example, in times of economic instability, a populist actor may choose to focus on the failure of the political class to protect 'ordinary people' from bankers. At other times, sociocultural issues may prove more salient: for example, the central issue that both Australian populist Pauline Hanson and New Zealander populist Winston Peters initially chose to focus on was the 'failure' of Asian immigration in their countries, while Dutch populist Geert Wilders has focused primarily on the

'failure' of Muslim immigration in the Netherlands. Another central failure that populist actors often focus on is the failure of political representatives or elites. This does not mean that populists are 'single-issue' politicians, but rather that a particular failure is initially identified as a way of gaining attention and building up a sense of crisis.

Elevate to the Level of Crisis by Linking into a Wider Framework and Adding a Temporal Dimension

The next step is to link this chosen failure with other failures, thus locating it within a wider structural or moral framework. In doing this, populist actors attempt to make the failure appear symptomatic of a wider problem, thus elevating the failure to the level of crisis.

Laclau has given us some indication of how this operation works in his discussion of what he calls 'demands' in his theory of populist logic. For Laclau (2005a: 74), an initial demand which remains unanswered or unfulfilled by the actor, institution or system it is addressed to (for example, a demand for reduced immigration levels addressed to the government) will begin to be linked with other unfulfilled demands in an 'equivalential chain'. The further the chain of equivalence between unfulfilled demands is extended, the weaker the connection becomes to the initial particular demand. As such, the initial demand begins to function as a 'floating signifier' that represents the different demands entering the anti-systemic chain of equivalence – it stands as the 'general equivalent representing the chain as a whole' (Laclau 2000: 302). It is this increasing 'emptiness' of the initial demand that is key to populism's political saliency: 'the so-called "poverty" of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy' (Laclau 2005b: 40).

Laclau, however, does not explain how such demands become linked together. Demands, or in our case, perceived failures, do not simply link together in an automatic fashion but have to be actively linked together – someone has to extend the 'equivalential chain'. This is where the performance of populist actors comes in. Through mediated performance (whether a speech, rally, interview, written piece, press release or other medium), populist actors link failures in an attempt to homogenize a disparate set of phenomena as symptoms of a wider crisis, with these discrete 'failures' contextualized in the form of a temporally bounded and significant event.

Two key examples illustrate the linkage of the failures as crisis through performance by populists. The first is that of Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to the Australian Parliament in 1996. Hanson managed to link an astounding number of perceived failures together in this one speech, including 'the apparent existence of "reverse racism", welfare payments to Aboriginal Australians, multiculturalism, bureaucracy, immigration, unemployment, foreign debt, living standards, family law, privatisation of government assets, foreign aid, the United Nations, government investment in large-scale development projects, national military service, interest rates, and the (apparently threatening) status and size of Asian nations surrounding Australia' (Scalmer 2002: 149–50). All of these failures were wrapped up in the central framework of multiculturalism, which she labelled 'a national disgrace and crisis' (in Hansard 1996: col. 3862). This spectacle drew 'unprecedented Australian and international media attention' (Ward et al. 2000: 2) and successfully launched Hanson as a key player in Australian politics, with her chosen 'crisis' of multiculturalism gaining a huge amount of attention and debate.

Another example of linking issues through spectacle and performance is the US Tea Party's Taxpayer March on Washington, which was held on 12 September 2009. While the initial issue that arguably spurred the creation of the Tea Party was the Obama administration's mortgage bailouts (as expressed by CNBC host Rick Santelli's rant at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange),[3] the speeches at this march extended to such issues as taxation, healthcare reform, abortion, free-market capitalism and big government, while signs held by the protestors compared Obama to Hitler and Stalin and questioned his 'true' nationality. The overall concern here was not just about bailouts – the initial 'failure' – but rather the looming crisis that was to be brought about by Obama's 'socialist' plan for the US, taking in a number of heterogeneous issues.

