# Populism or Radicalism? [1]
## Popülizm mi Radikalizm mi?

*Prof. Dr. Süha ATATÜRE*[2]

**ÖZET**

Bu makale, popülizm kavramını siyaset bilimi çerçevesinde teorik düzeyde ve uygulama örnekleriyle ele almaktadır. Kavram, tanımı, temel özellikleri ve sınırları üzerinden incelenmekte, popülizmi siyasetin bir türevi olarak konumlandırırken popülizm ile radikalizm arasındaki ilişkiyi açıklamaktadır. Makalenin, kavramsal çerçevesi, devlet-iktidar-toplum ilişkisi üzerinden kurulmuştur. Bu bağlamda, tarihsel olarak devlet, maddi güçlerini hukuksal ve yönetsel aygıtlarla toplumsal güçleri belirli rasyonaliteler doğrultusunda denetim altında tutmak ister. Devlet bunu belirli bir yönetim mantığı üreterek sağlar. Bu çerçevede makale Gramsci'nin "rıza" kavramı ve Foucault'nun "bilgi üretimi olarak iktidar" fikrinin, popülist iktidar uygulamalarını ve temsilî boyutlarını belirli demokratik bağlamlarda açıklamakta yetersiz kalabileceği, ancak Foucault'nun "yönetimsellik" kavramının, (governmentality) devletin bu baskı ve şiddet uygulayan bir egemenlik aygıtı olmaktan çıkabileceğini değerlendirmektedir. Auctoritas (otorite ilkesi) ve potestas (iktidarın kullanımı) arasındaki ayrım, Montesquieu'nün kuvvetler ayrılığı ilkesiyle birlikte incelenerek, demokratik ve demokratikleşme sürecindeki rejimlerde popülist liderlerin toplumsal ve siyasal süreçlere etkileri tartışılmaktadır. Son olarak makale, dünya sisteminin neden ulus devletten demokratik devlete evrilemeyişinin üç temel nedeni üzerinde durarak bunları; Genişlemiş Ölçek, Obez Ulus-Devletler ve Kusurlu Tasarımlar şeklinde belirtmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Otorite, Obize state, Gramsci, Governmentality, Foucault.

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the concept of populism within the framework of political science, addressing it at both the theoretical and empirical levels. The idea is analyzed in terms of its definition, core characteristics, and conceptual boundaries, positioning populism as a derivative phenomenon of politics while exploring its relationship with radicalism. The article's conceptual framework is structured around the state–power–society relationship. In this context, the state has historically sought to keep social forces under control by employing its material power through legal and administrative apparatuses in line with specific rationalities. The state achieves this by producing a particular logic of governance. Within this framework, the article argues that Gramsci's concept of "consent" and Foucault's notion of "power as the production of knowledge" may be insufficient to fully explain populist governance practices and their representational dimensions in specific democratic contexts. By contrast, Foucault's concept of "governmentality" is assessed as providing a more suitable analytical framework for understanding how the state may move beyond being merely an apparatus of domination based on coercion and violence. The distinction between auctoritas (the principle of authority) and potestas (the exercise of power) is examined alongside Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers to discuss the effects of populist leaders on social and political processes in democratic and democratizing regimes. Finally, the article addresses three fundamental reasons why the world system has failed to evolve from the nation-state toward the democratic state: Expanded Scale, Obese Nation-States, and Flawed Designs.

**Keywords:** Authority, Obize state, Gramsci, Governmentality, Foucault.

**State, Authority, and Power**

At first glance, the state appears to be a structure that exists for its people. However, historical experience shows that over thousands of years, states have largely failed to fulfill this seemingly simple purpose. Rather than serving the public, the state has primarily acted out of a drive for self-preservation. This instinct for self-protection has led the state to establish control over society -and thus over social forces- and, when such control has failed, to resort to coercion or violence through its material power.

These material powers generally include the armed forces, the police and gendarmerie, the state's local extensions, instruments of economic intervention, and the state bureaucracy. Social forces, by contrast, refer to the public sphere encompassing individuals, groups, civil and non-civil society, and are shaped by economic, political, or ideological differences that transcend class systems. For this reason, social forces lie beyond the direct reach of material power. Society produces both individual and collective power through ideas and actions (Atatüre, 2016).

While the sovereign state seeks to keep material power under government control, it simultaneously attempts to establish a mechanism capable of fully controlling social forces. In anti-democratic and hybrid regimes, this desire for control increasingly turns into a "state obsession." When this obsession becomes intertwined with coercive force, ideology and theory emerge as two fundamental determinants in political decision-making processes. Schevill (1941) argues that in the nineteenth century nationalism replaced religion as the dominant ideological framework; nevertheless, both nationalism and religion have continued to exert influence over political decision-making. Similarly, Adorno (1967) warned against underestimating nationalism and described the phenomenon of new nationalism as a "pathological" development.

