

'There Is No Alternative'? The role of depoliticisation in the emergence of populism

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'There Is No Alternative?'

The role of depoliticisation in the emergence of populism

Politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Jake Anthony Scott** 

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Abstract

The current literature on populism considers the causal factors surrounding the emergence of populism to be materialist and often ignores the role of elites in the precipitation of populist movements. Consequently, populism is often conceptualised as an epiphenomenon. However, it is the scope of this article that the construction of events or processes as 'beyond' public control contributes to popular resentment necessary for the emergence of populism. In comparison to this construction (encapsulated best in Margaret Thatcher's proclamation, 'there is no alternative'), democratic politics involves an appeal to the constituency most often associated with populism, 'the common people' and 'common sense'. This article, therefore, will proceed along the following lines: first, I establish the theoretical model for analysis with reference to Margaret Canovan's paper 'Trust the People!'; following this, sections 'Depoliticisation as "Pragmatic Politics"' and 'Common sense as "Redemptive Politics"' look at different permutations of the two sides of this theoretical model, respectively Depoliticisation, and an appeal to 'common sense', before turning back in the section 'Applying and illustrating the framework' to Canovan's theoretical framework to understand how the interaction between these two permutations can contribute to a populist reaction. The final section presents an illustrative example of this clash – immigration in the United Kingdom.

Keywords

common sense, depoliticisation, Ernesto Laclau, Margaret Canovan, populism

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Introduction

This article argues that the political strategy of depoliticisation contributes to the emergence of populist movements. It does so by establishing the theoretical framework laid

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out by Margaret Canovan (1999) in her paper, ‘Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’. From this, the inherent tension between pragmatic, rules-based governance, and redemptive, action-based politics is used to explain how depoliticisation is contested by populism, through an appeal to ‘common sense’ politics. This is done by defining as distinct concepts, in turn, depoliticisation and common sense, before returning to the theoretical framework, and illustrating the tension between the two with the contemporary issue of immigration in the British polity.

Developments in the literature on depoliticisation have considered the relationship between such political strategy and the broad field of ‘anti-politics’. Yannis Stavrakakis (2018: 54, emphasis in original), for instance, has suggested that depoliticisation is actually a part of ‘postdemocracy’, which is ‘a socio-political *process* leading towards a depoliticized polity where decision making is increasingly *slipping away from popular control* and accountability away from the people as *demos*’. This postdemocracy, Stavrakakis argues, is a contributing factor to the emergence of anti-politics. Bridging this ‘research gap’ and taking on a broader conception of ‘anti-politics’, however, is Colin Hay et al.’s (2017) consideration of the link between depoliticisation and anti-politics. Similarly, Camila Vergara (2019: 14) has argued that populism can act as a reaction to ‘systemic corruption and the immiseration of the masses’ and ‘preventing the further entrenchment of oligarchy’, while Malte Frøslee Ibsen (2019) utilises Jürgen Habermas’ theory of a ‘legitimation crisis’ in the ‘age of globalised capitalism’ to suggest a reaction to elite entrenchment can precipitate a populist movement.

However, putting aside the essentially contested nature of populism, little research has been done into the ways in which ‘postdemocracy’ or depoliticisation more specifically can contribute to a particularly *populist* form of anti-politics (with the exception of Claudia Landwehr (2017), who makes reference to it only briefly). If declining engagement with politics in general is indeed a symptom of anti-politics, how then can populism be conceived of as ‘anti-politics’ when populist movements have entered the Oval Office (Donald Trump), left the European Union (Brexit), and secured power from Hungary (Fidesz), to Greece (Syriza), and Spain (Podemos)? It is the argument of this article that while depoliticisation *can* lead to declining political engagement *in the short term*, the discourse underpinning depoliticisation can fail to entrench itself, thus taking on a technocratic face and clashing with the discourse underpinning democratic legitimacy: ‘common sense’. This tension fosters a long-term *frustration* with politics that in turn contributes to an atmosphere in which populism can thrive.

The two faces of democracy

To first understand how the tension between depoliticisation and common sense can contribute to the emergence of a populist moment, this section reconstructs Margaret Canovan’s paper ‘Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’. In this article, Canovan differentiates between two faces of democracy: the ‘redemptive face’ and the ‘pragmatic face’, and modern democracy as the point of intersection between the two. However, I do not believe depoliticisation and common sense conceptually map onto these two faces *exactly*; rather, Canovan’s utilisation of Michael Oakeshott’s distinction between the ‘politics of faith’ and the ‘politics of scepticism’ alongside the two faces of democracy illustrates the significance of tension between two democratic traditions and how they can contribute to populism specifically. Once this theoretical framework is established, sections ‘Depoliticisation as “Pragmatic Politics”’ and ‘Common sense as

“Redemptive Politics” define the concepts of ‘depoliticisation’ and ‘common sense’, before returning in the section ‘Applying and illustrating the framework’ to show how these distinct but related concepts can be understood as synchronic expressions of the tension that Canovan identifies.

