

## Populism and Political Palimpsest: France's Revolutionary Political Culture

### **Statement of Intent**

The purpose of this project is to answer the following questions: How does populist discourse in the French Revolution carry through to continued rebellions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? and How did this affect France's political culture? I argue that the populist discourse from the French Revolution carried through the subsequent movements and facilitated a shift in France's political culture to a republican ideology of sameness. The thesis will be divided into three sections, the first two, constituting the bulk of the analysis, as a descriptive analysis of populism in the French Revolution and subsequent revolutionary movements. The third section will look at the implications of populist discourse on French political culture.

### **Background and Significance**

Studies of the French Revolution for the last 200 years have focused on it as a key moment of nationalism in mass democratic incorporation (Auslander 2009). However, scholars in recent years have focused on a broader array of discourses with political significance, one of which is populism. Populism is a dualistic, Manichean discourse in which the "good" is the will of a good people or common man, and the "evil" is the will of the conspiring elite (Hawkins 2010). Populism calls for a return of power to the people, often calling for dramatic social reform or revolution. While the label of nationalism for the French Revolution is legitimate, I argue that there is a strain of populism found in the revolution that has previously been falsely enveloped under the name of nationalism.

The most important studies of the French Revolution focus on the ideas of the Revolution (de Tocqueville 2001; Mansel 2001), and the effect that their ideas had on the French citizenry. In previous work, I found that the French Revolution also had a significant level of populist

discourse. This raises the questions of a populist legacy for subsequent rebellions and revolutions during France's political transition to a republic. Populism, ultimately, is a way of approaching democracy, but approaching democracy in a way that is conspiratorial, Manichean, and dualistic and thusly driving a wedge between "the people" and "the elite." The French Revolution and its subsequent movements marked a key moment in France's history and in the history of democracy: it was the moment when democratic and Enlightenment theory made its way to the average person. This makes it the first moment of mass democratic incorporation for Western Europe and a shift in the country's culture (Auslander 2009). Populism is a signal and catalyst of this mass democratic incorporation, and showing how it reappeared in later echoes of the Revolution will demonstrate the effect that populism had on France's democratic incorporation and France's shifting political culture.

The existing literature on the French Revolution focuses on the nationalist elements of the Revolution (Jenkins 1990, Hayward 1991, O'Brien 1988), as it was a movement that took the idea of the nation and country and lauded it above the individual. A new flag for a new nation that would be heralded as the Fatherland: *la Patrie*. According to this nationalist theory, the citizens of France stood up for their rights and overthrew the monarchy, creating a new government for themselves because they believed in the power of their country. It is evident that the French Revolution fits this mold as the rising bourgeoisie stood up to take control of their country from the hands of the gluttonous elite; the French Revolution, in fact, brought the idea of the nation out of obscurity and into the forefront of the ideals of European patriotism and nationalism (Dann et al 1988). Nationalism is a clear theme in the French Revolution, but I argue that there is also populist discourse that can be parsed out from the nationalist discourse.

The movement that released the Declaration on the Rights of Man clearly has a vested interest in more than just the people as a nation, but also the people as in the common man. In a way, a nationalist movement is more inclusive than a populist movement, but a nationalist movement is simply an identity-based community deserving sovereignty. In *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution*, Godechot remarks: “This concept [of nationalism] was based...on the freely expressed will of the inhabitants: the right of peoples to self-determination” (Dann et al 1988, 16). This illustrates a populist sentiment (the right of the peoples to self-determination) mislabeled as a part of nationalism. Separating out the populist discourse from the nationalism of the Revolution grants the ability to understand the implications of populism on the revolution and the creation of French political culture.

I theorize that I will find a continued thread of populist discourse in the rhetoric of the rebellions of 19<sup>th</sup> century France. If this is the case, the French Revolution can be considered a case study in the long-term effects of populism on a political system, as well as evidence of populism before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A causal story connecting the French Revolution and subsequent movements will add to existing literature on the consequences of populism, adding a case study from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe during a period of mass democratic incorporation and a transition to a democratic government.

### **Methodology and Procedures**

The research for this project will utilize the holistic grading technique developed by Kirk Hawkins in *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Hawkins 2010). Holistic grading is used in order to create a holistic understanding of the discourse in the speeches; therefore, the data will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative aspect, I will look at speeches from leaders of the revolutions and code them

as extremely populist (2), moderately populist (1), or not populist (0). The scores will be averaged to determine numerically how populist the leader was. In addition, there will be a qualitative aspect examining specific lines of text to show populist elements. I have a sample of texts from the French Revolution, as well as a smaller sample of texts from the subsequent revolutions of 1830 and 1848.

