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Understanding Populism Through Difference: The Significance of Economic and Social Axes.

An Interview with Kenneth Roberts, *Cornell University*

Interviewers: Kayla Bohannon and Alina Hechler, *University of Kentucky*

Kenneth M. Roberts is the Richard J. Schwartz Professor of Government and Binenkorb Director of Latin American Studies at Cornell University. His research and teaching interests focus on party systems, populism, social movements, and the politics of inequality in Latin America and beyond. He is the author of Changing Course in Latin America: Party Systems in the Neoliberal Era (Cambridge University Press) and Deepening Democracy? The Modern Left and Social Movements in Chile and Peru (Stanford University Press). He is also the co-editor of The Resurgence of the Latin American Left (Johns Hopkins University Press), The Diffusion of Social Movements (Cambridge University Press), and Beyond Neoliberalism? Patterns, Responses, and New Directions in Latin America and the Caribbean (Palgrave-MacMillan).

So how did you first become interested in studying populism?

Ken Roberts (KR): (laughs) I did not set out to do that when I was in graduate school. It came shortly after I finished my dissertation research and had begun as an assistant professor. I was having lunch with a colleague, Kurt Weyland, from the university of Texas. We were in Chile at a little cafe talking about recent fieldwork that we had been doing. I had been in Peru, under Fujimori, and he had been in Brazil. We were both talking about the rise of these new political eaders on the right side of the spectrum that were implementing free market or neoliberal reforms, but they were very much anti-establishment kinds of figures who ran against traditional political parties and against the political establishment, and made explicit appeals to the people for their support, and tried to articulate a closeness to the common people. So Kurt and I were talking about this, and we were kind of struck by some of the similarities in their political appeals to traditional kinds of populist leaders in Latin America, but they were doing so in a context where they supported different kinds of economic policies. And so Kurt ended up organizing an APSA panel, the American Political Science Association, on new forms of populism in Latin America. He and I ended up writing and publishing some things that talked about the rise of new kinds of populist political leadership that were embedded in a different historical era in Latin America and adopted different kinds of economic policies, and yet it was a certain political logic that they shared in terms of challenging traditional elites and appealing to the people. So that was

for me the starting point. My core research at that time, I was working mostly on the reincorporation of the parties on the left into the new democratic arena in Chile. This was the early 1990s after the democratic transition in Chile. So, I was not really working on populism per se, but I was doing some comparative work with Peru, and I was quite struck by the Fujimori phenomenon. It was in response to that and to this dialogue that I had with a colleague around the anomalies of this new kind of populist political leadership that we thought we were seeing within the region.

We have seen a strong global surge in support for right-wing populist parties and actors. What do you attribute this to? Why now, and not ten years ago?

KR: Certainly, some of the antecedents for this rise were underway ten years ago. You could see it, obviously some of these movements had a presence and were slowly gaining some strength. Why you see it now, I would argue it is probably a confluence of different events that are factoring in. It is long term, erosion of the ability of the traditional parties to align and represent different sectors of society. In some ways I think it is reflecting the detachment of traditional political parties from the grassroots. I think part of it is also a response to the progressive convergence of traditional political parties around a common set of economic issues. And in some ways it is a response to the larger rubric of European integration around common sets of policies on a fairly wide range of issues. And I think what that tends to do is open the doors to some sort of populist challengers who politicize issues that the mainstream political parties are neglecting. So, I think for the parties, the far right ethnonationalist kinds of populist parties, they're clearly responding to the challenges of immigration and the social, political, and economic integration of immigrant communities, in particular the 2015 crisis. In some ways I think that surge in 2015 drew public attention to the issues in ways that allowed those political parties to try to make strong appeals on the basis of anti-immigrant kinds of platforms. But at the same time, you also see in southern Europe for example, the rise of what many people would argue are new platforms on the left flank, politicizing not the cultural issues of immigration, but more economic discontent coming out of the 2009 financial crisis. In particular, in southern European countries, the main debtor countries that were having to go through very difficult austerity and adjustment policies, where you saw traditional socialist parties implementing what are essentially very neoliberal kinds of economic adjustment platforms. So in that way, similar to what we saw in Latin America, in the earlier decades, where in the aftermath of neoliberal reforms, where all the mainstream political parties converged around some version of neoliberal orthodoxy, you saw the rise of new left populisms challenging that. So, I think that sort of depending on what part of Europe or part of the world you're looking at, you see different kinds of populist challenges emerging. But in all cases, they tend to be politicizing issue dimensions or issue positions that mainstream political parties have not been giving much attention to, or that mainstream political parties really don't effectively differentiate themselves on.

