

The Denial of Science in the Antisystem Populist Rhetoric

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Abstract

The article aims to carry out a conceptual resumption of antiscience populism, revisiting theoretical research that points to the “us” versus “them” binarism that characterizes the movement, shifts away from political elites and focuses on scientific elites, portraying them as antagonists of common people and political leaders. The study starts from the premise that populism against science refers to a political performance style that arises in contexts of democratic crises and that manifests itself in a generalized disbelief in traditional institutions. It highlights the importance that the media played in consolidating populism against science. In the pre-digital era, the effectiveness of populist leadership depended a lot on the leader's personal abilities, his oratory and the team's ability to articulate speeches adjusted to different media. Contemporary populism, on the other hand, is structured by the consonance between the media apparatus, the discursive mechanism and a tactic politics for the construction of hegemony. The article uses bibliographic research as a methodology and lists some classic and contemporary trends in populism. The results show that anti-science populism is a movement that derives from the character of contemporary populism that emerges in the context of institutional crises and uses digital media as an apparatus.

Keywords: Populism; Denial of Science; Politics; Media; Online Social Networks.

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1. Introduction

Scientific denial is a practice that is largely intertwined with far-right movements, which have expanded across Europe, with emphasis on Hungary, Austria, Italy, France and Germany and several countries in Latin America, including Brazil and the United States of America, during Donald Trump's presidential term (2016-2020), the representatives of this current [1]. The post-globalization situation contributed with the change in the profile, discourses and ways in which the radical right manifests itself and its escalation does not occur in an isolated and punctual way [2], making it possible to identify convergences, regularities and similarities between the various occurrences, even if in different contexts and cultures [3:4]

The author [2] points out that the last decade has seen a growth in the number of political parties operating in the spectrum of the radical right, and adherence to the proposals has become increasingly normalized in popular and party perception, occupying space in the political-electoral scenario, on the streets and on the internet. With ideological matrixes, the leaders' speeches are supported by messianic and salvationist narratives, which, despite following the specifics of local contexts, are unified around the agendas related to immigration, corruption, public security, anti-communism, international policies and scientific denialism.

In the specific strand of scientific denial, the author [5] weaves the hypothesis that the movement is based on the rise of the extreme right, which strives to occupy the political scenario of the Western world and influence public opinion. It is possible to highlight several countries that elected political representatives who follow the line of right-wing radicalism and head the discourse that contests scientific conceptions. In this context, figures such as former US president Donald Trump stand out, who, elected in 2016, proposed the construction of a wall on the border with Mexico as a way of barring illegal immigrants from entering the country. On the environmental front, it was favorable to nuclear energy and rejected clean energy policies. In choosing the ministries, Trump elected Scott Pruitt, a recognized environmental denier, to head the US environment agency. Adhering to the theory that human actions do not interfere with climate change, one of Pruitt's best-known actions referred to the efforts to veto in court the regulations proposed by former US President Barack Obama, in the battle against global warming.

Another piece of evidence came from the policy adopted in Hungary. As a supporter of an anti-immigration policy for Muslims, Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Órban, re-elected for the third term in 2018, is part of the list of revisionists in history, who are committed to attacking press freedom, the division of powers and crimes committed by Nazism. The admiration for Admiral and former President Miklós Horthy, who served as an ally of Adolph Hitler during World War II is publicized in Orban's actions, which extends to public tributes to the fascist leader, such as the inauguration of a monument in memory of Horthy even the propagation of a policy that flirts with anti-semitist movements [6].

In the same chain, leader Jussi Halla-aho, of the Finnish Party "True Finns", won second place in the 2017 elections in the country, with a small margin in relation to the Social Democratic Party. The party leader's political speech moves between opposition to immigration and rejection of policies against global warming. Also in 2017, the right-wing radical Marine Le Pen, from the National Front (FN), reached the second round of

the presidential election in France with a speech against immigration, in defense of a proposal for the immediate cessation of any support for immigrants who were already in the country.

