

Populism as a Conceptual Problem: Disciplinary Differentiation, Specialization, and the Complex Approach

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Abstract: Populism is a global phenomenon that has been widely debated in academia (particularly in political science), the media, and politics for decades. This has led to many different definitions which exclude or include different forms, and focus on different aspects. This article discusses and systematizes these different approaches and explains them based on their core logics and empirical support. Their differences are rooted in their disciplinary differentiation and specialization. This process is absolutely necessary to conduct research in modern and complex societies, but it can make grasping complex problems difficult. Especially, if the ontological and epistemological assumptions are not properly supported and classified, this will lead to a cacophony of definitions. To overcome this problem, a new epistemological approach is needed, one that is capable of integrating the different empirically supported perspectives. The paper will point out that embracing the complexity of society is fruitful and necessary as it allows for a new understanding of the phenomenon by integrating the current research into one common framework, based on the concept of cultural complexus. In this approach, populism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon—thus, the complex approach—with multiple variants that has a set of necessary and sufficient dimensions that identify it and that can be observed empirically.

Keywords: populism; differentiation; complexity; complex theory; epistemology; interdisciplinarity



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1. Introduction

The study of populism has become a recurrent topic in academic work, driven by the mounting evidence of its relevance in current political processes. It has also become common place to start by saying that there is no consensus regarding a definition. There is merit to this claim, as even a quick review of the available literature will showcase a variety of approaches. Furthermore, for some authors, a rigorous definition is simply not possible, and the term itself cannot be accepted as a concept [1].

There are two key points here. On the one hand, the phenomenon that has been identified as populism exists in reality, as populist organizations, movements, and figures of all stripes have emerged in multiple countries around the world. To be able to understand it, we require advanced theoretical tools which in turn necessitate a cohesive conceptual base. The fundamental assumption of our work is that populism as a phenomenon can be theoretically and conceptually studied for its further application in empirical research.

On the other hand, in our view, one of the obstacles to the study of populism is the disciplinary structure of the social sciences. Academic scholarship has undergone a process of disciplinary differentiation since the beginning of the Western modernity [2] (pp. 43–155), [3] (p. 352). This practice took place in all fields of research [4,5]. We operate with an ever-increasing inventory of discipline-specific information, and the necessary theoretical and methodological toolkit within different disciplines to perform research in

any field grows continuously. Hence, disciplinary specialization is now an established feature of academia.

Over time, this has resulted not only in the differentiation between the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, but also in new disciplines and further specialization within these more general disciplinary divides. Occasionally, this division of academic practice into three distinct wholes implies, somewhat pejoratively, distinct levels of scientific rigor, as the term science is often associated with the analysis of the structure and behavior of the natural world as well as positivist inquiry in general. While some scholars would justify this with the perceived mathematical precision of natural sciences, it becomes blurred in fields like biology or medicine [6] (pp. 15–23).

This is relevant, as differentiation follows fracture lines and classifications that are completely humanmade and socially constructed. Categories are not a fact of nature or even of human behavior, but a tool crafted to better understand and operate with them. The problem arises when those boundaries are assumed as a part of the object of the study, instead of a simplified description. As the metaphor states, the map is confounded with the territory.

Though modern understanding of academia with definite dividing lines sneaks into common sense, it is also a problem specific to the particular use of language, philosophical traditions, and/or administrative organizations. This implies that English-, German-, or Spanish-speaking academics will have different interpretations of supposedly common terms, and this is only a fraction of the cultural diversity embedded in the field¹. Also, science is not defined by its object of study, may it be nature, society, or human products, but, rather, by the way the effort is conducted, thus making the application of the scientific method the defining factor. In academia, this has led to the specialization of different tasks and the evolution of different disciplines, be it astrophysics, statistics, or linguistics [7] (p. 172).

Explanations of contemporary populism as a phenomenon have been attempted within the confines of disciplinary boundaries. In our view, it is primarily a political phenomenon, as it impacts political systems and processes at local, national, and international scales directly, and its driving demands take a clear political form. However, it is important to move beyond the theoretical and conceptual tools of political science to explain political phenomena.

This article has three main objectives. First, to systematize the state of the theoretical field in the study of populism and identify its possibilities and limitations. Second, to explore the effect of the disciplinary model and the traditional logic of academic research on the ability of political sciences to explain populism. Third, to propose an alternative for the study of populism, based on a broader shift in perspective in the social sciences.

The article is structured into three parts: an introduction, three sections, and conclusions. The first section engages in a critical evaluation of the existing theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of populism. In the second section, we discuss the underlying theoretical problems presented by the disciplinary model rooted in the ontology of social phenomena and their analysis. This background and the necessary contextualization of the existing state-of-the-art inform our theorization of the complex perspective presented in the third section.

Our proposal, that we call complex perspective, integrates diverse empirically supported approaches and paradigms, i.e., already existing knowledge, to offer a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of populism. This will contribute to superseding the limitations of fragmented views and will provide a platform of convergence for currently separated, and competing, projects.

2. The Problem of Populism

Populism has been a feature throughout modern political history. Oswald, Schäfer, and Broda [8] (p. 10) state that “Generally speaking, the first forms of populism appeared in the United States (US) as early as the seventeenth century”. They elaborate this idea further:

“If uprisings such as the Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts or even the French Revolution are counted—just think of Marat’s newspaper L’Ami du peuple (The people’s friend)—populism has even contributed to the formation or improvement of democracy. Also, the Chartists as a working-class male suffrage movement for political reform and the Narodnik revolutionaries in Tsarist Russia were essentially populist movements in the nineteenth century”. [8] (p. 10)

Popular media and politicians use the word recurrently, within very different contexts and with different aims and meanings [9] (p. 1). This provides populism with great visibility in the Western world, although it is well known in non-Western spaces also. Yet, Brown and Mondon [10] point out that this recourse to the term and widespread media coverage have deep implications for its meaning and interpretation, both notionally and conceptually. They also suggest that this visibility contributed to move part of the extreme right into the political mainstream.

An increasing body of research continues to study populism from a variety of perspectives. However, trying to understand it and explain it based on notions rather than on strictly defined concepts—a common occurrence—would render any attempt in this sense limited at best, as a thorough and comprehensive scientific investigation requires the rigor and precision of conceptual constructions, even if their content changes over time [11].

There is a fundamental problem here: existing definitions have limitations when attempting to encompass the diversity of variants of populism that form a part of contemporary political phenomena in various parts of the world. Also, arguments to exclude some of the proposed cases are derived from insufficiently developed conceptual frameworks. The use of the term in politics and popular media muddies these waters as well, given its impact on scientific research, particularly in a hyperconnected world. This is aggravated by the fact that, historically, the label populist has been an exonym applied to movements and figures, with few exceptions [12] (pp. 5–6). This means that there are not proper tenets or core programmatic features created by self-described populists that can be taken as a frame of reference. Another major issue is the variety of cases itself, and the extreme difficulty that this entails when attempting to bring all such cases within strict boundaries of particular definitions [13].

An additional obstacle in the path towards a general and internally consistent understanding of populism emanates from the practice of the division of social sciences into various self-contained disciplines. The idea of interpreting it as social and/or political phenomenon invites a discussion within the boundaries of sociology or political sciences, respectively, which can leave aside a number of dimensions. In the words of Jürgen Mackert [9] (p. 2):

“Besides this ongoing search for the definition or conception of what populism may actually mean, the scope of theoretical reasoning on populism that could exceed the disciplinary horizon of political science has apparently been neglected so far. Only few efforts have been made to discuss populism more intensely within different theoretical contexts in order to explain its dynamics and processes.”

