

Populism:

The Salt Sugar Fat of Our Politics

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One of the *New York Times* Bestsellers in 2013 was a book about a new type of addiction. The book is called *Salt Sugar Fat: How Food Giants Hooked Us*, by journalist Michael Moss (2013).

The point of my talk is to argue that populism is the Salt Sugar Fat of modern democratic politics.

In his book Moss explains how scientists and marketers—hired by the big food industry, with extensive knowledge of consumers' physiology—managed to calculate the optimal proportion of sugar, fat, and salt in manufactured foods to create “bliss point.” Bliss point is a condition where the brain wants exactly what is bad for the body. Salt, sugar and fat could be manipulated to produce a “state of hedonia” in those who consume them, leading to addiction and craving more (Rao, Rodriguez et al. 2018).

If I may borrow from Moss, populism could be seen as a political diet with a high concentration of sugar, fat and salt.

The sugar is the enticing part of populism—the aspect that produces fewest criticisms from a democratic point of view. The most often cited example of sugar in populism is when populism calls for the “integration” of the unabsorbed masses (Germani 1978) or the “rediscovery of the people” (Laclau 2005). Most advocates of liberal democracy have no objection here.

Salt is the use of a condiment to make flavors more intense, to heighten the senses. So when the populists engage in vicious attacks, insults, and provocations against opponents (Mudde 2004, Müller 2016, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), and even outrageous norm-breaking (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), they are relying on excess salt. When populists turn conventional negative campaigning into outright hate speech, or they groundlessly question the objectivity of experts (Mounk 2018), they are not just embracing Arendt's (1951 [1994]) notion of the purpose of ideology in totalitarianism—as an instrument to demonize enemies and render followers unable to make rational judgments; they are also overusing salt to hook the base further.

Fat is the part of populism dedicated to creating agenda density. Populists in office overwhelm the system with change attempts. Diamond (2017) lists twelve broad changes in the populist playbook, calling it a sort of “twelve-step” program. When populist leaders saturate the airwaves with excess TV talk or tweets, overhaul the bureaucracy with too much regulation or de-regulation, produce stress tests on institutions of checks and balance (Kaufman and Haggard 2018), they are creating agenda density. Agenda density fulfills the same role as fat: as a macronutrient, fat contains the highest energy kick. Regardless of its state—liquid or solid, healthy or unhealthy—fat energizes. Likewise, agenda density energizes the base. It makes followers feel that much is being done on behalf of the polity. Agenda density is how populism tries to contrast itself and compete with what Carothers (2002) calls “feckless pluralism” or gridlock politics, both frequent vices of liberal democracy.

Why is Moss's salt-sugar-fat concept a suitable analogy for populism? First, it helps us understand populism as a hybrid phenomenon. In the traditional discussion of

populism, the tendency was to think of populism in binary terms: good and bad populism, democratic and nondemocratic, inclusionary and exclusionary, radical or moderate. More recent scholarship, correctly in my opinion, has moved in the direction of saying that populism is a mix of its own, with democratic and undemocratic elements, sitting midway between liberalism and autocracy (Pappas 2019). The sugar-salt-fat analogy is another way to capture that mixture.

Consider how populism interacts with democracy to change it. It has now become conventional in political science to talk about at least three major strands of democracy: minimal, liberal, and participatory (Coppedge and Gerring 2011). Populism takes each of these strands of democracy and manipulates its sugar, salt, and fat content to produce a new version of a known food, and along with it, a new type of consumer—one far more addicted to the new version than to previous versions. In Appendix 1, I show how Hugo Chávez used sugar, salt, and fat to transform one aspect of democracy in Venezuela—electoral democracy. In Appendix 2, I offer brief examples of how the same manipulation of sugar, salt, and fat could be applied to the other types of democracy to undermine each.

Another reason the sugar, salt, fat analogy is useful is because it shows that the ingredients of populism are not new. Instead it is the manufactured combination of these ingredients that is new. Parties and leaders in advanced democracies have developed since the 2000s a growing propensity to overuse these old ingredients (see Hawkins and his team's analysis of rising populist content in politicians' speeches (in Lewis, Barr et al. 2019)). In Latin America, they've been doing this since the 1940s.

Another reason it's a suitable analogy: It forces researchers to look not just at the demand side of populism, but also, its supply side. It is true, as Germani argued, that voters demand populism, and that populism has to adapt to the particular demands of voters' tastes across different development stages and economic conditions (the disenfranchised sector in Latin America is very different from the disenfranchised sector in advanced democracies, for instance, and thus populism is different in each region). Yet, as Germani also emphasizes, populism is ultimately a top-down phenomenon, just like the high-content sugar, salt, fat foods are a concoction of the food industry. Specifically, populism is a concoction of leaders and parties: they are the actors that decide how much and what kind of populism to offer or to contain (Grzymala-Busse 2019, Roberts 2019, Verbeek and Zaslove 2019).

The analogy is also good because it allows us to understand that populism, like our packaged foods today, come in many combinations, just as there are many combinations of high-content sugar, salt, fat foods in a supermarket. De la Torre (2014) identifies differences even within one subset of populism: Latin American leftist populism of the 2000s. Yet, the common element of all populism, whether left or right, Latin American or other, is their ability to hook the voter, in the end yielding both private and collective negative effects.¹

¹ Excess salt, sugar, fat lead to obesity, and obesity has been linked to some of the worst early-onset diseases of our time: diabetes, cardiovascular problems, senility, mobility problems, arthritis, hypertension, liver disease, some types of cancer.

