



Mystical Family Formation: The Sacred and Metaphysical Reconfiguration of the Family in Populist Discourse

Mistik Aile Formasyonu: Popülist Söylemde Ailenin Kutsal ve Metafizik Yeniden İnşası

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Abstract

In recent years, populist leaders have increasingly placed the concept of the “family” at the center of their political discourse, reconstructing it not merely as a social institution but as a sacred and metaphysical political apparatus. This article introduces the original concept of the *Mystical Family Formation* as a theoretical contribution aimed at understanding this transformation on a conceptual level. The proposed concept seeks to explain how populist leaders reproduce traditional family ideologies through religious and mythological imagery, envisioning society around the construct of a “sacred family.” The theoretical framework of the study is built upon Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism, Roland Barthes’s methodology of myth analysis, and Max Weber’s notion of charismatic authority. Discourse analysis is employed as the methodological approach, and the cases of Narendra Modi in India, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil are examined comparatively. The analysis identifies distinct traces of the *Mystical Family Formation* within the discourse of these leaders, revealing how the emphasis on “family” transforms into a metaphysical conception of “the people” and how the leaders position themselves as guardians of this sacred family. In this context, the article discusses the explanatory potential of the *Mystical Family Formation* for studies in populism, gender, and political discourse, offering a conceptually rich analytical framework that lays theoretical groundwork for future research.

Keywords: Populism, Gender, Family Ideology, Charismatic Leadership, Mystical Family Formation

Paper Type: Research

Öz

Son yıllarda popülist liderlerin “aile” kavramını siyasal söylemlerinin merkezine yerleştirerek, onu yalnızca toplumsal bir kurum olarak değil, aynı zamanda kutsallık atfedilen metafizik bir siyasal aygıt olarak yeniden inşa ettikleri gözlemlenmektedir. Bu makale, söz konusu dönüşümü kavramsal düzeyde anlamlandırmak amacıyla literatüre özgün bir katkı olarak “Mistik Aile Formasyonu” kavramını önermektedir. Bu kavram, popülist liderlerin geleneksel aile ideolojisini dini ve mitolojik imgeler aracılığıyla yeniden üretip, toplumu “kutsal bir aile” kurgusu etrafında tahayyül etmelerini açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın kuramsal çerçevesi Ernesto Laclau’nun popülizm kuramı, Roland Barthes’in mit çözümleme yöntemi ve Max Weber’in karizmatik otorite anlayışıyla yapılandırılmıştır. Yöntem olarak söylem analizi benimsenmiş ve Hindistan’dan Narendra Modi, Macaristan’dan Viktor Orbán ile Brezilya’dan Jair Bolsonaro örnek olayları karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmiştir. Analizler sonucunda bu liderlerin söylemlerinde Mistik Aile Formasyonu’nun özgül izlerine rastlanmıştır; “aile” vurgusunun metafizik bir “halk” tanımına evrildiği ve liderlerin kendilerini bu kutsal ailenin muhafızı konumuna yerleştirdikleri ortaya konmuştur. Bu bağlamda makale, Mistik Aile Formasyonu kavramının popülizm, toplumsal cinsiyet ve siyasal söylem çalışmaları açısından açıklayıcı potansiyelini tartışmakta ve kavramsal derinliği olan yeni bir analitik çerçeve sunarak gelecekteki araştırmalara kuramsal bir zemin hazırlamaktadır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Popülizm, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Aile İdeolojisi, Karizmatik Liderlik, Mistik Aile Formasyonu

Makale Türü: Araştırma

Introduction

The global rise of populist politics has brought with it significant variation in the discursive construction of the concept of “the people.” A considerable number of contemporary populist leaders portray society as a morally pure, cohesive “family” that must be protected against external threats. In doing so, they construct political legitimacy by discursively excluding groups positioned as threats to this imagined familial unity. Within this framework, the concept of “family” transcends its traditional meaning as a social institution and emerges as both a political metaphor and an ideological tool.

For instance, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán positions himself as the guardian of Christian family values in opposition to Western liberal ideals, thereby establishing a cultural counter-hegemony through this discourse (Reuters, 2024). In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro legitimizes his conservative agenda—rooted in homophobia and opposition to abortion—through the rhetoric of “protecting the family,” effectively criminalizing demands for gender equality (Buarque, 2022). In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi frequently references both his biological mother and *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) in public speeches, constructing a collective identity around themes of motherhood, sacrifice, and sacredness (Sharma, 2024). These examples illustrate how populist leaders symbolically relocate the notion of “family” beyond secular boundaries, endowing it with mystical and sacred meanings through religious and mythological connotations.

The central premise of this study is that populist leaders instrumentalize family discourse not solely to advocate for conservative values, but also to position themselves as the “head” or “sacred protector” of the nation-as-family. While there exists a rich body of literature on populism, cultural hegemony, and the politics of values, the mystification of the family as a political apparatus remains under-theorized. In response to this gap, the study introduces the original concept of *Mystical Family Formation* as a conceptual contribution to the literature. This concept aims to analyze how populist leaders merge family discourse with religious and cultural myths to construct a collective “we” identity and mobilize mass support through this imaginary.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following primary research question: How do populist leaders reconstruct the concept of family within a mystical framework in their discourse, and what role do these discursive constructions play in the production of political legitimacy? To address this question, the research is structured around three core objectives:

1. To integrate the literatures on populism, gender, family ideology, and cultural hegemony into an intersectional theoretical framework;
2. To reveal the shared and context-specific features of the “mystical family” discourse across different national cases through comparative discourse analysis;
3. To assess the analytical utility of the *Mystical Family Formation* concept and contribute theoretically to the literature on populism.

