



QUALITATIVE APPROACHES IN POPULISM RESEARCH*

PODEJŚCIA JAKOŚCIOWE
W BADANIACH NAD POPULIZMEM

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— ABSTRACT —

In recent years, the amount of empirical research on populism has increased dramatically. The purpose of this text is to analyze these strands of existing research on populism which employ qualitative methods. Additionally, the paper discusses their basic categories and research design, and highlights the advantages and drawbacks of each of these approaches. The paper presents the three most influential trends in qualitative research on populism: ideology analysis-morphological approach, discourse theory, and historical-discursive analysis.

Keywords: populism, qualitative research, morphological analysis of ideology, discourse theory, discourse-historical approach

— ABSTRAKT —

W ostatnich latach lawinowo rośnie liczba empirycznych badań nad populizmem. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest analiza już istniejących badań nad populizmem korzystających z metod jakościowych, omówienie ich podstawowych kategorii oraz struktury badania, a także wskazanie na zalety oraz problemy każdego z omawianych podejść. Artykuł przedstawia trzy najbardziej wpływowe nurty jakościowych badań nad populizmem: analizę ideologii-podejście morfologiczne, teorię dyskursu oraz analizę historyczno-dyskursywną.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, badania jakościowe, morfologiczna analiza ideologii, teoria dyskursu, podejście historyczno-dyskursywne

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An analysis of the literature on populism leads to a significant conclusion that the number of empirical studies on populism is growing (Gidron, Bonikowski, 2013; Mudde, 2016). Until the early 21st century, theoretical and descriptive studies lacking a systematic research methodology of populism prevailed. Recently, however, a growing number of empirical studies has emerged, aiming to determine, for instance, the type of populism or the degree of populism present in the language of a given political agent. Characteristically, a number of such studies take a path of quantitative methods (primarily content analysis) which make it possible to move from single case studies to broader comparative studies. Additionally, quantitative methods ensure greater reliability than qualitative ones. On the other hand, Canovan notes that a majority of contemporary populism studies approach it as a discourse (Canovan, 2004). Such an assumption on the ontological status of populism seems to justify the claim that the importance of qualitative methods will continue to grow, since they facilitate systematic analyses which reveal multilayered, complex discursive instruments employed by populists in the public sphere. The importance of qualitative methods in populism studies results from their focus on detailed text analysis and the analysis of meanings produced by social actors aiming at thick description. Bearing in mind that populism does not express any ideology in the traditional sense and is a discursive structure filled with content which depends on the context of a given political culture, qualitative methods gather particular importance. They facilitate an insightful analysis of the merging of ideational content rooted in different political traditions. Indeed, in his proposals concerning future populism studies, C. Mudde stresses the need to examine populist parties more thoroughly, which quantitative studies, frequently based on secondary data (e.g. Manifesto Research Group) and codebooks, are not able to provide, as they sometimes fail to grasp the nuances of political communication (Mudde, 2016). The objective of this paper is to analyze extant populism research using qualitative methods, discuss their basic categories and research design, and indicate the advantages and drawbacks of each approach presented.

IDEATIONAL APPROACH – MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Populism is approached here as a “thin-centered ideology”. The starting point for populism studies is the morphological analysis of ideology by M. Freeden. It abandons the conventional macro-approach to ideologies as a series of

grand, exclusive narrations frequently characterized by a single category (e.g. freedom, equality or hierarchy). Traditional approaches applied simplifying generalizations and neglected the complexity of the ideologies produced by the heterogeneity of ideological content they encompassed (Freeden, 1996). If ideas are individual interpretations, ideologies are interpretive frameworks that are rooted in language as a set of categories (Stanley, 2008). Characteristically for Freeden's concept, the basic building blocks of ideologies are the political categories of freedom, power, rights, equality, solidarity, and so on. By analogy to sentences, which are composed of words, ideologies are specific configurations of categories organized in orderly patterns. According to Freeden, analysis of ideologies is morphological in nature as its essential objective is to examine the internal structure of ideology. All political categories are inevitably polysemic and their meanings raise constant disputes. Consequently, ideologies should be perceived as structural arrangements which attribute meanings to the sets of mutually defined concepts. Ideologies attempt to conclude the disputes on meanings by placing them in a specific arrangement of concepts resulting in their decontestation (Freeden, 2003). Characteristically, no ideology has the monopoly to use certain concepts, and the same ones are present in socialism and conservatism; yet placed in different arrangements with other concepts they assume different meanings. Ideologies also differ in terms of their complexity. There are full ideologies, which take into account all the main political categories and try to answer all the fundamental questions, alongside those that Freeden names "thin-centered" ideologies. Their morphological structure is narrowed down to a handful of fundamental core concepts, they do not address all the fundamental political questions and limit themselves to a few issues. Nationalism and feminism can serve as examples here, as they focus solely on one aspect of social and political life (nation and gender respectively).