According to Mackert, the disciplinary model, with its somewhat rigid boundaries, hampers the conceptual effort itself, which is key to building a viable theoretical framework. A large number of proposals have been advanced with different degrees of success. It is not possible to even mention all of them here, and it would be a futile effort to do so as this is a continuously developing area of research. Below, we briefly discuss the most important state-of-the-art research that reviews existing developments in the field, and supporting research that engages in empirical analysis of populist phenomenon.

Three compilations published between 2017 and 2022 help to systematize the main theoretical approaches to the study of populism in the last two decades. The first one is the *Oxford Handbook on Populism*, which identifies three dominant perspectives: political-strategic, sociocultural, and ideational [14]. The second is *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, which gathered works that showcase the essence of contemporary discussions on the topic; its

reading confirms the preponderance of the same three approaches [15]. The third is *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, which compiles an important part of the most noticeable advances in the field to that point [16]. The first chapter of the latter book systematizes existing theoretical work in nine approaches [8], as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical approaches to populism.

Approach	References
Populism as a strategy of mobilization, or mode of organization	[17,18]
Populism as a practice of discourse	[19]
Populism as a sociocultural approach	[20]
Populism as a political style (of political communication)	[21]
Populism as “political opportunism”	[22]
Populism as an “anti-incumbent”, “antiestablishment” or “anti-mainstream” attitude	[18]
Populism as a “thin centered ideology” as “a set of ideas”	[23–27]
An attempt of persuasion	[28]
Populism as logic	[29]

Source: [8]: pp. 6–9.

The most significant common denominator found across the relevant literature, visible in all the approaches, is that the key articulating axis is an opposition between *us*, identified as the people, and a nonpeople otherness. This typically translates into a people–elite opposition. The category *people* is central in populism, which is confirmed by some criticisms that build on the ambiguous character of the term and the ubiquitous recourse to it in political discourse [30] (p. 28).

In Table 2 below, eight of the nine approaches in Table 1 are classified into one of the three dominant perspectives elaborated in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. It is important to note here that this classification assumes neither a generic relation between the approaches nor a direct connection between authors. As observable in the book *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, and the other literature reviewed, we see these alternatives as neither ontologically equivalent nor mutually exclusive. It only expresses a perspectival common ground based on the core arguments and logic of the three dominant perspectives.

Table 2. Two-tiered classification of theoretical approaches.

Primary Approach	Secondary Approach
Political Strategic [17]	Populism as a strategy of mobilization, or mode of organization [18]
	Populism as a practice of discourse [19]
	Populism as a political style (mostly of political communication) [21]
	Populism as “political opportunism” [22]
	An attempt of persuasion [28]
Sociocultural [20]	Populism as sociocultural phenomenon [20,31]
	Populism as an “anti-incumbent”, “antiestablishment” or “anti-mainstream” attitude [18]
Ideational approach [24]	Populism as an “incomplete” or “thin-centered ideology” [23]
	Populism as “a set of ideas” [25–27]

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

It is noticeable that the last approach in Table 1, i.e., Ernesto Laclau’s theorization of “Populism as logic”, is not included in Table 2. This is due to two reasons. First, understanding populism as a logic [29] traverses all the approaches. Laclau’s distinct perspective of discourse assumes that ideas (or floating signifiers) become strategically connected with

each other and function to rally different social groups under one banner relying primarily on the distinction between elites and *the people* constituted by the respective social groups². In this sense, and rather than a meta-level subsuming of the other approaches, we consider Laclau's discourse theory as an approach distinct from the main arguments proposed by the other approaches reviewed above and presented in Table 2. We revisit the element of *the people* in Laclau's theory in further complexity in Section 2.4.

In this way, overall, we now focus our analysis on the three main theoretical approaches, i.e., the primary approach in Table 2. In the first three subsections below, we examine each of these three approaches, placing emphasis on their relation to empirical research and historical record. In the final subsection, we highlight the problems of teleology and steady state that characterize the approaches to the study of populism.

2.1. Political Strategic Approach

Populism is "...a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises governmental power based on the direct, immediate and non-institutionalized support of a large number of mostly non-organized followers" [17] (p. 14).

This approach points to populism as an instrument for obtaining or exercising personal power in the public sphere. This implies that the people—elite opposition is a utilitarian construct built discursively to mobilize support in a definite top-down relation. It further suggests that the presence of a personalist leadership is a condition *sine qua non*. This last idea is recurrent in part of the relevant literature [31–33].

We consider such an approach to populism to have many shortcomings. It excludes, by definition, any non-top-down structure and any movement lacking a clearly defined personalist leader. While leaders are a frequent feature of populist movements, as observable in Latin American or European political history, the presence of such personalist leaders is not confirmed in all cases. For instance, the earliest and well-known populist movements, such as the American People's Party and the Russian Narodniki, were not organized around personalist leaders [28] (pp. 27–46), [34] (pp. 27–57). More recently, Occupy Wall Street and the early Tea Party in the US emerged as grassroots movements [35].

By assuming populism as a strategy used by a personalist leader, it outcasts, by definition, any genuine populist leader. By a genuine populist leader, we understand a figure who is genuinely interested in a *demos*-centered politics and believes in the ideas conveyed to the populace, rather than using such ideas only as a tool to attract supporters without an actual ideological commitment to them—as implied by the definition of Weyland. Although it is indeed hard to determine accurately what constitutes a populist leader/politician, the assumption of populist politicians not only defined using a specific strategy is central to the study of populism. This represents central limitations of the preconceptions of this view. It has another major flaw: the whole approach says nothing about the factors and conditions that allow leaders to mobilize support through a populist discourse. Views by Di Tella [31] and Jensen [36] offer more in this sense, albeit attached to the centrality of leaders.

Weyland's view relates to the theoretical tradition that addresses populism as a communicational phenomenon. Other authors define it as a communicational style that refers to the people [37] (p. 322). Similarly, some other authors address the use of specific stylistic resources, thus focusing on the container rather than the content [38] (p. 425). Another version is the interpretation of populism as a discursive frame [39].

The works of various authors reviewed in this section are examples of attempts to understand the phenomenon of populism through a multidisciplinary lens, in this case political communication. There is no doubt that political discourse and communication in general are fundamental for political mobilization. However, these authors neglect key aspects like the ideological makeup of the discourse, the origin and character of both the people and the elite, or the relation with the specific institutional framework. Nonetheless, their work is supported by empirical data that uncover important patterns in political discourses and suggest explanatory paths for the adoption of certain public positions by members of the elites that act as populist leaders.

2.2. Sociocultural Approach

Populism is a “flaunting of the low” [20] (p. 73), in a relation between political leadership and its base, articulated around calls to the low that resonate with specific sectors of society due to historic sociocultural reasons [40] (pp. 4–23).

This perspective addresses, in part, the demand side, by pointing at cultural factors that resonate with the calls by the leadership. In other words, it includes the existence of attitudes among the public that, when merged with the operation of political actors, generate a populist response. This is at the root of so-called cultural populism, defined as a violent cultural reaction to change [41]. Thus, populism depends on the existence of a type of attitude in segments of the population, generated by changes in the cultural landscape.

Some studies have found empirical support for this thesis. For example, through the lenses of political psychology, Marta Marchlewska et al. [42] related the emergence of those attitudes with the combination of “collective national narcissism” and acute perception of disadvantage or relative deprivation among some sectors of society. This study found populism only in contexts of exacerbated nationalism, but it pointed to the interpretation of economic hardships and social backsliding through group identity and its external cultural indicators. This is further reinforced by the observed mutability of the balance between emotions and rational decision making [43]. In particular, politics in European countries demonstrate this behavior, as wealthier social strata, fearing social deprivation, vote for right populist parties³.

Some works in political anthropology indicate that populism is linked to social groups no longer adequately organized by formerly hegemonic social forms like parties, unions, or other organizations [44]. In the West, these are often reactions to immigration, bearing resemblance to racist discourses and ethnic-based rejection of others [45]. For instance, the erosion of the classical labor organizations in France left a blank space in the political sphere, which was filled mainly by the right-wing populists of Rassemblement National, formerly Front National [46].

This approach emphasizes the historic nature and the presence of cultural components in the conditions of possibility for the emergence of populism. Empirical research in this orientation has uncovered a series of mechanisms that help to explain such conditions. However, its reliance on a specific sociocultural dimension misses a number of areas of inquiry, such as the nature of political demands, the nature of the relation between base and leaders, the ideological makeup of populist movements, and the role of different institutional systems, among others. We can observe how empirically supported theoretical frameworks are rendered insufficient to explain the phenomenon as a whole due to their inability to address interstices as well as fields covered by other disciplines.

2.3. Ideational Approach

Mudde defined populism as “. . . an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” [23] (p. 543).

The ideational approach, based on Mudde’s definition, is probably the most influential one at the time of authoring this article. There exist some variations of the definition [13,47], but the core idea is the same. And clearly, ideology has to be included in any consideration of the populist phenomenon, as it is a key factor for political identification, attitudes, and political action.

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser [48] (pp. 65–67) considers that Mudde’s definition and the theoretical constructs it supports have three important advantages. First, it addresses both the demand side and the supply side—the public, and the leaders and platforms. Second, the clarity of conceptual limits, as it points to two direct opposites of populism: pluralism and elitism. Third, its ability to understand the flexibility and malleability of the populist discourse.

In this view, populism is a thin-centered ideology. This is particularly relevant, as it implies a simple ideological core, expressed in the vertical axis, based on two factors: the people–elite opposition and a critique of dominant political models exploited by the elites. It appears generally as anti-elitism, expressed as pure people vs. corrupt elite, and anti-pluralism [23,49]. Thick ideologies, on the other hand, operate in a horizontal, left–right axis. This means that the core populist ideology is insufficient to produce a comprehensive political project, as it is adversative in nature.

From here, we can extract two corollaries: populism necessarily combines with other ideologies—thick or complete ideologies—to be able to formulate programs and proposals; second, populism can be found across the political spectrum as a consequence of potential and actual combinations. Empirical research has shown the existence of these combinations [50] and suggests that they are necessary to mobilize supporters [51].

Critics of this approach have indicated some deficiencies in its basic constructs. For example, Paris Aslanidis [39] considers that addressing populism as a thin-centered ideology is erroneous for three reasons. (1) It is based on a conceptual structure proposed by Michael Freedman [52–55] that fails to offer a precise definition conducive to the establishment of measurable parameters to identify the different types. (2) There are methodological contradictions generated by the difficulty in establishing elitism and pluralism as opposite ideologies and the rejection of the radial model proposed by Freedman, in spite of using it for the definition of populism. (3) The contradiction between the nature of ideology as a dummy variable (either it exists or not) and the gradualism⁴ detected by empirical research. Aslanidis then proceeds to propose defining populism as a discursive frame.

Certainly, gradualism has been empirically observed [30,56] (pp. 27–89). Aslanidis sees it as a process of gradual expansion of populist tropes across the political spectrum and in specific political platforms and movements over time. However, his criticism assumes a closed ideological core. On the other hand, we know that it in fact merges with other ideologies, and the evidence suggests that this is a condition *sine qua non*. Therefore, it is an incomplete ideology, even if we discard Freedman’s model. Hence, gradualism is better interpreted as the visible form of different specific ideological combinations.

The ideational approach has other problems. The most significant of these is the fact that it focuses on only one dimension, i.e., ideology. Consequently, aspects like the nature of the real political action of populist forces has no place or explanation within this framework. Similarly, the ideological preferences and placements in the public appear as external to theoretical models derived from this approach and definition. As such, they cannot be explained, just observed. The ontology of the phenomenon requires their inclusion in any attempted explanation, so this framework needs to be complemented and expanded.

2.4. Other Problems: Teleology and Steady State

These three primary approaches and the secondary ones listed in Table 2 are the most influential and best developed ones. However, there are further approaches that we consider equivocal that are sometimes widespread and problematic, both in their structure and their assumptions.

This is the case of negative definitions that understand populism as a strictly antidemocratic phenomenon, as stated by Levitsky and Ziblatt [57]. There are two main issues with this view. On the one hand, if populism is strictly antidemocratic, populism should exist only within a political regime that can be described as democratic. However, populism opposes ruling elites by opposing the existing institutional framework and the broader political regime. In a nondemocratic regime, populism would oppose that nondemocratic order, thus refuting the narrow negative definition. Historical cases of populism have existed in nondemocratic political systems. The most relevant is the Narodniki in czarist Russia, one of the original, self-described populist movements.

On the other hand, such a perspective assumes a negative relationship between populism and democracy. Yet, other authors have proposed different views pointing at democratic aspects of populism and rejecting a strict antidemocratic perspective. Rosan-

vallon [58] interprets populism through the lenses of the failures of democracy, rather than as a cause or factor of democratic backsliding. Canovan [59] (pp. 2–3) considers that populism can serve the purpose of forcing a political system to open up to the demands and grievances of swaths of the populations otherwise excluded. Mouffe [60] points out that it serves to emancipate those subordinated in an asymmetric power relation. Tarragoni [61] identifies a democratic sense in populism, while others identify shortcomings in political representation generated by neoliberal policies and subsequent liberal exclusion as the cause of its recent forms [62,63]. Thus, the antidemocratic nature of populism is not as clear as theorized by some authors.

The definition of populism as an antidemocratic, or in some formulations anti-liberal [64], phenomenon with clear negative connotations suggests a bigger underlying problem. It assumes a singular definition of democracy where liberal democracies are the ideal or the ultimate political regime. More importantly, it assumes existing real Western-style liberal democracies as the end goal of the historical evolution of political systems. This implies a teleological perspective of history, as well as the capacity of human society to achieve a steady state of equilibrium, in which forces like populism are deviations that should be prevented. Albeit frequent among scholars of different stripes and times [65], historical evidence does not support these assumptions. Hence, the key premise of their theoretical constructions is untenable.

The proposal by Oswald, Schäfer, and Broda. [8], although more flexible than the strictly negative approaches mentioned above, knowingly reproduces the problem of restricting the definition so it is valid only within narrow limits. They recognize the historical nature of populism, its intrinsic diversity, and its occurrence within diverse political frameworks, including absolutist monarchies. Yet, due to unexplained methodological or theoretical reasons, they proceed to restrict themselves: “Still, we believe one can only speak about a path dependent populism that we can use in today’s understanding if we look at representative institutions as a yardstick” [8] (p. 10). Their proposed definition is, thus, limited from its base:

“Populism is a mode of political identification which gives rise to negative attitudes towards the country’s stewardship, claiming a neglect of the ‘common people’ by ‘distant elites’. This resulting dualism is mostly a symptom of a deeper dissonance within political systems, championing simple—often curtailed—solutions with a preference for direct democratic elements over political mediation. Populist protests or politics are often illiberal based on a majoritarian claim, an anti-pluralist outlook and a problem attribution to out-groups. Still, populism is not necessarily anti-democratic and it can give voice to those who feel unrepresented or affected by (relative) deprivation”. [8] (pp. 22–23)

The fundamental problem with this way of building the concept is that it renounces the possibility of a definition that can be adapted to diverse sets of conditions, thus reducing its applicability. It works better as an operational definition for a variant of populism that exists within a framework of representative institutions. These are more descriptions of characteristics of specific cases than proper definitions.

Returning to Laclau, he developed an important perspective, by describing *people* as an empty signifier⁵, that can be defined differently in different contexts to include some groups and exclude others and to serve as a framework for the generation of demands. This allows for a horizontal people–nonpeople opposition that could complement the vertical people–elite opposition. He concludes from here that populism does not possess a referential unit as it is not a delimited phenomenon, but a social logic to build the political space [29] (p. 11). However, such a view is problematic as it lacks the capacity to address proper phenomenological aspects empirically attested, given that it operates at the identity level rather than at the level of political action or ideologies proper.

The main approaches to populism have value and are supported by empirical evidence and, thus, cannot be discarded⁶. However, as elaborated earlier in this article, these approaches are unidimensional and posit general explanations by accounting for aspects and variables in isolation. We consider such approaches linear-determinist given their

fragmentary ethos that inevitably fails to conceptualize complex sociopolitical phenomena comprehensively. The resulting formulations are either too wide to differentiate from other phenomena, or too narrow to include all the cases. These approaches evolved within rigid disciplinary divides that essentially neglect the complex nature of society, hence their inherent limitations. A considerable part of the existing research reviewed above is teleological in its assumption of the possibility of steady states, which would imply that societies are not naturally dynamic. Therefore, we consider that the existing theoretical frameworks are insufficient where some of the approaches rely on preconceptions unsupported by evidence and, in turn, fail to comprehensively explain the contemporary phenomenon of populism.

3. Multiplicity of Paradigms in the Social Sciences

As we saw above, the theoretical field for the study of populism involves an array of competing approaches that typically select one specific dimension and one paradigm and attempt to build a comprehensive explanation on such a basis. Dominant perspectives fit this description neatly. However, in our view, the current inter- and intradisciplinary differentiations that inform those approaches impede the understanding of populism because they derive from a more fundamental epistemological problem produced by the multiplicity of paradigms. Assuming the validity and value of every approach, they show that populism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be grasped through a one-dimensional perspective and demands the merger of knowledges to capture all or most of its nature.

Although the heterogeneity of paradigms in the social sciences is often interpreted as a strength [3] (pp. 366–367), [66] (p. 330), [67] (pp. 64–66), we argue that it impedes the merger of the different insights. While engaging in that debate at large is beyond the scope of this article, we consider that the current state-of-the-art in the field indicates that this paradigmatic heterogeneity is a limiting factor in the absence of a synthetic approach [68] (pp. 14–15). This creates what could be called an epistemological cacophony [68] (pp. 29–36). It results, in part, from the nature of social phenomena and the diversity of aspects of social life. This has enriched the sciences with a vast literature on specific differentiated fields and disciplines, and it has also led to many different perspectives on the same phenomena. However, it is often difficult, or almost impossible, to merge these findings into comprehensive explanations of the objects of study. Populism is a prime example of this effect.

This problem can be elaborated in theoretical and epistemological terms. It unfolds along two axes at different conceptual levels. The first one comprises the theoretical question of the differentiation and specialization in social sciences in the analysis of complex phenomena [69] (p. 302). The second axis is connected to the first but delves more into the dominant conception or ontology of society. These need critical evaluation, elaboration, and further theorizing if we are to grasp societal problems comprehensively. To strengthen the validity of the complex perspective, we need to discuss the underlying scientific problem, which we address in this chapter. We expect our complex perspective to drive the inquiry in this direction without relapsing to cacophony.

3.1. Differentiation and Specialization

With new technologies and the increasing availability of information, scientific research is an increasingly complex endeavor, because the necessary competences and knowledge are growing and diversifying [70] (p. 30), [71] (pp. 152–154). However, the intellectual resources of individual human beings are limited, given that scientific appropriation of any subject takes many years of study [72] (p. 410).

This is grounded in the problem that language and, thus, the transfer of knowledge are sequential. Hence, it is inherently subjected to time. In addition, any individual is socially given only a restricted period to learn and study. Almost every society asks their students and scholars at some point to produce more or less tangible results [73] (pp. 347–349), [74] (p. 3). In other words, it is not possible to study comprehensive or special subjects for as long as someone wishes, as there are historically and socially defined timeframes for learning and production. Hence, specialization becomes necessary on two levels.

First, it is necessary to be able to absorb knowledge in a specific field, as knowing the state of research is prerequisite to contribute new results and ideas. Due to internationalization and the constant improvement of communication technologies, this has become both easier and more difficult [71] (p. 160), [75] (p. 2). More sources are easily accessible, but, at the same time, the amount of relevant literature renders it impossible or nearly impossible for any person, or even a team, to read it in its entirety, and much less to include it in any text [74]. Second, with the accumulated information and more advanced technologies, it becomes possible to study far more complex phenomena than in former times [74] (p. 1), [76] (pp. 347–349).

As a consequence of this comprehensive development and the social framework within which science exists, scientific research requires the division of labor to cope with its objects of study and its own instruments [77] (pp. 347–348), [78] (pp. 38–41), [79]. This is connected—and somewhat conflicted—with the task of science: to reduce the complexity of the world, by subsuming each singularity and event under general or particular laws [5] (pp. 14–15).

A first approach to the meaning of complexity derives from physics, where it indicates the number of variables necessary to describe the state of a given system, that is, the number of dimensions in which that system exists. In the limit case, it will exist in a Hilbert space⁷, thus making it impractical and unlikely to effectively consider each and all dimensions.

Hence, we reduce the complexity of each phenomenon by constructing the basic assumptions that must be met in order for the general laws to predict the practical event correctly. The reduction is necessary for theoretical and methodological purposes, but if it comes into the prediction of praxis, synthesis is necessary as the reality is complex [80,81].

Social sciences scrutinize diverse aspects of society. Yet, social life is highly complex, i.e., it is impossible to capture every part and their relations such as interactions between individuals and groups of individuals, as well as their overall milieu. Hence, addressing each detail and each particular behavior in any given study is impossible due to practical and methodological issues given the overwhelming mass of data on events of diverse natures that would be required and the very nature of that information. Thus, reduction is methodologically necessary for scientific research to cope with social reality. The latter is a reality without clear-cut edges that has to be partitioned by the researcher.

The concomitant processes of differentiation within societies increase the levels of complexity, and, at the same time, they offer a possible solution for the twin problems of scope and scale in social inquiry [2,82–84]. We see the formation and evolution of different social fields with specific internal logics, sets of rules, and dynamics, e.g., public administration works differently than enterprises [83,84]. Aligned with this, different disciplines studying these fields have developed by scrutinizing their perceived specific object of study, like political science, economics, sociology, etc.

Notwithstanding the potentialities, the division in different fields and logics is unstable and largely arbitrary. Each social field has a distinct core, but their peripheries overlap naturally. For example, while the process of drafting a constitution clearly falls in the realm of political science, research on subsequent specific policies can be undertaken from the perspective of political science, sociology, or economics. Furthermore, factors driving such processes are of historical, social, economic, and ideological nature. Therefore, different disciplines such as sociology, history, psychology, or anthropology would be needed to fully explain the phenomenon. An example of an interdisciplinary perspective at the intersection of the two fields of psychology and political science is the works of the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek [85]. We see even the natural sciences as having an impact on such social and political phenomena given that the natural environment crosscuts social reality and conditions its existence and operation. For example, the findings on climate change influence the implementation of environmental rights [86] (p. 40), [87] (pp. 85–90), [88].

Hence, a single phenomenon—in the example above, the making of climate-related policies, a fairly common political process—that can unfold in an articulated, logical manner may be addressed from a wide array of disciplines. Yet, those disciplines, associated with different fields, build their own specific logics. Additionally, they develop different paradigms and internal pluralities over time, thus adding layers of mediation to the understanding of the object of inquiry [67] (pp. 66–91). The simple aggregation of the findings of these different disciplines is, therefore, insufficient to represent the phenomenon as a whole, as the overarching logic is lost in the analysis. This points to the importance of epistemological operationalization beyond disciplinary boundaries as well as epistemological perspectives that can be comprehensively inclusive of such cross-disciplinary knowledge creation that can facilitate our scientific understanding beyond the status quo approaches.

Conversely, there is also the possibility that a broad object could be studied from a single given perspective beyond the limits of its applicability. This may, in turn, lead to the proposition of general explanations for global, multidimensional, and complex social phenomena from the perspective of a single discipline, and often from one theoretical perspective and a relatively reduced set of factors within that discipline⁸. This does not solve the problem of fragmented logic, as it is the overextension of a specific logical construct associated with one field or dimension to the entire object, to fields or dimensions that do not correspond to it. Rather than a solution to excessive reduction, it is an overreduction presented as synthesis.

An example of such overreduction is the study of historical fascism. There exist different perspectives on it, but each one fails to fully grasp it in its entirety. Different lines of thought draw different conclusions that can be located within different paradigms and fields. Somewhat schematically, there are two major traditions on the topic [90] (pp. 9–27). On the one hand, fascism is treated as a political ideology that was invented in several European states in the twentieth century [91]. On the other, it is perceived as a stage in the economic development of capitalism, as first proposed by Dimitroff [92]. Both elucidate different aspects of fascism, but any depiction remains incomplete, as long as they are not combined into a wider, complex definition of the phenomenon.

However, this is an intricate endeavor, because the multiplicity of paradigms hampers the translation and integration of the findings into one overarching scientific explanation. Also, a fully scientific approach to a phenomenon like fascism, and the integration of different perspectives, is further limited by ideological factors that introduce strong biases, both regarding the object of study and the theoretical perspectives. This can be observed across the board in social sciences [66] (p. 306), [67] (p. 72), [68] (p. 21), [90] (pp. 10–13), [93,94] (pp. 174–175).

In summary, in the social sciences, analysis, i.e., complexity reduction, works very well. It does produce a lot of useful and important information about myriad phenomena from different perspectives. Almost every finding may contribute something to the development of science. But, somewhat expectedly, efforts to synthesize this knowledge into an overarching theory of society or of complex social phenomena are lacking. This is grounded in the paradigmatic cacophony, which, on the one hand, enables fruitful research, while, on the other hand, hampers the effective synthesis of these findings into a whole, and this falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the social phenomena under consideration.

3.2. *The Ontology of Society*

This problem is rooted in the second axis of the theoretical conundrum, the ontology of social phenomena, or, more precisely, the lack of ontological reflection within the dominating paradigms in social science. We summarize most of them under the term vulgar historicism. Historicists assume that any social phenomenon is historically rooted and, thus, a singularity in a strict narrow sense (like in any other science) [95] (p. 965). Hence, they can be explained by previous events. In this view, they normally produce a historical trace, a sequence, where earlier events cannot be accurately compared to later ones, as they

do not carry over definitions of fundamental configurations of societies, which they would need to have in common to be comparable. If, for example, physicists were to operate in this manner, they would not compare the movement of massive bodies in space at an earlier moment in time with more recent events of the same type, thus limiting any knowledge about the laws of mechanics or anything else.

If social sciences define fundamental configurations of society, history can offer more cases for the study and understanding of societal phenomena. Of course, they will differentiate in time and space, but they must be defined to enable the intended synthesis.

Those definitions should be rooted in the ontology of society, which is a highly complex reality and, thus, can be perceived as a highly complex system. One basic function of systems is to sustain themselves, as is observed in all complex systems, e.g., for biological ones [84]. In sociology, there already exists the term mode of production which derives from materialist thought, which has been blamed (many times legitimately) for an economic reduction of social phenomena (e.g., Laclau's and Mouffe's post-foundationalist discourse theory [96] (pp. 109–120)). A better term could be mode of reproduction, which was proposed by Louis Althusser, or, more generally, the autopoiesis proposed by Luhmann [97] (pp. 13–14). Althusser argued that societies can be distinguished by their mode of reproduction [98] (pp. 37–44), although this represents society as a deliberately self-sustaining and closed system.

We have to differentiate between two distinct ontological levels and two axes that must be addressed. The first one comprises the nature of society as composed by different individuals, which is frequently discussed as the micro–macro issue in social science. Although every individual is unique, in society they integrate into groups and lose part of their individuality. Furthermore, we recognize that there are patterns of mass or collective action in societies—without this assumption, social sciences would be purposeless [99] (pp. 22–34).

The second ontological issue is also discussed in the area of philosophy of mind. Strictly speaking, there is a difference between what people do in the physical world (like acting or speaking) and how they or others perceive this. For instance, giving money to someone as a donation can be perceived either as an act of empathy, solidarity, or charity. Social sciences frequently lack a clear distinction of what is scrutinized and why. Many textbooks do not tackle this problem; the famous Thomas Theorem justifies the analysis of both the physical acts and their perception [100] (p. 572), [101] (pp. 12–13). Both issues must be combined in the social sciences as we try to examine agency and perception at the level of the masses as well as at the individual level.

Each individual is embedded in a highly elaborated network of relations, which differ in their logic of operation, i.e., how the individual subjects perceive how to interact with each other. These align with the differentiation within society, hence the latter becomes a highly multidimensional phenomenon, as different perspectives can be applied to explain interactions between its parts. For instance, distinct situations of interaction like a donation can be conceived as economical or religious in nature and thus be interpreted differently by the subjects.

Hence, society appears as a highly complex system that reproduces itself at all levels more or less autopoietically, i.e., it is capable of sustaining and producing the elements it consists of and their relationships by adapting to a changing environment [97] (pp. 13–14)⁹. If we want to fully understand a phenomenon that traverses the whole society, we need to address all these levels simultaneously, as we need all of them to determine the fundamental configurations of society.

In Table 3 below, we list the aforementioned main approaches to the study of populism and elaborate, based on the discussion above, the ontological focus of each of these approaches:

Table 3. The approaches to populism and their ontology.

Primary Approach	Secondary Approach	Ontological Focus
Political strategic	Populism as a strategy of mobilization, or mode of organization	Agency and Mass
	Populism as a practice of discourse	Perception and Mass
	Populism as a political style (mostly of political communication)	Agency and Individual
	An attempt of persuasion	Agency and Individual/Mass
	Populism as “political opportunism”	Agency and Individual
Sociocultural	Populism as a sociocultural approach	Perception and Mass
	Populism as an “anti-incumbent”, “antiestablishment”, or “antimainstream” attitude	Perception and Individual
Ideational approach	Populism as a “thin centered ideology”	Perception and Mass
	“a set of ideas”	Perception and Mass
	Logic [27]	Perception and Mass

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

To recapitulate: a theory that seeks to explain societal phenomena needs to tackle both theoretical problems. On the one hand, it must synthesize the different fruitful findings from different fields of social science and accordingly uplift the division of different fields of knowledge. On the other hand, this task is only possible if the theory accepts the complex ontology of society and does not disintegrate it into noncombinable jigsaw pieces.

4. A Complex Perspective

To offer a potentially more useful theoretical perspective on populism, a fundamental step is embracing complexity as the key ontological feature of human society and social phenomena. Here, we also face a terminological and conceptual conundrum, as the term *society* has many different usages and definitions that refer to different objects with distinct scopes. We need to tackle this problem first.

4.1. Rethinking Society: The Cultural Complexus and Its Evolutionary Nature

Societies as referred to in this text are totalities encompassing entire human communities. There are plenty of definitions already available, too many to even mention all of them here. Also, it is frequent for authors to assume society in a notional way, without detailing what it is and what it is not, and notions are unreliable when conducting scientific inquiries.

The proposal presented in this text builds on a definition of society as a totality generated by the diverse relations established among a set of interdependent collective and individual subjects. These relations are implicated and complex, and their specificities define the fundamental spheres of human activity. These spheres are identified by specific relations, leading to the production and reproduction of specific components of social and individual life.

Niklas Luhmann [103] considers societies as systems, in which communication is the differentiating factor from other forms of organization. He also insists on operational closure and autopoiesis as the key structuring processes. Although his definition has some shortcomings that we will address later in this article, the systemic nature to which it points is fundamental, as it is a fact that the subjects inserted in the system create and operate within a network of relations with communication as a key instrument.

A question that follows immediately is what type of system corresponds with society. We address this question from the perspectives of Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory [104], enriched by the approach to adaptive systems proposed by John Holland [105]. Further developments in this direction have advanced in the integration

of complexity and adaptability, along with the dynamic nature of systems like those we study [106].

The totality that we call society takes the form of a complex, open, adaptive, and dynamic system. The complex nature is expressed through the generative capacity of the relations, and the emergent qualities of the system [81]. Its dynamism is given by its ability to change over time. This system is capable of generating identity and of reproducing itself. In our view, the latter is a fundamental differentiating feature of societies. Sets of subjects that lack the ability to reproduce independently as a totality are not societies, regardless of their size [107] (p. 87).

The capacity to reproduce is deeply intertwined with the capacity to adapt to changing conditions. We see this as a key reason why proposals like Luhmann's are insufficient. Luhmann does not pay sufficient attention to adaptability. This is particularly relevant, as these systems do not exist in a vacuum but in milieus that change constantly. Here, the openness of the system becomes relevant, as it interacts permanently with the milieu, thus modifying the boundary conditions for the reproduction of societies and altering the organization and behaviors within the system¹⁰. This implies that adaptation is a permanent process and adaptability a necessary condition for societies' continued existence.

This brings us to another point. Subjects inserted in a network of relations identified as a society are not passive objects overdetermined by those relations. Rather, they are agents that have the capacity to intentionally modify their surroundings and to process influences coming from the milieu, according to their interpretation of their conditions and interests. This is the problem of agency, which has to be included in any study on human activity [107] (pp. 92–93).

Considering the nature of the system and the existence of a variety of relations that are traditionally defined as "social", we propose to use the concept of cultural complexus [108–110]. The argument for this proposal is threefold: first, the term complexus, meaning knitted together, conveys the basic idea of complexity; second, it avoids potential confusion derived from the dual usage of social and society, as totality and as part; third, it underscores the centrality of culture.

The latter is a polysemic concept, given the wide-ranging definitions proposed by various authors [111–113]. In the concept of cultural complexus, culture is understood as the process of production of all components of human life, material and immaterial, according to patterns that are themselves (re)produced. Hence, a complexus is produced and (re)produces through the continuous processes of culture.

Relations in a cultural complexus can be grouped into specific categories, based on distinctive features. These exist as reticula, subsystems of the complexus, shaped on the base of organizational principles [81] (pp. 115–179) with various degrees of stability. Each one of them forms one of the fundamental structures with relative stability that we can denominate as economy, politics, symbolic structure, and hierarchical structure. It is important to notice that subjects—individual and collective—are not equal in their capacity to influence the operation of the system, thus the hierarchical structure within the system. This implies an asymmetric distribution of power across a given population that takes the form of stratification, class formation, and evolution of elites.

Each structure acquires a double nature: on the one hand, they result from the specificity of the relations that form them; on the other, the distinction between types of relations, albeit based on recognizable features, is essentially methodological, as they are interdependent and all of them connect the same set of subjects. This means that the distinction does not represent a real separation, given the impossibility to effectively extricate them from those associated to other subsystems. Considering the principles of complexity [80], each subsystem shares with the complexus its character as a complex, dynamic, adaptive, and open system.

It is noteworthy that the concept of cultural complexus can be applied to human aggregates of different sizes and scopes, as long as they fit the definition. Also, they are inclusive, as they can integrate smaller, interdependent cultural complexuses, and they can

be interdependent with others, as well as components of larger ones. Thus, subnational communities, nations, plurinational communities, and world-systems can be classified as cultural complexes.

A crucial aspect in this discussion is the dynamic nature of the cultural complexus. Continuous change is a fact, demonstrated by the accumulated evidence from all social disciplines. How does change happen, that is, which factors make the system transform and through which mechanisms, is an extremely important topic that requires a lengthy analysis. We address here some of the fundamental aspects of the issue.

We propose that cultural complexuses exist away from equilibrium. The structure of a system away from equilibrium depends on its operation, from which derives the unviability of stationary configurations, and, therefore, the constant mutation of the system and its parts [114] (pp. 63–80). In the case of social systems, the structure depends on the relation between subjects.

Effective change results from the action of agents within the system and the influence of external forces, that is, the milieu in which they exist, formed by the natural environment and other human groups. This entails constant modifications to adjust to changing demands and pressures. There are a number of factors that impede achieving a state of stable equilibrium. As culture is the permanent production of social life, it includes the reproduction of its patterns that should be transmitted to new generations [112] via education—formal and informal. This replication of patterns, however, includes the occurrence of mutations that change the systems of signifying and, therefore, preferences and forms of satisfaction of individual subjects [115].

These mutations are also driven by the interaction with the milieu and participate in constant syntheses while forming and reproducing collective subjects, from family units to social classes and national communities. This space allows for horizontal modifications in the form of cultural drift [116–118] generated by the transmission of units of sense among subjects. Finally, collective and individual subjects compete, struggle, or negotiate to modify formal and informal institutions that regulate the operation of the system that are selected in the process of social selection and cultural selection [119], which are two forms of a broader historical selection.

The inequality of the subjects creates contradictions—inefficiencies in the operation of the system—as the demands of the subjects are addressed unequally by existing or emerging institutions. Class struggle, negotiations, and other forms of intersubjective conflict and cooperation are ways to address those contradictions and, as such, are generators of changes. We can interpret the resignification of “empty” or “floating” signifiers or creation of new ones as expressions of this broader process.

From this discussion, we can derive four premises for the development of a complex perspective on populism. First, societies, addressed through the concept of cultural complexus, are systems that evolve, driven by the complex and permanent interaction of internal and external factors that drive the modification of the institutions that regulate its operation. Second, the evolution of the complexus includes the transformation of all the subsystems, but this is neither instantaneous nor synchronic, thus creating space for inconsistencies and further contradictions, for instance, discrepancies between the self-depiction of a system or its original (perceived) function and its perception by different subjects or parts of the whole complexus.

Third, social conflict emerges from contradictions in the operation of the system and generates changes that in turn generate contradictions; hence, social conflict is a product and a cause of social change. Fourth, political phenomena are not separated from expressions of broader interactions and processes across structures within the complexus. This means that our view includes the historicity of social phenomena at various conjunctures.

An important corollary here is that this view does not include a predetermined goal for the evolution of society—it is not teleological—and rejects the possibility of a stationary state as long as there are active contradictions. Hence, no hierarchical system will be in a state of equilibrium, as is the case of all observed cultural complexuses.

4.2. A Complex Definition of Populism

We now can formulate a complex perspective on populism that aims to overcome the obstacles inherent to traditional disciplinary schemes. When we place the phenomenon of populism against the backdrop of a cultural complexus, it becomes apparent that, as we advanced above, existing approaches are insufficient. This does not mean that they are wrong, as they have empirical support. Rather, it means that we need to integrate them into a broader, complex perspective in order to arrive at better explanations. We need to produce a definition that captures the nature of the phenomenon and of the context in which it emerges. Recent work by political scientists has opened this path [120], but it is at a very early stage, and it still operates within the disciplinary boundaries of political sciences in a somewhat traditional way.

To construct a definition that provides necessary and sufficient dimensions [121] and that can be adequately operationalized, there are three key aspects that must be considered. First, the structural axis of any form of populism is the opposition between people and elite. Second, the meaning of those terms varies according to the specific political conditions, social structure, actors involved, and space–time coordinates, such that they are “empty signifiers” [29]. Third, there must exist conditions of possibility for the emergence of populism.

We propose to define populism as a component of political processes. It can crystallize in organizations, movements, political speeches, political platforms, and public policy, and can generate political identification. At its core, it expresses a vertical elite–people opposition, disruptive of the political order within which it exists. It includes four necessary and sufficient dimensions:

1. Semantic dimension: Continuous resignification of the terms people and elite. These primary signifiers can be referred through secondary or tertiary ones.
2. Active dimension: Political action critical of the established political order that breaks with the formal and informal institutions that articulate that order. Inclusive of one or several concrete expressions.
3. Ideological dimension: An incomplete ideological core with established conceptual lines and logic that drives the populist action. This core necessarily merges with other ideologies to form a complete proposal. The nature of the latter varies according to the specific resulting combination.
4. Demand dimension: A state of resentment prevalent in a relatively large population that considers itself harmed by the operation of the institutions currently existing in their particular historical context.

Hence, populism is neither a rhetorical device nor an ideology; it is not just a crystallized cultural opposition either. Rather, it is all of them at once, and more than the sum of those parts. Populism as a rhetorical device informing political action needs a fertile ground to flourish, which is produced by the demand dimension in combination with the semantic and ideological dimensions, while all interact with the active dimension. The four dimensions are necessary and sufficient as a system, not each one on its own. This proposal combines the empirically supported core of the previous main theoretical approaches in one complex definition. Its novelty lies in that combination. It can be applied to and made use of in in-depth studies conducted—empirical and theoretical—from the previously existing perspectives, once re-evaluated and reinterpreted.

Although one may object that this definition of populism is too vague, we argue that this is not vague but complex. Instead of giving a one-line definition of populism that can distinguish between phenomena included or excluded in the concept, we offer a definition that merges the state-of-the-art in one concept. The desire for simple definitions derives from different scientific paradigms favoring their perspective while rejecting the others and reducing the complexity of social phenomena to a distorting extent. To put it differently, instead of favoring simplicity, we preserve complexity to fully understand populism. Complex phenomena need complex conceptualizations. Therefore, our complex

definition enables us to differentiate the various dimensions of populism in particular phenomena and simultaneously preserve the coherence of the concept.

Furthermore, we argue that the necessary nature of all four dimensions establishes a clear threshold for the presence of populism in a given scenario. From here, we can derive several corollaries that establish the basis for the operationalization of the concept. First, groups, movements, organizations, and political figures may have different degrees of populist tendencies in their platforms and/or preferences [56] and in their actions. Second, populism can exist anywhere on the political-ideological spectrum as a result of diverse combinations. Thus, several forms can coexist in the same scenario as long as there is a sufficiently diverse offer of complementary ideologies. These two points translate into identifiable tropes and actions across the political spectrum and in the political processes.

Third, it is most likely to be found to a higher degree outside the current political mainstream as it opposes the associated institutional arrangement—may it be formal and/or informal. Consequently, the mainstream ideology and the political establishment are common targets for all coexisting forms of populism. Critiques of, and attacks on, the existing institutional arrangement can have different immediate goals, dependent on the populist (re)interpretation of those institutions. This ranges from some particular institutions through the political regime up to the mode of reproduction.

Fourth, the fluidity of the main signifiers allows for diagonal alliances between a given people and sectors of the power elites, as long as the latter are not identified as such, but, rather, defined as part or allies of the people. Fifth, segments of the subordinated classes and other strata can be excluded from and understood as enemies of the people and allies of the elites; this serves as a good predictor for right-wing (typically exclusive) or left-wing (normally inclusive) populism. These two points generate vast opportunities for the manipulation of populism by sectors of the elites and individuals.

Sixth, individual leaders may exist or not, thus creating another variable; this implies that autocratic tendencies are a possibility, not a given. This opens a whole field of scientific inquiry, as it would be necessary to determine the conditions needed for the emergence of those leaderships, and the conditions necessary for the emergence of authoritarianism and autocracy.

Populism emerges and evolves in concrete conditions and space–time coordinates that cross its different dimensions, thus providing content to its core signifiers in its discourses. In turn, this generates the type of grievances that fuel it, defining the referential framework of ideological alternatives. In other words, its expressions are historically conditioned.

Michael Kazin [28], in his influential work on American populism, explains it as rooted in what he considers the essential component of the ideological fabric of US culture: the amalgamation of Protestantism and Enlightenment. As such, no version of it could effectively challenge the core of the country's national identity and essential imaginaries. The problem with this is that it also implies that the core remains fundamentally unchanged. The dynamic nature of the complexus makes such a stasis highly improbable.

Paul Taggart criticized Kazin's claim of ubiquity of the populist phenomenon. In his words, "There is a danger with a tightly focused lens that detail comes into sharper relief than the larger contours of the surrounding area. Looking for populism in all corners of US politics, it is not difficult to find either the clear shapes or shadows of populism almost everywhere" [34] (p. 27).

However, it is not too far-fetched to think that populism may be a permanent feature of reality. This point was stated best by Edward Shils [26] (pp. 100–101): "... [populism] exists wherever [there] is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a differentiated dominant class established for [a] long time that believes that it possesses a monopoly on power, property, reproduction and culture." Shils points to acute contradictions generated by power asymmetries, inequality of means and perceived disenfranchisement as the sources of the phenomenon. This implies that it is generated naturally by the operation of hierarchical complexus.

Diverse studies have confirmed different forms of this relationship [42,122]. Discontent typically has a core of socioeconomic grievances, but it is often mixed with cultural factors: changing ways of life, changing religious landscapes, and changing ethnic composition of a population. Cultural grievances can subsume others by creating a biased matrix of interpretation of reality [41].

Other works find a strong correlation between the intensity of populist expressions and perceived vulnerability [123,124], marginality of a community in the context of current developments [124], and economic uncertainty [125]. The immediate implication is that there will be conditions for the existence of some form and degree of populism at any given time because some part of the population will be dissatisfied with the existing institutions in any context in which there is some level of inequality.