Do you also see a connection there because the refugee crisis in Europe has also been effective in mobilizing right wing movements in the United States even though the US was not as impacted by that? Would you say something about the transnational character of populist sentiments?

KR: Yes, I think there is certainly a transnational dimension to this. I think there was an element

of that in terms of left-wing populism as well in Latin America and even southern Europe where you saw some of the new left alternatives in Spain and in Greece that looked quite explicitly to the so-called Bolivarian cases in Latin America: Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador. So, some sort of political learning or transnational influence is there. And I think there is some version of that on the right too. In this day and age, it's easy to stay in touch with what's happening in other parts of the world, and there's sort of a demonstration effect. To the extent that you see one populist figure using certain kinds of discontents or prejudices and politicizing those, then that tends to spill over into other places. And so Bolsonaro in Brazil was clearly picking up on some of the politics and the same kind of resentments and prejudices that Donald Trump was picking up on in the United States. I think you see Salvini or other figures in Europe in some ways playing off of the same script. Even though different countries are obviously different and these movements and political parties and leaders come from rather different places, there's a certain script that they're able to play out according to the particularities of their own national situation, and I think some of them are doing that fairly effectively.

We have spent a good deal of time this semester discussing a distinction between left-wing populism in Latin America, versus right-wing populism in Europe and the United States. Do you think there is a significant distinction between these two types of populism? Are we even talking about the same thing when we refer to those two types of movements?

KR: Yeah, this is a very good question. I think it depends on what level of analysis you are talking about, whether there is some rationale for using the same label to refer to them. I think myself that if you're thinking of populism as I do, as a political logic that structures political spaces, a binary divide between some sort of virtuous people, however you define the people, and then some sort of nefarious or corrupt elite, however you construct the elite...if populism is understood as a basic political division between the elite and the people, so that populism is evoking some sort of appeal to popular sovereignty, I think you can identify forms of populism on the left and the right. At that level of analysis, there is something they share. They are both making some sort of common appeal to the people against an elite. But of course, the devil's always going to be in the details, and ultimately these are radically different kinds of movements or radically different kinds of populisms. There is much more that differentiates them, I would argue, than what they share. So, I think we have to be cautious in using the populist label. In fact, I would argue that the populist label is way too overused. In particular I'm cautious of using it without the adjectives that would define what kind of populism that we're talking about. So, I am uncomfortable simply talking about populist parties in Europe because in Europe you do find populisms of the left and the right. I would always attach whatever other identifying labels, the far right or the ethno-nationalist populists, or the left populisms in southern Europe. I think those adjectives tell you much more about the nature of those movements and what their impact is likely to be on the society where they emerge as opposed to simply referring to them as populism. At the end of the day I think what they share as populist is fairly thin and probably fairly insubstantial. What is, I think, more important is where they differ.

Americans who are fed up with politics as usual have recently flocked to populist political candidates. They see the rupture of the political establishment as a good thing. What would you say to someone who thinks that populist government would make life better in the United States?

