

Populism and the crisis of expertise: A commentary on Rogers Brubaker's essay

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic created an extraordinarily challenging environment for people to make sense of the world. As the coronavirus was spreading in devastating ways, fundamental institutional weaknesses were exposed even in well-endowed welfare democracies. The credibility of governments was tested as healthcare systems were placed under immense pressure, and authoritative medical expertise itself appeared to be collapsing. Public health officials who had rarely been in the limelight were brought to the center of public attention and scrutiny, and their expertise became viewed as political – tied to the political interests of the regime that hired them or of political groups that wanted to undermine incumbents.

The uncertainties communicated in expert messaging reflected the realities of the learning process among medical professionals, but the lack of clarity deepened public distrust in the competence of public officials. The vulnerabilities magnified by the pandemic exaggerated ordinary people's perceptions of being left alone in the dark by the very people whose job it was to identify problems and resolve them. This environment became an ideal setting for populism to thrive. After all, the essence of populism is a claim by its speakers that they stand for 'the people' against untrustworthy elites. The global pandemic heightened the need for competent and credible elites, and it also amplified the challenges elites faced in reaching the bar of competence and credibility. There is arguably no better time for populism to flourish than in an era of global pandemic that creates a complex set of interconnected crises.

The theme of populism already featured prominently in academic and public discussions before the Covid-19 crisis. The American Political Science Association (APSA) had designated 'Populism and Privilege' as the theme of the association's 2019 annual meeting. APSA is the largest professional organization in the field of political science, with over eleven thousand members in more than a hundred countries. The theme statement posted in 2018 for the 2019 annual meeting declared, 'No recent political development has been more striking than the rise to power of self-identified populist movements around the globe, whose main unifying trait is their claim to champion "the people" against entrenched selfish "elites." [...] These surging populist movements have transformed politics within nations and across nations, so they have become central to research in every political science subfield' (APSA, 2018). Much of the attention in the rapidly expanding literature written before the pandemic focused on populist leaders and their partisans. The focus was predominantly on the way autocratic-leaning leaders used a combination of anti-establishment and nationalist discourse to mobilize disenchanted electorates. Studies showed how politicians used populism to gain political power

and, once they became incumbents, to solidify and entrench their power against political challengers – usually by invoking some major crisis against which only they could protect their nation (Bieber, 2020). The social dimension of populist mobilization, involving questions about why people join different kinds of anti-elite and anti-establishment events, received less attention by comparison.

The anti-establishment protests that occurred during the coronavirus crisis revealed the need for a better understanding of the social dimension of populism. These protests expressed the depth of frustration and anger about socioeconomic inequalities. They also exposed the magnitude and mobilizational power of the disconnect between the experiences and knowledge of ordinary people and those of elites. The visibility of this gap became a major driver of anti-establishment frustration and anger during the coronavirus pandemic. The protests resulting from it have challenged scholars to look more closely and critically at the way we think about populism, and to clarify the lens we are applying to events and movements that look like populism (because they are anti-establishment) but may defy mainstream notions about it.

Rogers Brubaker took up the challenge in his recently published essay, ‘Paradoxes of Populism During the Pandemic,’ by initiating a discussion about what lessons we can learn about populism from the 2020 coronavirus anti-restriction protests in the United States (Brubaker, 2020). Since the 1990s, Brubaker has published pioneering work on social theory, always focusing on big questions and calling on scholars to think critically about their theoretical and analytical tools. In this essay, he explores the uses of populism during the pandemic – broadly understood as ‘a discursive and stylistic repertoire;’ a ‘certain way of talking, a loose complex of tropes and gestures’ (p. 74). He presents his account through an analysis that unpacks what at first glance might appear to be three paradoxes in the populism displayed by the 2020 anti-lockdown protests in the US: *the paradox of expertise; the paradox of crisis; and the paradox of protection*. According to conventional expectations, he explains, populism is hostile to expertise, dependent on crisis, and protectionist. Yet the Covid-19 anti-restriction protests happened at a time when people actively sought guidance from scientists and medical experts; and protesters mobilized not for but against those who spoke about crisis and the need for protection.

