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Patrice Cailleba

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The road to organisational populism

Patrice Cailleba

Department of Management,
Paris School of Business (PSB),
59 Rue Nationale, 75013 Paris, France
Email: p.cailleba@psbedu.paris

Abstract: Since populism is considered to be inherent to politics and each organisation a place where politics thrives, this article coins the concept of *organisational populism* to help firms and employees alike identify and use their voice against the phenomenon. We adapt Mintzberg's political arena and then Rosanvallon's three-fold simplification social, procedural and hierarchical) to the management sciences. Both studies help us construct a theoretical perspective on organisational populism (OP). In addition, the three simplifications present different characteristics and lead to specific behaviours, which then flourish thanks to the organisational populist leader's ability to manipulate employees' emotions. Dangerous by definition, this form of populism progressively increases the level of psycho-social risk and accentuates suffering at work by multiplying conflicting demands and by deepening the denial of stakeholder's vis-à-vis organisational reality.

Keywords: management; organisation; politics; populism; simplification.

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Biographical notes: Patrice Cailleba is a Professor of Management at PSB (Paris School of Business, France) and a member of PSB Research Laboratory. His research interests include business ethics, organisational behaviour and politics. An alumnus of Harvard BS and ESCP BS, he has a Doctorate in Philosophy (Sorbonne University) and a habilitation in management (Paris Saclay University). He is an auditor of the IHEDN (Institute of Advanced Studies in National Defence) and a member of the Think Tank 'Institut Sapiens'.

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1 Introduction

Populism is not a new phenomenon (Boeri et al., 2021) and has been analysed in various ways by political scholars.[1] Over the decades, it has re-emerged and gathered strength in Europe (Bergh and Kärnä, 2021; Capdevila et al., 2022; Gozgor, 2022), in the USA (Kundmueller, 2023; Madlovics and Magyar, 2021) and across many other nations (Lu

et al., 2022; Yilmaz and Erturk, 2021). As stated by Varshney (2021, p.131), 'much of the world has of late been in the grip of populist politics'.

What is now new is that political populism has invaded organisations in many different ways. Some business leaders or entrepreneurs have even followed certain political leaders in the way they act as populist leaders in and outside of their organisation (Douthat, 2022).

Since 2000, the development of social media and its use by political leaders and then business leaders has both facilitated and accelerated the emergence of populism within organisations. Many reasons explain this new wave: immediate and seamless personalised interactive communication with the wider public online (Kruikemeier et al., 2013); the emotionalisation and simplification of short messages to ostracise individuals or minorities (Engesser et al. 2017); and finally, the homophily and echo chambers favoured by social medial (Flaxman et al., 2016), which amplify in-group homogeneity and favour out-group resentment (Lu et al., 2022).

We qualify this phenomenon as organisational populism (OP). Fayol (1999), March and Simon (1958), Mintzberg (1983, 1985) and Foucault (2009) have all stressed that each organisation is a space for politics to take grip: firstly, in its verticality as a field of struggle for access to power and its exercise; and secondly in its horizontality, this space being understood as a structure for common action and where collective decision making can happen. Research shows that 'organisational politics is an inescapable part of organisational life' [Hinck and Conrad, (2018), p.1], especially at higher managerial and professional levels of the organisation (Allen et al., 1979). But how is OP different from organisational or corporate politics (CP)?

In this conceptual article, we apply populism as a political research lens focussing on organisations. In the first part, we consider the processes that lead to OP beyond CP. We show how OP is a product of CP through the management of emotions. In doing so, we propose a theoretical framework imported from political studies to understand what OP means. We then focus on the main characteristics of OP. Finally, we discuss the theoretical limits and main managerial implications of this new concept.

2 From organisational politics to OP

2.1 A short review of populism

Political populism appeared in the 1860s in Russia following the abolition of serfdom (Labica, 1999), and is historically a revolutionary political current that pits the people (in the Russian case, the peasants) against the elite (the aristocracy, i.e., the local elite in general). Karl Marx (Negri, 2021; Cailleba, 2004) was one of the first political leaders to identify and analyse populism in Russia and in Europe (particularly in France under the reign of Napoleon III). Just some years later, the USA experienced the same phenomenon with the emergence of the People's Party, or Populist Party, which won the protest vote of the Farmer's Alliance in the 1892 presidential election (Mansbridge and Macedo, 2019).

Whilst populism is considered to be inherent to politics (Arditi, 2005, 2006), there was no shared definition of populism for a number of decades: 'we simply do not have anything like a theory of populism' as recalled by Müller (2016, p.38). But if political philosophers have failed to agree on a common definition, many academics, (e.g.,

Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 1977; Panizza, 2005; Müller, 2016; Ginsburg and Huq, 2018) have provided citizens with the tools to identify the various aspects of populism. Firstly, populism appears to be a political movement based on anti-elitism and anti-pluralism (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Albright, 2018). Secondly, this movement promotes direct democracy instead of representative democracy (Akkerman, 2003; Stanley, 2008), thus highlighting the notion that it is 'people' who should rule. Thirdly, the 'people' whether composed of heterogeneous groups (left wing populism) or a homogeneous group (right wing populism) is always opposed to a powerful minority that corrupts and deceives them (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2018). Consequently, populism thrives on the victimisation of the 'people' demanding to safeguard traditional values (right wing populism) or to impose real and equal rights (left wing populism), and both at the expense of the identified elite (Fukuyama, 2018). Finally, scholars tend to agree on similar concurring definitions on 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' [Mudde, (2004), p.543].