### **Prospectus of the Finished Thesis**

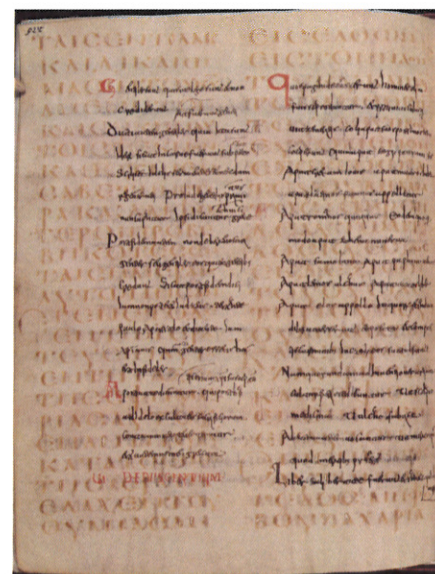
The finished thesis will be composed of three main sections, in addition to an introduction, literature review, and conclusion. Section 1 will draw heavily from my capstone research project on populist discourse in the French Revolution. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, I will show that under most periods and key leaders, the Revolution ranked highly as a populist movement. The most iconic period of the Revolution, the Reign of Terror under Maximilien Robespierre, showed the most radical populist discourse.

The presence of populist discourse in the French Revolution raises the question of its impact on subsequent movements and rebellions, specifically the July Revolution of 1830 and the Revolution of 1848. I theorize that the thread of populism continues throughout the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and propels France's search for democracy forward as the subsequent revolutions parrot the language and discourse of the first revolution. Most scholars trace the origins of populism to the late 1800s, but I argue that there is clear evidence of populist discourse tracing back to the rhetoricians of the French Revolution. Perhaps the French Revolution is the first truly populist movement, creating space for the study of the long-term effects of populist discourse.

Section 2 will attempt to replicate the findings of populist discourse in the original revolution in the discourse of subsequent revolutions throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The two critical

revolutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Revolution of 1830 and the Revolution of 1848, both of which replaced a king with a short-lived republic. Since both revolutions directly built off of the Revolution of 1789, I expect to see the same discourses carried throughout the century.

Section 3 will be a brief conclusion outlining the implications of populist discourse on the development of France's political culture. I refer here to the development of French political culture as a "political palimpsest." A palimpsest is an idea from medieval literature, when monks and scribes would reuse a piece of parchment by scraping the ink off when it was no longer needed. As seen in the picture, the parchment would be used as if it were new, but the previous layer of ink could never be fully erased. France's transition to democracy mirrors the use of a palimpsest, as each transitional regime throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted to start anew by paining over the past, but the shadow of the past could never be fully erased. This interesting dynamic between the past and future while France crafted its republican ideology opened the door for new ideas to have a lasting impact.



Populism, I argue, had this recurring influence as it reappeared in revolutions and created a permanent underlying aspect of French political culture. This populist influence supports France's republican ideology of "sameness" (Scott 2007) and the growth of radical right and populist parties in current French politics. Section 3 will be the most theoretical part of the thesis (as the first two sections will be largely descriptive analysis of speeches), as it looks at the implications of including populist discourse in the transmission of ideas throughout the creation of the modern political culture of France.

## Preliminary Research

My initial work on populism in the French Revolution was published in the Spring 2016 edition of the student political science journal *Sigma* and is the starting point for this project.

The stark differences in each period of the Revolution help to explain why the French Revolution should be considered as a populist case study. Populism can help explain these differences, as intense populism at the beginning of the Revolution can account for the descent into radicalism later. I proposed and found that the earliest periods of the Revolution will show moderate amounts of populism, peaking with the Reign of Terror, and subsiding into the more moderate and conservative Directory.

Historians, political scientists, sociologists, and other social scientists have looked at and analyzed the French Revolution since its earliest beginnings, but never yet as a case of populism. In order to provide justification and context for studying populism in the French Revolution, I performed a content analysis aimed at discovering how and if populism has been previously associated with the French Revolution. The results of the content analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Populism in the French Revolution

	Total Sources	“Populism”	Percentage
<b>Hugo Chavez</b>	3,489	126	3.61%
<b>French Revolution</b>	3,748	1	0.02%
<b>Robespierre</b>	200	0	0%
<b>Bonaparte</b>	1,373	0	0%

Source: Compiled by author, data from Academic Search Premier

The results of the content analysis are not surprising considering the focus on nationalism in the literature on the French Revolution. While a relatively significant portion of the literature on



Hugo Chavez considered him populist, only one of the many sources on the French Revolution considered it in the same realm of populism; in addition, this article did not explicitly refer to the Revolution as populist, but rather referred to the “populist reactions” to the Revolution. Two major leaders in the Revolutionary time period, Robespierre and Bonaparte, have not been considered populist in any literature thus far. The results of this quantitative content analysis are significant because it shows a gap in the existing literature and creates an opportunity for additional understanding. I believe that the gap in the literature is due not to a lack of understanding of the rhetoric of the revolution, but rather a mislabeling of the populist discourse as part of the nationalism of the Revolution.