An important temporal dimension underlies these performances of crisis. Populists present their appeal as having to be enacted within short timelines, without which terrible things will occur. This sense of impending doom presents society at a precipice, which, if broached, cannot be reversed. For example, in her maiden speech to parliament, Pauline Hanson claimed that 'time is running out. We may only have 10 to 15 years to turn things around' (Hansard 1996: col. 3862) before Australia was doomed by multiculturalism. Sarah Palin has argued that America is 'at a crossroads' (in Newton-Small 2011).

Even more dramatically, Hugo Chávez claimed during the 1998 Venezuelan presidential election that 'we are in the times of the Apocalypse. You can no longer be on the side of the evil and the side of God' (quoted in Hawkins 2010: 55). The urgency of these claims elevates the situation to one in which the crises must be dealt with immediately, and decisions made in order to stave off the crisis, rather than taking time to consider the many different options on the table. The 'slow politics' (Saward 2011) of consensus and negotiation are presented as ineffectual, while strong and decisive political action, unencumbered by procedural checks and balances, are seen as desirable.

The metaphors that are commonly used by populist actors in such performances also reflect this urgency. Metaphors of contagion or pathology, such as Pauline Hanson's claim that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' (Hansard 1996: col. 3861) are used alongside metaphors of natural disaster, such as Geert Wilders's claim (2013) that Western nations 'must stand together, otherwise we will be swept away by Islam'. As James Brassett and Chris Clarke (2012) have argued, such metaphorical framing devices invoke a sense of shared trauma and concern, with a common threat bringing together 'victims' through a shared sense of vulnerability.

Frame 'the People' vs. those Responsible for the Crisis

Once the initial failure has been linked and elevated into a wider framework of crisis, the populist actor is able to identify those who are responsible for the crisis, and to set them against 'the people', who are presented as being most negatively affected by the crisis. This is useful, given that 'the people' often remains a vague signifier, reliant on identification of the enemy in order to give meaning to 'the people's' identity – as Taggart (2000: 94) argues, 'populists are often more sure of who they are not than of who they are. The demonization of social groups, and particularly the antipathy towards the elite, provides populists with an enemy, but it is also a crucial component of the attempt to construct an identity.'

Indeed, the performance of crisis facilitates this group identification in two major ways. First, it allows populist actors a way of linking the elite with the aforementioned social groups, who together are portrayed in concert as being opposed to 'the people' in presenting,

causing or perpetuating the crisis.[4] For example, Western European populist radical right actors, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, have tended to focus their exclusionary efforts on non-native groups, such as the Roma, Muslims or Turks, as well as on the elite, including bureaucrats, journalists and academics. Similarly, the Reform Party of Canada used a 'crisis' of Canadian democracy (Laycock 1994; Wegierski 1998) to target the elite (in the form of old parties and bureaucrats) as well as 'welfare mothers', juvenile delinquents and 'special interest groups' among others who allegedly drain the country's coffers (Laycock 2012). In each of these cases, the elite is construed as designing, promoting and advocating the policies that benefit the minority groups who have taken advantage of the situation, leading to a crisis that ultimately hurts 'the people'.

Second, the performance of crisis offers populist actors a seemingly 'objective' rationale for targeting their enemies, beyond outright discrimination. As noted, Hanson was able to demonize Asian immigrants by linking them to the crisis of multiculturalism. Here she did not explicitly attack the personal character of Asian immigrants, but rather framed the need to stop immigration in order to ensure 'that our dole queues are not added to by, in many cases, unskilled migrants not fluent in the English language' (in Hansard 1996: col. 3862). Geert Wilders (in Traynor 2008) has framed his opposition to Islam in similar terms: he claims, 'I don't hate Muslims – I hate Islam', and has argued for the need for the Dutch people to stand against the impending crisis of the Islamization of Europe by invoking a threat to the cornerstones of liberal democracy: 'if we do not oppose Islamization, we will lose everything: our freedom, our identity, our democracy, our rule of law, and all our liberties. It is our duty to defend the legacy of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem' (Wilders 2012: 216).