As the essay unravels each of these paradoxes, we find out that two of the three (the paradox of expertise and the paradox of crisis) are only seemingly paradoxical to mainstream expectations, and the third (the paradox of protectionism) may be a uniquely American paradox. We might be tempted to conclude that the primary takeaway from Brubaker’s analysis is a negative answer to the question of whether the coronavirus anti-restriction protests provide new knowledge about populism. His findings reaffirm the mainstream notion that populism is an anti-elite and anti-establishment stance without ideological content, and they also confirm expectations about the centrality of crisis in populist discourse.

Along the way, however, Brubaker’s analysis expands the analytical scope of the populism lens. He directs attention to the significance of the social dimension (complementing a currently predominant focus on populist political leaders, elites, and parties), highlights the significance of the *epistemic gap* between the experiences and knowledge of ordinary people and elites (which has received little attention in populism literature), and introduces concepts for the understanding of epistemic populism that have significant comparative value. My commentary will focus on these contributions.

2. The populist challenge to expertise: Creating alternative knowledge

The analysis begins by describing the extraordinary and unprecedented influence of medical experts during the Covid-19 crisis on the lives of billions around the world and presenting this intense public engagement with expertise as a ‘paradox of expertise.’ Brubaker explains that this is only an ‘apparent paradox,’ because ‘precisely this influence, this visibility, and this accessibility have made that expertise vulnerable to populist attack’ (p. 74). I would go further, however, and question the usefulness of the idea of paradox altogether in this case: If populism is expected to be hostile to expertise, then public attacks against experts meet that expectation. (A paradoxical situation might have emerged if anti-lockdown populists had supported medical experts.)

The strength of the essay’s contribution becomes more visible if we focus on Brubaker’s substantive discussion about the crisis of expertise. The essay provides a compelling account of the way the pandemic crystallized populist challenge against expertise. The epistemic gap between the opinion of medical experts (which formed the basis of lockdown measures) and the everyday experiences of people (whose livelihoods were affected by the lockdowns) generated strong populist challenge to expertise. The populism literature provides little guidance about this dimension of anti-establishment protests, and Brubaker’s essay offers helpful analytical concepts. It describes how the crisis of expertise generated a combination of ‘experiential challenge’ and ‘participatory challenge.’ An experiential challenge was triggered by the epistemic gap between local experience and expert knowledge, and a participatory challenge was built on an abundance and wide availability of expertise-relevant data that ordinary people could access, assess, interpret, and communicate with each other.

The concepts of ‘experiential challenge’ and ‘participatory challenge’ to expertise have strong analytical value. Although Brubaker carefully acknowledges the limitations of the generalizability of his observations (which focus specifically on the 2020 anti-lockdown protests in the US), I find it useful to apply his concepts comparatively within the US. I will explore the applicability of the concepts of experiential and participatory challenge to anti-racism protests occurring in the same environment during the pandemic. It was not coincidental that anti-racism protests intensified and broadened during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic exposed the way marginalized and resourceless populations (racialized minorities, the urban poor, the incarcerated, etc.) become even more vulnerable at times of complex social crisis. Thus, the protests against coronavirus restrictions and the anti-racist ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) movement became two faces of anti-establishment mobilization during the coronavirus crisis.

The experiential and participatory challenge became prominent in both anti-lockdown and anti-racism protests, but the anti-establishment stances presented by anti-lockdown protesters differed substantively from those displayed in BLM protests. Anti-lockdown protesters spoke against the authority of experts who told them what to do (e.g., wear masks, maintain physical distance, and close their shops), limiting their perceived entitlement to free movement and enterprise. These protesters challenged the credibility of the data coming from experts. They populated alternative information spaces where they created and exchanged alternative knowledge and theories about elite conspiracies.