Drawing on the work of Oakeshott, Canovan (1999: 8, emphasis added) differentiates between the ‘politics of faith’, which conceptualises politics as ‘a matter of achieving perfection or salvation in this world’, with ‘the assumption . . . that governmental action can bring it about’, and the ‘politics of scepticism’, that is ‘suspicious of power and of enthusiasm, and has much lower expectations of what governments can achieve . . . for this style of politics, *the rule of law is crucial*’. Although Oakeshott is aware of these two styles of politics as ‘abstractions from a concrete practice’, Canovan develops this theory to suggest that, as indicated earlier, modern democracy lies at the intersection between these two styles of politics that presents ‘two faces’: one is redemptive, relying on the maxim of *vox populi, vox dei* (government of the people, by the people, for the people); and the other is pragmatic, ‘a system of processing conflicts without killing each other’ (Canovan, 1999: 9–10) and embodies political ideals.

The contrast between these two styles of politics, Canovan (1999: 10–11) argues, has three related principles. The first is the distinction between politics as a ‘way of coping peacefully with conflicting interests’, typically found, in particular, institutions and practices that make ‘power relatively accountable’, and democracy as a repository of aspirations to the betterment of human civilisation through political means. The consequence of this principle is that democracy is christened with a ‘halo of sacred authority’ as a way of ensuring public engagement and, therefore, its functional ability. In summary, ‘pragmatism without the redemptive impulse is a recipe for corruption’ – without a belief in the capability of democracy for securing a better life for the *demos* (however that might be specified) that spurs citizens into political engagement, the governing elite can become detached from those they represent, and pursue agendas antithetical to the interests of the ‘common people’.

The second principle, which follows logically from the first, notes that ‘the content of democracy’s redemptive promise is power to the people’ but this exists ‘in deep and inescapable conflict with democracy viewed in the cold light of pragmatism’ and therefore concerns ‘the contradiction between the power and the impotence of democracy’ (Canovan, 1999: 11–12). This ideal of popular sovereignty persists elsewhere in Canovan’s (2002: 34) work: for instance, the exalted constituency of democracy as ‘the people’ acts in two ways: one, it forms a boundary between ‘the people’ and ‘the power elite’ as well as those beyond the boundaries of the polity; two, it identifies ‘an entity, a corporate body with a continuous existence over time’. However, this ‘continuous existence’ of a corporate body is complex; it is not to ossify the people into a single, permanent constituency, but rather identify (as noted earlier) the locus of the *ideal of popular sovereignty* (Canovan, 2005: 91–92):

The problem of popular sovereignty is therefore the attribution of ultimate political authority to a ‘people’ that manages somehow to be both a set of concrete individuals, taking action in a particular place at a particular time, *and* an abstract collective entity with a life beyond such limitations. (Canovan, 2005: 91–92)

For Canovan (2005: 121), this ideal of popular sovereignty is intimately bound up with political action by drawing on the work of John Locke: ‘the people’ is a contingent group,

existing in the abstract until a crisis forces individuals to associate to *restore* a vision of authority that has been compromised since the social contract was entered into. It is not, therefore, 'a timeless abstraction but . . . an outcome of political mobilisation . . . an occasional community of action.'

This specification of the people as the constituency of democracy acts to locate the 'capacity for renewal' specified in the first principle within this constituency; however, populism exploits this by identifying the gap between the promise and the performance of democratic politics, to argue that the promised project of politics has been corrupted by a force external to 'the people', and only this contingent community can act to restore that promise.

Finally then, we turn to the third principle: a perception that the redemptive power of politics, as achievable through democratic exercise, has been compromised by corruption, causing alienation between the people and democratic institutions:

in so far as democracy's promise of popular power is made good, this can be done only through institutions *that make power effective and lasting*. But entwined with the redemptive strand of democracy is a *deep revulsion against institutions that come between the people and their actions*. (Canovan, 1999: 13, emphasis added)

This conception that institutions can come between the people and the realisation of popular sovereignty suggests that populism is not in itself anti-institutions, but relies on the capacity of popular sovereignty's corrective power to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate institutions – and those institutions that are illegitimate are those that remove power from 'the people'. However, without these institutions, government cannot function, so democracy is caught in an unresolvable paradox; 'populists appeal past the *ossified institutions* to the living people: proclaiming the *vox populi* unmediated' (Canovan, 1999: 13–14, emphasis added).

Having identified these three principles of tension within modern democracy, the subsequent sections define depoliticisation and common sense, respectively, to show how they can each correspond (without, as mentioned earlier, mapping *exactly* on) to Canovan's 'two faces' of democracy.

Depoliticisation as 'Pragmatic Politics'

In this section, I attempt to draw out an operationalisable conception of depoliticisation, and show how it corresponds to Canovan's identified 'pragmatic' (i.e. rules based) politics. By examining the broad literature on depoliticisation, I conclude this section by arguing that Wood and Flinders' definition, with improvements from Jenkins and Landwehr, is the most operationalisable, especially for the concerns of this article.