Use Media to Propagate Performance

Much of the success or failure of performing crisis relies on the circulation of the populist's performance through media. Indeed, the media play a central role in the 'breaking' of a crisis, disseminating information about crisis, and perpetuating a continuing sense of crisis. However, media attention does not come easily in a media-saturated age. As Linda Bos et al. (2010: 142–3) have shown in their study of European radical right populist actors, to combat this

situation and 'get media attention, these politicians will have to be somewhat unusual in their behaviour, style, or in terms of their messages . . . By exploiting their novelty and outsider position, their news value can in fact become very high, thereby assuring prominence. Indeed, speaking as a harbinger of imminent doom or perpetuating a critical threat can help to gain this vital media attention.'

One of the most obvious ways that populist actors promote and perform a sense of crisis is through media events, designed as spectacles to attract wide attention, garner salience for the particular threat, and identify the enemies of 'the people'. While Beata Ociepka (2005: 210) argues that 'populists often inspire media events by introducing issues into the public discourse in order to launch the process of opinion building', they also go beyond 'inspiration' and actively promote or stage these events as a central part of performing crisis. The small political communication literature on populism provides us with some evidence of the forms that these events take. They include press conferences, radio or television appearances, speeches that privilege 'hot button issues' (Jenkins 2003: 158) such as immigration or crime, and the making of inflammatory or controversial statements in public arenas. For example, Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2008: 60) writes of 'Bossi's neo-Celtic liturgies, Haider's remarks about the Nazis and the Jews, Fortuyn's outspoken statements on Islam . . . [as] "newsworthy" realities that the media will automatically cover in their pursuit of corporate goals', given that spectacle of creating crisis helps gain viewers, listeners or readers due to their controversial or spectacular nature.

Indeed, these spectacles and performances fit firmly within the media's pecuniary interests.[5] A dramatized, salacious crisis obviously makes for more entertaining reading or viewing than a sober and even-handed account of an event. Mazzoleni (2008: 55) makes this mutually beneficial relationship between populist leaders and the media clear: 'this convergence of goals sees the media pursuing their own corporate ends by striking emotional chords on issues such as security, unemployment, inflation, immigration and the like. At the same time, populist leaders and their movements gain status, visibility and popular approval by generating controversy, scuffling with incumbent political leaders and resorting to inflammatory rhetoric.' With many contemporary populist parties, movements and leaders now having professional public relations managers and media liaisons (Stewart et al. 2003), these links become even more professionalized, and thus performances of crisis become more sophisticated and spectacular.

Other media events used by populists to perform crisis include gatherings, marches or performative rituals (Biorcio 2003) that may initially appear 'unmediated' – that is, as 'grassroots' events – but of course then often gain a large degree of media attention due to the spectacular nature of the event. Examples include the aforementioned Tea Party's '9/12 Taxpayer March on Washington' and the 2011 'Convoy of No Confidence' in Canberra, Australia, which was a rural truck convoy motivated by a crisis of confidence in the Gillard government (Wear 2012).[6] These seemingly 'unmediated' events operate to give feelings of threat and crisis a semblance of legitimacy by presenting 'the people' rather than populist leaders as the central drivers of these concerns. Furthermore, some populist actors directly use their own media channels to perform crisis, including Thaksin Shinawatra or Toronto Mayor Rob Ford on their own radio shows, or Hugo Chávez on his television show *Aló Presidente!*, with a particularly illustrative example being when, in 2008, Chávez ordered a general to send troops to the Colombian border, causing what the *New York Times* called 'a near-war and full-on diplomatic crisis' (Nolan 2012).

Present Simple Solutions and Strong Leadership

Once a failure has been spectacularized, and a sense of crisis has been created and propagated, the next important step is to present oneself as having the solution to the crisis. Populist actors are able to do this using a number of performative methods, including portraying other political actors as incompetent and feckless; offering simple answers for the crisis; and advocating the simplification of political institutions and processes.

The portrayal of other political actors as incompetent and ignorant of the true urgency of the crisis allows populist actors to position themselves as 'straight-shooters' who cut through the 'bullshit' (Frankfurt 2005) of mainstream politics, with ideological differences and the actual practicalities of multiparty democracy being portrayed as superfluous for the practice of governing in times of threat and breakdown. Populists thus present themselves as being 'beyond' ideology or the minutiae of 'everyday politics', and rather focused on the urgent crisis at hand, ready for action and armed with solutions. In an example of this positioning, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy made clear that

he was not interested in the 'abstract principles' or 'complicated ideology' of party politics (in McCarthy 1996: 134) and claimed, 'whenever I hear that Forza Italia is a party, I get shivers down my spine' (Berlusconi 2000: 140). Similarly, in the run-up to the 2012 Republican primaries in the US, Herman Cain declared, 'I am not a politician, I'm a problem solver' (in Jones 2011), while fellow Tea Party candidate Michelle Bachmann claimed, 'I'm not a politician. I am a real person. I don't even know how to be a politician' (in Johnson 2011). Such manoeuvres allow populists to paint other politicians as self-interested and disengaged from the 'real world' – caught up with reviews, reports, community consultations, calls for tender and protracted implementation – rather than seeking to put a definitive end to crisis.

The second performative method is the offering of simplistic solutions to the crisis. These often take the form of what Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) has called 'a procedural and institutional simplification' inherent in populism. Procedural simplification is evident in the often crude and immediate policy solutions offered by populist actors in the effort to stop crises. An example of this can be found in Geert Wilders's ideas for solving the impending crime and immigration 'crisis' in the Netherlands:

Problem: Moroccans throw stones at the Dutch Police.

Solution: Arrest them, prosecute them and deport them . . .

Problem: This government is breaking record after record in the area of mass immigration.

Solution: Don't allow in any more Eastern Europeans and shut the borders to immigrants from Muslim countries. Now! . . .

Problem: Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands, will have an immigrant majority by 2012.

Solution: Repatriation, repatriation, repatriation. What comes in can also come out. (in de Bruijn 2011: 35)

The solutions offered by Peter Skaarup (2010), parliamentary group chairman of the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) for stemming the Danish financial crisis are equally simple: 'if non-western immigrants and descendants worked to the same extent as the Danes, then the economic situation would immediately be 24 billion Kroner [€3.2 billion] better, the sustainability problem would be solved and the growth in the Danish economy would explode'.

The logic behind these solutions is simple: remove or eradicate the enemy of 'the people', and the crisis will be either staved off or solved. Žižek (2006: 555) explains this formulation: 'the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice'. In such formulations, the cause of the crisis is not the system or general structure as such, but rather always the enemy. The enemy of 'the people' thus is 'the singular agent behind all threats to the people' (Žižek 2006: 556). In this way, populist conceptions of crisis can be viewed as a refusal to deal with the complexity of contemporary political life: rather than acknowledging that many complex and intertwined factors cause systemic failures, the aim of the populist performance of crisis is to point the finger squarely at the enemy of 'the people'. The key point is that *somebody* must be responsible for this mess.

Institutional simplification, meanwhile, is evident in the way populist actors use crisis to attack and attempt to simplify the existing political system because it is perceived as being perverted or corrupted. Here, intermediary or unelected bodies that stand between 'the people' and their elected representatives are seen as illegitimate, while anything that stands in the way of 'solving' the crisis – such as the political opposition or checks and balances – is to be bulldozed over. This has been most obvious in those situations where populist leaders have been able to win high office. In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra used the Asian financial crisis to great effect in this regard. Tejapira details Thaksin's 'institutional simplification':

Making full use of his financial resources, enhanced executive power and overwhelming parliamentary majority, Thaksin lost no time in packing or bending the constitutionally created bodies set up as checks and balances, to undermine or neutralize their power. The government has intervened in the selection of candidates for some of these organs, refused to co-operate with them, obstructed their work or even offered them bribes. (Tejapira 2006: 28–9)

 In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi similarly spent much of his time in office attempting to discredit the Italian judiciary, calling it 'a dictatorship of leftist judges' (in Reuters 2011: online), and painting it as an unnecessary and dangerous interference to the voice of the sovereign people (Tarchi 2008). In Ecuador, under the guise of a 'citizen's revolution', President Rafael Correa illegally closed the Congress and concentrated power in the Executive (de la Torre 2012).

