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Krämer, Benjamin

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Is There Such a Thing as Science-Related Populism? An Essay on Anti-Science Sentiments and Ideologies

A certain anti-science sentiment seems to coincide with the rise of certain (seemingly) populist forces. An apparent affinity between anti-science attitudes (or ideologies) and populism has not escaped social scientists' attention. To get at the core of the problem, Niels Mede and Mike Schäfer (2020) have recently proposed the concept of science-related populism (SRP).² The present short essay seeks to add nuance to the idea that there is such a thing as science-related or anti-science populism. It argues that there are indeed certain forms of populist opposition to science, but that we should not overstretch the concept to include things that are neither really populist (or not populist in the same way) nor related to science in the same way. And we should not overly narrow it down and thus exclude a lot of criticism of science currently associated with populism.

1. If there is such a hostility towards science, is it a kind of populism?

As Mede and Schäfer (2020) rightfully argue, there is an affinity between certain anti-science stances and populist anti-elitism. Should we therefore call this anti-science sentiment “a” populism? Of course, we can call things as we want, but we should clarify what we mean by something being a kind of populism. Populism researchers would probably agree that in a list that reads: “left-wing populism, agrarian populism, right-wing populism, science-related populism,” the latter element is at odds with the others. The first three denote ideologies or discourses that can frame a broad range of issues in terms of an antagonism between “the elite” and “the people.” The latter describes an attitude towards a specific field (or certain subfields). The relationship between them requires theoretical explanation and empirical research that is not only based on cross-sectional correlations between attitudes but, for example, on elaborate designs to identify basic categories (Do people think in terms of “the elite” or different elites with analogies or connections between them?) and long-term or biographical studies on the acquisition, generalization, and differentiation of anti-elite attitudes (Are people first discontented with and increasingly hostile towards political elites and then towards certain other elites, or maybe vice versa, and what drives and affects this process?). To understand people's more or less “populist” worldviews or communication, and their attitudes towards different social fields with their actors, populism should not

¹ Dr. Benjamin Krämer (kraemer@ifkw.lmu.de) is Privatdozent at the Department of Media and Communication at LMU Munich, Germany.

² I would like to thank Niels G. Mede for the fruitful discussions on the topic of this essay.

only be understood as a set of static ideas about politics in the narrow sense but also as a performative phenomenon that, by itself, establishes and connects antagonisms in different areas.

Without a theory on how SRP is related to other “populisms,” the concept has not yet reached its full analytical potential or may even unnecessarily multiply the number of concepts in a case where “populism” as a set of more general ideas or a performative discourse would be sufficient. Thus, we have to ask in what way the anti-science sentiments that the concept of SRP hints at are actually populist and “science-related.”

2. If there is such a hostility towards science, is it primarily populist and straightforwardly anti-science?

Many academics in the Global North are probably most concerned about a certain type of anti-science sentiments—those that have to do with the rejection of certain kinds of expertise, that are, among others, spread by populist parties and politicians, and that aim at fields such as climate research, gender studies, and, most recently, virology, infectiology, and epidemiology. These sentiments have arisen in a particular discursive constellation. To get a grasp of this constellation and its relationship with different types of populism, we may contrast a few types of more specific anti-science sentiments with what may be called *banal epistemic populism*, i.e., the not (yet) strictly politicized idea that ordinary people with their experience and practical skills can or do know better than the higher-ranking professionals or even those in the ivory tower, ranging from small everyday subversions of hierarchies (such as in narratives on the competences of nurses versus doctors, construction workers versus architects, etc.) to deep-seated anti-intellectualism. Banal epistemic populism is not identical to but probably often related to *anti-academic sentiment* that takes offense at the habitus and perceived arrogance of academics (or formally highly educated persons in general) who claim superior knowledge and authority over others. However, some people may make a difference between arrogant academics and science or (unpretentious) scientists producing valuable knowledge.