Conceptualised by Pete Burnham (2001: 128–129, 134–136), depoliticisation is 'the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making', thus 'shielding the government from the consequences of unpopular policies', emphasising it is *not* the 'direct removal of politics from social and economic spheres or the simple withdrawal of political power or influence' but as a 'governing strategy'. Furthermore, governments are insulated from the *political* consequences of notionally *unpopular* policies, by emphasising an 'automaticity' and the necessary nature of relying on a strong, rules-based system that allows governments to 'rebut demands made by domestic interest groups, indicating "our hands are tied"'. Consequently, governments are not *weakened*, but rather

benefit from a 'distancing effect' that strengthens the programme to which that government is committed.

Expanding on Burnham's originally materialist focus of depoliticisation, Buller and Flinders (2006: 295–297) suggest depoliticisation is better understood as:

the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision (Buller and Flinders, 2006: 295–297)

emphasising that the distinction between politicised and depoliticised fields ought not to be understood as a binary distinction but a 'rebalancing or shift in the nature of governance relationships that is matter of degree'. Laura Jenkins (2011: 158–159) rightly identifies that depoliticisation can, therefore, be understood as 'an attempt to *remove* something – whether this is to remove responsibility, politics or, more extensively, human agency' but critiques Buller and Flinders' focus on governance, to in turn suggest agency ought to be included in the conceptual definition of depoliticisation as 'wherever there is agency that impacts on others there is politics'.

This desire to move 'beyond the governmental' is reflected in Matt Wood and Matthew Flinders' (2014) analysis of depoliticisation. Wood and Flinders (2014: 151) note the concern with 'a shift to technocratic governance and models of decision making . . . and a more subtle set of concerns regarding the essence of democratic politics and the willingness or capacity of politicians to take inevitably unpopular decisions'. Addressing this conceptual need to move beyond static, state-based conceptualisations of politics, Wood and Flinders (2014: 154) suggest that depoliticisation ought to be understood as 'a rebalancing or shift in the nature of governance relationships that involves not only the displacement of decisions from politicians, but the exercise of power by many non-state actors as well'. To buttress this understanding, Wood and Flinders propose three faces of depoliticisation: governmental, societal, and discursive.

The first face, governmental depoliticisation, is specified as 'a state-centric or institutionalist approach that examines the withdrawal of *politicians* from the direct control of a vast range of functions, and the rise of *technocratic forms* of governance' (Wood and Flinders, 2014: 156, emphasis added). This face, therefore, draws on Burnham (2001) and Buller and Flinders (2006), focusing on the reliance on what Burnham (2001: 134) specified as 'rule-based systems' and Buller and Flinders (2006: 300) called 'institutional depoliticisation' that would 'place certain issues beyond the conventional political arena'. This reliance on 'esoteric knowledge and a degree of operational flexibility rarely found in bureaucratically dense ministerial departments' facilitates a 'technocratic turn' in governance that privileges elite knowledge over (the focus of section 'Common sense as "Redemptive Politics"') 'common sense' in order to achieve long-term goals – Buller and Flinders' chosen example being the nationalisation programme of the 1945–1951 Labour Government in the United Kingdom.

'Societal depoliticisation' moves beyond the narrow state-centric view of the first face of depoliticisation, to take into account social actors, and 'the existence (or not) of social deliberation across and between the various "spheres of contingency" . . . that acknowledge the existence of choice'. To this end, Wood and Flinders (2014: 159, emphasis added) draw on the definition presented by Harder, of societal depoliticisation as 'the process by which the social deliberation surrounding a political issue gradually erodes to the extent that it effectively becomes depoliticised in the sense that *the existence of*

choices concerning that issue are no longer debated' and, therefore, a depoliticised polity would exhibit 'very little public debate . . . alongside a very barren political landscape in terms of public engagement and social dynamism'.

The consequence, argue Wood and Flinders (2014: 160), is a "choice-less democracy" in which the only questions revolve around who to select to manage a predestined political project'. We can see a similar situation to governmental depoliticisation in that technocratic governance is emphasised, with a thin veneer of responsiveness in the process of choosing the 'project managers'. Indeed, this overlap is highlighted by Wood and Flinders (2014: 161), who note that

the various 'faces' are rarely independent or distinct, but tend to exist in a Janus-faced manner whereby the transfer of a function away from ministers (that is, *governmental depoliticisation*) is fuelled, or at the very least facilitated, by a broader process of *societal depoliticisation* (delegation of decision making goes hand in hand with the decline of issues as salient matters in societal debate). (Wood and Flinders, 2014: 161)

Finally then, the third face of depoliticisation, 'discursive depoliticisation', involves a return to Jenkins' criticism (highlighted earlier) of the state-centric focus of much of the literature. Jenkins (2011: 160) defines depoliticisation thus:

Forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or *removing* contingency. To engage in a strategy of depoliticisation is also to perform a political act, as it generates the restriction, removal or suppression of our capacities for autonomy, as well as the preservation of a particular strategy or force. (Jenkins, 2011: 160)

The distinctiveness of the 'discursive depoliticisation face' 'lies in discursive depoliticisation's focus . . . on ideas and language' and occurs when '*the debate* surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal, and hence changed in content' (Wood and Flinders, 2014: 161). The focus of this face is, therefore, on the denial of choice, by denying the conflictual nature of politics and asserting a hegemonic formation as *the* expression of that society's identity; in this analysis, the discursive face of depoliticisation draws on the work of Chantal Mouffe (2013: 2–3, emphasis added) to suggest that 'the political' is 'the antagonistic dimension which is inherent to all human societies' and, therefore, 'political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved *by experts*. Proper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives.'