Beyond ideology, the second factor shaping political decisions is theory. Because theories are grounded in scientific foundations, they tend to adapt to changing conditions as political and social understanding evolves. Unlike ideologies, theories are not dogmatic and cannot resist change. They derive their strength precisely from this adaptability—from their capacity to grow by adopting new frameworks—and it is from this quality that their influence on political systems stems.

Accordingly, the state is not merely an apparatus that organizes, directs, and controls material power; it also functions as a regulatory mechanism that steers social forces toward desired ideological patterns (Atatüre, 2016). In this context, Gramsci (2000) emphasizes that the state maintains its dominance not only through an "apparatus of coercion" but also through ideological hegemony. Power is exercised not solely through repression and violence, but also through cultural and ideological institutions that produce social consent. In short, the state claims to govern society through various forms of power.

Within this framework, Foucault's concept of governmentality further clarifies the issue. In his discussions of governmentality, Foucault refers to a typical assemblage that enables the implementation of modern political thought and action; he calls this assemblage "governmentality." According to Foucault, governmentality comprises the totality of institutions, procedures, analyses, modes of thinking, calculations, and tactics that enable the exercise of power. The concept of governmentality suggests that the state can move beyond being a purely coercive and violent apparatus of domination to become a form of power that governs through these mechanisms. In this sense, power operates not only through the control of material resources but also through the establishment of regimes of knowledge that determine how social processes are perceived, organized, and directed (Foucault, 1979, p. 87).

However, in my view, what must primarily be recognized in Foucault's understanding of governmentality are its historical foundations in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. For Foucault, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Clausewitz constitute a tripartite point of intersection. In each of these thinkers, issues such as the dissolution of feudalism, the effects of revolution and Napoleon, the limitation of the powers of rulers, or—particularly in Clausewitz—the centralization of the state, the establishment of state–society relations, or the regulation of relations among powers are central concerns. At this point, Foucault poses the following questions: How will the state govern the people? The state does not need the people's consent to rule them; the real issue is with what means, through which mechanisms, and in what manner the people are governed (Foucault, p. 89).

Undoubtedly, Foucault's concept and approach of governmentality are of great importance. Nevertheless, his assertion that the state does not need the consent of the people to govern is debatable. For when we consider how power governs the people, a fundamental question arises:

Why do governments seek the consent of society, and how do they obtain it? Two main reasons can be identified. First, those in power often believe that they still have unfinished tasks and that no one else can accomplish them; this reflects the leader's ambition and sense of indispensability. Second, governments desire to transform society in accordance with their own ideological frameworks. At this point, populism emerges as an exemplary technique that can be applied alongside Foucault's proposals.

Generally, the continuity of power takes priority over ideological transformation. Since these two conditions are interdependent, they create a constant field of tension between government and society. In democratic systems, the desire to maintain power is relatively complex due to constitutional and legal constraints, as well as the advanced scientific, artistic, democratic, and cultural capacities of open societies (Popper, 1989, pp. 164–175). By contrast, in systems that have not democratized, this process is relatively more straightforward due to the weakness of the rule of law and the principle of separation of powers. In such regimes, rulers may find various ways to extend their terms in office, reshape society according to their intentions, or implement

changes through coercion and repression. Under these conditions, neither public consent nor the rule of law is considered necessary.

In this context, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin represent non-democratic models. At the same time, in twenty-first-century Turkey and the United States, despite liberal-democratic frameworks, the insistence of President Erdoğan and President Trump on remaining in power reflects the same tendency in different contexts.

In advanced democratic societies, however, voter behavior tends to move away from ideological loyalty toward value-oriented participation, in which issues such as environmental protection and human rights come to the fore. Consequently, for governments to gain social consent, they need only inspire trust and demonstrate persuasive maturity. When democratic, humanist, and universal values are at stake—and when power promises to protect these values—society may voluntarily grant its consent; otherwise, it resists. Therefore, governments can neither sustain authority through coercion nor impose ideological restructuring, because coercion becomes neither necessary nor feasible.

In summary, Gramsci's concept of consent is more applicable to non-democratic and hybrid regimes, where government authoritarianism weakens society's capacity to resist. Foucault (1977), by contrast, arrives at a similar conclusion through a different path. In Discipline and Punish, he conceptualizes power not merely as a repressive mechanism, but as a productive force that shapes individual and collective behavior through the production of knowledge and discourse. Foucault's argument is grounded in the relationship between prisons, prisoners, and power, and suggests that power regulates behavior by producing knowledge within institutions.

While this approach convincingly explains developments in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, its applicability to the twenty-first century—when prisons are increasingly treated as spaces of education or knowledge production—is debatable. Moreover, when Foucault's understanding of "knowledge and discourse" as instruments of power is regarded as a variant of Gramsci's concept of "consent," its contemporary validity becomes questionable. For this reason, both Foucault's theory of knowledge/discourse production and Gramsci's notion of social consent may be considered overly optimistic when applied to the realities of the twenty-first century. By contrast, Foucault's concept of governmentality offers a more defensible analytical ground.