This study is a theoretically driven qualitative inquiry, relying on an empirical dataset composed of publicly available political speeches and discourse. The selection of India, Hungary, and Brazil as case studies is grounded in the fact that the leaders in these countries exhibit strong populist traits while systematically employing religious and cultural family-oriented narratives as political strategies. Narendra Modi (Hindu nationalism), Viktor Orbán (Christian conservatism), and Jair Bolsonaro (a fusion of Evangelical and Catholic ideologies) represent analytically valuable cases for comparative analysis due to their use of similar discursive strategies in differing cultural and religious contexts.

The findings of the study will illuminate how the *Mystical Family Formation* manifests in each of these three cases and will evaluate the theoretical contribution the concept offers to the broader field of populism studies.

1. Literature Review

Although the literature on populism encompasses a range of theoretical approaches regarding its definition and function, a common point of convergence among these approaches is the antagonistic distinction drawn between “the people” and “the elites.” In this context, Mudde (2004) defines populism as an ideology that constructs society around a sharp divide between two opposing camps—the pure and innocent people versus the corrupt and self-serving elites. According to him, populism perceives democracy solely as the direct expression of popular sovereignty (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 82). Within this framework, populist leaders position themselves as the direct voice and authentic representatives of the people, fostering a majoritarian and exclusionary understanding of representation. Similarly, Canovan (1999) describes populism as a persistent “ghost” haunting liberal democracy. She argues that populism is a political phenomenon that exposes and dramatizes the structural contradictions of modern political systems, constantly testing the boundaries of liberal democracy.

Laclau (2005), on the other hand, conceptualizes populism not as a substantive ideology, but as a discursive construction. For Laclau, populism involves the articulation of diverse and often heterogeneous social demands under the signifier of “the people,” turning them into a hegemonic challenge against ruling power blocs. In this framework, the notion of “the people” lacks a fixed meaning; it functions as an “empty signifier” that is redefined in each historical context and can accommodate various collective aspirations. Accordingly, Laclau (2005) does not treat populism as the antithesis of democracy, but rather as one of its constitutive dynamics (Panizza, 2005, p. 5).

A prominent strand within populism studies is the “ideational” approach, which frames populism as a “thin-centered ideology.” This perspective holds that populism, rather than being a self-contained or comprehensive ideology, is a discursive form that can be flexibly combined with “thicker” ideologies such as nationalism, conservatism, or socialism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6; Stanley, 2008, p. 99). In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the intersections between populist discourse and other socio-cultural ideologies, particularly those related to gender regimes and family ideologies (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

Right-wing populist movements, in particular, have increasingly centered traditional family structures in their political rhetoric, developing exclusionary narratives that target feminist movements and LGBTQ+ rights activism (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The discursive and political alliance between anti-gender movements and right-wing populism has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. According to Graff et al. (2019), “anti-feminist populism” has emerged as a primary political strategy aimed at suppressing the so-called “gender ideology” and restoring traditional gender roles—a trend that has gained traction in many parts of Europe. This observation highlights how populist politics and family-centered conservative discourse have become ideologically integrated.

Within right-wing populist discourse, the ideology of the family functions as a carrier of nationalist and conservative values. It constructs an idealized social order based on heteronormative gender relations, the sanctification of women’s maternal roles, and the reinforcement of male authority within the family (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). This ideal family model is presented as the guarantor of social order and moral stability. Consequently, populist politics displays strong resistance to any form of social transformation perceived as threatening the status quo, including same-sex marriage, abortion, divorce, and comprehensive sex education (Verloo, 2018, p. 20). In various countries, right-wing populist actors in power have linked feminist and LGBTQ+ advancements to “gender ideology,” portraying them as foreign influences and threats to national cultural values. This dynamic

indicates that the ideology of familialism in right-wing populism operates not merely as a cultural norm but as a hegemonic political tool. Through family discourse, broad segments of the population are emotionally mobilized, reinforcing a collective sense of “us” while simultaneously demonizing political opponents as “anti-family” or “immoral” actors, thereby intensifying political polarization (Kováts, 2017, p. 175-176).

Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony offers a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing how populist discourse integrates with family ideology. According to Gramsci (1971), ruling classes establish their worldview as the societal norm to secure mass consent, thereby transforming coercive power relations into a form of hegemonic rule based on consent. In this sense, the articulation of family ideology within populist discourse involves not only the promotion of conservative values but also the redefinition of dominant cultural norms. Populist leaders elevate “national family” imagery to present their conservative-nationalist agendas as natural, immutable, and legitimate, thereby reinforcing their political strategies for hegemonic control through the production of cultural consent (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022).

One concrete example of this strategy is evident in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. The Orbán regime has restructured societal norms by glorifying the Christian family model as the only legitimate form of life, marginalizing dissenting voices as alien to national values (Reuters, 2024). Similarly, in Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, an ideological hegemony constructed along the axis of God-State-Family has shaped not only political rhetoric but also educational policies and the discursive orientations of public institutions (Buarque, 2022; Amorim and Chaia, 2024).