Consequently, discursive depoliticisation is actually a *denial* of the political nature of social issues by asserting that there is 'no alternative' to the choice being privileged by 'expertise' through a use of language that denies subjectivity in political debates (Jenkins, 2011: 168). This 'closing down' of debate by insisting on the lack of choice precludes any discussion surrounding the topic, and therefore, brings the topic out of 'the political'. It must be remembered, however, that depoliticisation is *itself* political, in the act of determining those issues that *can* be discussed (politicised) and those that *cannot* (depoliticised) (Hay et al., 2017). We can see, therefore, that 'the politics remains but the arena or process through which decisions are taken is altered' (Buller and Flinders, 2006: 296).

Crucially, it must be remembered that depoliticisation (in the governmental sphere, at least) is a governing method that seeks to avoid blame for the consequences of unpopular decisions, and in turn, deepen the popular support for that government through

blame-deflection. Finally, we can summarise the process of depoliticisation thus (Landwehr, 2017: 51–52):

A political decision is: a) taken by a legislator or government that, from a normative perspective, should be democratically legitimate; b) a contingent choice between alternative options for action; and c) collectively binding for a specified community. Depoliticisation thus takes place where any of these three properties of decisions is lacking or denied. (Landwehr, 2017: 51–52)

Landwehr's definition thus incorporates the move beyond the 'purely governmental' focus to include both Jenkins' concern for agency and contingency, and Wood and Flinders' three-face argument. Significantly, mapping onto Landwehr's definition specified earlier, the policy field that is depoliticised is no longer thought to be under the control of the representatives that the *demos* have entrusted to affect that policy field: a responsiveness-link is severed, but crucially, *no other link is established*, meaning (a) the *demos* is left confused as to where the ability to affect that policy field lies, (b) the contingency of choice is denied, creating a sense in the *demos* that their (innate) option is *illegitimate*, and (c) the consequences of the decisions taken by an ostensibly undemocratic agency neither affect everyone equally nor allow for an inclusive discussion in the rectification of such inequality.

We can see here how depoliticisation can precipitate an emotive response of confusion with regard to the *promises* of democracy and the *reality* of depoliticised governance. However, depoliticisation *alone* is insufficient to explain the emergence of a specifically populist expression of 'anti-politics'; there must be a countervailing discourse that motivates 'the people' to see depoliticisation through the lens of a populist movement.

Common sense as 'Redemptive Politics'

Currently, there is very little established literature on the political salience of 'common sense', especially outside the literature on populism, excepting Sophia Rosenfeld's (2011) *Common Sense: A Political History*. It will be pertinent, therefore, to take steps to define what we mean by 'common sense' by drawing, as Kate Crehan (2016) has, on the work of Antonio Gramsci, its role in populism, and how it relates to, *but remains distinct from*, depoliticisation.

Gramsci's (1971: 419, 421) conception of 'common sense' traces the genealogy of the term to establish that 'common sense applies the principle of causality' and 'identifies the exact cause, simple and to hand, and does not let itself be distracted by fancy quibbles and pseudo-profound, pseudo-scientific metaphysical mumbo-jumbo' with regard to philosophical enquiry. Gramsci also refers to common sense as 'the conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individual of the average man is developed . . . it is the "folklore" of philosophy'. Significantly, 'it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is'. This is summed up best thus, common sense is the 'spontaneous philosophy of the multitude'.

From this, we can draw out a number of assumptions regarding 'common sense': it is held by the 'common people', it is anti-intellectual, and it is unsystematic. Each of these assumptions is interrelated, and revolves around a distinction between intellectuals and non-intellectuals that is best explicated through a summary of each. The first of these, that

common sense is held by the ‘common people’, appears obvious in the etymology of each phrase, but the distinct conception that Gramsci holds is one of the ‘uncritical conception of the world’ (Nemeth, 1980: 75–76) held by the masses. In this understanding, ‘common sense’ is not derived *from* the people, but held *by* the people as fragmentary residues of multiple philosophies that have been and gone (Simon, 2015: 22–23). As Rosenfeld (2011: 4) summarises, the term evolved in such a way as to mean ‘certain basic, largely unquestioned notions . . . common (in the sense of shared or jointly held) to common (in the sense of ordinary) people simply because of their common (again, shared) natures and, especially, experiences’.