Burchell, Gordon, and Millar note that between 1970 and 1984, Foucault delivered 13 annual lecture courses at the Collège de France and that he elaborated the concept of governmentality in his 1979 and 1980 lectures. Foucault understood the term "government" in both a narrow and a broad sense; in its wider sense, it refers to the conduct of conduct, that is, the management of behavior. Foucault defines "government" as an activity aimed at shaping, directing, or influencing the conduct of one or more individuals.

Foucault uses the term "rationality of government" almost synonymously with the "art of government." He treats government as an activity or practice, and the arts of government as the ways of knowing what this activity consists of and how it can be carried out. Accordingly, the rationality of a government signifies a way or system of thinking about the nature of governing practice (who can govern? what is government? what or who is governed?). This system renders a particular form of governing both conceivable and practicable for those who exercise it and for those upon whom it is exercised. In this sense, governmentality refers to the totality of institutions, procedures, analyses, modes of thinking, calculations, and tactics that enable the exercise of power. Undoubtedly, this approach also explains the mechanisms by which the state's material power governs social forces. Populism constitutes one of these mechanisms.

In summary, Gramsci's concept of consent is more applicable to non-democratic and hybrid regimes, where government authoritarianism weakens society's capacity to resist. Foucault (1977), by contrast, arrives at a similar conclusion through a different path. In Discipline and Punish, he conceptualizes power not merely as a repressive mechanism, but as a productive force that shapes individual and collective behavior through the production of knowledge and discourse. Foucault's argument is grounded in the relationship between prisons, prisoners, and power, and suggests that power regulates behavior by producing knowledge within institutions.

**Expanded Scale – Obese Nation-States – Flawed Designs: A Conceptual Framework**

Over the past two decades, there is a concept I have frequently emphasized in my work: the democratic state. The democratic state represents the stage that follows the nation-state in the historical evolution of the state. After the phases of the early state, city-state, feudal state, absolutist state, national state, and nation-state, the democratic state ultimately emerges. As the characteristics of the state have changed from its early forms to the present, its conceptual definition has also been reformulated; in each historical period, it has taken on a different form on the political stage. Just as there was once an evolution from the national state to the nation-state, signs began to appear in the final quarter of the twentieth century suggesting that the nation-state would, in turn, evolve into the democratic state.

This transformation did not occur under the guidance of a particular will or authority; rather, it emerged as a natural process driven by changing economic structures, advancing technologies, and the pressures exerted by societies resisting political authority. Revolutions, major wars, political and scientific transformations, social movements, and mass uprisings played decisive roles in shaping the state. Yet from the 1970s onward, the neo-realist and neo-liberal political–economic structures of globalization, when combined with racism, religion, and nationalism, increasingly pushed governments toward more repressive and anti-democratic tendencies.

The expectation, however, was the opposite: a transition toward a democratic state grounded in

principles such as human rights, the rule of law, constitutional democracy, the fight against climate change, pluralist democracy, the separation of powers, and the strengthening of local governments. This process did not unfold as anticipated. I argue that three interrelated factors can explain this failure.

## Expanded Scale: The Crisis of Governable Size

Globalization has elevated the scale of political, economic, and social processes to an unprecedented level in history. Expanded scale refers not only to geographic enlargement but also to the increasing complexity, speed, and intensity of decision-making mechanisms, economic networks, technological infrastructures, and social interactions. These processes have reached dimensions that exceed human and institutional scale. As a result, the level of interdependence that has emerged cannot be effectively managed by the nation-state's traditional institutional capacities.

From a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, it has become increasingly challenging to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of "how" the state governs. As scale expands, the distance between knowledge production and effective intervention widens, giving rise to a structural problem of governability.

## Obese Nation-States: Excessive Expansion Without Democratization

Obese nation-states are political structures that have responded to expanded scale not through democratization, decentralization, increased productivity, or the expansion of rights, but through the accumulation of authority, bureaucracy, and control mechanisms—while simultaneously failing to solve institutional problems. Rather than adapting their institutional designs, states seek to sustain themselves through administrative expansion that exceeds their functional capacities.

From Gramsci's perspective, this excessive expansion signifies a decline in the state's capacity to generate consent. Coercion, securitization, and states of emergency gradually replace hegemonic leadership and ideological persuasion. Indeed, while political leaders struggle to cope with wars and, in their attempts to achieve peace, often generate new conflicts, political structures are in fact shrinking quantitatively and regressing qualitatively. From the highest international structures down to the nation-state and sub-state levels, institutional arrangements remain far behind contemporary standards.

## Flawed Designs: Structural Mismatch and Institutional Failure

Flawed designs result from the structural mismatch between expanded scale and obese nation-states. Institutions originally designed for smaller and relatively homogeneous societies are now tasked with governing highly heterogeneous, globally interconnected systems with extremely low

tolerance for entropy. This historical mismatch produces systemic dysfunctions ranging from economic instability and ecological destruction to political polarization and crises of representation. Moreover, when attempts are made to correct these design flaws, new design errors often emerge, rendering governance increasingly unmanageable.