Spain also saw the rise of the far-right Vox party in the 2019 elections, which became the third-largest force in Parliament, managing to elect 52 deputies out of 350 seats. With a populist agenda, contrary to abortion and the rights gained by women, in addition to defending family values, Vox joins forces with parties that deny the importance of climate policy, in contrast to scientific discussions on global warming. The party relies on the polarization narrative and wages a campaign against the Podemos and Socialist Workers Spanish parties, which has Pedro Sánchez as President of the country since 2018. Vox defends the neoliberal matrix for the economic sphere, the reduction and elimination of taxes and the approval of a mixed Social Security system with the presence of the private sector.

In this sense, the Spanish Vox party is closer to the ideologies defended by Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (No Party). President Bolsonaro is a former personality in the Brazilian political scene, having held public office since 1989. Over 27 years as federal deputy for the state of Rio de Janeiro, he presented 171 projects in the National Congress, most of which focused on the interests of military (since he is a retired soldier and defender, including the military dictatorship that was implemented in the country in 1964 and remained until 1985. Of these, only 2 were approved.

In the governments of former presidents Dilma (PT) and Temer (MDB), Bolsonaro gained notoriety and began to occupy a frequent space in entertainment programs, mainly due to moralistic and sometimes xenophobic speeches against minorities. During the electoral campaign period, Bolsonaro disputed the second round with Fernando Haddad (PT) in 2018. Bolsonaro's victorious campaign, undertaken by an unrepresentative party (PSL - which at the time had only 1 deputy in Congress), gained prominence in the absence of a strong coalition, without the support of traditional politicians and constituted with a strong presence in social networks, markedly based on the discourse of militarism, anti-Petism and anti-system.

It is possible to identify similarities between the classic values of fascism and the narrative marks of pocketnarianism, with precepts that are based on discipline, conservatism and religiosity, while acting based on militarism, anti-intellectualism and scientific denial [7]. Establishing a comparison between the rising extremist movements in Europe and Brazil, the author [8] points to the fact that both project the solution to social conflicts in Christian conservatism and police violence. In spite of this, it is possible to establish other similarities, namely: intolerance towards minorities, hatred of Human Rights and denial of democratic institutions such as science and journalism.

In Brazil, the denial movement has become more frequent in recent years, with narratives that relativize the origin of slavery, exalt the military dictatorship, deny the effects of global warming, etc. The denial of the climate and the movement of the flat Earth are some points in the repertoire of this “wave” which, by questioning a scientific consensus, weakens science in the search for a rational view of the world and boosts the virulence of social networks in the current post-truth era. At the heart of the debate about the denial of science lies the idea that the last decade is marked by the post-truth era, an entry that became known after the US

elections that culminated in the victory of Donald Trump and the troubled referendum on the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (BREXIT), both in 2016.

The concept that best defines the phenomenon of post-truth can be portrayed from the consolidation of a time in which scientific evidence and knowledge are being replaced by alternative facts [9]. Aware of the philosophical breadth that involves the concept of truth, the new proposition is in line with the explosion of false content, in English, fake news, which are disseminated in digital environments and which have profound impacts on contemporary political and social dynamics [10]. The denial of science has been shown to be the most ominous character of the post-truth era [11].

That the discourses that invent, distort or deny facts and events are at the service of economic, religious and political interests. Many of these discursive practices that carry false content aim to reconstruct history and seek to alter the past in order to reconstruct the future [12]. In this sense, the research will seek to answer to what extent political movements that negate science represent a category of current populism. Is it possible to establish a relation between scientific negacionism and antiscience populism

Mede and Schafer called populism against science a new political movement that shifts away from political elites and focuses on scientific elites, portraying them as antagonists to common people [13]. Populism crosses political history and has raised, since the third decade of the 20th century, attention and debate in the public sphere by the press, social sciences, political circuits, whether to refer to a type of political action, an ideology, a regime or a political period dated historically [14]. There is a wide appropriation of the term by popular political rhetoric, having been meaning and re-signified for decades. However, the phenomenon of populism is not restricted to a single type of ideology, nor is it limited to the definition of a historical period [15:16].

In seeking a concept for the phenomenon, the author [17] points out as the main characteristic the fact that populism is based on the elite and people dichotomy, in which the political leader starts to represent the interests of the majority, in confrontation with a corrupt and privileged. It usually appears with the promise of giving voice to those excluded from the system and antagonizes the existing institutions, driving them away or making them rivals with the people. In certain contexts, this enemy can be represented in the figure of different institutions, such as the scientific, the press, the legal body, etc.