The literature on populism and charismatic leadership also underscores the role of family-centered discourse in reinforcing the personal authority of populist leaders (Eatwell, 2006; Moffitt, 2016). Max Weber’s (1978) conceptualization of charismatic authority describes a form of legitimacy based not on legal-rational or traditional grounds, but on followers’ belief in the leader’s extraordinary qualities and attributed sanctity, heroism, or redemptive capacity. In this context, the charismatic leader is imagined not merely as a statesman but as a paternal or protective figure, whose declarations are perceived less as policy proposals and more as dogmatic truths accepted on faith (Tormey, 2015).

Populist leaders frequently associate themselves with symbolic representations of national parenthood. In India, for example, Narendra Modi has been mythically identified with Hindu deities, and some supporters have even engaged in the worship of his statues—illustrating the mythical dimensions of charismatic authority (BBC News, 2015). This type of leader-follower relationship shifts the terrain of modern political communication away from rational deliberation and toward emotional allegiance, mythic representation, and sacralized authority. As Laclau (2005) and Wodak (2015) emphasize, this strategy aligns with the populist aim of generating emotionally bonded masses.

In conclusion, the current literature highlights the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between populism, gender, and family ideology. Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony and Weber’s concept of charismatic authority offer powerful analytical tools for examining these political phenomena. However, explaining the specific formation referred to as *Mystical Family Formation* requires a holistic theoretical framework that emerges from the intersection of these literatures. The subsequent sections of this article aim to elaborate this framework in detail by first outlining the methodological approach, then providing a conceptual analysis informed by Laclau, Barthes, and Weber, and finally, examining selected case studies through this theoretical lens.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and is based on discourse analysis. The primary objective is to conduct an in-depth examination of the meanings attributed to the concept of

“family” in the discourse of populist leaders, and to analyze how these meanings are discursively constructed.

As a qualitative method, discourse analysis investigates how meaning is produced through language and how power relations are embedded in discourse. It moves beyond mere textual description to explore how language shapes social realities and ideological structures (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2015). In this study, discourse is approached not just as a medium of communication but as a constitutive force that defines political subjects and symbolic boundaries. The analysis is informed by critical discourse analysis and post-structuralist traditions, emphasizing the performative and hegemonic functions of language (Howarth, 2000; Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 24).

Methodologically, the study follows a comparative discourse analysis strategy, which allows for the examination of culturally diverse discourses within a shared theoretical framework and facilitates the identification of both structural similarities and contextual differences.

2.1. Case Selection

This study selects India (Modi), Hungary (Orbán), and Brazil (Bolsonaro) based on conceptual diversity and empirical variation, enabling theoretical generalization. Despite their distinct cultural and geographical contexts, all three leaders represent right-wing populist regimes characterized by strong leadership and the prominent use of religious and familial rhetoric.

An additional selection criterion was data accessibility. Each leader’s public discourse—including speeches, social media, and interviews—offered a rich and consistent body of material, reflecting official communication strategies and allowing for in-depth discursive analysis.

2.2. Analytical Strategy

The study employs a multi-stage analytical strategy combining thematic content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Texts were first reviewed in their original languages to identify key themes, followed by conceptual coding in English and/or Turkish.

Initial coding focused on direct references to “family,” metaphors, and symbolic expressions (e.g., “India is one big family,” “God, Homeland, Family”). These were grouped into broader themes such as *Sacred Family Rhetoric*, *Anti-Gender Discourse*, and *Nation-as-Family Construction*. In line with Fairclough’s (2010) critical discourse approach, the analysis also considered speaker positionality, audience, and social impact, with particular attention to exclusionary language (e.g., anti-LGBTQ+ narratives) and emotionally charged terms (e.g., “motherland,” “enemies of the family”).

2.3. Reliability and Limitations

To reduce the risk of subjective interpretation inherent in qualitative discourse analysis, the coding process was guided by conceptual frameworks from previous studies and categories defined in the existing literature. In order to minimize researcher subjectivity, fidelity to the original languages of the texts was maintained, and bilingual analysis was employed to avoid meaning distortions resulting from translation.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. It is restricted to three case studies, which necessitates caution regarding the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the analysis focuses exclusively on the discourse of right-wing populist leaders; the ways in which family discourse is constructed within left-wing populism falls outside the scope of this study. Therefore, the concept of *Mystical Family Formation* is primarily tailored to the analysis of religious-conservative tones within right-wing populist discourses. For broader theoretical applicability, future research should test the explanatory power of this concept in different ideological contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

Ernesto Laclau developed a discourse-centered theoretical framework that moves beyond classical definitions of ideology to explain populism. According to Laclau (2005), populism is a discursive construction that emerges from the articulation of dispersed and heterogeneous social demands through a “chain of equivalence,” culminating in their condensation around a common symbolic center—an “empty signifier.” In this context, the concept of “the people” does not refer to a fixed or predetermined social group but rather functions as a flexible signifier capable of expressing diverse societal aspirations. Thus, “the people” is not a subject with a stable content, but a hegemonically constructed identity within discourse.

In Laclau’s approach, populism is essentially viewed as a strategy of representation. A populist leader or movement reconfigures existing structural conflicts in society into a dichotomy between “the people” and “the elites,” constructing the political space as a bipolar field. Within this construction, the leader positions themselves as the sole and authentic representative of the people’s will (Laclau, 2005, p. 4). This process of representation is constructed through linguistic and discursive means, as Laclau argues that the political is inherently discursive.