Understanding the populist discourse in the French Revolution of 1789 leads directly into the notion of extended populist movements in the subsequent revolutions throughout the nineteenth century. I suspect that the discourses of the original revolution will be resurrected in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 that were trying so desperately to return to the values of the revolution. Only a cursory understanding of Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is required to recognize the refrain “Do you hear the people sing?” and notice the Manichean worldview of the young revolutionaries. Preliminary investigations indicate that while there is limited source material from these popular movements during the 1800s in France, there are samples available, including an archive of political documents from nineteenth century France (Robinson 2006; Hone 1830).

Finally, preliminary research regarding the potential influence of populist discourse on French political culture reveals indubitably that the French Revolution is the de facto Ground Zero for understanding French political culture. After 1789, even references to the *ancien régime* are tainted by Enlightenment values. The third section of this thesis will briefly explore the possible

connections between France's political ideology of "sameness" (Scott 2007) and populism, including the recent resurgence of radical right parties, such as France's *Front National*.

There is a discontinuity between the logic of populism and the true democratic imperative, as populism advocates popular sovereignty from the people as a homogenous body (Abts and Rummens 2007). Populism can be both a corrective and a threat for liberal democracy, but it is a threat to the democratic imperative of individuals within a populous because minority rights are undermined (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). This leads to an extreme majoritarianism, which in turn contributes to a political culture of sameness that has a difficult time stomaching differences within the populous. It is not just that there is a people with the right and responsibility to govern, but this community of people is created on the same basic identity: in this case, being French. Popular sovereignty compounded with a populist notion of the people created an underlying popular xenophobia in French political culture that left the door open for future radical right movements, such as the *Front National* (Rydgren 2003). Rydgren refers to this resurgence of the radical right as an effect from a "new racism based on culture and difference," based on a division of cultures rather than races or ethnicities. The French political identity is one built on a nationalist and populist framework, leading to a xenophobic culture of sameness.

Understanding the French Revolution as the basis for modern French political culture means that the discourses in play during the Revolution formed foundational elements of French political culture (Furet and Ozouf 1989). The language of the Revolution undoubtedly had an effect on its legacy, as Petrey (1989) stated:

"The language of the Revolution was constantly at work in the events of the Revolution, a dynamic interaction of speech and acts with profound implications for literary as well as political history."



The third section of the thesis will be an attempt to substantiate this claim and provide evidence that there was a distinct transmission of ideas that occurred and effected change in political culture, and populism played a fundamental role in this shift as it was one of the basic discourses of the Revolution.

### **Qualifications of the Investigator**

As the investigator, I am qualified to pursue research on this project because it is a topic and research design that crosses both of my areas of study. As an international relations and French studies double major, I have taken classes on research design (POLI 200, POLI 328) as well as classes on French literature, history, and culture (FREN 202, FREN 340, FREN 361, FREN 362, FREN 454R). My research project in POLI 450 focused on populism in the French Revolution, and was the catalyst and starting point for this project. In addition, I have worked as a research assistant for Prof. Kirk Hawkins since winter semester 2014, with my work focusing largely on populism and closely related topics.

### **Qualifications of Faculty Advisor**

Professor Kirk Hawkins, my faculty advisor, is qualified to pursue this project as most of his research has centered on this topic, including his 2010 publication *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*.

Professor Ray Christensen, the Honors Coordinator over the project, is qualified to pursue this project as a coordinator. He has a strong background in International Relations and comparative politics and received his PhD from Harvard University in political science in 1992.

Professor Sara Phenix, the second reader on the project, is qualified to pursue this project because she focuses on 19<sup>th</sup> century French culture. She has taught courses that cover French

culture and politics throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She received her PhD in French from Penn State University.

### **Schedule**

1. Capstone research project finished: April 2015
2. Thesis proposal submitted: October 2016
3. Research: September-October 2016
4. Thesis first draft finished: November 2016
5. Revisions: November-December 2016
6. Thesis draft submitted: February 10, 2017
7. Thesis defense completed: March 10, 2017
8. Final thesis copy uploaded: March 17, 2017
9. Graduation: April 28, 2017

### **Expenses and Budget**

I will not require outside funding for this project.

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