Understanding populism as a phenomenon that periodically surfaces in history, as a typical personalist rhetoric and performativity that go beyond the paradoxes that the term contains in the ideological field, the article aims to broaden the theoretical discussion on the negacionist character of contemporary populism, assuming that scientific institutions have become the target of the “people” versus “elite” binarism that characterizes the movement. The text will return to the concepts of populism to identify how the movement of scientific negacionism is anchored in a political structure that can be recognized from the phenomenon of antiscience populism. To achieve the proposal, a bibliographic review will be carried out, supported by concepts explored in national and international research, aiming to contribute to broadening the discussion of the modus operandi of this political practice.

2. Negacionism and Populism: Historical Considerations

The difficulty in conceptualizing populism has already been mentioned by different authors, who describe the complexity of establishing a definition that captures the phenomenon in different cultural and historical contexts [18]. Substantial discrepancies concern the genre of populism [19], which has already been defined as a political style [20], a discourse [21] or an ideology [15]. Commonly held, the notion that populism is a set of ideas that describe society as a morally charged conflict over sovereignty in political decision-making between a supposedly virtuous people and a supposedly corrupt elite [19:18].

Even so, even 150 years after its first use of the term, there is no consensus on its meaning, observed with particularities depending on the context, people and political movements. Given its chameleon nature, the author [22] points out that the political phenomenon is reborn in different contexts, with an intense capacity for survival and resistance to adversity. The historical origins of populism are linked to the mass democracies that were inaugurated in the 20th century with the expansion of voting rights and social rights, including in electoral and state policies a huge contingent of new urban workers.

In addition to the description of a historical period, the term became popular throughout the 20th century, applying to the characterization of a way of doing politics marked by a set of typical communication strategies and by accentuated performativity and personalism in the relationship of rulers with the ruled.

Often, populist leaders and their ideals seek to hover over ideological disputes and advertise themselves as non-ideological or non-political, seeking a position of neutrality or ideological purity as a justification for their actions. The populist leader preaches a kind of purification of the political field and often brings his personal prestige, his symbolic power and his purifying discourse from other social fields such as, for example, the military or the religious field. Thus, populism approaches the conduct of the so-called outsider politician, that is, the one who comes from outside the system, since the populist proposes a break from the political status quo, for the construction of a new reality whose protagonist would be the identified people in the personality figure of the leader.

In the same way that populist behavior carries an element exogenous to institutional and traditional politics, political regimes and populist campaigns often define themselves as non-ideological or call themselves the "third way", that is, an alternative to the right and the left. But, as it is not tied to any specific political ideology, a populist regime can be erected evoking any of the political-economic thought systems, from liberalism to socialism, or even anti-political thought. The denial of an established system (political, cultural, scientific) and the establishment of an alternative truth which the populist leader bears emerges as a central ingredient of populism. Thus, the populist leader emerges as the herald of a new truth, arbiter of conflicts, moderator.

Populism had two faces: the working masses began to participate in government actions. In reality, populism is something more complicated than mere manipulation, and its political complexity only highlights the complexity of the historical conditions under which it takes shape [23]. "Populism was a determined and concrete way of manipulating the popular classes, but it was also a way of expressing their dissatisfactions. It

was, at the same time, a way of structuring power for the dominant groups and the main form of political expression of the popular emergence in the industrial and urban development process.” [23]

Despite having already carried a positive meaning in some political circuits in the first half of the 20th century and carrying an essential ambiguity regarding the manipulation or political inclusion of the masses, the pejorative meaning was what was most popularized, giving the term populism the image of an “empty” or “contentless” phenomenon, a manipulative political act, characterized by superficial and demagogic discourse [14]. On the one hand, the historic concessions made by populist governments presented a political and socioeconomic functionality to the incipient capitalism of Latin American countries by serving as an alternative to the risk of the communist wave. However, the charismatic leaders who emerged from the populist pact between social classes defended a stronger and more inclusive state, which did not fit the liberal vision of the traditional oligarchies. Thus, in the ideological field, the term historically aroused ambiguous actions on both sides of the party spectrum.