Within this theoretical framework, a populist leader may unite disparate demands and grievances of social groups through an inclusive discourse, such as “we are the forgotten families.” In such cases, the term “families” becomes a functional empty signifier, serving as a symbolic node that unites groups with differing economic, cultural, or moral concerns (Panizza, 2005). A central element in Laclau’s theory, the notion of the empty signifier, emphasizes that the content of populist discourse is not fixed but filled through the charismatic authority of the leader and the performative power of discourse (Moffitt, 2016).

In this context, a central analytical question in examining the phenomenon of *Mystical Family Formation* is whether the concept of “family” functions as an empty signifier. If family discourse succeeds in uniting heterogeneous demands—such as economic insecurity, cultural disintegration, and moral decline—into a symbolic node, then Laclau’s theoretical framework offers significant analytical power (Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Indeed, populist leaders often attribute to the image of the family a deliberately inclusive and ambiguous character, allowing every citizen to find personal resonance within it. This suggests that the discourse of the family is not merely ideological, but also performs an emotional and unifying function within the construction of populist hegemony. From a Laclauian perspective, *Mystical Family Formation* may be regarded as a particular form of populist articulation. Around the empty signifier of “family,” various national, religious, class-based, and gendered demands are brought together to construct a homogenized identity of “the people.” This unifying narrative functions not only as an ideological construct but also as a powerful emotional adhesive that enables populist political mobilization.

Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1972), examines how everyday signs are ideologically charged and how these meanings are naturalized through discourse. For Barthes, myth is a second-order semiological system: signs on the first level—linguistic or visual—are transformed into a new ideological layer of meaning through myth (Chandler, 2017). The primary function of myth is to present historically and culturally constructed meanings as “natural,” “universal,” and “self-evident,” thereby obscuring their historical context. Barthes famously describes this process as the “transformation of history into nature.” This theoretical approach offers a critical lens for uncovering hegemonic meaning-making processes, especially in political discourse and media representations.

A classic example of Barthes’s myth analysis is his interpretation of a *Paris Match* magazine cover featuring a Black soldier saluting the French flag. Barthes argues that, beneath the image’s apparent neutrality, it conveys a myth of French imperial unity, presenting all peoples—including colonial subjects—as members of a national family, thereby naturalizing a sanitized version of French multiculturalism while erasing its colonial past (Mambrol, 2016).

This Barthesian framework provides a powerful conceptual tool for analyzing the notion of *Mystical Family Formation*. From this perspective, the family discourse of populist leaders can be seen as a practice of myth-making. In this discourse, “the family” is stripped of its historical and social contingency and transformed into a metaphysical essence—transcendent, immutable, and sacred. The nation is represented as a “thousand-year-old family,” while those who threaten this “family” are constructed as manifestations of cosmic evil (Wodak, 2015). As Barthes (1972) notes, myth fixes the meaning of a concept by presenting it as natural, neutral, and universal—rendering the historical inevitable.

Within populist discourse, the ideal of the “traditional family” is presented as an undisputed norm, as an essential component of human nature, and as the foundational unit of society (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022, p. 15). Feminist or liberal values are, in contrast, stigmatized as deviant, ahistorical, or “foreign,” while the heteronormative and patriarchal family structure is elevated to the status of a primordial and eternal value (Kováts, 2017). A concrete example of this myth-making is Viktor Orbán’s statement affirming the “truth” that “a father is a man and a mother is a woman.” This statement constructs a specific, historically situated model of the family as a universal and sacred norm (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, 2022). Jair Bolsonaro similarly naturalizes family values within a religious frame, incorporating the phrase “the family as God intended” into his political rhetoric. Here, “the family” is absolutized as the manifestation of divine will and rendered immune to political contestation (Buarque, 2022).

According to Barthes (1972), myth not only produces meaning but also fills semantic gaps by simplifying the complexity of reality and offering superficial explanations. In this sense, the “family myth” in populist discourse displaces structural causes of social problems—such as economic inequality, declining educational quality, or institutional corruption—with reductive, emotional, and symbolic narratives like the “collapse of family values”. These narratives identify the culprits of moral decay and social crisis as “perverse ideologies of the West,” “immoral liberals,” or LGBTQ+ communities (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022).

Ultimately, Barthesian analysis offers a functional theoretical tool for understanding the ideological core of *Mystical Family Formation*. As a modern political myth, this formation serves the purpose of legitimizing populist worldviews by presenting them as “common sense.” This form of discursive hegemony is so effective that questioning the family myth becomes tantamount to social deviance—thus marginalizing political opposition and stripping it of moral legitimacy.

Within Max Weber’s typology of authority, charismatic authority is defined as a form of legitimacy rooted in belief in the extraordinary qualities of an individual. According to Weber (1978), charismatic authority is “a type of domination resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.” In this context, charismatic leaders are not merely political figures but become symbolic centers of authority, idealized by their followers as saviors, patriarchs, or even prophetic figures (Eatwell, 2006). This form of leadership often becomes prominent during periods of crisis or when the legitimacy of existing political systems is eroding, offering society a new map of meaning (Tucker, 1968).

The discourse of charismatic leadership typically relies not on rational or technical policy proposals but on highly emotional, symbolic, and metaphorical narratives. The leader presents themselves as a messianic figure who will heal the people’s suffering and restore social order (Moffitt, 2016). In this regard, there exists a close structural and discursive relationship between populist leadership and charismatic authority (Moffitt, 2016; Pappas, 2019, p. 19). The populist leader often constructs themselves as the “head of the national family,” with the people portrayed as children or siblings. The leader’s role is depicted as that of a protective, guiding figure endowed with sacred responsibility—whether paternal or, in some cultural contexts, maternal (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022).