In summary, dysfunctions and any attempt to correct design flaws through technocratic or authoritarian interventions often generate new design errors. From a governmentality perspective, governance mechanisms reach their operational limits; rather than resolving problems, they reproduce and multiply them. In this regard, an especially revealing insight into design flaws appears in Foucault's historical analysis in his work on Governmentality. While examining this issue, Foucault states:

"Some authors rejected the idea of a new art of government centred on the state and reason of state, which they stigmatized with the name of Machiavellianism; others rejected Machiavelli by showing that there existed an art of government which was both rational and legitimate, and of which Machiavelli's The Prince was only an imperfect approximation or caricature" (Foucault, 1979, p. 89). This observation underscores that debates over governmental design and rationality are not merely contemporary concerns but are rooted in longstanding theoretical disputes about the nature, legitimacy, and limits of governing practices.

**The Triple Dynamic: A Self-Reinforcing Cycle**

When the structural and functional conditions of the contemporary world are considered together, this triad forms a self-reproducing political cycle:

Expanded scale erodes governability. States respond by accumulating power through flawed designs, giving rise to obese nation-states. Excessive centralization accelerates the proliferation of flawed designs and leads to institutional breakdowns. These breakdowns generate new crises, further expand scale, and the cycle begins anew.

Within this cycle, politics moves away from rational problem-solving and increasingly turns toward populism, permanent crisis management, and moral polarization. Leaderships with high representational appeal but weak democratic and productive capacities (mediocre leaderships) emerge in the gaps created by flawed designs; they sustain their power not through governance, but through simplification. In this context, populism becomes the primary mechanism for maintaining power.

<div align="center"><strong>Theoretical Conclusion: The Deferred Democratic State</strong></div>

The framework of expanded scale – obese nation-states – flawed designs explains why the transition from the nation-state to the democratic state is persistently deferred. The obstacle is

not merely authoritarian leadership or misguided policies, but a more profound structural mismatch between scale, institutional design, and governing rationalities.

For this reason, the democratic state must be conceptualized not only as a normative ideal, but as a new political architecture capable of functioning at an expanded scale, avoiding institutional obesity, and preventing the reproduction of flawed designs. Without such a reconstruction, contemporary politics will remain trapped in a cycle of systemic crises and progressively diminishing governance capacity.

**Populism as a Derivative of Politics**

When the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in November 2002, it had to establish credibility both domestically and internationally during its early years in office. To this end, the party pursued two strategic initiatives—the first concerned European Union (EU) policy. The previous coalition government had already made significant progress in Turkey–EU relations, including the historic abolition of the death penalty. By maintaining continuity with this policy, the AK Party succeeded in alleviating the concerns of both domestic and external actors. The second initiative focused on economic reforms. The severe financial and economic crisis of 2001 was overcome through the Kemal Derviş reforms adopted and implemented by the coalition government (Ecevit–Yılmaz–Bahçeli), which also succeeded in reducing inflation. By continuing these reforms, the AK Party created a general climate of confidence both at home and abroad.

The final step in consolidating this atmosphere of trust was the removal of the military's traditional tutelary role. This step was taken primarily through the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, which were conducted in cooperation with the Gülen movement. Senior generals and officers were convicted on charges of coup plotting, and new promotion decrees established a senior military leadership loyal to the government. As a result, the government gained the capacity to act freely. The referendum of 21 October 2007, which introduced the popular election of the president, undermined one of the regime's core pillars. In 2010, the judiciary came under the executive's control, and following the 16 April 2017 referendum, the parliamentary regime established in 1923 was replaced by the Presidential Government System.

The trust placed in the AK Party between 2003 and 2007—and in the social groups that relied on it—came to an end when the founding regime of the state was transformed, the judiciary was subordinated to the executive, the separation of powers was rendered ineffective, and society faced economic collapse. Intellectuals, businesspeople, academics, and ordinary citizens who had trusted the government realized their mistake only too late. This process served two fundamental functions. First, it enabled the AK Party to preserve and continuously renew its political power through electoral success—a goal shared by all political parties. To achieve this goal, political actors employ various strategies, among which populism is the most common and effective.

I conceptualize populism as a derivative of politics intertwined with radicalism and distinguish between two types: explicit populism and implicit populism. Explicit populism is employed to sustain power in line with the objectives stated in the party's official program. Implicit populism, by contrast, does not appear in the party program; it is used to ideologically influence and mobilize the leader's inner circle through speeches and directives—often delivered in closed meetings or non-public settings.

Implicit populism is not practiced solely by the leader; it is also disseminated through ministers, newly established institutions aligned with the ideology, loyal civil organizations, and other actors. This demonstrates that populism is not limited to the leader alone but is embedded in the party apparatus as a whole. For example, the leader's goals of "raising a religious generation" or "changing the regime" are not included in the party program; nevertheless, these objectives have been articulated through both implicit and explicit populist instruments and have been decisive in sustaining power.