Second, common sense is not only unintellectual but *anti*-intellectual: this may be a bold assertion but, as we have seen, common sense rejects ‘metaphysical mumbo-jumbo’ in favour of (over-)simplified responses to philosophical questions. As Kate Crehan (2016: 48, emphasis added) observes, part of this understanding arises out of Gramsci’s distinction between the intellectuals and the ‘subalterns’ (subordinate groups), whose possession of common sense:

is a multistranded, entwined knot of, on the one hand, clear sightedness (good sense [*buon senso*]), which is *not fooled by the sophistry of spin doctors*; but, on the other, blinkered shortsightedness clinging defensively *to the comfortable and the familiar*. (Crehan, 2016: 48, emphasis added)

Common sense, therefore, is not an absence of thinking about the ‘real world’, but a way of thinking that translates experiences in the ‘real world’ into intelligible understandings, allowing common people to navigate through it. Why then is this anti-intellectual? I mean here, a specifically Gramscian conception of the intellectual as a progressive, Marxist thinker, whereas forms of ‘peasant resistance’ were typically disorganised, reactionary, and backward-looking as opposed to forward-looking (Crehan, 2016: 29). As a result, common sense views intellectuals with suspicion – however, it must be remembered (and is frequently forgotten due to the fragmentary nature of the *Notebooks* themselves) that Gramsci valued the *organic* intellectual, and so this understanding of common sense as anti-intellectual is not *praised* by Gramsci, but is part of his initial diagnosis as to why the working class has failed to align with Communists (the phenomenon of ‘false consciousness’; see Eyerman, 1981).

Significantly, this idea of ‘false consciousness’ links to the third assumption regarding common sense, that of being unsystematic. This is due to the fact that what is thought to be ‘common sense’ was not received, created or experienced evenly, or systematically, and is therefore (as noted earlier) residual; ‘common sense is a chaotic aggregate of disparate conceptions, and one can find there anything one likes’ and that

what was said above does not mean that there are no truths in common sense. It means rather that common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multiform concept, and that to refer to common sense as confirmation of truth is nonsensical. (Gramsci, 1971: 422–423)

However, this unsystematic nature is, for Gramsci, a redeeming trait: ‘embedded within the chaotic confusion of common sense that is both home and prison, he identifies what he terms *buon senso* (*good sense*)’ and these fragments of ‘good sense’ as ‘the seeds from which new political narratives emerge’ (Crehan, 2016: 47–49). The relationship of intellectuals to presumptions of common sense, therefore, is to ‘continually question them,

dragging into the light of day all the implicit, taken-for-granted assumptions buried within that which presents itself as simple reality' (Crehan, 2016: 52).

We can see how 'common sense' is conceived of within a Gramscian understanding of power relations and the relationship between common people and intellectuals: the reactionary nature of those who hold 'common sense' is derived from an uncritical acceptance of those precepts that have been experienced in common by a particular group, and that experience can in turn be constitutive of the group itself, reinforcing a particular horizon of inclusion. However, moving away from Gramsci, we need to understand the nature 'common sense' plays in populism. For instance, Cas Mudde (2004, 2007, 2017) has placed significant emphasis on the concept of the 'General Will' in populism, but rather than relying on a purely Rousseauian conception instead notes that:

the notion of the general will employed by populist actors and constituencies is based on the notion of 'common sense'. This means that the general will is framed in a particular way, which is useful for both aggregating different demands and identifying a common enemy. (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 505)

In this, populist actors (and populism by extension) *rely* on the incoherence of common sense to bind together a loose alliance of disaggregated groups possessing different views and goals, but all of whom consider their own knowledge as 'common sense'.

This centrality of 'common sense' to populism can be best understood through Ernesto Laclau's work on the centrality of empty signifiers to a popular identity, the presence of which 'both expresses and constitutes an equivalential chain'. By this, Laclau (2005: 70, 129) means the circumstance in which the recognition of a multitude of difference (a plurality of groups) results in the closing of a differential space through expulsion of (at least) one of these different groups, but resulting in an 'irretrievable fullness' by virtue of the fact that those *included* groups share equivalence in their *difference* to the excluded group and simultaneously an unresolvable internal tension due to their difference to one another. In order to overcome this tension, the empty signifier acts as a term that each of these different groups can identify with, but engage in contest to signify as their own values or identity, and act as the hegemon (Laclau, 1996: 43).

To make this terminologically dense system of ideas more intelligible, the term 'common sense' in populism draws on its own incoherence to mean a multitude of things to a multitude of groups simultaneously, and is never articulated clearly, because 'common sense' is drawn from the experience of a heterogeneous 'common people' who are identifiable only by virtue of what they are *not*: the powerful. To return, then, to Gramsci, we see how populism's utilisation of 'common sense' is not the intellectual revolution Gramsci imagined, but the valorisation of an incoherent residue of philosophies that are conflictual but legitimate by virtue of their authenticity (Stanley, 2008: 105). Despite this, 'common sense' is also a rhetorical flourish designed to loosely constitute a 'people', not to provide any coherence to this 'people' (for to do so would risk the incoherence of 'common sense') but to delineate the boundaries between those thought to be *the* people and those thought not to be (the elite), in the same way Laclau conceived of the closure of a differential space by excluding one of those differentials.

Some might reasonably argue that common sense is, in itself, a depoliticising term; especially in regard to the discursive face of depoliticisation, 'common sense' can present certain assumptions and cultural constructs as inviolable and unquestionable, by virtue of their very commonsensical nature (Rosenfeld, 2011). This argument is certainly worth

considering, but there are two concepts that I wish to bring out of the idea of common sense explored above in order to clarify the depoliticising rhetoric of common sense, and therefore reveal its limits: the centrality of incoherence and the inability to move beyond the discursive face of depoliticisation/into the governmental face of depoliticisation.