Aware of the epistemological pitfalls of the notion of populism (Tarragoni, 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), Müller (2016) identified the core questions at the heart of populism that help circumscribe it: 'Who are the people? Who speaks for the people? How does populist identification occur?' (i.e., what kind of vision does populism offer?). In this article, we do not explore the inherent ambiguity of the definition of 'people' (Canovan, 2005) as we focus on how populism spreads and flourishes through organisations otherwise defined as 'stable associations of persons engaged in concerted activities directed to the attainment of specific objectives' [Bittner, (1965), p.239]. However, we do attempt to answer the two following questions that may exist in any organisation: 'who speaks for the people?' and 'how does populist identification occur?'.

2.2 Populist leadership in organisations

Political populism is mostly incarnated by charismatic leaders (Conger, 1989; Nai and Martinez i Coma, 2019; Tormey, 2018) who are mostly male (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). These individuals embody the various aspects of populism presented above. In other words, they put emphasis on the so-called victimisation of the 'people' they pretend to come from (Mudde, 2004); they identify the oppressing minority and accuse it of all bad deeds, i.e., corruption and deceptions (Chang et al., 2016; Diestre et al., 2022); they propose to take on the role of a servant leader for the good of the oppressed minority and for the benefit of the wider population, even if they have to make personal sacrifices (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008). However, research shows that while the populist leader presents and diffuses a servant or 'giver' attitude, he hides a 'taker' attitude (Grant, 2013; Sousa and Van Dierendonck, 2021). Centred around himself and his own achievements, in the end he appears to be driven by hubris (Picone et al., 2014).

Within an organisation, a populist leader would appear to possess the same characteristics (as detailed in Tables 1, 2 and 3). He portrays himself as a self-made man who succeeded against the odds in a fierce environment (Jia Galluzzo, 2023). Taking personal credit for his company's good results, he is prone to undervaluing his colleagues' expertise (Galinsky et al., 2006) and objectifies his own employees (Gruenfeld et al., 2008). In the face of a challenge or failure, he quickly identifies those

responsible(s) outside the organisation (the competition, suppliers, or even the parent company) or inside the organisation (the former C-suite or current executive managers). At the same time, he is committed to defending the organisation and its employees, and to prevailing over those who want him to fail.

From abusive and bullying leadership through to toxic leadership (Burns, 2017), harmful leadership styles have been widely analysed by scholars (Aasland et al., 2010; Boddy, 2011; Pelletier, 2010). Lipman-Blumen (2006) defines toxic leadership as 'a process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behaviour and/or dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organisations, and non-followers, alike' [Lipman-Blumen, (2005), p.1]. For the purpose of our article, we include OP leaders in the vast family of toxic leaders even if they are characterised more by their political bias than by their psychological bias. However, considering the predominant role of emotions, we underline the role of 'susceptible followers' in supporting the OP leader as well as the importance of an environment that is conducive to creating a 'toxic triangle' as considered by Padilla et al. (2007).

2.3 A product of organisational politics

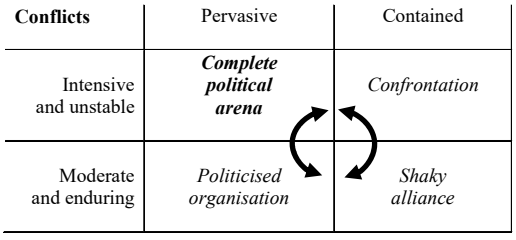
The OP leader is a product of organisational politics. Allen et al. (1979, p.77) suggest that 'organisational politics involve intentional acts of influence to enhance or protect the self-interest of individuals or groups' within an organisation. Also commonly considered as office politics (Postma, 2021; Doldor and Wyatt, 2022), organisational politics appears to be a 'natural phenomenon' (Poon, 2003; Zaleznik, 1971). As professional and personal interests collide, conflicts emerge in many ways (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010). This might concern the organisational strategy or the mission (Vigoda-Gadot and Kapun, 2005), individual promotions (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010) and day-to-day jobs or tasks (Jehn, 1997). In addition, the search for power or recognition and the protection of self-interests can lead to 'unethical implications' [Sussman et al., (2002), p.314].

Such unethical implications inevitably lead to more conflicts between individuals through what Davis (2020) names 'Polanyi's 'double movement''. Indeed, organisations tend to create internal and external competition between individuals: what Polanyi (1944, p.113, pp.163–165) calls 'discipline'. But since the end of the 20th century, the social fragmentation generated has been slowly replaced by new political identities and solidarities. This phenomenon has created a kind of 'collective backlash' [Davis, (2020), p.398], i.e., modern populism mixing individual emotional exhaustion with moral disengagement. In this paper, we argue further that this phenomenon has now reached organisations and is thriving within them.

It is for this reason that the goal of any organisational control systems is at least to moderate and mitigate conflicts (Mumby, 2013) to turn them into constructive criticism and support operational efficiency. To achieve this, control systems are based on systems of authority (legal formal power), ideology (accepted norms and beliefs) or expertise (certified formal power) as stated by Mintzberg (1985). When these systems fail and conflict becomes the norm, the organisation seems to become a 'political arena' in which 'behaviour termed political is neither formally authorised, widely accepted, nor officially certified' [Mintzberg, (1985), p.134]. Conflicts then become inevitable, just as in any political community (Mouffe, 2013).