Continue to Propagate Crisis

It is difficult to propagate and perform crisis continually: the efficacy of the invocation of crisis often stems from its episodic and 'out of the ordinary' character, whereby crises are constructed as temporally limited events. This presents a set of challenges for perpetuating a sense of crisis – it can be difficult to continue to attract attention and prolong panic and concern about one's chosen crisis, especially if it becomes clear that one's notion of crisis is not particularly convincing, or if the issues that one's notion of crisis revolve around become less salient to voters or media. In an illustrative example of this dilemma, Jens Rydgren (2006: 71) has shown that the failure of the Swedish New Democracy party was due in a large part to the 1990s economic crisis, which made socioeconomic issues far more salient (particularly issues around Sweden's political economy and the welfare state) than the sociocultural issues that New Democracy campaigned on (an immigration 'crisis'), and thus saw it suffer a humiliating defeat in the 1994 general elections.

One way that populists attempt to stem this loss of interest or salience is by switching the notion of crisis that they employ: for example, in the 2012 Dutch elections, Geert Wilders temporarily attempted to switch the focus of his party's campaign from the crisis of the Islamization of Europe to the European financial crisis, advocating the Netherlands' exit from the European Union. Similarly, Pauline Hanson has cycled through a number of impending crises from which Australia is allegedly suffering – from an 'Asian invasion', to a health crisis brought on by 'diseased' African immigrants, to a privatization crisis caused by the selling-off of public services. These attempts to 'switch' crises have met with some degree of failure, with Wilders's Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid – PVV) losing nine seats and 5 per cent of its 2010 vote share in the 2012 election, and Hanson failing to gain office after 2001.[7]

Another tactic is to extend the purview and size of the crisis or breakdown. Hugo Chávez was successful in doing this, beginning with a breakdown of trust in regards to old party elites, moving on to attacks on the domestic opposition, and then to a far-reaching imperialist conspiracy spearheaded by the US (Hawkins 2010: 61). This was met with increasing electoral success, perhaps because Chávez was able to build up his notion of crisis in a gradual and linear manner, rather than switching his focus suddenly. More so, this

building of crisis implicated all of his enemies in a grander cosmic scheme. More recently, de la Torre (2012) has argued that Rafael Correa has extended his vision of his enemies and the crisis that Ecuador allegedly faces in a similar way.

Of course, none of these tactics is guaranteed to work. Different environments and audiences will prove more receptive to certain types of performance of crises than others. While some populist actors' successes in performing crisis are short lived and of their time, others (like Chávez and Correa) have been able to perpetuate a sense of crisis over an extended period. This latter condition, when successfully presented, can be rather effective, moving crisis from being an extraordinary phenomenon to an ordinary one, thus allowing these populist actors to strengthen their authority as the sovereign voices of 'the people'.

POPULIST PERFORMANCES OF CRISIS VS. 'CRISIS POLITICS'

Taken together, this model of how populist actors go about performing crisis raises an important question: how do such performances differ from 'crisis politics' in general? In other words, what makes these performances unique to populism? This is a particularly timely question, given that we are living in the wake of the global financial crisis, and 'crisis politics' seems to be common across the board in the so-called 'age of austerity' (Schäfer and Streeck 2013). 'Crisis politics' here can be understood as the type of politics and responses outlined in Boin et al. (2005) that seek to deal with large-scale crises – examples include the governance of cities after natural disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina), political reactions to terrorist attacks (such as the 11 September attacks), the politics of large-scale disasters (such as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster) or the politics of responding and adapting to financial crisis (such as the Greek government-debt crisis).