KR: (laughs) Yeah, it is a tough question because clearly a lot of people are unhappy with the status quo. I think that both of our traditional parties have limitations in terms of really being able to effectively incorporate and respond to the full range of interests that exist within American society. So, it's very understandable that people are interested in new alternatives. It's important to know when we talk about the kinds of figures that many people would label as populist in the US, which is Trump on the right or Bernie Sanders on the left, it's striking that both of them in contrast to what you usually see in Europe or Latin America, they both emerge within traditional mainstream parties. Trump is not a traditional Republican by any stretch of the imagination, but he uses the Republican party as his vehicle to gain access to electoral office. Bernie Sanders is also not a traditional Democrat, but he also ran using the primaries. The primary system in the US opens the door for candidates who are not traditional members of the political party or members of the party leadership to appeal directly to the people for support, in essence to try to use the primaries then as an institutional opportunity to run as a populist figure against the political establishment. So, in some ways American political institutions are uniquely designed to create opportunities for this-- not just the primaries but I think other aspects of our institutions. I would argue that simply running against the establishment does not get you very far. I think there are very legitimate reasons to run against the status quo and the establishment in the United States, but on what basis are you doing so? When you look at the rationale for Bernie Sanders's critique of the establishment, it is radically different in most ways than Donald Trump's. Sanders is in particular going after the influence of private wealth on the democratic process in the US, and the extent to which the political establishment is dependent upon the sources of funding that come from private interests and the ways in which that distorts democratic representation. I happen to share a lot of those criticisms. I think that the fact that a populist candidate may be bringing those kind of issues to the table may be an important way of expanding the range of democratic debate in the United States, thinking about, are there things we can do to try to reform and improve our democratic institutions? It is easy to look around the world and identify places where populism creates real challenges to democracy. But I think we also must recognize that populism does bring in new voices, new interests, sometimes new issue positions into a democratic area in ways that can expand democracy and potentially reform democracy. I think that is what makes populism especially difficult for us because it can be a two-edged sword. Populism almost always means bringing in new people or giving new voices some sort of representation in the political arena. The question, is, can you do that in ways that amplify and perfect democracy as opposed to doing it in ways which end up whittling away traditional kinds of democratic levers. And that is the problem that we see in places like Hungary, Venezuela, where you see populist figures coming to power and concentrating power in ways that undermine the checks and balances of liberal democratic rule. I think that the challenge for democracy is, can you find ways to amplify democracy in positive ways without undermining those democratic checks and balances? This is not just a populism problem. This is an age-old challenge that democracy faces.

Trump's Make America Great Again slogan successfully serves as an empty signifier onto which different groups project meaning. But he has also faced opposition within his own party. Why do you think other Republican candidates were unable to compete with Trump and his message during the 2016 primaries?

KR: I think this is something that caught a lot of us by surprise, even those of us who take populism seriously and recognize that there are strong populist currents in American society. I think that many of us underestimated the extent to which the Republican party really has transformed itself in recent decades. And in some ways the party has been cultivating those kinds of populist currents for quite some time. But you had a party establishment that was always able to maintain control of the party at the top level and make sure that one of their candidates was the nominee for the presidency. And we saw that in 2012, where there were a series of grassroots populist type figures who channeled these currents within the party and challenged Mitt Romney in the presidential campaign in the primary season, but at the end of the day it was Romney who prevailed and those populist candidates fizzled out. What was different in 2016 was that Trump never fizzled out. He made it very clear that at the grassroots of the Republican party, this is the party. It has become an anti-establishment party that has deep populist tendencies, and he is the figure that pulls those different strands together. I would argue now that it is his party, and it is very much a populist political party, and it is less of mainstream conservative party than the Republican party was traditionally. So, you still have mainstream elements within the party, there's still a party elite that remembers the old way of doing things, but the party has become very ideological, and it is also become very populist, and those things do not necessarily go together. But I think Trump has effectively knit together those strands within the party, so at this point it really is very much his political party. And in the absence of some sort of crisis within his administration, I see very little opportunity for any mainstream challenge to Trump from within the Republican party.

And so you have business millionaires more in touch with the Republican base than mainstream politicians who have been doing this for years and who actually come from these districts and not from Manhattan.

KR: Yeah, this is one of the classic contradictions of the Trump era. Populism almost always is riven with contradictions, and this is a classic one. How is it that a billionaire can take up the populist mantle as the representative of the common person, of we the people? But Trump is not a conventional billionaire. Obviously, he's wealthy, but he was never fully integrated into the most elite Wall Street financial sectors of American capitalism. He represented a different branch of American capitalism. So even though he became quite wealthy, he was never really fully accepted within those elite networks. And in some ways, he sort of represented this place where wealthy capitalism intersected with pop culture, with the celebrity culture. He is in the professional wrestling hall of fame, not as a wrestler but as a businessman. It was casinos, it was the beauty pageants, it was professional wrestling. He was not a titan of Wall Street. So, in some ways he connected to a sphere of Americana as sort of a business celebrity more than a business tycoon himself. And in many ways as he remade his business empire, he did so as a celebrity more than as a businessman. But at the end of the day, whatever his wealth may be, he is an individual of rather common tastes. This is something in Pierre Ostiguy's work on populism where he talks about the flaunting of the low, the ability to talk gruffly. For Trump, the kind of food he eats, his way of talking, his mannerisms, are not those of a titan of Wall Street. He has