In this light, *Mystical Family Formation* can be seen as a functional discursive tool in the construction of charismatic authority. By presenting themselves as the sacred parent of the national family, the leader elevates their legitimacy beyond rational political deliberation, situating it within a near-metaphysical realm in the eyes of their followers (Eatwell, 2006). In the Weberian sense, charisma generates a form of extraordinary devotion that may undermine even the checks and balances of modern democratic systems (Tucker, 1968, p. 731).

The personality cult surrounding Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi exemplifies this phenomenon. Modi is perceived by his supporters not only as a political leader but also as a moral and spiritual figure (BBC News, 2015). His modest background, origin as a tea-seller, personal austerity, and religiosity are interpreted as signs of virtue and sanctity (Landrin, 2024). A prevalent narrative depicts Modi as a devoted “son of the motherland,” thus positioning him simultaneously as both child and father of the people. Supporters offering flowers to his statues or displaying his portraits in their homes illustrate the extra-rational nature of charisma as described by Weber (Pathi and Saaliq, 2024; BBC News, 2015).

Similarly, in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro frequently frames himself as a leader “sent by God” (Cunha, 2023, p. 2854; Buarque, 2022). By declaring himself a “servant dedicated to God, family, and the nation,” Bolsonaro cultivates both a humble, relatable image and a divine mission, thereby anchoring his charisma in sacred terms (Meyerfeld, 2024). This dual strategy exemplifies what Weber termed the “routinization of charisma.” The leader’s charisma is institutionalized through political discourse and reinforced by legislative and constitutional reforms—such as laws that glorify family values or constitutional changes grounded in religious references—which serve to preserve charismatic continuity.

Weber’s theory not only explains the nature of charisma but also addresses how charismatic authority transforms to achieve permanence. A populist leader may initially emerge as a revolutionary figure with extraordinary attributes but tends to routinize that charisma as they remain in power. *Mystical Family Formation* functions as one of the key narrative forms that facilitate this transformation. Through its emphasis on continuity, stability, and rootedness, the discourse of the family repositions the charismatic leader not only as a crisis savior but also as the eternal, protective patriarch. This form of representation contributes to the uninterrupted perpetuation of charismatic authority.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of this study—comprising Laclau’s theory of populist discourse, Barthes’s myth analysis, and Weber’s conceptualization of charismatic authority—offers complementary perspectives for understanding *Mystical Family Formation* in a multilayered manner. Laclau enables an analysis of how populist discourse is articulated; Barthes reveals the mythical nature and naturalizing mechanisms of that discourse; and Weber allows for the examination of the legitimacy and political implications of leader-follower relations. This theoretical synthesis makes it possible to analyze the family-centered discourse of populist leaders not only as an ideological construct, but also as a hegemonic strategy that operates across cultural, emotional, and institutional dimensions.

4. Case Studies: Discursive Manifestations of the Mystical Family Formation

Uncovering how *Mystical Family Formation* manifests across different political and cultural contexts is essential for illuminating both its universal dimensions and its localized specificities. Within this framework, the case studies presented below examine how populist leaders in three distinct regions—Asia, Europe, and Latin America—construct political legitimacy through family-oriented discourse.

While each case is shaped by its own historical, religious, and cultural codes, a common strategic pattern is evident across these examples: the nation is redefined through the metaphor of the family, and the leader is positioned as either the protective father, the devoted child, or a divine intermediary of this sacred familial order.

This narrative framework not only structures political rhetoric, but also shapes gender regimes, imaginaries of citizenship, and the ideological orientation of the state. The following sections analyze the cases of India, Hungary, and Brazil, each revealing different discursive appearances of *Mystical Family Formation*.

4.1. India – Narendra Modi and the Children of *Bharat Mata*

As the leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has constructed a powerful populist discourse since 2014, blending it with charismatic authority to generate broad-based societal support (Mehta, 2025). In Modi's political rhetoric, the nation is frequently represented through the feminine figure of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), a symbol rooted in a long-standing national-mythological narrative that associates the Indian nation with motherhood and sacredness (Sharma and Destradi, 2019, p. 290; Vasudeva, 2025, p. 139).

Modi often refers to India as the “mother of democracy” and the “cradle of civilization” in both domestic and international speeches (Sharma, 2024). For instance, in his 2023 address to the U.S. Congress, he stated, “India is the mother of democracy,” representing the country as an ancient, honorable, and fertile nation. Through this discourse, the Indian people are positioned as the devoted children of this exalted mother. These representations foster a sense of national belonging while grounding the leader's charismatic legitimacy in a culturally resonant foundation.

In Modi's discourse, his biological mother, Heeraben Modi, also plays a unique symbolic role. Frequent public references to her and her elevation as a paragon of virtue and simplicity serve a dual communicative purpose: first, to reinforce the image of the leader as an ordinary man who has not forgotten his humble origins and who embodies traditional values associated with filial piety; and second, to reproduce in the political arena the sacred and sacrificial symbolism associated with motherhood in Indian culture. When Modi described his mother as “a form of God” after her death in 2022 (NDTV, 2022; Economic Times, 2022), this statement became part of a charismatic narrative that entwines his personal biography with collective national memory. In this way, the leader's personal story becomes mythologized and integrated with familial and religious codes at the discursive level.