Although Freeden did not write about populism, his division into thick- and thin-centered ideologies has provided a significant stimulus to populism studies. Freeden's concept made it possible to theoretically explain the chameleon-like nature of populism (Taggart, 2004). Since ideologies are the amalgams of different categories and, additionally, thin-centered ideologies are possible, the under-specified, variable and polymorphic character of populism can be explained by its thin-centered character. Populism is founded on several basic categories which interact with other ideologies, becoming decontested as a result of this diffusion. B. Stanley states that "the thinness of populism ensures that in practice it is a complementary ideology: it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself

throughout full ideologies” (Stanley, 2008). Such openness and ambiguity of fundamental categories allows them to combine with full ideologies (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2011).

Freeden’s concept has also made it possible to empirically study concrete expressions of populism in political communication. Applying the morphological attitude to ideology, C. Mudde concluded that populism has a conceptual character. He believes that this thin-centered ideology encompasses several categories: the people, corrupted elites, and politics as the expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). A very similar stance was proposed by B. Stanley, claiming that populism is founded on several basic ideas: (1) the existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: “the people” and “the elite”; (2) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite; (3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and (4) the positive valorization of “the people” and denigration of “the elite” (Stanley, 2008). D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell complemented the above-indicated core concepts of populism with the affirmation of one’s own culture and the exclusion of others, as well as the unity of the leaders with their people (Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2008). Detailed studies on populism take the direction of qualitative text analyses which examine how the basic concepts characteristic of populism are “decontested”. For instance, A.R. Jupskås investigates how the concept of the people is constructed in Scandinavian populisms (Jupskås, 2013), and D. Albertazzi examines how the elites and the enemy of the people are constructed in Italian populisms (Albertazzi, 2007). These studies are founded on the list of properties typical for populism designed on the basis of Freedен’s theory and the definition it provides. Importantly, empirical data comes from political manifestos and publications of political parties, as well as from politicians’ interviews and other public statements (such as speeches and parliamentary statements; Albertazzi, McDonnell, 2015; Pankowski, 2010; Enyedi, 2016, Vossen, 2011). The sample is selected on a theoretical basis in the studies which approach populism as a thin-centered ideology. The scope of research concerns either case studies (e.g. Vossen, 2017; Zaslove, 2011) or comparative studies limited to several countries (e.g. Pauwels, 2014).

A significant advantage of this approach is that it takes into account the heterogeneous character of populism, which combines elements of different ideologies, various ideas and political traditions. Additionally, qualitative analyses closely stick to the texts, demonstrating how concrete aspects of reality are interpreted by populists. Another crucial merit is approaching populism as a set of ideas, focusing on the properties of messages instead of the actors. In this way, the constant

disputes about the status of populism have been concluded, and actor-centered analysis has been abandoned in favor of the analysis of communication modes. Another outcome involves the possibility of measuring the degree of a given agent's populism. Indeed, the morphological approach has triggered quantitative studies that examine to what extent a given subject refers to the people, anti-elitism and the principle of sovereignty of the people (e.g. Rooduijn, Pauwels, 2011). As far as the drawbacks of this approach are concerned, they are typical of all qualitative studies: restricted reliability, stress on interpretational acuity of individual scholars rather than on an orderly, structured research procedure, limited comparative and generalization potential of such studies. Moreover, Freedén's theory does not provide any practical guides that would allow full ideologies to be distinguished from thin-centered ideologies (Aslanidis, 2016).

DISCOURSE THEORY

The approach focused on the content of populism raises outright criticism from the Argentine social philosopher, E. Laclau. In his opinion, attempts to define populism have failed because they addressed the content rather than the form of populism. Consequently, every attempt at defining populism ended with a list of exceptions of populist parties and movements that did not fit the proposed definition (Laclau, 2009). Laclau believes that populism is a structural outcome of the inherent logic of politics (Stanley, 2008). He says that "a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are" (Laclau, 2005). The theory of populism by E. Laclau can be presented referring to six stages. First, a series of social claims cannot be fulfilled by the extant institutional channels. Second, unfulfilled claims enter a mutual relationship of solidarity or equivalence. Third, the demands crystallize around shared symbols. Fourth, all these phenomena may be used by leaders who interpellate the frustrated masses, thereby commencing the process of collective identification. Fifth, "the people" emerge as the collective actor confronting the regime. Sixth, the objective of this collective actor is to demand to change the regime (Arditi, 2010). In this approach, a demand, understood also as a request, is the basic analysis unit. If this demand remains unfulfilled, an equivalential chain is created and the border between this chain of demands and the system is drawn (Moffit, 2016).