sort of everyday man kinds of appeals. And there is a place in some ways that I think that helps to authenticate who he is to people at the grassroots. He's sort of like them, just more successful. He is like them, but he has more money. And in the study of populist leadership there's work that talks about this. Yeah, you must be like the everyday person, but the reality is the average worker doesn't want someone just like them, just a worker in the White House. They want somebody who is more like them, but only somehow better or more successful or knows how to get things done. And in a sense, I think when Trump talks, they hear somebody who thinks and talks the way they do, and yet somebody who's a billionaire and who they see as a very successful business person. I would also like to point out, to come back to this notion of the flaunting of the low, which Ostiguy defines in sociocultural terms. It's sort of the ways in which Trump is deliberately politically incorrect, something that the establishment, the elite is directly offended by. Oftentimes populist figures like to make fun of the elites, they like to affront elites. And a leader who speaks in those terms, the kinds of things that many of us would be offended by, they tend to appeal to a lot of people who are angry with things, who feel that they have been neglected, or worse, that they have been exploited somehow or been abused by those who are in power. And so, someone who they see as speaking the truth to power, they like that combative streak. And some of the opinion polls suggest that more than Trump's policies-- and who knows, the policies are all over the map, there is nothing coherent or consistent about the policies-- what is consistent in Trump is this combativeness, and this willingness to be politically incorrect, and to not adhere to the basic norms and rules of the game. And that appeals to those slices, those sectors of society who feel left behind and resent their lack of power. And so again, this is one of the ways in which a billionaire can frame himself as someone who can really represent those groups in society.

The 2018 midterm elections brought in Democratic freshmen legislators, some of whom have been pushing for legislation and positions that are left of the mainstream Democratic party. Do you see some similarities here to the change of the Republican party into a movement-based party going on?

KR: I think there is an element of that and I think a lot of that is a very positive energy at the grassroots within the party. I think that there were a lot of things about the Democratic Party as a party establishment, or a party machine, that I personally would find objectionable. I think that there is a new, sort of renovation process that is underway at the grassroots. It is bringing a lot of new energy and new ideas into the Democratic Party in ways that are very very positive, and in some ways they are remaking the party into less of a party machine and more of a grassroots-based movement, which might be a very good thing for the party and for American democracy.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that it does in some ways feed what people call the polarization in American politics, which in many respects, I think, has been a misinterpretation of what we have seen. I think we must be careful in how we use that term, because when you look at it from the two political parties, the polarization has been highly asymmetric. Until recent times in the United States, and by that, I mean to the extent that there is been polarization American politics, it's largely been the Republican party moving in a more ideological direction. We forget that the Democratic party clearly tried to not only move to the center, but in many ways was supporting very pro-market kinds of policies on trade and on financial deregulation. This was hardly a party of the radical left, and I think very few people

would even recognize the Democratic party as a party of the left - certainly not in any comparative perspective. The Democratic party could not be compared to parties of the left in European democracies. In a comparative context, the Democratic party would not be considered to be a party of the left. Now, with the rise of Bernie Sanders - arguably the Occupy Wall Street movement in some ways fed some movement currents, which I think filter their way into the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016 and which you see increasingly active at the grassroots within the party. You see movements becoming infused into the Democratic party, which have never been absent. We forget that the civil rights movement had a strong presence historically, [just as] the women's movement, the anti-war movements. There has always been at least some movement dynamic within the grassroots of the Democratic party, but I think there are new elements of that today. And I think they are pulling the party more to the left on a range of public policy issues, both economic and cultural.