For some sectors more to the left, populism represents a manipulation of the masses that works against the real emancipation of the working class. For the liberal right, populism is the protagonist of a political culture of demagoguery and state paternalism. There are also those who see, in moments of populist upsurge, objective opportunities for the advancement of popular or “labour” agendas [24]. It is important to highlight that populism is not limited to the definition of a single type of ideology, specifically restricted to a historical period. Thus, populism can simultaneously assume an ideological, strategic and discursive character, of a radical, anti-systemic, generalist and antagonistic nature, against corruption and in favor of social justice.

Cesarino point to an opposition between populism and institutionalism [25]. Thus, “moments of populist rise are usually accompanied by institutional fragility and, conversely, moments of technocratic preponderance stifle the antagonistic-populist character of politics” [25]. “Typically, the populist mechanism is put into operation by a charismatic leadership that emerges in contexts of widespread dissatisfaction, claiming to come from outside the system and placing itself as a champion of rupture and change” [25].

The discursive character is built from the mobilization of empty or floating signifiers, bring “vague notions of nation, order, security and change” [25], but are capable of bringing together contrasting agendas. In his recent researches, the author [25] coined the term digital populism, supported by the conceptual basis of people versus elite, who uses it to describe a new type of performative strategy anchored in digital mediations, in which the capacity The mobilizer expands into the network of followers, who form a contingent of support for the leader's political project. The concept is in line with the assumptions of populism 2.0 in which social networks are tools for an emerging anti-establishment digital mass policy. Populism 2.0 is designated as an ideological orientation in which politicians capitalize on the power and influence of social media in the formation of citizen opinion through the dissemination of populist ideas, such as attacking institutions [26].

It is worth remembering that the media played a fundamental role in the growth and consolidation of populism. In the 1960s, voters were driven by alliances that mostly followed party-political ideologies, with media apparatus of the print and radio media, which, at the time, performed the selection of the main political contents

that were put up for debate. With the arrival of television, the political field began to deal with the plastic and performative image of candidates and political leaders, in the face of marketing and advertising tools in the construction of charismatic profiles and narratives structured around broad social themes.

But it is at the beginning of the 21st century that the globalization of the media, supported by the internet, establishes a new dynamic for the political environment. Cesarino recalls that, in the pre-digital era, the effectiveness of populist leadership depended a lot on the leader's personal abilities, his oratory and the team's ability to articulate speeches adjusted to different media. The phase described as digital populism is structured by the consonance between the (digital) media apparatus, the discursive mechanism (of mobilization) and a (political) hegemony construction tactic [25].

Therefore, digital populism is not defined only by the insertion of digital technologies into the populist dynamic, but also by the inclusion of specific discursive patterns that are structured in permanent mobilization. This occurs through alarmist and conspiratorial content, in the inverted mirror of the enemy and returning accusations, and in the creation of a direct and exclusive channel of communication between the leadership and its public that finds apparatus in the delegitimization of instances production of authorized knowledge in the public sphere, specifically science and the press [25].

3. The Faces of Populism against Science

The democratic crisis that occurs on a global scale translates into an epistemological crisis that results in disbelief in fundamental institutions, including science. In a context of generalized crisis, populist political leaderships emerge that usually come up with the promise of giving a voice to those excluded from the system and antagonize the existing institutions, alienating or making them rivals of the people.

An certain contexts, these enemies are not only represented by the political class, but by different institutions, elucidating that the current populist leaders are not only targeting political elites, but media systems, the legal field, large companies, specialists and the academic elite. These academic elites are a subset of a general elite—those who have supreme epistemic authority and can make science-related decisions, that is, organizations such as universities or research institutes, as well as individual scholars and experts [13]. Similar to other forms of populism, however, anti-science populism also describes academic elites as morally inferior, replacing their anti-establishment uprising with a discrediting approach to science [13]. The authors point to sovereignty as one of the pillars of science-related populism. In this case, it is the group of people and not the elite who have the decision-making power, and may even guide what should be researched, studied or presented, in an attempt to protect the scientific work by the political power invested in the leader and your interests [13].

An example of this ideological interference in scientific work is reported by researchers studying former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015), right-wing conservative leader. During his tenure, Canadian science went through dark times, with cuts in funding and resources, closing of research laboratories and scientific libraries, implementation of environmentally questionable policies, leading the media to frame the movement as a "war on science" [28].