The ideological foundation of Modi's discourse is grounded in the doctrine of Hindutva. Hindutva defines Hindu culture and religion as the core of Indian identity and rejects secular pluralism in favor of a Hindu nationalist worldview (ISD Global, 2023; Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 12). Within this ideological framework, the concept of the “Hindu family” extends beyond the nuclear family to signify a broader social order; Hindu society as a whole is imagined as a sacred family (Kaul, 2017). Modi integrates this ideological base with populist rhetoric to reconstruct the nation as an emotionally and spiritually bonded family. His oft-repeated slogan from the 2014 campaign—“I love India as much as I love my mother”—(Premiership of Narendra Modi, 2025; *Populism reaches new heights...*, 2023) articulates nationalist sentiment through religious and familial references (Vasudeva, 2025; CIDOB, 2024). This discourse corresponds directly with the formulation of *Mystical Family Formation* in the Indian context, wherein the nation = mother, the people = children, and the leader = the most loyal child (and implicitly the father).

In terms of gender roles, Modi's discourse aligns with a conservative family ideology. Within the BJP's political vision, women's roles are defined through their functions in the traditional family structure; the ideal “Hindu woman” is constructed through the archetypes of the self-sacrificing mother and the chaste wife (Mohan and Bhayana, 2023; Singh and Parihar, 2023, p. 47 and 150). Modi occasionally adopts a tone in his public rhetoric that reinforces these traditional roles for women. For example, the “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao” (“Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter”) campaign, though promoting girls' education, reproduces the father-state's protective authority through its language of “saving” (Monteiro and Vashishth, 2022, p. 109; Kumar, 2023, p. 19). This approach lies at the intersection of patriarchal protectionism and

populist paternalism, allowing the leader to present himself as a paternal figure safeguarding the daughters of the nation.

Modi's leadership discourse is further reinforced through metaphors such as the "watchman of the country" (*chowkidar*) and the "father of the nation." In some Hindu nationalist circles, Modi is exalted as a semi-divine figure, associated with mythological Hindu heroes such as Rama or Krishna (Tuli, 2022). This phenomenon represents an extreme instance of Weber's concept of charismatic authority, where the leader is not merely a political actor but a figure absorbed into a mythic narrative and transformed into a cultural symbol.

In sum, the example of Narendra Modi demonstrates how the concept of *Mystical Family Formation* is articulated in the Indian context. The nation is reconstructed as a sacred family centered around a feminine deity, while the leader assumes the roles of both devoted son and protective father. This discourse effectively integrates deep cultural archetypes—such as the mother goddess and the mother-son relationship—into modern political rhetoric. The Hindutva ideology provides the foundation for this integration, while the populist strategy transforms it into mass mobilization. Ultimately, this hegemonic discourse—materialized in Modi's electoral success—has generated strong emotional attachment across large segments of the population, while discursively externalizing the opposition by casting them as "children betraying the mother."

4.2. Hungary – Viktor Orbán and the Christian Family Utopia

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, one of the most prominent representatives of the right-wing populist wave in Europe, has constructed a consistent discourse that places the concept of family at the center of political rhetoric. Under Orbán's leadership, the Fidesz party has developed policies that elevate Christian family values both discursively and institutionally (Perintfalvi and Voges, 2024, p. 62; Halmi, 2018). The inclusion of statements such as "Hungary is a part of Christian Europe" and "the family shall be recognized as the union of a man and a woman and their children" in the 2011 revised Hungarian Constitution institutionalizes this ideological orientation at the constitutional level (Bienvenu, 2023). Accordingly, the Orbán government has secured its intent to reshape society around the traditional family model by law and implemented a set of social policies supporting nuclear and large families through tax cuts, social aid, and loan incentives.

A recurring theme in Orbán's political rhetoric is the binary opposition between Western Europe's secular-liberal values and Eastern Europe's conservative-Christian values. He positions himself on the conservative side of this divide and portrays Hungary as the "last bastion of Christian civilization" (Bráder, 2025). In his criticisms of the European Union's migration policies and LGBTQ+ rights, the rhetoric of national and familial "survival" becomes a central discursive pillar. Notably, in a 2022 speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the United States, Orbán asserted: "The father is a man, the mother is a woman, and we raise our children according to this truth," presenting a normative framework that absolutizes the biologically-based family model (The European Conservative, 2022). This discourse constitutes an ideological challenge to both gender equality advocates and liberal values in Europe.

In Orbán's populist discourse, the Hungarian nation is frequently described through the metaphor of a large family. Historical references such as "the Hungarian nation is a thousand-year-old family" blend national identity with familial continuity, shaping nationalist sentiments around a culturally internalized sense of family belonging (Abouthungary, 2019). Within this framework, the rhetoric of "foreign forces threatening the family" becomes a central discursive strategy. Migrants, global corporations, Brussels bureaucrats, and figures like George Soros are cast as threats to the integrity of the "Hungarian family" (Zerofsky, 2019). In a 2018 speech, Orbán declared: "In the West, family values are collapsing, genders are becoming blurred; we will not allow this. We will protect Hungary because we are a family" (Beauchamp, 2021).

Policy implementations under Orbán's government align with this discursive structure. Lifetime income tax exemptions for mothers of four or more children, interest-free marriage loans for young couples, and tax benefits for large families are tangible expressions of a state model centered on the family (Martuscelli, 2023; Albert, 2020). These measures are directly linked to Orbán's emphasis on "population growth" and "national survival" (Population Matters, 2025). His statements such as "We don't need migrants; we need our own children" reflect a pronatalist ideology that merges demographic crisis discourse with anti-immigrant rhetoric (Dunai and Romei, 2024).

