Abstract Jana Goyvaerts

We Need To Talk About How We Talk About Populism: The signifier populism and discursive struggles about democracy in the Belgian press.

Over the course of these last few years, 'populism' seemed to be everywhere. From Trump and Brexit to Syriza and Podemos, a 'populist boom' appeared to be happening. At the same time, the term 'populism' became omnipresent in academic research and media coverage (Brown et al., 2021; Goyvaerts et al., forthcoming; Hunger & Paxton, 2022; Mondon, 2022). This is of course partially due to a rise of populist politics, but the growth of references to 'populism' is not a mere consequence of this rise of populist politics, and characterising such politics as 'populist' has an impact on the prevalence and success of so-called populist parties.

Instead of focusing on populist discourses, this thesis proposes to look at discourses *about* populism. Recently, there have been more and more researchers who have emphasised the need to study discourses about populism (De Cleen et al., 2018; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021; Glynos & Mondon, 2016; Stavrakakis, 2017). Scholars that have already studied populism as a signifier have shown that the use of 'populism' is steadily growing and populism is increasingly used negatively, often to label and denounce political adversaries or newcomers (Brookes, 2018; Herkman, 2016; Houwen, 2011; Jäger, 2017; Kim, 2018; Zicman de Barros et al., 2022). They have also shown that populism is a politically charged term, and the meanings attributed to the term seem to differ significantly between different opposing discourses. Therefore, this thesis proposes to look at the role populism plays in broader ideological conflicts by analysing the hegemonic struggles around the term. To do so, the research is guided by the following research question: *how is 'populism' used as a signifier in Belgian newspapers, and what do the hegemonic struggles around the term look like?*

This thesis situates itself in the poststructuralist and discourse-theoretical tradition, which allows to deconstruct a sign into the *signifier* and the *signified*. This allows to study 'populism' as a signifier, to discover what different meanings are ascribed to it. Building on a strong theoretical overview of the literature on discourses about populism, the hegemonic struggles around the signifier 'populism' are examined through a qualitative content analysis in Belgian newspaper articles. To capture the complex dynamics and nuances in discourses about populism, this thesis proposes to look at the three main producers of discourses about populism: academia, media and politics.

Apart from looking at three different producers of discourse, this thesis also compares two time periods (2002 and 2018) and two different language communities (Flemish and francophone) to contextualise the findings and to compare between time and space.

This analysis shows that the term 'populism' is consistently used negatively, usually in opposition to democracy. The hegemonic discourse is clearly anti-populist, but there is not one clear anti-populist discourse. 'Populism' can rather be seen as a floating signifier that is articulated in rival discourses, and is linked to various signifiers from different democratic theories to construct different and often opposing democratic identities. Moreover, its consolidated negative meaning as a 'dangerous trend' allows actors to define this trend differently and reflect on its causes, often articulating critical assessments of the current state of politics and the status quo. Therefore, this thesis proposes to approach anti-populism as a political logic. In an anti-populist political logic, the signifier 'populism' is used to construct new frontiers, to defend what is seen as 'democratic' and to attempt to naturalise those conceptions. This allows to study the political ideas that are articulated *through* anti-populism, which becomes a political logic to structure political discourse.