It should be noted that, according to E. Laclau, populism is a gradable phenomenon, and the greater the number of demands articulated into an equivalential chain across a greater number of social spaces, the greater the degree of populism (Howarth, 2014). The constitution of the political frontier between the powerful and the underdogs – requires that the particularities that make up the signifier “the people” become elements in a chain of equivalences. The only thing that links all these demands into a chain of equivalences is the formal relation of antagonism towards the system (Panizza, 2005). Summing up this approach, F. Panizza observes that populism is an anti-status quo discourse, which simplifies the political sphere by symbolically dividing society into “the people” and “the other” (Panizza, 2005). Both “the people” and “the other” are political constructions with the performative power of making the entities they name real. They are thus symbolically constituted by the relation of antagonism (Laclau, 2005).

The logic of equivalence and the logic of difference are constructed through the rhetorical devices. Among them, metaphors and metonymies are exceptionally significant as they let some elements of the chain substitute other elements (Thomassen, 2016). Since politics is essentially about constructing collective identities based on chains of equivalence, rhetoric is a key dimension of political activity. In the discourse theory, the fundamental research objective is to determine whether a given practice is articulated through an empty signifier “the people”, or through other empty signifiers. Second, it aims to determine to what extent social representation is antagonistic, and divides society into two principal blocs. The empirical data collection does not differ from the methods of historical or ethnographical research. Empirical materials include press articles, speeches, politicians’ statements, official reports, unofficial documents, biographies and visual materials (Howarth, 2008). Samples are selected on a theoretical basis in order to reflect all the elements of discourse by a given actor that are typical of populism (Marttila, 2015). A typical basic sampling unit is the discourse of a given individual or collective actor. The next stage involves linking the data to the theoretical frameworks developed on the basis of the fundamental categories of discourse theory. The objective of this stage is to identify the discursive logics of constructing “the people” and the frontier between the people and those in power. The most typical research design are case studies, for instance the analysis of the discourse of the Governor of Alabama, G. Wallace (Lowndes, 2005), President of Argentina C. Menem (Barros, 2005) or the Greek left-wing Syriza party and its leader A. Tsipras (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, 2014).

Significant element of Laclau's approach is its stress on the role of populist form and avoids the description of discourse content. Another advantage is that in this approach, populism is understood as a series of discursive measures applicable in a variety of ways (Laclau 2009), and as a gradable phenomenon. Moreover, Laclau's proposal is perceiving populism as a practice, something that emerges in the course of action rather than a certain *status quo*, and emphasizing the role of discursive representation producing performative outcomes. The most frequently indicated drawbacks of Laclau's concept refer to the lack of operationalization of populism indices, which prevents the degree of populism from being assessed. Another criticism concerns the identification of populism with politics as such, which is deemed to be an excessively broadened understanding of populism, leaving scholars unable to distinguish between populism and other political phenomena. Finally, a broader criticism is voiced with respect to discourse theory, rather than the concept of populism alone. Studies by Laclau and the Essex School, which has developed his proposals, do not provide concrete tools that allow discourse to be analyzed in detail.

DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

The discourse-historical approach as a version of critical discourse analysis is distinguished by having an extensive range of analytical tools rooted in different strands of linguistics which facilitate a thorough discourse analysis, and the intention to take into account a possibly wide range of contextual information provided by the analyzed spoken and written texts (Wodak 2011). The very term discourse points to a highly contextualized analysis. Discourse is understood here as a complex bundle of concurrent and successive linguistic acts present in one or more fields of social life (Wodak, 2008). This definition emphasizes the importance of studies of interdiscursivity and intertextuality – linguistic phenomena that indicate the heterogeneous character of discourse, which draws on numerous topics and texts from different fields of social life.

Generally speaking, discourse analysis encompasses two levels: an entry-level analysis, focused primarily on the thematic organization of texts, and in-depth analysis, driven by research questions, which examines text coherence and cohesion, speech genres, discursive strategies and other linguistic instruments (Wodak, 2015). From the point of view of populism studies, it is of utmost importance that discourse analysis is concerned not only with examining explicit

messages but also the content that is alluded to and deeply encoded (Wodak, 2011). The research procedure in this approach is based on the set of questions and corresponding discursive strategies. First, how are social actors constructed by means of names assigned to them (nominalization strategy)? For the studies of populism, the us – them dichotomy is exceptionally significant in this case, as well as metaphors and synecdoches allowing a part to represent the whole. Second, what positive or negative features are attributed to the linguistically constructed social actors (predicate strategy)? Third, what argumentation schemes are used in order to justify or delegitimize specific nominalization and predication? Fourth, from what point of view are the above three strategies implemented? Fifth, are the texts under analysis intensified, openly articulated, or maybe moderated? Each of these strategies calls for an analysis of specific linguistic instruments (Reisigl, 2011; Wodak, 2008).