Although Orbán's charismatic leadership is more pragmatic than classical Weberian charisma, it resonates with the archetype of the "patriotic son" in Hungarian political culture. Narratives about his past—particularly his youth as an anti-communist activist—present him as a figure who has shared in the people's struggles, positioning him as an "elder father" who protects the family. This image offers a culturally rooted model of authority distinct from the technocratic opposition leaders (Povedák, 2014).

In Orbán's case, the concept of *Mystical Family Formation* clearly manifests as a Christian-nationalist mythological structure. Its "mystical" dimension derives from the sanctification and transcendental framing of the family through religious and cultural values. The instrumentalization of Catholic and Protestant heritage in Hungary serves the goal of institutionalizing this transcendence. Orbán constructs alliances beyond Hungary's borders using family rhetoric, framing countries with similar ideological orientations such as Poland and Italy as part of the "same family," and declaring in a 2022 speech in Texas that "we are members of the same civilization family" to American and European Christian conservatives (Smith, 2022; Than, 2024).

In the context of gender politics, Hungary under Orbán has become a site of institutionalized opposition to "gender ideology." The 2018 ban on gender studies master's programs in universities and the rejection of the Istanbul Convention reflect how the family ideology has become a guiding principle in policy-making (Kafkadesk, 2020). Here, the family functions not only as a cultural symbol but also as the normative and legal foundation of the political order.

In conclusion, the example of Viktor Orbán illustrates how the concept of *Mystical Family Formation* is constructed in the European context. Orbán reconstructs the nation as a sanctified family and presents himself as its protective father and bearer of a political mission, legitimizing his ideology through family norms intertwined with Christian values. This mythical family narrative functions both as a tool of cultural hegemony in domestic politics and as a means of building transnational solidarity networks with ideologically aligned actors on the global stage.

4.3. Brazil – Jair Bolsonaro and the Politics of God–State–Family

Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro represents one of the most striking examples of right-wing populist leadership in Latin America, having constructed his political discourse along the axis of God, nation, and family. His 2018 campaign slogan—"Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos" ("Brazil above everything, God above all")—was not merely a call to nationalism and religiosity, but also an expression of a conservative societal vision integrating nationhood, faith, and family values (Pontes-Ribeiro, 2021, p.867). Bolsonaro entered the political stage not only as a statesman, but as a leader endowed with a divine mission to rescue Brazil from chaos and corruption, promising a moral rebirth for society (Phillips and Phillips, 2018). At the center of this promise was the rhetoric of "protecting the family," which informed a conservative agenda particularly opposed to LGBTQ+ rights and abortion legislation (Iamamoto et al., 2023, p. 3).

In Bolsonaro's political rhetoric, "the family" functions as a central ideological construct set in opposition to modern liberal values. He frequently attributed Brazil's major issues—high

crime rates, economic instability, corruption—to the weakening of the family institution and a deviation from religious values (Iamamoto et al., 2023). Within this discursive framework, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and secular education policies are framed as “demonic” threats. Bolsonaro became one of the most vocal global opponents of so-called “gender ideology” (Carranza and Rosado-Nunes, 2024). His portrayal of sex education and gender equality curricula as “brainwashing attempts” exemplifies this ideological stance (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Statements such as “We fear God, we value our family, homosexuality has no place in the school curriculum” resonated powerfully among religious and conservative audiences.

Bolsonaro’s charismatic leadership aligns with the historically embedded archetype of the messianic leader in Brazil. Often referred to as the “Trump of the Tropics,” Bolsonaro was perceived, particularly by Evangelical Christian communities, as a chosen representative of God (Buarque, 2022). The rising political influence of Evangelical churches further strengthened his strategic alliance with this constituency (Pooler, 2022). By reading Bible verses at campaign rallies and reiterating that he was “a president who believes in God,” Bolsonaro positioned himself as both a religious and political figure (Tamaki et al., 2021, p. 82). This dual representation constructed Bolsonaro as a moral savior destined to return the Brazilian nation to God’s path, while also casting him as an authoritarian father figure (Buarque, 2022). The emphasis on family was central to this charismatic construction. Bolsonaro’s personal family life became a key component of his public image; his wife Michelle Bolsonaro and their children frequently appeared in campaign visuals, and Michelle’s image as a devout woman served as a symbolic appeal to Evangelical voters (AFP, 2022).

Policies implemented during Bolsonaro’s tenure gave practical expression to this discursive framework. The education system underwent curriculum changes aimed at “cleansing gender ideology”; institutional structures related to women’s rights were weakened; and the rhetoric of protecting children from abuse was instrumentalized to justify anti-LGBTQ+ policies (Corrêa and Faulhaber, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Carbone, 2024). Bolsonaro’s government opposed certain United Nations initiatives related to sexual and reproductive health rights, arguing that such efforts undermined the institution of the family. Internationally, he aligned with like-minded right-wing governments, signing family-focused declarations with countries such as Hungary and Poland (de Sousa Pinto, 2020).