There are two central differences that can be identified between the performances of crisis that are a feature of populism, and 'crisis politics' more generally: the centrality of 'the people' and the necessary perpetuation of crisis. In regard to the first, the primary aim of populist performances of crisis is to divide 'the people' from those ostensibly responsible for the crisis – whether that is the elite, some dangerous other or a combination of both. If it does not

succeed in this regard, the populist performance of crisis fails. This is not the case for more general forms of 'crisis politics'. They *can* invoke 'the people', but this is not necessarily the key political subject that all forms of 'crisis politics' attempt to mobilize or 'render-present' (Arditi 2007). For example, 'crisis politics' can invoke subjects as different as distinct classes (as in times of economic crisis), ethnicities (as in times of ethnic conflict), religions (in times of religious conflict) or genders (such as the 'crisis of masculinity') among others. None of these political subjects needs to be couched in the language of 'the people' for 'crisis politics' to operate effectively. Related to this, the enemy of these political subjects does not have to be the elite – this is culturally and politically contingent.[8] So while populist performances of crisis always divide 'the people' from their other, 'crisis politics' more generally do not need to invoke 'the people'.

Second, if populism is 'a powerful reaction to a sense of extreme crisis', as Taggart (2000: 2) puts it, then its existence and continued success is reliant on the continued propagation and perpetuation of crisis. As has been argued, this means that we should see the performance of populism as a core feature of populism, because its perpetuation is necessary for populist actors' political survival. This is simply not the case for all other forms of 'crisis politics'. Many forms of 'crisis politics' blatantly seek to end the specified crisis at hand, rather than continue to perpetuate it for political gain ('t Hart and Tindall 2009).[9] For example, prolonging a sense of crisis is probably not in the interests of leading political actors in some of the European countries that have been hit the hardest by the eurozone sovereign-debt crisis, given that they are facing disenchanted, desperate and disgruntled citizens – here, an end to the crisis stands as the key goal. As such, while narratives within more general forms of 'crisis politics' tend to have a broadly teleological structure – they have a defined beginning, middle and, most importantly, end – the performances of crisis by populist actors are ongoing, in that they either extend the scope of the crisis, or alternatively switch their notion of crisis so that it continues. In other words, populist performances of crisis never really end, unlike 'crisis politics' in general.

At the same time, there are some overlaps between populist performances of crisis and 'crisis politics' more generally that need to be acknowledged. For example, some current non-populist examples of forms of the 'crisis politics' of austerity have identified an initial failure (step 1), linked it to a wider framework and added a temporal

dimension (step 2), used the media to propagate the performance (step 4) and presented simple solutions and leadership as a way of solving the crisis (step 5). However, as noted above, what is missing in such cases is a distinct focus on 'the people' versus their enemies (step 3), as well as an active attempt to continue propagating the crisis (step 6). The fact that populist performances of crisis and other modes of 'crisis politics' in contemporary democracies share a number of commonalities should not come as a surprise, given that many authors have noted the interrelated nature of populism and democracy, with populism being viewed as an 'internal periphery' (Arditi 2007), 'mirror' (Panizza 2005) or 'spectre' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) of democracy. Similarly, a number of authors (Mazzoleni 2008; Mondon 2013; Snow and Moffitt 2012) have noted the ways that populism is becoming increasingly 'mainstreamed' in contemporary democratic politics, indicating that populist and more 'mainstream' forms of politics can have much in common. However, just as we do not identify all democratic politics as inherently populist just because they share the same language of 'the people' at times, neither should we collapse populist performances of crisis with all forms of 'crisis politics' because they share some features. As demonstrated, there are distinct differences between the two, and it makes sense to keep them analytically separate.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that dominant conceptions of the relationship between contemporary populism and crisis are only partial, as they tend to view crisis as only external to populism. Instead, it has argued that crisis should also be seen as an internal feature of populism, given that crises are never 'neutral' events, but are actively mediated and performed by populist actors who attempt to 'spectacularize' failure to propagate a sense of crisis. Having outlined the mechanisms of this performance, it has shown that this performance allows populists a method for dividing 'the people' against a dangerous other, for presenting themselves as the sovereign voice of 'the people' and for radically simplifying political procedures and institutions. It must be stressed that the performance of crisis should not be viewed just as a particular political strategy among others that populists can choose to deploy if they feel it would politically advantageous – rather, the

performance of crisis should be seen as an essential core feature of populism itself.