Mede and Schäfer also indicate that one of the possibilities of action of science-related populism may lie in host ideologies, as is the case of economic liberalism, seeking to promote market solutions instead of solutions prescribed by specialists [13]. In the recent Covid-19 pandemic, this scenario was notably seen in Brazil, which was guided by a model of discrediting epistemic institutions in the name of market interests, especially in the government policy of hydroxychloroquine defense, one of the main centers of dispute over information during the pandemic.

The authors Poland and Jacobson also note the relationship between scientific denial and the connection with populist leaders, indicating how in 2017, the Italian Five Star movement (5SM) resumed concerns about the MMR and the link of the immunizing agent to the development of autistic spectrum syndrome. The association brought about a reduction in MMR vaccination coverage from 90% in 2013 to 85% in 2016, resulting in an increase in measles cases from 840 in 2016 to 5000 in 2017. Similarly, the right-wing National Front in France raised concerns about the risks of the vaccine and questioned the laws that make childhood vaccination mandatory [29].

That said, despite movements that deny science, Merkley and Loewen focus on the concept of anti-intellectualism, based on a survey carried out with 3600 American citizens [30]. For the authors, anti-intellectualism can be defined as the generalized suspicion and distrust in intellectuals and specialists, which are formalized through the distance from the academic environment [30]. The authors establish some motivations linked to anti-intellectualism, including the disagreement between the position of specialists and religious authority; resistance to new technologies and human progress, nourished by a nostalgic feeling or even those who identify in practical knowledge and common sense a superior value to education and critical thinking. Discrediting scientific knowledge is also rooted in the perception that it is a mechanism used to control ordinary citizens. This fact is close to the populist discourse of the last decades [30].

It is possible to identify that the populist leader appropriates the anti-intellectualism already structured in different social contexts to print the anti-elitist rhetoric that divides society from the binary polarization "people versus elite", with the objective of weakening democratic institutions and controlling their opponents. For the author Ylä-Anttila there is an objectivist technocracy in the speeches of populists, especially those on the right. Rivals are categorized as wrong, not just in terms of morals and knowledge, but on the basis of their epistemological assumptions about the world. For the author, the practice does not only reproduce an anti-intellectualist character, but a clear strategy in defense of a positivist and even empiricist vision in the face of forms considered harmful to the ideology defended by these leaders [31].

It should be considered that, alongside anti-science populism, a process of strengthening pseudoscience and individual experiences and opinions, to the detriment of scientific epistemology, has intensified. Pseudoscience can be described as any activity aimed at trying to affirm and/or prove something, without the proper use of the scientific method. Carl Sagan describes that the theories evoked by pseudoscience assume a scientific treatment, but rely on insufficient information or ignore clues that point to another path [32]. In the sphere of pseudoscience, Hansson pays attention to the need to establish a distinction between the denial of science and pseudotheory. The deniers of science are driven by the confrontation with some specific theory, produced

through criteria that deviate from the scientific process. This strand is articulated through the production of false controversies, is organized around strong activism and, at times, is in connection with some strand of the political right [33].

Defenders of pseudo-theory, on the other hand, are driven by the ambition to present a theory or assertion of their own, and the rejection of science is not seen as the main objective, but only a means of promoting their convictions. Van Zoonen named “I”-pistemology the process by which individuals reject scientific epistemology and try to replace it with people's common sense, their personal experiences and emotional feelings [34]. The author explains the phenomenon from the dichotomy between the epistemology that is concerned with the nature, methods and sources of knowledge and the “I”-pistemology that answers questions based on the self (myself), on subjective judgment, on memory individual and has the internet as a great facilitator of the process [34].

Individual experiences recorded as their own reports or those of close people assume significant importance in the hierarchy of credibility of the information that individuals receive, which, together with disbelief in modern institutions, reflect the weight that unmediated personal opinion has gained in the political sphere.