A similar phenomenon has been observed in the United States. Despite not being included in the party platform, the Republican Party and President Donald Trump employed implicit populism —particularly during his second term—to reshape the state's institutional structure ideologically, eventually making these intentions explicit. Heywood (2003) defines ideology as the process by which a leader presents a worldview that criticizes the existing order, then designs an "ideal society" as a desired future, and finally explains how political change based on this vision can be achieved. Similarly, Abts and Rummens (2007) argue that populist leaders use the power of "the people" to challenge the legitimacy of the existing political order. Once in power, however, populists sustain their discourse by appealing to the "common sense" of the people, presenting the new order they create as both reasonable and legitimate. In this way, populism becomes a derivative of politics employed by parties and leaders to seize and maintain power.

Populism and radicalism are expressed not only through discourse but also through body language. While the AK Party leader and Donald Trump clearly display this capacity through physical gestures, Xi Jinping conveys it through stillness in posture, and Vladimir Putin through a defiant bodily stance. Throughout the AK Party's rule, the leadership—seeking to shorten the path toward its ideological objectives—constructed not its own bourgeoisie but a capitalist class, thereby securing economic power. This is not merely a financial matter; as Gramsci (1971) emphasized, it is a question of ideological hegemony. The realization of an ideological objective requires both the creation of the necessary power and the establishment of favorable conditions. Once these conditions are in place, implicit populism naturally comes into play.

Indeed, implicit populism emerges together with radicalism. It cannot be considered separately from the party's unwritten ideology; the populist acts in accordance with this unwritten doctrine. Implicit populism is, in a sense, the "truth behind untruth." When the boundaries between reality and unreality blur, the populist actor resorts to radical discourse to render the situation

intelligible. During the AK Party's uninterrupted 24 years in power in Turkey, the leader's extraordinary skill in deploying both explicit and implicit populism meant that by the time opponents fully grasped the effects of this hidden strategy, it was already too late. The founding regime of the state had been transformed; economic, social, and military institutions, as well as the bureaucracy, had been handed over to individuals close to the new regime; the education system had been restructured in line with concealed objectives; and the judiciary had come under executive control. Naturally, the suspension of the separation of powers and the rule of law, and the preservation of the appearance of democracy while hollowing out its substance, became the preconditions of this entire process. In such an environment, populism became a powerful political instrument for the leader and his narrow circle.

Benjamin Arditi (2024), in an article published simultaneously with Ernesto Laclau's On Populist Reason, reinforces the idea that populism is a derivative of politics by asserting that "there is no political intervention that is not populist to some extent." Arditi further develops his assessment by posing two questions about populism. His first question is: "Can you explain what populism means? You will probably say that populism is a moral conception of politics that divides society into two camps, pitting good people—led by a messianic leader—against bad elites who stand in the way of fulfilling the promise of popular sovereignty. This is a very standard answer." His second question is whether labeling a political group, policy, or decision as populist adds any additional value. "I see no such value," he argues. "Calling far-right parties populist tells us very little about them." Undoubtedly, both of Arditi's questions—and their brief answers—are conclusions that are easily accepted and readily understood. It is precisely for these reasons that, in this article, I argue that what populism is can only be meaningfully grasped within the framework of the populist's discourse.

Adopting a provocative approach, Arditi notes that in the 1980s and 1990s—exemplified by Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina—neo-populism, or neoliberal populism, underwent a major U-turn, embracing the Washington Consensus. The third wave in the 2000s, by contrast, was characterized as left-wing populism, with one of its leading figures being Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. Finally, Arditi turns to the contemporary wave of right-wing populism, concluding by describing Trump as a pathological narcissist surrounded by sycophantic aides and followers who reshaped the Republican Party around his own personality.

### Conceptual Characteristics of Populism and Radicalism

According to Gniazdowski (2021, p. 63), the term "populism" is most frequently used to describe violations of the rule of law and the anti-establishment, anti-liberal, nationalist, xenophobic, and homophobic rhetoric employed by political leaders in certain European Union countries. Accordingly, this concept—by no means neutral or value-free—denotes a phenomenon that emerged alongside the crisis of the global political order established after the Second World War, one that feeds on local political disorientation and is characterized by the increasing use of

technologies of political manipulation. Gniazdowski also defines critical populism as "a form of political discourse filled with highly demagogic clichés and impossible promises, aimed at winning the approval of the masses at any cost." At this point, the element that populism incorporates for political manipulation is radicalism.

Drawing on decades of research, Mudde (2018) argues that the core ideological feature of populist parties and their supporters is nativism, which constitutes a xenophobic form of nationalism. According to him, the primary consequence of the "rise of populism" has not been the empowerment of "native" elites, but rather the emergence of policies that restrict the rights of "foreign others"—most notably migrants, Muslims, and refugees. Adorno (2020, p. 38), for his part, views populism as a political phenomenon that seduces the masses with the claim of guaranteeing the future, but in reality amounts to little more than a grand deception. The fact that peasant and farming classes predominantly supported populist movements emerging simultaneously in Russia and the United States reinforces the argument that populism is at least connected to rural life, or that it represents a reaction by materially weaker, conservative segments within rapidly modernizing societies (Müller, 2016, p. 34). Simon (2019, p. 10) argues that the concept of "the people" lies at the very center of populism. For populists, the people—rather than a specific social class, ethnic group, or nation—constitute the primary subject of politics.