Bolsonaro’s abrasive rhetorical style was tightly interwoven with his defense of family ideology. His attacks on opponents frequently emphasized their alleged disrespect for family values. For example, his 2014 remark to a left-wing female member of parliament—“You don’t even deserve to be raped”—not only reflected misogyny but also served as part of a strategy to position himself as a morally superior family patriarch (Kleinfeld, 2023, p. 14). In Brazil’s polarized political environment, such statements were applauded by supporters as part of the “honest and tough father” narrative, while critics condemned them as examples of sexist and violent political communication (Hunter and Power, 2019). Bolsonaro’s posture in this context illustrates how populist leadership can reproduce and legitimize specific gender regimes (Moreira, 2023).

In the Brazilian case, *Mystical Family Formation* materializes as a mystical and conservative myth structured around the triad of “God–Family–Nation.” Bolsonaro fused Catholic and Evangelical symbols to generate religious legitimacy, invoked patriotic rhetoric that echoed nostalgia for the 1964–1985 military regime, and used family discourse to mobilize broad conservative support (Phillips and Phillips, 2018). This rhetoric was particularly resonant among rural populations, residents of impoverished urban neighborhoods, and religious communities. Even allegations of corruption or political failures during the COVID-19 pandemic failed to significantly erode his support among followers, who continued to perceive him as an infallible “father of the nation.”

However, Bolsonaro's mystical family discourse did not achieve universal appeal. Urban middle classes, young voters, and feminist movements developed strong resistance to his rhetoric. The "Ele Não" ("Not Him") movement, which began in the lead-up to the 2018 elections, became one of the most organized social responses to Bolsonaro's misogynistic and homophobic discourse (Santos and Pereira, 2021, p. 381-382). This resistance reveals that Bolsonaro's family myth also produced deep societal polarization. For some, his promise of a "sacred family" symbolized redemption; for others, it represented an authoritarian and exclusionary dystopia. His defeat in the 2022 elections reflects this fundamental division within Brazil's political system.

In conclusion, the example of Jair Bolsonaro demonstrates how *Mystical Family Formation* can be constructed on a religious-conservative foundation in the Latin American context. By presenting himself as a servant of God and the family, Bolsonaro fashioned a charismatic savior figure and redefined the Brazilian nation as a community bound by faith and family. This mythological framework functioned both as a source of political legitimacy and a vehicle for populist mobilization, leaving behind a lasting legacy of conservative populism in Brazilian politics.

Conclusion

This study explored the explanatory potential of the concept of *Mystical Family Formation* through a comparative discourse analysis of three populist leaders—Modi, Orbán, and Bolsonaro—representing distinct cultural and geopolitical contexts. Despite differences, each leader redefined the family as a sacred entity, using it as a central metaphor to construct an exclusive "us" identity. The family emerged as both a unifying and marginalizing discourse, delineating moral insiders from perceived outsiders, including minorities, migrants, and political opponents.

Religious symbolism was key: Modi invoked *Bharat Mata*, Orbán embedded Christian values in legal frameworks, and Bolsonaro drew from Evangelical-Catholic motifs. These practices reflect the mythologization of the family, in Barthes' terms, transforming sociocultural constructs into sacred truths. The metaphor adapts to local traditions—matriarchal in India, patriarchal in Hungary and Brazil—and varies in institutionalization, with Orbán most effectively embedding it in state structures.

Theoretically, the family functions as an "empty signifier" (Laclau), absorbing diverse demands into a shared symbolic field. Charismatic leadership (Weber) amplifies its emotional appeal, creating familial bonds between leaders and followers. Yet this discourse also legitimizes exclusion and repressive social norms.

This comparative framework becomes particularly evident when analyzing the discourses of Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, and Jair Bolsonaro. Although they operate within distinct cultural, religious, and geopolitical settings, their discourses share significant structural similarities. All three leaders construct the nation as a sacred family and position themselves as either the protective patriarch (Orbán and Bolsonaro) or the devoted son (Modi), thereby personalizing political authority through familial metaphors. Religious symbolism plays a central role: Modi invokes *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) rooted in Hindu nationalism; Orbán grounds his discourse in Christian-patriarchal traditions institutionalized in Hungary's constitution; and Bolsonaro merges Evangelical and Catholic references into a God-State-Family triad. However, these discourses also reflect contextual variations. Modi's rhetoric is more matriarchal and civilizational; Orbán's discourse emphasizes demographic survival and anti-liberalism; Bolsonaro's narrative focuses on moral panic and divine election. Despite these differences, each case illustrates how the family metaphor operates as a mythological and emotional device that legitimizes charismatic leadership and conservative socio-political agendas.

Mystical Family Formation offers a novel framework for understanding populism as a cultural and ideological project, not merely a political strategy. While this study focuses on right-

wing cases, future research could test its relevance in left-wing or oppositional populisms. Overall, this concept reveals how the sacralization of the family underpins symbolic authority, populist mobilization, and the reshaping of democratic values.

In this context, the concept of Mystical Family Formation offers a functional analytical tool for examining the multilayered intersections between populist discourse, gender ideology, and charismatic leadership. However, further theoretical refinement and empirical validation are necessary to assess its full explanatory potential. Future research could explore how the mystical family narrative operates in different ideological contexts—such as left-wing populisms or secular nationalisms—or how feminist, ecological, or queer counter-discourses challenge and reconfigure this hegemonic myth. Additionally, investigating how such narratives are reproduced in digital media and online political communication may reveal new dimensions of this phenomenon. Comparative studies conducted across these diverse domains would not only delineate the conceptual boundaries of Mystical Family Formation but also enhance its applicability within broader populism scholarship.

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