Now there was a version of that story, of course, that played out in the Republican party in recent decades as well. The Tea Party movement, certainly, pulled the party to the right, but you also had an infusion into the Republican party from the Christian evangelical movement, the anti-abortion sectors, the gun rights movements, and now, in contemporary times, anti-immigrant types of movements. So there has been some mobilization at the grassroots that has pulled the Republican party further to the right. And until fairly recent times, I think, the story of polarization was largely a story about the conservative party. I think we are in a situation today, where you can see both parties moving towards their respective poles and taking more ideologically differentiated positions on the issues. That has certainly opened the democratic arena to a wider range of debates, which can be quite healthy and can be rejuvenating, but it also tends to intensify the conflicts. I think it creates a lot of uncertainty over how the institutions will manage this, because we're accustomed to the institutions being set up to function in a context where the two parties overlap in the middle and where both parties sort of compete in the center for what we call the median voter. And in a context where the two parties are moving towards their respective poles, the ways in which institutions like the Supreme Court, Congressional investigative commissions, or other kinds of institutions of American democracy work, becomes quite different. And so, I think that is some of the uncertainty that we see in contemporary American politics.

That partly answers the next question, which was, if Trump's brand of right-wing populism should be met with a new brand of left-wing populism.

KR: I myself would probably not want to call it left-wing populism. But I do think that Trump's brand of populism should be met by a lot of energy at the grassroots from those sectors of American society that are troubled in terms of what Trump's presidency means for women's rights, for immigrants, for healthcare policies, for gun control, for a wide range of issues. Where we do see mobilization taking place is at the grassroots within the Democratic party, some of it to the left of the Democratic party. I think that mobilization at the grassroots creates some opportunities to bring new energy into the democratic arena in ways that can safeguard the institutions from some of the potential threats that could exist from forms of right-wing populism, and potentially even push the democratic process to make it more inclusive and more open to the

full range of interests that we see in American society. So, I see this energy at the grassroots as a positive development. I am reluctant to call it left-wing populism. I think there are new movements, and the challenge for them is to find ways to come together and to cohere into some sort of political platform that creates a real alternative in American democracy.

In your article "Parties, Populism, and Democratic Decay" you said that the two US political parties are differentiated more along the lines of social issues rather than economic issues. Do you think that populism is generally more concerned with one type of issue than others? Is differentiation regarding social issues more likely to mobilize populism than differentiation rather than differentiation based on economic issues?

KR: I think that with the rise of Bernie Sanders within the Democratic party you can now see the new politicization of economic issues in ways that we have not seen for quite some time. The Clinton presidency and its supporters in the Democratic party were not a branch of the party that was especially close to blue-collar workers. There was a branch of the party that very strongly supported free trade, a branch of the party that basically implemented financial deregulation policies. So those are all pro-market policies that left aside a lot of American citizens. And so I think what you see now is the politicization in particular of economic inequalities under Bernie Sanders and questions of the levels of taxation: what kinds of Health Care, what kinds of rights do we have as democratic citizens to healthcare? These are the type of issues that Bernie Sanders and others from the left wing of the Democratic party have put on the agenda now, and that has expanded the Democratic agenda dramatically from what it was in the era of Clinton, and even the Obama era.

I think we see a very different debate underway over the range of policies on the economic axis. I think we are seeing a re-politicization of that economic axis on which the differences between the parties never collapsed in the U.S. The Republican party is so ideological on the other flank compared to Europe, but I think that the traditional understanding of polarization misses the fact that the Democratic party was not on the left pole, that it was very much in the center and even the center right on the economic axis, but that has changed considerably.

There has been polarization between the parties on the social or cultural axis that goes further back. This is basically an axis, I would argue, between some sort of cosmopolitan/multicultural/universalist understanding of who we are as a country, and something that is more nationalistic, more ethno-nationalistic, and tends to have strong religious identities as well on the other pole. And that pole has really been heavily politicized in many respects going back to the civil rights movement, and then the countermovement on the right against the civil rights movement. This process of party polarization really begins in the 60s, when the civil rights movement leads the southern conservatives to break with the Democrats and move into the Republican party. Right before then, the two parties overlapped in the center. We forget that the Republican party was more liberal on civil rights issues than the Democratic party until the 1960s. So this is a fairly recent phenomenon, but what's happened in the civil rights movement in this sense, and then the counter-movements that followed and the other movements that came in its wake - the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement - those movements all politicized the social-cultural axis in ways which have pulled the parties further apart over time. I would argue that is the axis where we have consistently seen true polarization

between the parties in American politics.