Arguably, the Black Lives Matter protests presented an even stronger experiential challenge to establishment institutions, though the challenge was not aimed specifically at medical expertise. The 2020 BLM protests were triggered by a specific event: a widely circulating video about the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a policeman in Minneapolis. The anger and

frustration voiced by these protests, however, spoke not only about police brutality but about deeply entrenched systemic racism in establishment institutions that embody a general gap in credible knowledge about and disregard for Black experiences. An important reason why the BLM protests gained multiracial and international support was that the video created an experience for viewers of witnessing the killing in person. The wide availability of the video expanded the discursive space for speaking about the sources and consequences of the epistemic gap between Black and non-Black experiences in the US and elsewhere. Beyond voicing an experiential challenge, BLM protesters also expressed a strong participatory challenge. They voiced demand for Black actors to participate in transforming establishment institutions in a way that integrates knowledge about Black experiences – from police forces to institutions directly engaged in creating and communicating knowledge, from schools to universities and research institutions, art institutions, and so on.

3. The populist challenge to crisis management: Staging a counter-crisis

The second paradox described in the essay focuses on what the coronavirus anti-restriction protests have revealed about the role of crisis in populism. In Brubaker's words, 'instead of performing crisis, as is generally the case, populism has seemed here to be performing non-crisis, performing normality in the face of an establishment in full crisis mode' (p. 79). He explains, however, that this is only an apparent paradox: In fact, anti-lockdown protesters capitalized on crisis. They countered the discourse about the medical crisis with a discourse about a more fundamental economic and political crisis: the crisis of individual freedoms and rights. Beyond the particularities of oppression during lockdowns (i.e., the right to move freely in public spaces without masks), these protests spoke about violations of basic rights, such as the right to engage in economic enterprise, practice one's religion, and bear arms. They expressed political crisis in anti-government language that resonated among those who held libertarian or anti-progressive attitudes, and they energized a significant protest wave across the US.

Thus, Brubaker's analysis confirms that crisis is central to populism, but it also highlights populism's counter-establishment performative dimension. The anti-lockdown protests displayed how populists actively stage crises that fit their agendas. Although significant public crises might objectively be present around them, populists will choose to deny, exaggerate, and create crisis according to their political interests. The selective instrumentalization of crisis has also been described in other literature on populism (including studies cited in the essay), but Brubaker's account opens possibilities for analyzing what we might call a *populist counter-crisis*. Although he does not work with this concept, he provides insights into the mobilizing power of an alternative crisis that was staged successfully by populists in the face of a massive public health crisis they chose to deny; one that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands in the US and millions around the world.

The essay does not address the role of actors, but it is important to point out that the mobilizational aspect of an alternative crisis discourse cannot be understood without discussing the role of leadership. In the US, anti-lockdown protesters found an interested ally in former President Trump, a leader with an extraordinary capacity to communicate alternative crises to his followers. Although coronavirus anti-restriction protests were fundamentally anti-government, they did make an exception for Trump's idea of government intervention to suppress an alleged law-and-order crisis created by the BLM protests. (The role of Trump's leadership in

galvanizing this segment of the anti-establishment constituency through an alternative crisis discourse became even more evident during the last weeks of his presidency, culminating in the January 6 attack on the US Capital.)

A comparative look at the 2020 anti-racism protests is helpful if we want to understand the role of crisis in different kinds of populist mobilization. In this respect, too, anti-lockdown and anti-racism protests diverged substantively in the US, although both movements spoke about a major crisis. On the one side, anti-restriction protesters performed normality about the coronavirus and staged a political crisis about governmental overreach. On the other side, BLM protesters did not perform normality but wanted to transform the institutional status quo. The crisis BLM protests staged was not a counter-crisis that denied the coronavirus crisis. Instead, these protests spoke about systemic racism as a crisis that had been consequential for a long time but became more visible during the pandemic.

4. American populism: Does individualism trump social protection?

The third paradox explored in the essay is the anti-protectionism of the 2020 coronavirus anti-restriction protests. Brubaker explains that this displays a real paradox, 'or at least a puzzle,' about populism (p. 81). Populists are expected to be protectionists, yet these anti-lockdown protests staged strong opposition to measures that governments introduced to protect people from the pandemic. The charge that these policies violated individual freedoms was part of the political crisis these protests performed. Yet the protesters also spoke about an economic crisis resulting from the lockdowns, and in that context their lack of interest in government protection from economic losses was indeed puzzling. The US is a country where medical care is extremely expensive, and job loss easily results in loss of access to healthcare.