According to Brubaker (2017, p. 358), scholars studying populism have defended the concept's reliability as an analytic category on three main grounds. First, populism encompasses a wide range of political projects with diverse social bases and modes of action. Second, the chronic and widespread character of practices labeled as "populist" in modern democratic contexts has increased skepticism toward the concept. Third, if populism is everywhere—as grand narratives suggest, insofar as the claim to speak in the name of the people is ubiquitous—then it is nowhere. For this reason, populism, as a morally and politically loaded term, risks losing its distinctive quality. Consequently, populism often functions less as an analytical tool in academic research than as a discursive weapon in political struggle. Brubaker, therefore, asks whether populism can still serve as a functional analytic category when scholars use it in such divergent and deeply politicized ways. Nevertheless, he concedes that while these criticisms are valid, they are not destructive, and he seeks to preserve the analytical legitimacy of populism through the concept of repertoire.

The core element of the populist repertoire is the claim to speak and act on behalf of the people. However, this claim is not unique to populism; democracy itself is founded on this assumption. For this reason, the literature emphasizes that populism typically speaks and acts in the name of the people against elites. Referring to Szacki, Gniazdowski (2024) argues that populism cannot be defined as an ideology, political doctrine, or system of thought like liberalism, conservatism, or socialism, because populism is "a syndrome composed of emotions, expectations, and vague beliefs that does not produce a specific program for social reconstruction." For this reason,

Szacki likened populism to "a faith without a theology or a church." Within this conceptual framework, it becomes necessary to clarify the relationship between populism and radicalism, which reinforce each other and are intertwined. In this regard, the analyses of Jorge Ramos-González and Pablo Ortiz (2024), as well as Gniazdowski's examination of Marx's and Laclau's reflections on radicalism, are of particular importance.

In their discourse analysis of Spain's Unidas Podemos (UP) and VOX parties—both frequently labeled as populist—González and Ortiz note that the literature often treats populism and radicalism as closely related concepts. According to the authors, many scholars argue that populism articulates the need for emancipation or revolution against elites who suppress the will of the people, thereby establishing a clear link with radicalism, which aims at profound structural transformation. However, González and Ortiz emphasize that although a selective affinity may exist between the two concepts, this does not amount to complete overlap. In their view, despite their mutual entanglement, radicalism can exist without populism, and populism can exist without radicalism.

Gniazdowski suggests that to understand Marx's reflections on radicalism, one must begin with Marx's answer to the fundamental question: "How should a political program be designed so that it captures the masses and turns them into followers?" For Marx, the answer lies in directly addressing humanity's radical needs. In Marx's own words, to be radical is "to grasp the root of the matter." Contemporary post-Marxist thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, by contrast, argue that populist politics follows a logic inherent in every process of social identity formation. From Laclau's perspective, therefore, there is no essential difference between populism and radicalism; both emerge as expressions of unmet social demands and as processes of constructing solidaristic communities. In other words, both phenomena represent the constitutive logic of politics itself.

For Marx, the practical effectiveness of a political theory in "grasping" the masses depends on its capacity to address the deepest human needs—that is, on its radicalism. In this sense, Marx's radicalism is also the source of his populism. For Laclau, by contrast, the populist quality of a political theory—its ability to mobilize broad popular masses—should be regarded as the criterion of its radicalism.

In light of these perspectives, the distinction and intersection between populism and radicalism can be understood through the nature of populist discourse. When a populist leader constructs political discourse as part of a plan signaling a gradual, long-term radical transformation, this indicates that populism and radicalism have fused within a single strategic framework.

Populist discourse often blurs the boundaries between truth and falsehood and between explicit goals and implicit objectives. Therefore, when populist discourse contains a latent transformative agenda, populism and radicalism operate simultaneously. In other words, when populism strategically instrumentalizes radicalism, the boundaries between the two concepts become

permeable. Just as one cannot speak of populism without a populist, it is likewise challenging to conceive of populism without a certain degree of radicalism.

Populism functions as a framework whose meaning is constructed by the populist; without the information and content provided by the populist, populism cannot exist as an autonomous concept. Thus, while the populist is the subject that determines populism, populism is the object that is chosen. By contrast, liberalism can be defined independently of any liberal actor; in other words, liberalism can exist conceptually without a liberal. For this reason, the populist, populism, and radicalism together form an integrated conceptual structure. Indeed, Toprak (2019, p. 10) notes that the theoretical content of populism has been debated by many scholars, including Edward Shils, Peter Worsley, and Jean Leca, yet without reaching a definitive conclusion. More daring scholars, such as Peter Wiles, who define populism as a belief or a movement, further corroborate this argument.