I think the economic polarization on that other axis is quite recent. Therefore, it's very problematic, I think, to talk simply about the left and the right in the United States. These are separate axes, if you plot them out spatially, they are orthogonal to each other. There is nothing about being an evangelical Christian, for example, that requires you to be a market fundamentalist on the economic axis. These are separate axes, and what the Republicans have effectively done is pull these axes together and convince people that there is such a thing as a "conservative movement" that is defined in terms of market orthodoxy, Judeo-Christian identities, and gun rights and other kinds of things - but that's a product of effective packaging. It is a bundling of issue positions that really occupied different competitive axes and there are ways in which they can be broken up. You see that in part with Trump, because Trump is supporting a trade war - nothing could be more antithetical to a market orthodox position than trade wars. And what Trump's populism has done, is pull together strands that allow him to appeal to certain constituencies that he could not appeal to if he adhered to the ideological orthodoxy of the Republican party on the economic axis. Trump himself is sort of redrawing these alignments in American politics, as populism often does, because populism is rarely, if ever, ideologically orthodox.

Talking about the two-party system in the US. In western European countries, populist parties have been maybe able to enter coalitions, but they have not been able to gain control of the national government. Would you say that a two-party system is inherently more susceptible to a populist takeover than a multi-party system?

KR: I think this is one of the places where the American institutions set us up for this unexpected turn, and in the absence of primaries you would not get this. In a parliamentary system, for example, it is the legislative block of the party that selects who is the Prime Minister. That obviously would not be Donald Trump in the Republican party - you would not have had Trump emerge in a parliamentary system. Proportional representation makes it easier for new parties to form, so far-right elements tend to form on the right flank of the mainstream political parties. What you see in Europe is that they start as very small marginal parties on the right flank. Now they have been growing over time, but they have not been able to access power directly in Western Europe. They have worked their way into coalition governments in a number of countries, but they have not directly taken the reins of power.

In the U.S. case you have the combination of a presidential system with plurality elections rather than proportional representation, and then primaries which allow an independent outsider to come in and run as a Republican, even if they are not a traditional Republican. That combination of institutions, I think, has left us susceptible to this kind of populist takeover in ways that we did not really imagine. Without the primary system, Trump would have had to run as an independent. There are cases, like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, where the traditional establishment breaks down and somebody can run as an outsider against that establishment and win elections. We have not seen that in the United States. Instead, the populist outsider works within one of the mainstream parties and basically has now taken control of one of the parties.

So, it's a very different institutional dynamic the way in which it is played out here. We

see this kind of populist leadership and power in a number of Eastern European countries, post-communist Hungary in particular and Poland now, but we have not seen this populist leadership take control and become the head of states in the Western European context. Salvini is sort of the strongman in Italy, but he is only the minister of the Interior. He is not the Prime Minister, but he clearly has a strong influence. In Austria and other places, you see these parties in coalition governments, but nowhere do they directly control the reins of state power yet in Western Europe.

And lastly, what are any future projects that you are currently pursuing?

KR: I am hoping to do a little bit of work that is new for me, which would be to look at the Republican party in a comparative perspective. I think we do not have a good handle yet on how the party has been transformed over time by the infusion of these movement currents into the party and its transformation into a populist vehicle.

I think a lot of the American politics literature doesn't give us a good handle for understanding that process of transformation, and I don't think we have a good understanding of how the Republican party is more ideologically orthodox - or ideologically radical if you want to call it that - than any of the other mainstream conservative parties that you see in Europe or elsewhere. But while it has this ideological orthodoxy, it also has this populist current that has now been grafted onto this ideological platform in ways that are very unusual. As a political scientist, I think the Republican party is a very unusual case that needs to be understood in comparative terms because that gives you a different vantage point on what's taking place than what you can do just by studying it from an American politics perspective. So that is what I am hoping to move towards.