First, the centrality of incoherence makes the depoliticising nature of common sense difficult; indeed, it does reflect a certain experience of ‘the people’ (as explained earlier) but must intentionally avoid doing so in any *authoritative* way, for to do so would be an attempt at coherence and ultimately risk the loose aggregation formed around ‘common sense’. After all, the incoherent nature of ‘common sense’ reflects an unevenness in both time and space: what is considered to be ‘common sense’ in one time might be thought of as unconventional in another (Crehan, 2016: 45). Similarly, even within that temporal setting, a plurality of social identities makes uniform declarations of ‘common sense’ difficult, as each group would experience either different phenomena, or the same phenomenon in different ways (thus, in turn, constructing a differentiated ‘common sense’ that would reinforce this difference in ‘filtering’ experience): ‘every social class has its own common sense’ (Gramsci, 1985: 420). If depoliticisation can be thought of in terms of strategy (section ‘Depoliticisation as “Pragmatic Politics”’ earlier), there must be a certain degree of coordination and systematicity behind it in order to close off certain contingencies, but this cannot be done if the very knowledge needed for a depoliticising strategy is incoherent.

From this, we can see the dividing lines between ‘common sense’ and ‘depoliticisation’, principally: depoliticisation is strategic in closing-off contingent options, (typically) elite-led and concerned with technocratic (rules-based) knowledge; common sense is unsystematic, held by ‘ordinary’ people, and fragmentary. Furthermore, common sense, though it might be ‘depoliticised’ in a certain sense (a hegemonic assertion of what is ‘good knowledge’), it cannot fit the framework of depoliticisation identified earlier as it does not adhere to the strategic requirements of coherence and systematicity. In addition to this, a ‘successful’ depoliticisation strategy would typically align the governmental, societal, and discursive faces in the same direction in order to fully close off contingencies and deepen the support, or insulate the discontent, held for a governing party.

How, then, can we understand the circumstances wherein two different faces of depoliticisation not only misalign, but clash? By this, I mean a situation where the governmental face of depoliticisation pursues an agenda considered to be at-odds with the discursive or societal faces. More significantly for the study of populism, why does this tension seek to resolve itself in a *populist* manner? In order to understand this, in the next section, I return to Canovan’s theory of the ‘two faces of democracy’ to understand how the clash between depoliticisation and common sense can contribute to the emergence of populism.

Applying and illustrating the framework

Finally, having defined the respective terms ‘depoliticisation’ and ‘common sense’, this section examines their correspondence to the model established in the section ‘The two faces of democracy’, in three dimensions: one, the rhetorical device of ‘common sense’ acts to constitute ‘the people’; two, depoliticisation mirrors closely those ‘ossified institutions’; and three, the divergence between the two reveals a tension that can (but does not necessarily) lead in a populist direction. To illustrate this, the contemporary issue of immigration in the British polity shows how, when a topic is ‘depoliticised’,

while continuing to be resisted by appeals to ‘common sense’, a reaction against the depoliticisation can move in a populist direction.

First, if the redemptive face of democracy requires an appeal to popular sovereignty in order to ‘lubricate the machinery’ of institutional politics, then the rhetorical device of ‘common sense’ acts to provide two political solutions: one, it appeals to an already-constituted constituency, and two, it provides a critical discourse relevant to the structures of power. These two are actually different dimensions of the same act, that of specifying the contingent constituency of ‘the people’ (Canovan, 2005) capable of providing the legitimacy required by the pragmatic face of politics. In other words, if institutions must be christened with the legitimacy of popular sovereignty by regular recourse to the constituency of ‘the people’, then the rhetorical device of ‘common sense’ appealed to by populism and populist actors specifies how that legitimacy might be re-conferred. Furthermore, due to the specifications of common sense identified in the section ‘Depoliticisation as “Pragmatic Politics”’, the constitution of the people also specifies those illegitimate sources of authority – those who corrupted the institutions in the first place. As a result, common sense acts to provide the horizon of closure that Laclau identifies as necessary for a populist movement. Finally, the incoherence of common sense identified in the section ‘Depoliticisation as “Pragmatic Politics”’ is circumvented in the act of opposition to corruption – as Ben Stanley (2008: 103, emphasis added) has specified, involving ‘the people’ as inherent to a ‘binary ontology’ allows populism to avoid the complex process of decontesting the term, and instead creates a structure wherein ‘any identification of the people will involve at the same time an identification of the elite’. By avoiding decontestation and remaining committed to a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity, “the elite” of populism is neither the bulwark of the social order championed by conservatives; nor the enlightened legislative and administrative cadre of liberalism. Rather, its fundamental distinguishing feature is its adversarial relationship with the people’.