**Characteristics and Practices of the Populist**

- **Elections and Representation**

Populists have no inherent problem with representation or, consequently, with elections. In full or hybrid democracies, it is not possible to abolish elections altogether. As long as elections guarantee the preservation of power, they represent for the populist a renewed sense of legitimacy and strength. However, this perception changes when the populist's electoral victory is at risk. In such circumstances, the populist tends to exert pressure on the opposition and civil society while manipulating the judiciary to their advantage. In Turkey, the current government has renewed the power it gained in November 2002 through the elections of 2007, 2011, and 2015. Moreover, constitutional amendments and referenda in 2010, 2014, 2017, and 2023, as well as presidential elections, have represented major political victories for the ruling party. Nevertheless, the results of the March 31, 2024, local elections have revealed potential risks for the 2028 elections. As the government sensed these risks and increased political pressure to mitigate them, clear examples of populism have begun to emerge.

- **Claiming Sole Representation of "the People."**

A populist asserts that they alone represent the entire people. In doing so, they are well aware that they have secured the votes of the majority. Those who oppose or do not support them, in their view, have already lost legitimacy. According to the populist mindset, opponents neither recognize nor meet the needs of the people, for they are considered inherently inadequate. For the populist, "the people" are homogeneous and infallible in their preferences. Populists often claim to be fully integrated with the people. When President Erdoğan stated during the 2018 elections that "This election has shown that the love between my nation and me has grown into a state nurtured in the fire of democracy," it raises the question of which "nation" he refers to.

In another campaign speech, he began by saying, "Greetings to our mothers and women whose feet are upon paradise." In yet another speech, he expressed his unity with the people using one of populism's most effective rhetorical devices: "We set out with the belief that the time has come for Turkey."

- **The Populist's Claim to Represent the Common Good**

A populist always insists that they think only of the good of the people, the "common good." For them, this claim of virtue stems from the people's mandate granted through elections. The populist uses this mandate against anyone who opposes them. Their electoral base is the reliable, silent, and compliant majority, which they portray as the "true people." The populist uses this compliant majority against elected representatives in opposition. Former U.S. President Donald Trump exemplifies this type of populism in his attacks on former Presidents Obama and Biden, often using language that borders on insult. A similar rhetoric of denigration is seen in Turkey, where President Erdoğan refers to opposition leaders as "incompetent" or "incapable." Likewise, the opposition leader Özel can also be said to employ populist rhetoric. Despite their similar use of discourse, one speaks of the "real," while the other, as a populist, also constructs "the unreal."

- **Elections and Referenda as Tools of Power Maintenance**

As long as the populist remains in power, they stay open to elections and referenda. However, the populist resorts to referenda only when two conditions coincide:

- There is an issue of paramount importance that must be enacted or legitimized—such as regime change, extending the term of office, or pursuing an implicit political goal; and
- The populist is confident about the outcome of the referendum.

For the populist in power, the timing of referenda is determined by these two conditions. Conversely, if there is no guarantee of success, the populist may even seek to avoid elections altogether. In short, both elections and referenda are instruments for the populist to maintain power rather than mechanisms of democratic accountability.

- **Control over the State and Society**

The populist governs the state ostensibly for the people they claim to represent, including by fulfilling core campaign promises. However, this practice follows a clear logic:
> The populist has a loyal voter base. To maintain its allegiance, the populist provides targeted financial or material assistance—not to the general public but selectively through local party organizations and loyal constituencies. This ensures a stable percentage of the electorate that guarantees re-election. In addition, the populist appeals to voters by emphasizing either (a) nationalist-conservative identity or (b) religious sentiment.

intelligible.

Yet the populist never neglects another, smaller but critical group: the economic elites. The distribution of resources is always carried out with an eye on future elections. To maintain such control systematically over the years, the populist gradually captures the state bureaucracy. Loyalists are placed at every level of administration, forming a reliable chain of information and fear that extends from the lowest to the highest ranks. This network is reinforced through coordination with local party branches and provincial governors.

In this closed system, where corruption is concealed and dissenters are suppressed, sustaining the structure becomes imperative. The opposition, stripped of effective means of influence, cannot easily challenge this order. The government's actions are presented as legal, lawful, and moral, rendering dissent insignificant. The populist's primary concern is to control civil society—the only potential source of genuine resistance. Their approach to constitutional law is particularly revealing: the separation of powers is viewed as an obstacle to effective governance, and the rule of law becomes meaningless under an influential judiciary. Adherence to the constitution is conditional—respected only when it serves political objectives. This does not mean the outright rejection of the constitution but rather the willingness to amend or reinterpret it when necessary.

- **Populism and the Decline of Democracy**

From the foregoing points, it becomes evident that the populist stands far from the principles of a full democracy. As populists increase political pressure and consolidate power, authoritarian tendencies inevitably deepen. Consequently, a fully authoritarian populist can no longer be publicly debated; they refuse to participate in such discourse.