Banal epistemic populism and anti-academic sentiment may fuel or rationalize, but probably cannot fully explain the current, sometimes fierce, politicization of anti-science sentiments. They do not fully account for the differences in the degree of politicization among academic fields, and the sometimes hostile or even hateful reactions towards scientists and scientific fields. Many people probably will not have the idea of claiming general “decision-making sovereignty” (Mede & Schäfer, 2020, p. 481) over science without some more specific kind of political motivation. Certainly, politically motivated criticism of science may be rooted in banal epistemic populism or anti-intellectualism, such as the complaint that scientists in their ivory tower “waste our tax money” on useless research. However, this kind of anti-science sentiment probably mostly occurs ad hoc when people become aware of specific activities that have a particularly

ivory tower smell to it. This kind of sentiment does not seem to explain the thoroughgoing and hostile politicization of certain fields of research, the perception of science as an actual threat. And that banal epistemic populism or banal “not with my money” populism are not necessarily articulated with a general antagonism between ordinary people and the elite (although the taxation of hard-working people can be a central aspect in some populist ideologies) or even a resulting sense of crisis. At least, we would have to analyze empirically when the “representative” function of science in the sense of representing peoples’ priorities (and the function of decision-making more generally) as opposed to its ascribed function to “represent” reality is at the center of discussions and judgments, and to what degree and how they are politicized.

Mede and Schäfer (2020) themselves refer to different types of anti-science sentiment that may or may not be included in or overlap with SRP, such as the diverse observations on counter-knowledge and counter-authorities by Harambam and Aupers (2015) or Ylä-Anttila (2018) and in the concept of epistemic populism Saurette and Gunster (2011) already introduced with an eye on its political aspect. I am somewhat skeptical as to whether the concept of SRP can equally accommodate different prominent anti-science sentiments one might associate with populism. I would argue that they differ in their degree or type of populism and their political criticism of science.

Unlike banal epistemic populism, what I would call *reactionary epistemic populism* or *reactionary (general) anti-intellectualism* describes scientific elites not simply as out of touch with practical reality and everyday experience, but in specific sociopolitical terms. This populist view reacts to a threat that is, in the most prominent version, seen through the lens of a conservative ideology (Krämer & Klingler, 2020): Despite all commonsense and everyday experience (for example, that there are men and women and that the weather can change), liberal and left-wing elites are attacking a traditional or normal way of living (for example, by forcing the “climate hoax” or “gender nonsense” upon the population). This is often seen by the critics as a matter of priorities (e.g., too many professorships for gender research) but probably more importantly as a question of the representation of reality (that is judged against a whole worldview with political implications).

Another type of attack on academic research that may be associated with populism could be termed *conservative scientism* or *scientistic (specific) anti-intellectualism*. Its enemy is verbiage that sounds smart and intellectual but is only ideological, non-scientific nonsense with dangerous political implications, mainly from the social sciences and humanities. However, there is also a fear that the “pure” and “unpolitical” natural sciences—whose rigor and objectivity the other disciplines fail to equal—are contaminated by ideological biases and political agendas (e.g., when atmospheric physics turns into “alarmist” and “activist” climate research). Thus, this view is not simply anti-science but affirmatively appropriates one conception of science to use it against another. It is based on a narrow, scientistic understanding of “real” research

and has mainly socially conservative implications, such as a biologicistic binary conception of gender, the legitimation of inequality as natural or objectively necessary, or climate change denial.

The danger postulated by the scientific anti-intellectualists certainly originates from what they see as influential, elitist groups. The attacks on academia might therefore be described as populist, but one may also recognize a rather elitist aspect, a technocratic or meritocratic ideology, an ideology of natural talent and effort: Science is not necessarily for everyone but for the gifted, the rationally thinking, and hardworking, whose research benefits the general public—unlike those in the social sciences and humanities who lack talent, rigor, and effort, and only work for their own benefit (e.g., grabbing one of the chairs of gender studies) or to indoctrinate their students and the population. It may also be consistent with this view to perceive the participatory turn in science as going in the wrong direction, introducing “social” or “political” concerns into the “pure” sciences.