Brubaker's analysis of this puzzle points to anti-protectionist elements in American political culture that reinforce the anti-elite skepticism of anti-lockdown populists, which involves even disdain for soft and risk-averse elites living in a world separated from the people (p. 81). This (gendered) image of a tough and brave American may be seen as only an exaggerated version of populism's ordinary person standing against corrupt elites. But the picture of a strong man standing against soft elites expresses something stereotypically American about these protests: an individualistic stance that centers on self-reliance and resists notions of shared responsibility and social protection. (In another expression of this face of populism, research suggests that gun buying went up significantly in the US during the pandemic; see Tavernise, 2021.) In this regard, Brubaker's general disclaimer about the generalizability of his observations has substantive relevance. Yet his focus on the cultural context of anti-protectionism in the US protests has comparative value. It directs attention to the role of socialization into a particular political culture as a source of substantive differences between populists living in diverse settings.

To probe the question about substantive differences rooted in socialization, it is again helpful to look through a comparative lens within the US at the anti-racism protests that happened during the pandemic. Here, too, the anti-restriction protests and the BLM protests diverged significantly. While anti-restriction protesters spoke in libertarian language against the protection imposed by the nanny-state (with the previously mentioned exception of government intervention to suppress the BLM protests), the BLM protesters sought protection against police brutality and against the economic and social consequences of systemic racism.

They spoke about the need for government not to retreat but to transform itself, take account of Black experiences, protect Black lives, and create equal life chances.

Thus, the populism lens employed in this essay expands the analytical possibility to explore variations in anti-elite and anti-establishment mobilization. Although Brubaker's focus is specifically on the 2020 coronavirus anti-restriction protests in the US, and he emphasizes the limitations of generalizing from this case, the analytical concepts introduced in this essay are valuable for comparative research within the US and beyond. Nonetheless, important questions remain about how much breadth and depth the populism lens enables in social science research. Populism is an easily applicable framework for describing the basic tension underlying political mobilization – between those who speak for 'the people' against establishment elites and institutions. The Covid-19 pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity for scholars and ordinary people to see and act upon this tension. It exposed gaps between elites and publics in tangible ways, and it triggered multiple, sometimes conflicting, anti-establishment protests. If we want to advance the general understanding about these events beyond identifying the basic tension they are expressing, however, the conceptual repertoire of populism needs to expand. It needs to provide analytical tools that make the populism lens useful in ways that complement the conceptual repertoire offered in the rich literature on contentious politics (Tarrow, 2011). Brubaker's essay helps to expand populism's analytical repertoire in an important domain by exploring the credibility of elites engaged in knowledge production.

5. Populism as a lens for exploring the credibility of knowledge

Brubaker's focus on the epistemic dimension of populism draws attention to an area of major significance that has received relatively little attention in this literature. Questions about what counts as credible knowledge and what roles experts and social actors play in creating it have been integral to academic and public discussions for a long time. In the social sciences, debates about methodology have centered on these questions for decades. Similar discussions are present in other fields involving human subjects, including medical research. The coronavirus pandemic exposed the broader salience of these questions with unprecedented intensity, and it has also shed light on the difficulties of turning expertise into a credible source of public policy.

When experts become public figures associated with political establishments, expertise becomes politicized. Politicized expertise, in turn, becomes up for grabs in political competition. Among other dangers, public distrust of expertise can weaken the ability of scientific institutions to contribute to the welfare of societies. Moreover, autocratic leaders can capitalize on public distrust to justify political control over scientific institutions. Brubaker's essay closes on a pessimistic note about the unpredictability of the direction in which these processes involving populist challenge are evolving. He also questions the relevance of past experiences in making sense of 'the complex interpenetration of medical, economic, political, and epistemic crises' (p. 83). There is, however, an upside to the contention over the credibility of expertise. The intensity of public interest in scientific knowledge provides an opportunity for creating a better balance and a smaller divide between elite and public knowledge.

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