Along the same lines, Ylä-Anttila indicates two concepts to describe what he called populist knowledge. The first is “epistemological populism”, according to which knowledge is based on the experiences of ordinary people [31]. Counter-knowledge refers to contesting epistemic authority by defending authorities of alternative knowledge. In the first case, individual experiences recorded as their own reports or those of close people assume significant importance in the hierarchy of credibility of the information that individuals receive, which, together with disbelief in modern institutions, reflect the weight that unmediated personal opinion has gained in the sphere policy [31]. Personal experience has become a discursive source of an integral part of the new right-wing populism that has emerged in a number of European countries.

To portray the dimension of counter-knowledge, Ylä-Anttila warns that knowledge and forms of specialization are available to everyone, but that a significant part of society does not have the resources to incorporate them [31]. Thus, for the author, the belief in alternative knowledge is not mere irrationality, but part of an ontological insecurity that can influence the discredit that part of the population may harbor in relation to scientific authorities, starting to trust other leaders [31].

Still, it should be considered that the new media ambiances, leveraged in particular by the virtual environment, changed the way knowledge is built, how individuals connect and the relationship they establish with social structures. It should be noted that people live in the bubbles created by the customization of algorithms, which are fed by content that generates acceptance among members. Social networks allow the circulation and sharing of information in groups anchored in a closed circuit of trust and credit, whether friends, colleagues, family members or even people who belong to the same social circle [35].

However, the political, ideological (groups have divergent opinions) and affective (when there is aversion between groups) polarization are characteristics of social groups both online and offline. political, ideological

(groups have divergent opinions) and affective (when there is aversion between groups) polarization are characteristics of social groups both online and offline [36]. Normally, in networks, these groups are characterized by having many internal connections and few external connections, reinforcing the homophilic character of the networks and, at times, the radicalization of individuals. It is noteworthy that, in this scenario, the most radicalized individuals are the most participatory, and that the circulation of information on the networks depends on the users and algorithms of social networking sites.

Along the same lines, Maynard points out that among cyberactivists, those on the far right gained prominence, in the first place, for their pioneering use of cyberspace. Realizing the economy and agility of the networks, the far right soon got their hands on the keyboards [37]. Finally, the democratic crisis, combined with the dynamics of horizontalization and decentralization of content production in online social networks, drives the emergence of populist leaders who constantly challenge the legitimacy and survival of traditional institutions.

4. Conclusion

Notably, from the second decade of the 21st century onwards, there has been a resurgence of a crisis on a global scale, which affects the democratic regime in several countries and reaffirms the perception that periods of populist upsurges are preceded or accompanied by institutional instability [38]. In this context, a new form of populism emerges, evidenced above all by the rise of populist leaders, who cultivate in their discursive strategies the denial of institutional politics, the critique of democratic institutions, including the press and science, the cult of personality leader, as well as the promotion of values linked to the centralization of power.

This article proposes a current debate, in a context in which populist leaders confront scientific authorities. In the field of politics, the shake-up of traditional institutions such as science and journalism, gave an unprecedented space for the circulation of conspiracy theories and for the performance of a new type of political populism, manifested in the virtual environment of social media. Statements that often break with institutional normality and even scientific consensus, find in social networks an adequate channel for populist rhetoric to manifest itself and for citizens to express their indication with elites regarded as corrupt [26].

Subjects are increasingly losing confidence in traditional institutions, such as science and journalism. In the case of academic elites, populist criticism takes place at a more circumscribed level. The criticism here is made in relation to epistemic authority and its decision-making or influencing power. It starts to be seen with suspicion or as part of an articulation that aims to hurt universal and moral values shared by the people. Attacks can be on specific actors, such as scholars and professors, as well as on institutions and entities that promote research and publications [13].

Linked to denial movements, antiscience populism is part of a performative political style, whose vocation is to label researchers or scientists as enemies or friends, based on the way they position themselves around the ruler's rhetoric. This act is based on the formula that anyone who does not think or act in line with the populist leader is the country's enemy. One of the most effective impacts of this communicational representation is the maintenance of a permanent crisis, expressed in the Manichean rhetoric of the existence of opposite poles in the

narratives of support for the leader.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that authoritarian tendencies and attacks on institutions are harmful to democracy. The maintenance of a state of crisis, when permanently maintained throughout the government, can have serious consequences in the curtailment of perspectives linked to democratic regimes, in which the strengthening of authoritarian governments is configured, which is one of the hallmarks of populism throughout of history.

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