This anti-intellectualism is not *epistemically populist* but *sociopolitically populist* at best: It attacks certain elites not in the name of the wisdom of ordinary people, and maybe not even in the name of common well-understood but politically unrepresented interests of the general population, but because (social) reality is misrepresented.

Thus, instead of a common epistemic populism, it is the conservative implications of this “scientist” criticism of academic fields that is the basis for alliances with other anti-science forces (such as right-wing and epistemic populists proper). However, the scientist ideology can also cause tensions with other conservative movements (such as religious conservatives) that are also sometimes represented in parties classified as “right-wing populist” (that would often be described more adequately as coalitions of various, more or less populist far-right forces). And given the sociopolitical basis of the above types of criticism, our analysis of anti-science attitudes and the meaning of the term “science-related” cannot simply be based on our conception of societal differentiation, of what is specific to the logic of science, but on the ascriptions by the critics. They may or may not define what scientists do and should do in the same way as we do.

Populists (and also conspiracy theorists) may position themselves against mainstream scientists but not necessarily against “scientific” authority as defined by themselves, ranging from references to rather marginalized but established scientists (often presented as factual arguments but sometimes also in a way that almost longs for authority) to an outright cult of outsiders with radically different epistemologies.

Analyses of ideological views of science in the general population and political discourse will certainly also find different criticisms of science—or anti-science sentiments—among groups that would typically be considered left-wing (and among those who defy classification on this axis). Such views may range from epistemic populism or cynicism, advocacy of esoteric teachings and folk wisdom, to more

established criticisms based on consequences of technologies or the (structurally) conservative and discriminatory implications of certain scientific approaches.

I am reluctant to subsume some or all of these different strands of criticism or hostility towards science—across the political spectrum and including less-politicized sentiments—under the concept of SRP. Of course, not every criticism of science is SRP. However, we risk imposing a rather formal concept on a diverse set of ideologies or discourses that are not equally populist and related to science in very different ways, and that would require a different conceptualization and counter-strategies. We may then define the concept of science-related populism as those ideas or discourses that apply a sociopolitical populism to science (opposing the people and different elites based on interests or general political ideologies) but are not necessarily epistemically populist (so both reactionary epistemic populism and maybe scientific anti-intellectualism would be included), or restrict SRP to the combination of sociopolitical and epistemic populism (which would exclude scientific anti-intellectualism).

3. If there is such a hostility towards science, what is to be done?

Thankfully the issue of certain anti-science ideologies or discourses is now on the scientific agenda. Given the existing operationalizations of ideational populism, anti-science populism appears to be easily measurable, and it seems obvious to proceed with empirical studies. However, if a measurement were to cover both attitudes based on, and not based on, *epistemic* populism in the strict sense, and if it is to avoid any references to other specific *political* ideologies or motivations, we may end up with a very abstract and unspecific anti-science sentiment based on very different epistemological and/or political ideas whose specifically populist character is hard to recognize. Or SRP may be defined very narrowly (e.g., based on strict epistemic populism), excluding many other types of criticism of science currently associated with populist politics.

At least in addition to more standardized approaches, we should therefore continue to explore the “messy” field of anti-science ideologies and discourses using ethnographic and discourse-analytical approaches and study the contingent alliances and fault lines—before we “black-box” and even risk to reify the concept of SRP once and for all.

When anti-science politics emerge, doing science becomes political, whether we want it or not. A differentiated understanding of various anti-science ideologies and discourses helps us not to de-politicize current problems as a lack of information and dissemination of knowledge, to target various critics specifically, and to set our priorities: Should we try to convince scientists of the value of different epistemologies? How can we address everyday anti-intellectualism and prevent the development of more politicized populist anti-science attitudes while working towards more participatory academic fields and research, etc.?

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