- **Performing Proximity to the People**

The populist appears close to the people, employing both body language and rhetoric to create this impression. In all settings, they imitate the people's language, behavior, and idioms to construct the perception of being "one of them." This performative proximity reinforces the claim of popular sovereignty. Whatever the populist does or says "for the people" is ultimately driven by self-interest and ideological motives. However, the populist does not hesitate to adopt or support political and economic values they do not genuinely believe in if doing so serves their objectives.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have examined populism, radicalism, and the populist actor within the framework of political science, both theoretically and through practical examples. I analyzed these concepts in terms of their definitions, core characteristics, and conceptual boundaries. While treating populism as a derivative of politics, I sought to clarify its relationship with

radicalism. The article's conceptual framework is grounded in the relationship among the state, power, and society. In this context, I argued that the state—historically existing not primarily for the people but for itself—has sought to control social forces through both coercive and ideological mechanisms.

Although populism and radicalism appear to be distinct concepts, I argued that they frequently overlap, are often employed together by populist actors, and that, at the level of political analysis, the meaning of populism cannot be determined independently of the populist subject. However, Marx and Laclau—despite specific nuances—offer differing perspectives by maintaining that these concepts can also be analytically separated.

I further contended that Gramsci's concept of consent and Foucault's understanding of power as knowledge production are particularly effective in explaining non-democratic and hybrid regimes. However, their applicability to democratic regimes remains limited. The distinction between auctoritas (the principle of authority) and potestas (the exercise of power), examined alongside Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers, was used to assess the social and political impact of populist leaders in both democratic and anti-democratic systems.

When radicalism is understood in Marx's sense as "grasping the root of the matter," it becomes possible to establish a connection between radicalism and revolution in contexts where fundamental political change is at stake. I noted that, in the discourse of radical populists, the term 'radical' often carries a negative connotation. By contrast, revolution signifies the destruction of the old and the creation of something new and of higher value, and therefore bears a more positive meaning.

Finally, I argued that populism is not comparable to concepts such as liberalism, idealism, or realism. While these frameworks can be defined by their core principles and illustrated with concrete examples, populism is a framework concept that can be described only through the discourse of the populist. In other words, populism acquires meaning only through the knowledge produced by the populist; without this, it remains merely a discursive frame. In this regard, Brubaker is correct in noting that despite the abundance of definitions, no consensual or fully satisfactory definition of populism exists. However, by emphasizing this conceptual deficiency and proposing the term repertoire instead, Brubaker himself adopts a form of analytical avoidance. By contrast, this article maintains that while the populist is the determining actor, populism itself is the determined phenomenon. Liberalism, by comparison, can be defined independently of any liberal actor; conceptually, it can exist without a liberal subject. Therefore, populist, populism, populists, and radicalism together constitute an integrated conceptual whole.

The article also addresses three fundamental reasons why the world system has failed to evolve from the nation-state to the democratic state: Expanded Scale, Obese Nation-States, and Flawed Designs. In conclusion, populism is assessed within a framework in which it is intertwined with

radicalism, shaped by populist discourse, and understood as a derivative of politics itself.

## Kaynakça

Abts, K. & Rummens, S. (2007). Populism versus Democracy, Political Studies: Vol 55, 405–424, University of Leuven, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x

Adorno, T. W. (2020). Yeni Sağ radikalizmin Veçheleri. İstanbul, Metis Yayınları.

Arditi, B. (2024). We must retire the word "populism." Criticism of populism diverts us from the real issues,

Atatüre, S. (2016). The Tyranny of the Nation State, Turkish Political Quarterly, volume 14, number 4, (100-107)

Brubaker, R. (2017). Why populism? Theory and Society, 46(5), 357–385.

Burchell, Gordon, and Miller. (1991). The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality With more lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault, edited by The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 60637, S. (1995). Edt, Habermas, 1995, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. New York: Pantheon.

Gniazdowski, A. (2021). Populism and Radicalism as Explanatory Terms with Reference to the Current Political Tendencies in Poland, file:///C:/Users/satature/Downloads/Populism_and_Radicalism_as_Explanatory_T.pdf.

Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the Prison Notebooks. New York: International Publishers.

Gramsci, A. (2000). Edt. David Forgacs, Selected Writings 1916-1935. New York University Press, New York.

Heywood, A. (2003). Political Ideologies, 3rd edition, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Jorge R.G Ortiz, P. (2024). Radicalism and populism: do they always go hand in hand? A comparative analysis of the radical left and the radical right in Spain, Journal of Political Ideologies, 29:3.

Montesquieu (2008). The Spirit of the Laws, edited by Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller & Mudde, C. (2018). How populism became the concept that defines our age, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/populism-concept-defines-our-age.

Poggi, G. (1978). The Development of the Modern State, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Popper, K. (1989). Açık Toplum ve Düşmanları, Cilt 1, İstanbul, Remzi Kitapevi.

Resmî Gazete, (2018) T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığının 10 Temmuz 2018 tarihinde yayımlanan ve 30474 sayılı 1 Nolu Kararnamesi.

Schevill, F. (1940). The Foundations of a More Stable World. Edi, Walter, H. C. Laves, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Toprak, Z. (2019). Türkiye'de Popülizm 1908-1923, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları.

Torney, S. (2019). Populism, Oneworld Publication, London.

Weber, M. (2012). Bürokrasi ve Otorite, Ankara. Adres Yayınları.