This argument has a number of ramifications for thinking about populism. First, it makes clear the centrality of performance in contemporary populism, lending credence to those conceptions that view populism as a political style (Filc 2011; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt and Tormey 2013; Taguieff 1995). Indeed, the theoretical arguments and empirical examples utilized in this article demonstrate that crisis can only become a crisis through performance or mediation. Second, it provides a more nuanced notion of crisis to be applied in the populist literature, showing that crisis can be thought of as an external trigger as well as an internal feature of populism. Third, it demonstrates that the performance of crisis helps to divide the 'the people' from their other, in that it can link the elite and other minority groups together and can offer populists a seemingly 'objective' rationale for targeting 'the people's' enemies. Fourth, it presents an analytical model of the steps that populist actors take in performing crisis, which can be tested and applied to different cases of populism across the world. Fifth, it shows that there are differences between the ways that populists perform crisis and 'crisis politics' more generally.

In a world that is allegedly beset by a number of crises, this shift in perspective allows us to question arguments about the simple causality between populism and crisis, and to interrogate the very notion of crisis as a discrete and objective phenomenon. By addressing the performative repertoires, practices of mediation and role of spectacle inherent in populist use of crisis, we are better equipped to understand the phenomenon in the future, and to discern more clearly its increasingly important position in the contemporary political landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1] See Townshend (2003, 2004) for an explanation of the Essex School of discourse analysis.

[2] Panizza (2005: 14) is an exception: despite editing a Laclau and Essex School-centric collection on populism, he is keen to note that crisis can lead to many outcomes

other than populism, such as authoritarianism, dictatorship or, more positively, a renewal of democratic political institutions.

3 This is commonly accepted as the key motivating 'event' that spurred on the formation of the US Tea Party movement (Lo 2012).

4 This is in line with Albertazzi and McDonnell's depiction (2008: 3) of the key division at the heart of populism as being between 'the people' and 'a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice'.

5 An example of the disproportionate amount of media coverage given to a populist actors is that of Tea Party candidate Herman Cain, who in 2011, according to the Pew Research Center, was the most covered Republican candidate in the US media, and indeed, the third most covered figure overall, after Barack Obama and Muammar Gaddafi (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011).

6 Both of these events have been argued to be 'astroturf' – a play on the term 'grassroots' which refers to 'the artificial formation of apparently spontaneous grassroots movements by private interests' (Wear 2012: 1). In these cases, such private interests included business interests such as the Koch brothers' Freedom-works, and media actors – former Fox News host Glenn Beck in the case of the 9/12 Taxpayer March on Washington, and shock-jock Alan Jones in the case of the Convoy of No Confidence.

7 However, this does not necessarily mean that changing tack in terms of crisis is always a negative experience. According to recent opinion polls, at the time of writing (July 2013), Wilders's Party for Freedom is the second most popular party in the Netherlands (Louwerse 2013).

8 In some situations, the elite can even be portrayed as the victims of crisis: for example, the US Justice Department has depicted a number of banks (including divisions of Citigroup and Bank of America) as victims of Standard & Poor's credit ratings during the financial crisis – a new twist on the usual narratives that have emerged from the global financial crisis. Indeed, the *Wall Street Journal* (2013) went so far as to state, 'The Feds Discover a New Crisis Narrative' in its headline for the story. It is rather difficult to imagine populist actors presenting the elite as victims of crisis.

9 There are, however, some forms of non-populist politics that seek to perpetuate crisis and 'normalize' it to create a permanent 'state of exception'. See Agamben (2005) for examples and discussion of this phenomenon.

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