In his seminal paper, Mintzberg (1985) discusses four basic forms of the political arena based on two main dimensions, namely the intensity and the pervasiveness of conflicts within organisations. Figure 1 presents what we qualify as a conflict matrix under systems of politics.

Figure 1 The conflict matrix under systems of politics



Source: Adapted from Mintzberg (1985)

When the different control systems (authority, ideology, expertise) are effective, conflicts are contained and moderated. Conflicts can be eventually solved in three different ways: firstly, through an intense but brief and constructive confrontation; secondly, through a shaky alliance in the interest of all engaged stakeholders; and thirdly, through the moderation of conflicts in on-going bargaining process between stakeholders. As conflicts evolve in time and change in their form, the way they are solved becomes dynamic. Confrontation may succeed a shaky alliance or a complete political arena, whilst a politicised organisation may follow a show of alliance or another complete political arena.

However, when all control systems fail, they progressively leave space for the emergence of pervasive and intense conflict. As a result, conflict turns the organisation into an 'ideal type' of complete political arena where 'Authority, ideology and expertise are all subordinated to the play of political power' [Mintzberg, (1985), p.141]. Mintzberg (1985, p.141) indicates that such a type of arena is the 'least likely to be found in practice, or, at least, the most unstable'. In any case, the main causes of such complete political arenas are found in highly disrupted business environments, that is to say [Mintzberg, (1985), p.141]:

- 'change in the fundamental condition of the organisation'.
- 'the breakdown of the established order of power'.
- 'major pressure from influencer(s)' who are internal or external stakeholder(s).

This 'complete political arena' leads to what we call OP.

2.4 A result of employees' negative emotions and unethical behaviour

Rost (1993) emphasised the dynamic and interactive processes involved in leadership. Not only the local culture and history of the 'people', but also the personal traits and competences of the leader as well as the leader-follower congruence nurture this relation and define populist leadership as a situational concept (Graeff, 1997; Thompson and Glasø, 2015). As such, OP appears to be a combination of individual as well as collective

elements, a shifting and complex combination that is difficult to apprehend and anticipate.

The reason for this is that before being a problem, OP turns out to be a solution for the problems a company faces, and in particular those caused by the 'flexible' ethics of certain employees. The populist leader indeed needs a fertile ground in which to germinate and subsist. The 'dark side' of some employees (Ahmetoglu et al., 2015; Garrad and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2016) can take the form of collusion or the defence of personal interests (maintaining situational rents, significant freedom granted in the performance of missions, etc.). It may also be the desire for change in leaders about whom the literature has shown that narcissism (Paulhus, 1998) is initially seductive. Finally, following a string of crisis periods, the company may suffer from a disengagement of its employees who give free rein, through weariness, to an organisational populist leader. This disengagement generates a phenomenon of 'neglect' (Farrel, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1988) as a response to job dissatisfaction, as well as a way of protecting oneself for employees who refuses to take part in growing dissent and prefer to flee their responsibilities.

Beyond ethical considerations, OP thus raises questions about the individual psyche and emotions within an organisation. Some [Pesqueux, (2009), p.57] have spoken of a 'sadomasochistic model of organisations' which, without being 'a 'sufficient' hypothesis', provides some clues to a possible answer. In reference to the work of Weber (1995), who distinguishes several types of legitimate domination (rational, traditional, charismatic), populist leadership makes the domination-consent dichotomy the engine of the sadomasochistic organisation. The question of consent then applies as much at the individual level as at the organisational level: all agents, or a large proportion of them, have a particular interest (and therefore pleasure) in the situation. The ambivalence of each agent's feelings reinforces this type of organisation: on the one hand, management is recognised as toxic and inefficient (Lipman-Blumen, 2006); on the other hand, the organisational actor takes advantage of it to serve their own interests or needs (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). Nevertheless, unlike the political populist leader, the organisational populist leader is not elected. He is chosen by shareholders or promoted internally according to some key characteristics.

3 The main characteristics of OP

As seen previously, Müller's (2016) analysis of populism answers three questions: 'Who are the people? Who speaks for the people? How does populist identification occur [populist vision and ambition]?'. Over the last decade, Rosanvallon (2011a, 2011b, 2020) has shared in-depth analyses of populism. In his research, Rosanvallon identified three (2011a and b), followed by five criteria (2020) that underpin populism. These criteria help to identify the main characteristics of populism, and to address Müller's questions:

1 Vision ('What does populism offer to employees?').

2 Representation ('Who speaks for the people within organisations?').

3 Incarnation ('Who are the people?').

4 Protection through a protectionist and nationalist economic mindset.

5 Management through the role of emotions.

Since this article specifically focuses on organisations we leave aside the fourth aspect, which refers to the macroeconomic dimensions of national political leadership (Albright, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mouffe, 2013). In addition, we also leave aside the role of emotions in the emergence of OP per se which we consider leverages the first three characteristics. These emotions support the leader's harmful management as much as those of the employees who relay and nurture it. We therefore focus on the first three main characteristics in the list. These characteristics lead in turn to a three-fold simplification (Rosanvallon, 2011b), which we translate into the context of the business organisation as follows:

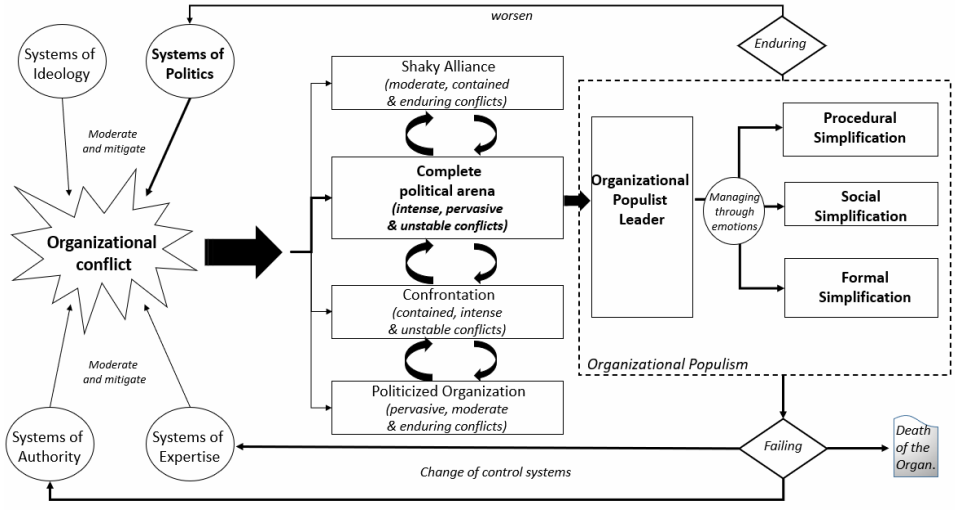
1 Social simplification in terms of the organisation's vision: 'we are all one big happy family!'.

2 Procedural simplification in terms of the representation of the organisation's operating mechanisms: 'Let's get rid of procedures in order to be able to innovate!'.

3 Hierarchical simplification in terms of the embodiment of leadership: 'No need for a leader: let's all become leaders!'.

Simplification is at the core of OP since complexity is rejected and reflective thinking is banned (Laclau, 2005; Tarragoni, 2013), thus favouring management through emotions and the development of unethical behaviour (Figure 2).

Figure 2 From organisational conflict to OP



Source: Author, adapted from Mintzberg (1985) and Rosanvallon (2011a, 2011b, 2020)

Using Mintzberg's and Rosanvallon's work as a foundation, in the following sections we describe the main characteristics of the three organisational populist simplifications within companies.

4 Social simplification: 'we are all one big happy family!'

Rosanvallon presents the 'one-people' concept ('Peuple-Un' in French) as the first essential element of political populism. In doing so, he sociologically reconstructs the people into a simplified entity, opposing 'them' – the oligarchic elites – to 'us', the people. He discusses the end of social classes and argues that populist movements 'intend to give significance to the appeal for a one-people that has become untraceable' [translated from Rosanvallon (2020), pp.27–34].

Applied to organisations, the 'One-People' concept turns out to be the company's employees led by the organisational populist leader. This OP leader stands out first and foremost in that he develops an often-paternalistic discourse that compares the company to a family (Jorda, 2009). The image of the united and supportive family allows the populist leader to establish his popularity. In his discourse, there are no longer different categories of members of staff – managers, executives, or employees – everyone 'is in the same boat' and must stand as one and defend their jobs, especially in times of crisis.

The OP leader promises to (re)instate power to the members of the workforce, who can potentially all be proactive forces of good. At the same time, the OP leader organises social events (such as sports or cultural activities, etc.) that involve all categories of staff. This type of practice proves to be effective in the short-term because it temporarily (re)welds employees together. However, a form of cynicism may appear in the medium term when this social simplification fails to produce results (Farrel, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1988). The solidarity and equality displayed in the early days then come across as a façade used to cover up certain mistakes and failures through collective compassion that the populist manager seeks to take advantage of. Even if certain links or hierarchies change at the top of the pyramid, the family metaphor quickly ends up losing its relevance with those it was destined for. Indeed, how can one really establish a genuine friendship with one's superior (Dattner, 2011) and erase any social dimension, in the sense of a contractual commitment within the company?

In addition, the family metaphor has another limit. Indeed, a family finds its *raison d'être* only within itself (continuity and descendants). Conversely, an organisation finds its own singularity (Gautier and Voynnet-Fourboul, 2019), through a progressive reduction in complexity (Luhmann, 1995) which helps it answer these questions: 'Who are we? What kind of business are we in? What do we want to be?' (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Briefly, a business finds its *raison d'être* through distinguished as well as central and enduring organisational attributes: what, how, when and why (Whetten, 2006). The social simplification introduced by the populist organisational leader therefore has a long way to go. As a result, the leader gradually adopts a form of doublespeak vis-à-vis stakeholders, beginning to rebuke certain colleagues in closed circles, whilst manipulating others, for want of being able to gather their support: there is no more 'one big happy family'. The OP leader engages in leadership practice for the pure sake of communications, and social events begin to disappear. Officially, the image of the happy family remains, but the populist leader makes one ineffective decision after another and demonstrates an inability to either plan or organise effectively (Table 1).

Social simplification also generates a culture of 'always being available and open' to new ideas that can emerge from anywhere in the structure. This culture, in which e-mail communication is initially overused (Bretesché et al., 2014), can end up creating numerous dysfunctions and progressive fatigue. Combined with the multitude of links

that are artificially woven, interpersonal relations within the organisation evolve towards a situation close to Bhagwati's (1994) 'spaghetti bowl'.[2] Interpersonal exchanges proliferate, but fewer and fewer people are able to identify the decision-makers or those responsible for following up on the decisions taken.

Table 1 Social simplification: some detailed effects

Multiplication of ineffective decisions	'Chronic meningitis' (Noyé, 2005): meetings are held more and more frequently to favour a collaborative working approach.
	• They are characterised by the absence of agendas, the lack of minutes, the diversity of decision-making and the lack of information on the responsibilities of each person and on deadlines (Rogelberg et al., 2007).
	Flatter communication channels are encouraged to restore confidence and build on existing skills in a poorly managed matrix organisation (Joyce, 1986).
	• A form of 'collaborative overload' (Cross et al., 2016) appears: decisions are muddled, and the chain of command is unclear.
	• Because of the succession of meetings, the follow-up of decisions is no longer subject to controls. Announcements are rarely followed by action.
	Work groups and brainstorming meetings involving large numbers of people also become commonplace.
	• They are an opportunity to get everyone involved. But they also serve to conceal the lack of vision and ideas of the OP leader.
	• However, brainstorming is rarely useful (Markman, 2019) and when it is useful; it is mainly within small groups in specific contexts (Sawhney and Khosla, 2014).
Inability to plan	The increase in the number of demands and participants makes it very difficult to plan effectively.
	• The strategy changes regularly. The reason is that it is adapted as closely as possible to the reality on the ground. A new 5-year strategy may emerge several years in a row (Kunisch et al., 2017).
	• To demonstrate their ambition, some OP leaders go so far as to budget for fictitious or extravagant incomes (e.g., opening markets abroad).
	• Window dressing (Allen and Saunders, 1992) and creative accounting (Jones, 2010) artificially boosts the morale of the troops and falsely convinces the holding company, partners or Board of Directors.
	The inability to plan forces the OP leader to resort to external expertise. In times of crisis, they may call on a variety of consulting firms (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006) for strategy, finance, marketing, etc.
	• These consultants make life easier for the populist leader, who buys the expertise he does not have.
	• Moreover, the OP leader can offload responsibility onto them, since it is the 'consultants who recommend that...'.

This confused situation can get worse in a context of a matrix organisation put in place even though the skills of the actors have not been identified and the actual implementation has not been accompanied (Reeser, 1969; Butler, 1973). In the end, it generates a 'growing disenchantment' [Joyce, (1986), p.557] that has been amplified ever since the development of social media, and which disintermediate relations through continuous connectivity (Mazmanian, 2013). This quickly leads to it being impossible to

bring projects to fruition while, paradoxically, the very ideas behind projects continue to multiply. The projects that are actually in progress may end up going downhill.

However, as the self-proclaimed conveyor of the will of the workforce at the top of the organisation, the populist leader readily adopts the adage of De Mirecourt (1869): 'I must follow them, since I am their leader'. In doing so, by displaying or taking up the ideas of others too readily, the OP leader appears to have no ideas of his own or values to defend. The disrepute of the senior management team starts to gradually take hold, above all among disbelieving middle managers who are increasingly short-circuited because of a poorly controlled matrix organisation. Behind this social simplification, which begins with lies and manipulation, the erasing of all types of formalisation is never far away. The rejection of anything that can slow down the disruption rounds off OP.

5 Procedural simplification: 'let's get rid of procedures…!'

Using numerous theoretical references from the 19th and 20th century, Rosanvallon shows how Napoleon III's writings[3] can be meaningful in the debate on contemporary populism. The researcher stresses the unanimous plebiscite this populist leader thrived on thanks to his so-called 'direct link' to the French people [Rosanvallon, (2020), p.100]. This strong link was accompanied by a persistent distrust of parties and all political intermediate bodies. In parallel, the press was also strongly distrusted and censored for the very reason that there can be no interference between the people and the sovereign.

This direct link implies an absence of interference and the end of processes and intermediates within organisations to facilitate managerial innovation and improve performance. Indeed, time is of the essence and, to accelerate change, direct interpersonal exchanges need to be introduced. The OP leader therefore criticises anything that allows for formalisation (Table 2).

The regularity of management committee meetings decreases. Other committees are created under a more appealing name, officially, on a temporary basis. Participation in these meetings varies: it is no longer clear who is officially a member (Noyé, 2005). At the same time, cross-cutting project meetings are set up to bypass the new committees. It is no longer clear where decisions are actually made.

The title or objectives of some of these working groups occasionally overlap with the missions of people already in place. This amplifies confusion of roles and slows down the decisions that are needed to be made. At the same time, procedures are replaced or simplified to be more efficient. Quality standards and procedures are considered too expensive and time-consuming and are pushed back *sine die*.

The oral word becomes part of managerial practice since, in the absence of written formalisation and regular follow-ups, orality promotes the flexibility and organisational agility desired by the OP leader. No need to write things down, just say it. OP is meant to be performative. Stemming from this, a group of courtiers is structured around the leader (Elias, 1993) who unconditionally supports him, which favours untimely changes ('the whims of the Prince') and inevitably ostracises certain employees (Table 2).

In concrete terms, this procedural simplification takes the form of a rejection of any kind of formalisation, which results in the desired use of 'start-up' management methods (Table 2) and consequently the blacklisting of those employees who do not support the direction taken. From the outset, the OP leader accuses predecessors of having hidden

things or lied. Using the same tactics they actually criticise, the OP leader puts into perspective any current failures (drop in turnover and/or profitability) to focus on an inevitably ambitious future. With regard to external stakeholders, a reassuring tone is adopted, ensuring them there is a happy atmosphere in the company, and that the management team has the full support of staff. However, the progressive disappearance of processes and/or guidelines favour the emergence of unethical behaviours (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010; Sussman et al., 2002; Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006).

Under the guise of organisational innovation, a structure is put in place that may become opaque in a matrix organisation (Burns and Wholey, 1993). Calling for transparency from others, the OP leader locks himself into the heart of the matrix organisation he has set up and whose ramifications are no longer understood by anyone. However, whilst innovation management becomes a leitmotiv, the management tools remain absent (or silent).

Table 2 Procedural simplification: some detailed effects

Rejection of any type of formalisation	The populist leader changes the role of the board of directors or the executive committee.
	• The number of meetings is reduced. Other committees are created using more upbeat titles, officially on a temporary basis.
	• The participants present at these meetings fluctuate: it is no longer clear who is an official member (Noyé, 2005).
	Transversal project meetings are organised which bypass the new committees. It is no longer clear where decisions are taken.
	• The title or objectives of some of these work groups sometimes overlap with the tasks of people already in office. This further confuses roles and slows down the decision-making process.
	Procedures are replaced or simplified in order to be more efficient.
	• Considered to be too expensive and time-consuming, quality assurance is pushed back indefinitely. When everything is back in order, there will be time to put them back in place.
	• A group of courtiers (Elias, 1993) is structured around the leader, which favours inopportune changes (‘the whims of the Prince’).
Start-up management	‘Innovative management’ requires a willingness to implement ‘agile’ methods of management.
	• However, most companies cannot operate like start-ups (Blank, 2017).
	• Whether the OP leader has experience in a start-up is irrelevant.
	The continued absence of an organisational chart that would clarify the duties and responsibilities of each staff member adds to the expressed desire for flexibility and agility.
	• As a result, no one really knows the exact duties of certain managers.

Notes: [1]The ‘Fort/Da game’ or ‘cotton reel game’ in Freudian psychology. ‘In the same way as a couple that separates, before getting back together and then separating again, one can predict that each of their questionings will be followed by a questioning of the questionings and so on’ [Bourion, (2015), p.188]. Fort/Da can be embodied through actions (the OP leader actually calls upon an employee previously side-lined from an important assignment, then side-lines them again, before temporarily reinstating them, etc.) or through words (the OP leader might defend the individual in public then attack them in private, and vice versa).

Table 2 Procedural simplification: some detailed effects (continued)

Exclusion of certain employees	Some managers are deemed incompetent and are thereby discarded. Some may become scapegoats (Allen et al., 1979; Girard, 2014). • The populist manager can then direct employee discontent towards an isolated figure and in so doing serve his own interests (Douglas, 2002). • The gradual lack of formal annual appraisals weakens these individuals. However, this scapegoating phenomenon may only last for a short period of time. • Some employees who have been dismissed may be called back, given that their expertise makes them necessary, if not indispensable. • A game of Organisational Fort/DA (OFD)[1] that alternates between recalling and rejecting dismissed employees can even be put in place (Bourion, 2015).

Notes: [1]The 'Fort/Da game' or 'cotton reel game' in Freudian psychology. 'In the same way as a couple that separates, before getting back together and then separating again, one can predict that each of their questionings will be followed by a questioning of the questionings and so on' [Bourion, (2015), p.188]. Fort/Da can be embodied through actions (the OP leader actually calls upon an employee previously side-lined from an important assignment, then side-lines them again, before temporarily reinstating them, etc.) or through words (the OP leader might defend the individual in public then attack them in private, and vice versa).

The will of the OP leader is always on the move: it is a creative and performative will (Aggeri, 2017). Conveyed by the abundant use of communication channels internally and social networks externally, in spite of itself it creates a form of lassitude and is the source of chaos that gradually takes shape. This procedural simplification eventually slows operations down and progressively suppresses the notion of hierarchy, which fades away.

6 Hierarchical simplification: 'we are all leaders!'

Procedural and social simplifications eventually extend into hierarchical simplification. The organisational innovation put in place then reaches its limits. Indeed, in a company where everyone has a say, the leadership figure starts to fade away, since each idea or project can chase away another and, with this, the person who was in charge of it.

As a result, the exercise of responsibility becomes both fragile and difficult, as social and procedural simplification makes room for the removal of hierarchies (Table 3). This confusion is accompanied by the plundering of others' ideas and a conflictual situation, whereby the OP leader wants to be a leader without wishing to assume the very role (Collovald, 1990).

At the same time, the OP leader has great difficulty in getting people who no longer think like him, or who contradict him to work together in small groups. But even if the hierarchical links become weaker, the OP leader still wants to make people believe they are the right person for the right job. It is for this exact reason that the organisational populist leader no longer speaks in front of his immediate subordinates, but to as many people as possible at once. He convenes plenary meetings involving all employees, preferably to justify his actions *a posteriori* rather than to explain them a priori. He may also invite other stakeholders (customers, suppliers, etc.) or the media, who will listen without a critical ear.

Finally, the OP leader seeks at all costs to master the good news-bad news effect (Eil and Rao, 2011). If there is not enough good news to go around, he will look elsewhere than in his legitimate sphere (Table 3). Constantly seeking good news to be shared, the populist leader's desire is to 'evangelise', i.e., in the etymological sense of the term, to bring good news, for his sole benefit. When good news is scarce, the populist leader plays the victim and suggests that everybody wants him out. Victimisation remains a big part of any populist storytelling (Müller, 2016; Mouffe, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2020).

Table 3 Hierarchical Simplification: some detailed effects

The predatory manager	A form of predation sets in vis-à-vis other people's ideas. • At a meeting, a manager can convincingly advocate ideas they were against just a few days or even hours before. It may also involve predation on the work or success, whether past or present, of other colleagues. He can make them his own or allow them to be monopolised by others. • A project manager's name is removed from a document during the final proofreading stage. • A project manager is replaced at the last minute for a presentation to a client or stakeholder.
Mr. Good News	The populist leader seeks at all costs to master the good news-bad news effect (Eil and Rao, 2011). If there is not enough good news to spread around, he will look elsewhere than in his legitimate sphere. • Looking for good news to spread on an ongoing basis, the populist leader's wish is to try, in the etymological sense of the term, to 'preach the Gospel' for his sole benefit. When good news becomes scarce, the populist leader may put himself under pressure. • He victimises himself by associating his company with his own paranoia: the market and the competition 'want to kill us off! Let's all stick together!'.
Leader, without being a leader!	The populist leader does not want to be the (authoritarian) leader: he wants to be the (empathetic) leader with whom one can engage in discussion (Collovald, 1990). • But even if the hierarchical links are blurred, the populist leader still wants to make people believe that he is the providential man. • At the same time, the populist leader has great difficulty in gathering together, in a small group, people who no longer think like him or contradict him. In contrast to the leader who speaks mainly in front of their direct subordinates, the populist leader prefers to speak in front of as many people as possible. • This is why he prefers to organise plenary meetings for all staff members, to justify his actions *a posteriori* rather than to explain them a priori. • In addition, he may invite other stakeholders (customers, suppliers, etc.) or the media, who will listen to him without being critical. They guarantee the leader a form of security: indeed, who would dare to speak out in public to challenge him?

Unaware of their own incompetence (Kruger and Dunning, 1999), the OP leader judges the competence of others negatively. A self-indulgence bias is developed, leading him to systematically evoke external causes (bad luck or fate) to retrospectively analyse his mistakes. It is the fault of the employees in charge (not competent enough) or of the

market which is not ready (because the product is cutting-edge since the innovation is presented as being disruptive).

Presenting himself as the leader of a community (Wellman, 2017) or 'collective leader' (Boffa-Comby, 2017), the organisational populist leader does not actually assume his leadership role (Table 3). He rejects any form of hierarchy, does not wish to formalise things and lays claim to a form of enterprise that he wishes to be fraternal. Demanding that everyone gets out of their individual comfort zone, he may become unable to get out of his own and can only respond to criticism through contempt or scorn. Having innovative ideas on a regular basis may even justify the populist leader's inaction since; by thinking endlessly about disrupting he no longer has time to take action. The responsibility for implementation is therefore left to others.

Beyond the ambiguity of the meaning given to its work-ambiguity that can serve to support a form of behavioural hold (Boutiba and Zeribi-Benslimane, 2015), OP makes a clean sweep of social and hierarchical separations as well as organisational rules. As a result, it creates the conditions for chaos that leads to the disengagement of employees and the failure, if not an abrupt slowdown (Figure 2), of the organisation's smooth functioning (McMillan and Overall, 2017).

7 Theoretical discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this article is not to illustrate the collective dynamics that lead mechanically to company failure (McMillan and Overall, 2017), but to highlight a behaviour that goes beyond organisational politics, which we qualify as OP. We do not assume that the elements of the simplification represented by OP could accumulate dysfunctionally in a precise order that remains to be determined. On the contrary, these elements may emerge progressively and/or simultaneously as a result of the action of the OP leader whose *hubris* (Owen and Davidson, 2009) and narcissism (Paulhus, 1998; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) can lead to organisational failure. Nevertheless, the political system that prevailed at the beginning may progressively lose its influence and be replaced by systems based on expertise or authority (Figure 2).

Added to the management of employees' emotions, the three-fold social, procedural and hierarchical simplification that characterises OP is recognisable in this travesty of reality where words end up losing all meaning. In fact, corruption, in the primary sense of spoiling and degrading (Aristote, 2014), begins with words that are spoken before attacking the company's culture and turnover. Just like political populism, OP is not revolutionary: under the guise of a desire for total change, OP ends up reinforcing the *statu quo* (Rosanvallon, 2011a) and contributes to worsening a crisis.

OP appears to be a bad consequence of deviant organisational politics that go against the corporate goals [Mintzberg, (1985), p.148; Gotsis and Kortezi, (2010), p.498]. This is the main difference with organisational politics that can be either dysfunctional (negative) or functional (positive) to employees and organisations [Allen et al., (1979), p.82; Cacciattolo, 2014]. On its positive side, organisational politics can stimulate innovation (Matsuo, 2005), favour creativity (Amabile, 1988) and develop collaboration between rival teams within organisations (Drory and Vigoda-Gadot, 2010; Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010; Naidoo and Sutherland, 2016) so as to help organisations to survive and thrive (Othman, 2008).

But as we illustrate in this article, OP has no positive side: it is a 'container' that gathers and 'boils' individual and collective emotions [Vince, (2002), p.75]. Under the rule of OP, the disappearance of formal procedures and the wave of triple simplifications favour the development of unethical behaviour (Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010), which in turn increases the perception and reality of OP (Figure 2). Breaking the vicious circle of OP – that slowly generates messiness (Klag and Langley, 2023) – then turns out to be extremely difficult, even for whistle-blowers (Cailleba and Charreire Petit, 2018).

In addition, putting an end to OP may be much harder if cultural differences are taken into account. Because the way people assess behaviours in a professional context differs widely from each cultural background (Hofstede, 2011; Smith et al., 1996) and from each company history (Jones and Zeitlin, 2008), OP is likely to be less easy to identify than organisational politics. Especially as many business leaders play successfully on collective emotions to rule their organisations (Humphrey, 2002), increase employee motivation (Ouakouak et al., 2020) and performance (McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002) while others may use social media as a plebiscite for their leadership (Matthews et al., 2023) and overall influence[4] (Douthat, 2022). It is for this reason, just like with populism (Mouffe, 2020), that there is no one unique type of OP but several types of OPs.

Nevertheless, as observed by Laclau (2005), populism emerges in times of leadership crisis. OP is no different in this respect: it emerges progressively when the different control systems, i.e., ideology, expertise and authority (Mintzberg, 1985), have failed (Figure 2). As a consequence, any organisation is likely to be confronted with populism. But the OP leader's legitimacy is quickly diminished as deficits or failures accumulate. However, he can manage to stay in office provided internal support comes from an active part of his employees (see above), but also externally from shareholders or owners of the company who are responsive to his discourse and blind to his practice as long as the parent organisation can pour in cash and resources into the firm. Hence, this kind of figure may be commonplace in some branches of successful private companies and in some civil service sectors or similar types of organisations. The OP leader's damaged credibility, combined with weak legitimacy due to poor results, may therefore not be enough to oust him from his management position. Toxic by definition, this form of populism then progressively increases psychosocial risks and accentuates suffering at work by multiplying conflicting orders and the denial of organisational reality.

Sound managerial measures should limit the emergence of the influence of OP. Firstly, stopping individual bad habits related to workplace bullying constitutes the foundations of fair management based on mutual respect (Yao et al., 2022). On top of this, traditional political prudence helps 'avoid drifting to the dark side' of political behaviour [Amah, (2022), p.351]. Also, asking for conflict mediation (Balzer and Schneider, 2021; Hennigs, 2021) or even taking a step aside out of the organisation or during a sabbatical (Schabram et al., 2022) ought to reduce, or at least postpone, the opportunity for deviant behaviour. Finally, the total combination of these sound measures could help create what Rogers et al. (2023, p.88) call a 'work growth-mindset' that favours solidarity and benevolence between employees.

But since 'organisational politics is an inescapable part of organisational life' [Hinck and Conrad, (2018), p.1] and an organisation can 'get captured by conflict' [Mintzberg, (1985), p.133)] the way to manage dissent or dissensus (Rancière, 2010) is the *sine qua non* condition of organisational future success. Rancière talks about 'a dissensus space' where possible deviations from the organisational strategy are explored. Not only does

dissensus disrupt existing 'official' consensual patterns, but it allows an exchange between the actors of the dissensus made possible by the postulate of internal equality and unfixed hierarchies. Dissensus is a space for mobility that should allow the activation and facilitation of political alliances within the minority space. It implies continuous mobilisation of all stakeholders within organisations, increasing at the same time individual productivity and political efficiency (Vertongen, 2014).

Notwithstanding the sustaining dimension of dissensus, the objective of organisational control systems is to exclude from the company any possibility of conflict (Mumby, 2013). Nevertheless, Ashforth and Mael (1998) showed that even efficient control systems leave room to resistance and finally conflict despite the risks dissenters face (Conrad and Poole, 2012). Further research should explore this perspective and show how leadership can in practice simultaneously manage the internal heteronomies and the implementation of a shared vision and successful strategy. Since 'there's no escaping office politics' [Doldor and Wyatt, (2022), p.1], organisational politics should be handled effectively and ethically (Postma, 2020) to be turned into a powerful force for inclusion.

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Notes

1 Since 2006, some 170 articles related to 'populism' were presented at one of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congresses. Search carried out on 17 January 2023 in the IPSA 'Conference Proceedings Library'.

2 In keeping with international trade theory, Baghwati's analysis is based on the contradiction between the existence of the World Trade Organisation on the one hand and the resurgence of bilateral trade agreements on the other. Indeed, he notes that in the 1990s, the explosion of these bilateral inter-state agreements (symbolised by spaghetti) contradicted the WTO's original mission, which was to reduce the number of these same bilateral agreements.

3 Louis Napoléon Bonaparte was the first elected French president (1848–1852). He organised a *coup d'état* to become emperor under the name of Napoléon III (1852–1870). He is considered to be one of the first European political populist leaders who tried to justify his actions (Pombeni, 1997; Rosanvallon, 2020). He was criticised and identified as a populist during his lifetime by authors and pamphletists (Hugo, 1852).

4 Tipalti publishes a ranking of the most influential CEOs, from *Twitter* to *TikTok*. In 2022, they were Elon Musk (#1), Bill Gates (#2) and Jeff Bezos (#3). Consulted on 31 January 2023: https://tipalti.com/ceo-influencers.