Second, while Canovan is principally concerned with the corruption of institutions through a lack of recurrent legitimation through popular sovereignty, her illustrative example of institutions as particularised versions of ‘a highly contingent collection of institutions and practices’ can be re-applied to the practice of depoliticisation. To recap, as specified in the section ‘The two faces of democracy’, depoliticisation can be understood as the introduction of, or reliance on, rules-based systems to regulate behaviour and close off contingencies of choice in such a way that a responsiveness-link is severed without replacement, to delegitimise the demos’ choice of action, and produce an unequal field of outcomes in the depoliticised policy field (Jenkins, 2011; Landwehr, 2017). In turn, this fits those specifications by Canovan of an ‘ossification’ of practices that obscures the capacity for popular sovereign action by ‘coming between’ the people and the policy field they wish to influence. Furthermore, as Buller and Flinders specify, the reliance on esoteric knowledge that accompanies the ossification of practices no longer reliant on the legitimising constituency of popular sovereignty results in a technocratic turn – it is relatively easy to see how depoliticisation, especially in the context of complex institutional practices, can fit this specification. More importantly, this ossification is not necessarily institutional, and therefore intentional; Canovan specifically observes that ‘governments cannot in fact control economic conditions’ (as an example), which corresponds to that phrase identified by Burnham – ‘our hands are tied’. Even if, therefore, ‘the people’ are mobilised to confer the legitimacy of popular sovereignty onto political actors, their capacity to return control over that policy field to the popular sphere (‘repoliticisation’) is

in question. Consequently, understanding depoliticisation's role in Canovan's theory allows us to open up the examination of populist sentiment to beyond the mere interaction with institutionalised actors, but look beyond that focus to understanding populism's interaction with non-institutional processes.

Third and finally, bringing these two concepts together to understand their divergence reveals the way in which a depoliticised policy field can contribute to populism emerging as a distinct form of anti-politics. Both Hay et al. and Stavrakakis have drawn the comparison between anti-politics and populism, with Stavrakakis suggesting that (based on an agonistic reading of democracy – see the section 'The two faces of democracy', Mouffe, 2013), 'populism should be primarily understood . . . as a specific type of discourse or ideology that claims to express popular interests . . . against an "establishment" or elite, which is seen as undermining them and forestalling their satisfaction' (Stavrakakis, 2018: 52), while Hay et al. (2017: 4) note that 'anti-politics can refer to insurgent populist politicians claiming that they can push the state to work better through more "authentic" politics'. Each of these claims correspond in different ways to the preceding discussion: Stavrakakis' claim, for instance, indicates towards the 'type of discourse' that populism rests on, which I have attempted to specify as 'common sense', against an unspecified, indeterminate elite that has a specified role ('undermining them [the people] and forestalling their satisfaction'); and Hay's claim that populism aims towards a more 'authentic politics' involves an implicit appeal to authenticity as the basis of legitimacy, which in turn, relies on a specific constituency identified as 'authentic' (which I have shown 'common sense' works to do). Significantly, Eatwell and Goodwin (2018: 109–110) have remarked that 'the gap in representation would matter less if the rulers and ruled had broadly similar views about key issues, especially those that have risen up the agenda'.

In summary, a policy field becomes depoliticised as a result of a multitude of different potential factors, two of which I have indicated in this article: the ossification of contingent institutions (Canovan, 1999), and reference to uncontrollable global processes that localised politics is too constrained to handle (Burnham, 2001). Either way, the outcome is that the pragmatic face of democracy is seen to 'override' the redemptive face, and sever the connection between the people (constituted through a negative process in the use of a discourse of common sense in opposition to highly technocratic or esoteric knowledge) and either the institutions capable of restoring this severed connection, or the policy fields those institutions were, in their first instance, established to address (not, significantly, 'control'). It is salient, for instance, that Stanley made reference to the 'enlightened legislative and administrative cadre of liberalism' in his identification of the constituency of 'the elite'; if depoliticisation becomes a process of administration, rather than deliberation, then there forms a perception of democratic politics as entirely beyond the control of the constituency it is designed to draw legitimacy from: the people.

Finally, I here illustrate the framework I have laid out above with a contemporary example in the British polity; immigration. When Canovan wrote her paper in 1999, she commented that 'a topic that agitates populists in many Western states' is 'the place of criminal justice in a democracy'; that topic feels less salient now, but the remarks she made remain just as applicable. The idea of 'populist mobilisation against the dead letter of the law' and the 'appeal past the ossified institutions to living people' (Canovan, 1999: 14) are reminiscent of the claims that 'the EU ordered it and our politicians wouldn't stand up to them' (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 144) or that 'decisions

over key issues moved up to the European level, longer and less transparent chains of delegation reduced the accountability of those who were making the decisions' (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 98). One policy field in which this divergence can be detected is immigration; here, I show how the depoliticisation of the topic can be observed, followed by the discursive construction of the reaction to the topic as 'commonsensical', and end by arguing that the value-divide over the topic made a populist reaction a likely outcome.

First, though the terms used to identify those 'in power' vary, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018), Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin (2014), and David Goodhart (2017) have each noted the value-divide with regard to immigration that emerged in Britain. Goodhart, for instance, argues that those he calls 'Anywheres' (the 'winners of globalisation') 'felt at ease' with the new reality of annual inflows of over 500,000 people, and the 'lack of internal (New Labour) party opposition' meant the dominant power in British politics was ideologically committed to the change anyway. Furthermore, Goodhart notes that the British governing elite had 'lost the power to control the inflows from the EU' (Goodhart, 2017: 123–124, 220). In the same vein, Ford and Goodwin (in the voice of a fictionalised, but representative, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) voter) note the feeling that 'with Europe, and all the red tape, none of (the politicians) can do anything about [immigration]. Look at Cameron. He says he wants to stop migrants coming, but he just can't do it while we're in Europe!' (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 183). Finally, 'many people feel that ethnic shifts are now *completely out of control*' (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018: 147, emphasis added). Not only was the topic of immigration depoliticised in that it was perceived to 'not be allowed' (Goodhart, 2017: 124–125) on the electoral agenda prior to 2010, but the capacity to influence the topic was also perceived to have passed beyond the realm of national politics, and the most significant area of democratic politics, to the international level. It must be noted that the *perception* of immigration as being 'not allowed' on the electoral agenda is not *necessarily* coherent with reality: Goodhart makes very clear that immigration was only *absent* from the electoral agenda, not intentionally *denied* its place; but, as 'common sense' acts as a synchronic expression of an appeal to the 'redemptive power' of politics-outside-institutions, for populism the *perception* must persist that a 'popular' desire to reverse a policy is obstructed by the 'pragmatic face' which, as I have argued, is seen to be the 'depoliticising' process. As Philip Stephens put it, 'citizens expect national politicians to protect them against the insecurities . . . that come with global integration. Yet government have *lost much of the capacity to meet the demands*' (cited in Goodhart, 2017: 108, emphasis added).

Second, the salience of immigration, and most important negative perceptions of it as a topic, have both grown considerably in the early part of the 21st century. Ford and Goodwin document that in 2011, 60.6% the British working class believed that immigration needed to be reduced 'a lot', 62.2% believed immigration has had a negative economic impact, and 55.9% believed immigration had a negative cultural impact and that, at the time of writing, 'immigration [was] once again a top priority for the economically and socially disadvantaged'. What drew supporters to UKIP was the belief that 'someone was speaking plain, *common sense* . . . they are what this country needs: *common sense* and a *fresh start*' (Ford and Goodwin, 2014: 123–125, 144). Similarly, David Goodhart argues that there is a 'seething discontent of a large slice of public opinion created by twenty-years of historically unprecedented immigration' (Goodhart, 2017: 118). The connection here to Canovan's recognition of the need for 'democratic renewal' is obvious,

and the use of common sense as the basis of the legitimacy of that renewal is significant in the drawing of a boundary between the people and the elite in constituting the constituency of such renewal.

Third, Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon have undertaken rigorous work into revealing the value-divide over immigration, stating that the increase in support for UKIP on the basis of immigration ‘was not because voters had become more intolerant or hostile towards immigrants’ but there remains a ‘sizeable bloc of voters – around 80% – who think immigration is too high’. Perhaps most significantly, even when a mainstream political party (the Conservatives) began to address the topic of immigration, the perception remained that ‘the Conservatives would try to reduce immigration if they got in, but only 19% (of people) thought they would succeed’ (Goodhart, 2017: 41–43). These observations draw together the above two points neatly: the social attitude to immigrants might have been steadily improving (with Goodhart (2017: 119) and Eatwell and Goodwin (2018: 120) reporting similar value-changes) but the attitude towards the concept of immigration had become increasingly negative; a value-change that was both not reflected in the governing elite’s attitude to the policy field prior to 2010, and perceived to be beyond the capacity for control in the policy field after 2010. In this, it is a certain emotive response (although it is hard to specify which emotion) towards elites, institutions, *and* processes that directed the attitudes within the policy field of immigration in a populist direction, in accordance with Canovan’s theoretical framework. As there was a perception developed that democratic renewal can only go so far in resolving the tension between ‘the people’ and those external groups identified earlier (elites, institutions, and processes), and therefore, a perception that the loci of power were not within the hands of the people *despite* the promises of democratic politics, an appeal ‘to the living people’ (Canovan, 1999: 14) marked a populist turn in the policy field of immigration.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show that the specifically populist form of anti-politics can emerge as the result of the conflict between two countervailing discourses – depoliticisation and common sense – that create two conflicting conceptions of the political and, using Margaret Canovan’s theory of the two faces of democracy, generate a tension that populism seeks to overcome in the ‘redemption’ of democratic politics. By understanding how common sense works as part of a wider political schema in the populist challenge to established democratic politics, the article has attempted to show how populism conceives of political action as repoliticising policy fields considered to be within the purview of established institutions, either by ‘taking back control’ of those institutions or seeking to overthrow those institutions entirely. The fourth section, in a discussion on immigration, has sought to illustrate this, though hopefully without devolving too much into particularist discussions, and remaining connected to a wider, generalisable theory. Similarly, the article has also attempted to show that depoliticisation as a value-neutral phenomenon can allow us to explain one factor in the emergence of populism without recourse to traditional left-right theorising that complicates and obscures our understanding of specific populist movements and their goals.

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