REFUGEE CRISIS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE AUSTRALIAN CASE

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Abstract - In the current 'post-factual age', truth has often been distorted with the aim of serving the political goals of demagogues, especially with regards to debated hot issues, such as the recent migratory crisis. Despite being located further from certain conflict areas on the world map, Australia has also been challenged by influxes of refugees and asylum seekers coming from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Especially since the 2012 reimplementation of the Pacific Solution, the proliferation and manipulation of media contents on the matter has intensified. The main purpose of this small-scale study is to understand what kind of representation strategies populist leaders employ to represent refugees on the social media platform of Twitter and shed light on the nationalist propaganda underlying their tweets. The research relies on a mixed methodology that combines Corpus Linguistics and Discourse-Historical-Approach, which were employed to analyse qualitative data elicited from the Twitter corpus. The findings suggest that there are several similarities between the Euro-American and the Australian populisms, although the former has received greater attention within the literary field. As a matter of fact, refugees are pictured as outlaws or petty criminals, who come massively to Australia to usurp the country's resources while taking advantage of Australia's welfare system. As a whole, they are portrayed as a threat to the unity of the Australian nation, to be neutralised in order to safeguard the integrity and the future prosperity of the country. The ultimate goal of the research is to encourage social media users to become aware of these manipulative discursive practices circulating online and, ultimately, spur them on to oppose an indiscriminate accreditation of untruthful information.

Keywords: australian refugee crisis; atlantic bias; antipodean populism; twitter discourse; discourse-historical approach; populist rhetorical strategies.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Digital Era, technologically advanced countries worldwide have witnessed a crucial shift in the production and accessibility of political information (Westerman et al. 2014, p. 171). The metastatic diffusion of social media networks, as platforms where to wage political and ideological battles, has brought about a new configuration of political participation, which is often enacted within homophilous spaces of discussion called "eco chambers" (Brummette et al. 2018, p. 498). In fact, in the current 'post-factual age', truth has been frequently distorted according to the political goals of demagogues (Fuller 2018), especially with regard to hot issues, such as the planetary migration crisis.

Over the past decades, Australia, like other countries worldwide, has been challenged by conspicuous influxes of refugees and asylum seekers, coming especially from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Controversy has increased exponentially since the 2012 reimplementation of the Pacific Solution, which implied the reopening of the offshore detention centres on the Pacific Islands of Nauru and Manus (Papua New Guinea), where refugees have ever since been confined and detained, in the fallacious hope of entering the Australian country under protection (Karlsen, Phillips 2014).

In this vein, previous literature has argued that the construction of refugees and asylum seekers within media discourse epitomizes political leaders' ideological stances with regards to the migratory emergency (Wodak 2012; Baker et al. 2008). However, far too little attention has been paid to how refugees and asylum seekers are discursively represented within the 'Twittersphere' by Australian populist leaders. The present article seeks to analyse, from a triangulated perspective, the different kinds of representation strategies that some selected political actors adopt to construct narratives on refugees and asylum seekers. Ultimately, the

research's intent is to shed light on how these mediatized constructions may account for virtual political propaganda.

2.   Literature review

In recent times, a large and growing body of literature has attempted to define what populism is, often in simplistic terms, thereby failing to capture the multifaceted nature of this revitalized political phenomenon (Moffitt et al. 2014, p. 382). However, some general tenets might be identified and summarized in the assumption that:

> '[t]he elite', 'the establishment', 'the state' or 'the system' (or other related signifiers) are usually evoked in populist discourse as the source of crisis, breakdown, corruption or dysfunctionality, as opposed to 'the people' who in turn have been 'let down', 'