Ufficio Stampa della Provincia autonoma di Trento
Piazza Dante 15, 38122 Trento
Tel. 0461 494614 - Fax 0461 494615
uff.stampa@provincia.tn.it

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On the second day of the Trento Economics Festival, Cas Mudde an expert in the field, gave a presentation on the causes and consequences of populism.

Cas Mudde: "Populism is a thin-centered ideology"

Cas Mudde gave an in-depth presentation at the Trento Economics Festival as to what populism is, providing the audience with a definition he formulated himself that is the most widely accepted version of the term. He compared and contrasted the concept of populism in the United States, Europe, Russia and South America highlighting where populist parties were successful and where they failed. His analysis of populism emphasized the differences between the far-right and populism while also exemplifying how some “populist” parties have combined the two ideologies to create new groups.

In this evening session, Cas Mudde gave a presentation on the causes and consequences of populism. His presentation contained an explanation of what populism is, who populists are and the causes and consequences of their success. Mudde makes the claim that it is time to move away from using populism by itself and talk more about the far right.

He provided his definition of populism that he developed which is “Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté general (general will of the people).” This definition has three important elements. The word ideology, because populism is not just a strategy to win power, once they are in power this vision informs how they justify their actions and what actions they take. Populists do not consider a society that exists of different groups with different values and interests. They see society as all people have the same exact interests and values.

Mudde states, according to populists, there is only one group of that same space and that is the elite, but they are corrupt and therefore do not deserve the same protections as the people. Moralism is another key component of the definition. Moralism is the distinction of the people between the elite. It is not about the money or whether you are a part of the government. It is about pure vs. corrupt values. This is why so many wealthy people are able to sell themselves as the voice of the people. An example of this is Donald Trump or Silvio Berlusconi. They do not live as common Americans or common Italians do but Trump does things like eat at McDonalds that helps him relate to the common American.

Next, Mudde discussed populism and democracy. Populism is pro-democracy but anti-liberal democracy. The difference is that liberal democracy adds separation of powers, rule of law and minority rights. Populism is different than fascism in that it does not believe minorities should be protected. Minority rights in this context mean political minorities. In the mind of populists, there is only one group who is not the same as the people. Mudde reiterates that this group is the elite.

Mudde shares that populism can be left or right depending on the host ideology of the populist actor. He uses the Five Star Movement as an example of one of the few populist parties that does not have a host ideology. The League on the other hand, is a populist radical right party because it combines populism with nativism.

Mudde then examined populism around the globe. Mudde said that today populism is more left wing in the South and more right wing in the north both in Europe and the Americas. However, left wing populism is on a decline. He expressed that he believes South America is the heart of populism and Europe is the other birthplace. However, even though these two regions were the center of populism. In the 20th century, populism was practically dormant.

When answering the question of why populism is successful now, Mudde said anti-immigration has played a large role; important issues are not adequately addressing by elites meaning it is not whether something is actually true but whether people feel it is true; the elites are perceived as being "all the same"; and a more optimistic reason is that people have more efficacy which leads to cognitive mobilization. This means that people feel they are better informed and in fact they are better informed.

Mudde delves into the consequences of populism on liberal democracy stating that, populism creates a re-politicization of certain issues; a polarization of the political debate; and populism leads to anti-populism which leads to even further polarization. One of the most significant consequences is that populism can change a liberal democracy into an illiberal democracy and even an autocracy. He uses Viktor Orbàn as an example of this shift.

Mudde concludes his presentation with some conclusions. He concludes that populism has a long but marginal history until the late 20th century (except in Latin America). Populism is peaking in the early 21st century but its popularity continues to be over slated. However, populism can be both corrective and a threat for liberal democracy but when in power, populism will almost always lead to a deterioration of liberal democracy.

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