Hence, the question is one of intensity and detectability rather than existence. We observe populism if it reaches a certain undetermined—likely variable—threshold regarding its different aspects, thus allowing for a perception of discontinuity. In practice, the study of the phenomenon normally focuses on the peaks of activity, when it is easily detectable. But this leads to the interesting question of when populism is becoming noticeable within a specific context. Also, as it exists necessarily in combination with other ideologies, populism will be in a fluid state, to different degrees, in a number of organizations, platforms, and movements.

Muno and Stockemer [126] proposed a model, according to which an increase in votes for right-wing populist parties—in their case, in Germany—is triggered by a shock in conditions of accumulated grievances. Their model can be adapted to other scenarios by adjusting for the differences in the political system. The model is of limited scope by design, as it focuses solely on votes and political parties. However, it contains an important premise: grievances and resentment accumulate over time, and particularly impactful events—*shocks*—act as triggers and catalysts.

This means that the potential for populism and minor manifestations are generated naturally by contradictions within the complexus, and appear to leap forward when specific conditions make more visible the imbalances and apparent unviability of current institutions. Consequently, the demand for public policies that address the needs and demands of large sectors of a population are paired with the loss of legitimacy by the institutional order.

The implication is that populism emerges as a visible and influential factor in politics in periods of structural crisis. Long-term processes create the conditions, and their specific expressions depend on the perceptions of the different groups and the type of cleavages [127,128] (pp. 53–58) activated in a particular context, and for each specific segment of the population and the political spectrum. The interaction with segments of the elites allow for the latter to use this type of mobilization to support and legitimize a project to adjust institutions to the changing conditions according to their interests.

There is a second implication: the emergence of populism is likely a regularity of the evolution of society, particularly modern society. It would be a factor of the adjustment of political systems as a part of transitional processes between configurations of the complexus—historical conjunctures—via the modification of informal and more often formal institutions.

5. Conclusions

The standing dominant theoretical approaches in the study of populism fail to tackle the fundamental problems presented by the nature of society and the evolution of social sciences. Consequently, their answers to the fundamental questions are insufficient and result in an amalgamation of partial explanations for narrower or broader aspects of the puzzle, while neglecting or downplaying others. Thus, a comprehensive theoretical approach needs to address these problems to produce the necessary synthesis.

The ideational approach reduces populism to a product of human thought or ideology, but it fails to explain how these products find fertile ground in societies. It perceives the

phenomenon not as a complex one, but as one of the human mind. The sociocultural approach tries to explain the ground where populism can grow but restricts itself as it cannot include the concept of human action and the ideological products of movements. As they interpret society as a social structure, it remains contingent. Furthermore, they fail to spot causes for populism in the political framework. The political–strategic approach fails to fully grasp populism as it overrates the role of individuals and political communication and is not capable of including others. To further their studies, authors within each of those schools of thought have to move beyond the limits of their definitions.

Each of these approaches reduces the phenomenon to a single dimension of what society is. Other views that do not fit in these frameworks have other insufficiencies, such as a teleological or unhistorical perception of society. Hence, they all have a reductionist conception of society as they focus on one of its dimensions or restrict it to a certain fixed concept rooted in the respective disciplinary differentiation. For example, it is by no means surprising that a scholar of ideology perceives populism from an ideational perspective.

The problem of the differentiation and specialization in social sciences is a major factor in the evolution of the associated disciplines and their ability to tackle complex phenomena. Both processes are inevitable and necessary, but the way in which they have unfolded, the resulting fragmentation of knowledge, the cacophony, and the lack of connective theoretical platforms, even within disciplines and more mundane issues like administrative structures and ego, hamper the capacity of the social scientist to address complex social phenomena [129] (p. 51).

The cultural complexus overcomes this problem as it interprets society as a complex, open, dynamic, and adaptive system that comprises all interactions of human existence. Thus, it bluntly accepts the differentiation of societies and the different forms of interactions without losing its fundamental unity. In other words, it is capable of grasping the multi-dimensional nature of society as it does not reduce it to one aspect of social phenomena. In fact, this makes social sciences more complex, because it refrains from being reductionist, but enables the possibility of new insights, as it offers a possibility to study complex phenomena holistically.

Populism is addressed from this perspective as a multidimensional, modern phenomenon that can have different forms in different settings, and that is a distinct product of rising contradictions within a cultural complexus, be they of political, social, cultural, or economic nature, or exist only in the perception of reality by a part of society—this latter possibility seems rather unlikely, but cannot be discarded offhand.

Thus, political science alone is insufficient to fully explain populism as a phenomenon, as are other disciplines on their own. The solution to this conundrum lies in approaching the inquiry from a cross-disciplinary platform—political sciences, political economy, sociology, history, anthropology, psychology, and others. Its condition of political phenomenon means that it manifests primarily in that specific subsystem, as it is a struggle for the redistribution of public power and the reorganization of the institutional framework that regulates its management. However, it expresses intertwined contradictions and dynamics in the hierarchical, economic, and social structures and their inner subsystems; all of them are components of recursive interactions between subjects that have to be accounted for in a comprehensive explanation.

The phenomenon can take different shapes, as this depends on the ways it is expressed and the spectrum of strategies that can be adopted. Our perspective shows that populism can only arise given particular conditions, which restrict its occurring form. These conditions are themselves dynamic, as the specific combinations and behavior of variables that generate the necessary resentment with the existing institutional framework are contingent on the historical context. What remains a regularity is the emergence of populist forms in situations of accumulated grievances derived from contradictions in hierarchical societies where different subjects seek to transform—or protect—their status.

To fully scrutinize these variants, we must abandon one-dimensional perspectives and not discuss which one is the best, but rather accept the fruitfulness of the findings of

the other scholars and implement these results in a wider perspective that is capable of merging them together in a comprehensive explanation. Each typical perspective provides only one picture; thus, these approaches, each on their own, produce limited and somewhat misleading conceptions. But a synthesis of the images further enriched by additional data and analyses is the path towards the image of a highly complex object.

The complex perspective proposed in this article embraces this multidimensionality and, thus, enables deeper insights into social phenomena as it does not try to reverse the process of differentiation and specialization, but tries to integrate and supersede its results while accepting its merits in the production of knowledge. The result is that the categorical hierarchy formed by previously standing theoretical approaches is integrated as a system of components of a general theory.

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Notes

- ¹ These are all Western European languages and cultures. When we include into the mix Asian, Middle Eastern, or African actors, this problem becomes much more pressing.
- ² We thank our Reviewers for pointing us to this aspect.
- ³ Interestingly, this complies with the main support to fascist parties in the last century, where the middle class that feared social descent was especially supportive of fascism.
- ⁴ Populism appears in different degrees in the content of political platforms and discourse.
- ⁵ We are aware that there also exists the term *floating signifier*, which only differs in the use of a metaphor and not at a conceptual level.
- ⁶ For a wider view on the methodologies and empirical advances, see Rovira Kaltwasser et. al. [14]; Hawkings et al. [56]; Fitzi, Mackert, and Turner [15]; and Oswald [16].
- ⁷ A Hilbert space is a mathematical construct that entails an infinite-dimensional vector space, or at least a very large number of dimensions that can be considered infinite for any practical case.
- ⁸ A relevant example is the phenomenon of the so-called economic imperialism in social sciences, where economists try to explain any aspect of social life by economic means [89] (pp. 352–353).
- ⁹ Niklas Luhmann already described the process of socialization as an autopoietic aspect of societies ([102] (p. 7); Luhmann 1984, 59).
- ¹⁰ Conversely, societies modify the milieu, thus establishing a dialogical and recursive relationship.

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