And as with sugar-salt-fat dependence, one of populism's worst private and collective negative effects stems from its connection to addiction and overconsumption. Think of Oreo cookies, the quintessential example of overuse of sugar, salt, and fat: three oreos provide 14 grams of sugar-based carbs, 8 percent daily allowance of sodium, and 11 percent daily allowance of fat. Oreos produce the same level of pleasure in the brain as cocaine (Walton 2013), which is the reason we have a hard time eating just three cookies and can easily eat an entire row. A Food and Drug Administration Commissioner called this "conditioned hypereating" (Kessler 2018). Populism is equally addictive.

And the problem with voter addiction in politics is that it destroys the most hope-producing promise of democratic politics: the accountability promise. Democracy has always held the promise that bad governance, somehow, will cost electorally. We know this promise is often overstated (Przeworski, Stokes et al. 1999). But when a part of the electorate is hooked on a particular governing formula, regardless of its negative private and collective effects, the promise of electoral accountability goes from overstated to entirely far-fetched.

The limits of the analogy

The sugar-salt-fat analogy is not perfect. What this analogy does not capture is that present-day populism does produce adverse reactions among some voters, sometimes even among a majority of them. Populism is polarizing, with some voters highly hooked on it and others absolutely repulsed by it.

This adverse reaction to populism is the good news about populist politics in our time. Although of course there are exceptions (with Uribe in Colombia, Duterte in the Philippines, Putin in Russia achieving 80 percent approval ratings), populism rarely captivates an entire nation. Even Chávez, at the height of his economic boom, achieved approval ratings mostly in the mid 50s. The point is that for the most part, populism splits the electorate, potentially producing a liberal-democratic counter-response. This democratic counter-response can potentially "trump populism" (Weyland and Madrid 2018).

We understand very little about the opposition to populism: how it rises or flounders. This little understanding of the opposition to populism is to me the biggest gap in the research agenda of populism studies. But at least we know that all populist movements elicit strong rejections. Populism comes with polarization. And this is a sign of hope for democratic survival.

The problem with polarization

Despite its benefits, populism-induced polarization can be bad news. Polarization in populist contexts can be shown to help the polarizer.

To return to the diet analogy, think of the fitness movement in modern societies. In many ways, the fitness movement has been a response to the sugar-salt-fat predicament that Moss discusses. Notice also that this countermovement is also prone to its own excesses, some of which apply to the liberal-democratic opposition

to populism. The fitness movement, for instance, can sound elitist (I only buy organic; I only eat in fancy restaurants), preachy (Oreos are bad for you), dogmatic (I never give sugar to my kids), prone to call-outs (if you offer me dessert, you are an "enabler"), and opt-outs (I think I'm going to pass on your invitation to Thanksgiving dinner).

Not all the opposition to populism succumbs to these excesses, naturally, but the risk is there. And when it happens, rather than win friends among the addicted side, supporters of liberal democracy might end up paradoxically making the other side feel less welcomed, less eligible, and thus more entrenched (see Corrales 2005).

Conclusion

Populism in office transforms the sugar, salt, and fat content of democratic politics to create a new political regime. These ingredients have always existed in politics. The newness is the discovery in that they can be manipulated to produce a bliss point, and thus an addiction.

Like all addictions, the populist addiction is difficult to end or contain. The love for populism can linger, even when the voter knows it is a product that is damaging individually and collectively. As an addictive phenomenon, populism risks eroding the promise of accountability that is central to liberal democracy.

But populism also produces a counter-reaction. The good news is that this counter-reaction is an important type of check on this addiction. As long as this check is in place, liberal democracy stands a chance of surviving. The unfortunate news is that if managed improperly, the forces that rise to resist the populist appeal can end up entrenching it further.

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"Salt Sugar Fat is a breathtaking feat of reporting. Michael Moss was able to get executives of the world's largest food companies to admit that they have only one job--to maximize sales and profits--and to reveal how they deliberately entice customers by stuffing their products with salt, sugar, and fat. This is a truly important book, and anyone reading it will understand why food corporations cannot be trusted to value health over profits and why we all need to recognize and resist food marketing every time we grocery shop or vote."-- Marion Nestle, author of Food Politics and...
"Don't even get me started on Lunchables! One of the downfalls of our modern day society. "It's like I'm sending my kid to school with a present so he knows I love him! Tee Hee!" And as with sugar-salt-fat dependence, one of populism's worst private and collective negative effects stems from its connection to addiction and overconsumption. Think of Oreo cookies, the quintessential example of overuse of sugar, salt, and fat: three oreos provide 14 grams of sugar-based carbs, 8 percent daily allowance of sodium, and 11 percent daily allowance of fat. This adverse reaction to populism is the good news about populist politics in our time. Although of course there are exceptions (with Uribe in Colombia, Duterte in the Philippines, Putin in Russia achieving 80 percent approval ratings), populism rarely captivates an entire nation. Even Chávez, at the height of his economic boom, achieved approval ratings mostly in the mid 50s. "Salt Sugar Fat" is the best book that I have yet to read about the problems of popular convenience foods (including pizza) and industrially produced foods. For those who avoid these types of foods, this book will serve as a confirmation. Unfortunately, those who are affected usually don't read this type of book. But if so, they should expect a difficult struggle with their own emotional brain or rather limbic system and amygdalae (emotional reactions). Most people unfortunately develop a sense of resignation before they would try to take their fate into their own hands. Moss of The author explores his theory that the food industry's used three essential ingredients to control much of the world's diet. Traces the rise of the processed food industry and how addictive salt, sugar, and fat have enabled its dominance in the past half century, revealing deliberate corporate practices behind current trends in obesity, diabetes, and other health challenges. Features examples from some of the most recognizable and profitable companies and brands of the last half century, including Kraft, Coca-Cola, Lunchables, Kellogg, Frito-Lay, Nestlé, Oreos, Cargill, Capri Sun, a