The critical character of this approach results in its being primarily interested in right-wing populisms which are deemed to threaten European democracy. Right-wing populism is studied by the discourse-historical approach through the prism of content articulated via discursive strategies. R. Wodak points to nine characteristics shared by all right-wing populist agents, and starts her list with a general statement about the representation of “the people” as a homogeneous entity being based on nativist ideologies. The “rhetoric of exclusion” constitutes an inherent part of this discourse allowing internal (e.g. Jews, political elites, establishment) and external aliens (e.g. the European Union, refugees) to be constructed. Other topics significant for populism include threat scenarios, defending the homeland, conspiracy theories, traditional conservative values and morality, support for simplistic solutions and the need for a charismatic leader/savior. Typical discursive strategies that help articulate the above messages include the Manichean dichotomous division into us – them, argumentation strategies such as *ad hominem* and *ad populum*, hasty generalizations as well as the topoi of anger, democratic participation and burden, designing unrealistic scenarios as well as calculated ambivalence permitting provocation and victim perpetrator role reversal (Reisigl, 2014; Wodak, 2015).

Analysis is eclectic – it is based on a number of theories. The research procedure is based on constant switching between theory and empiricism; the list of categories typical of populism is designed deductively and then specified by analyzing concrete empirical data. Sample selection employs the triangulation method which, in this case, means collecting data on the same macro-topic but in different genres, together with different contextual data, making a thorough

and multi-level analysis possible. The next stage involves data selection and sorting in order to obtain a small corpus to be analyzed. It typically concerns one or several discourses and one or several actors. A study usually concerns a single case, for instance the Freedom Party (Wodak, 2013), or a selected issue, for example islamophobia (Krzyżanowski, 2013). Having a larger number of cases does not automatically entail that a rigorous comparative study is conducted. Taking them into account serves the purpose of the largest possible sample diversification in order to identify and illustrate all the possible expressions of right-wing populism. The selection of concrete discourse fragments is based on such criteria as typicality, influence (intertextual/interdiscursive), significance, exceptionality (extreme cases) and the originality of data (Reisigl, 2011). The basic sampling unit is a discourse on a specific topic (e.g. immigrants) and the discourse of concrete right-wing and populist agents. A significant research stage also involves a pilot analysis of a selected fragment of the discourse conducted in order to specify or complement linguistic analytical tools.

The fundamental advantage of discourse-historical analysis is its focus on contextual data and the development of a range of analytical tools which correspond to the heterogeneous character of contemporary populism. Additionally, the focus on implicit messages and discursive controversies is particularly significant in the context of strongly mediatized politics. Finally, another significant aspect of discourse-historical analysis is its examination of how the enemy is constructed, which corresponds to the dichotomous nature of populism. Speaking about the drawbacks of this approach, it is frequently criticized for its excessively impression-based analysis style and arbitrary sample selection (Breeze, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the three most influential qualitative approaches to populism studies indicates a broad area of agreement between them. Each treats populism as a communication phenomenon related to political discourse, i.e. a practice where different themes and linguistic genres are combined. Freedén's concept, as applied to populism by C. Mudde, refers to "ideology" but it is not limited to analyzing messages in manifestos, which are traditionally identified with the ideology *locus*, but reaches out to broadly understood political communication. Ideology as a category is also a significant element of discourse-historical analysis.

Table 1. Qualitative research on populism – three approaches

	Ideology analysis –Morphological Approach	Discourse theory	Discourse-historical analysis
Ontological status of populism	“thin-centered” ideology	discursive logic	content characteristics and corresponding discursive strategies
Level of analysis	macro-/meso-	macro-/meso-	micro-
Sample selection	theoretical/purposive	theoretical/purposive	theoretical/purposive
Coding strategy	mainly deductive	mainly deductive	abductive

Source: Author’s own analysis.

An indisputable achievement of the analysis of ideologies and discourse theory is their clear tendency to seek the minimal definition of populism and its specific logic, while abandoning the examination of detailed content characteristics, typical of earlier studies, which produced a series of exceptions. The most significant differences between the approaches discussed in this paper concern the level of analysis. It is most general in discourse theory, and most detailed in discourse-historical analysis. It appears that the most fruitful direction of future studies will integrate the minimal/formal definition coined by the analysis of ideologies and discourse-historical analysis with the detailed instruments developed by critical discourse analysis.

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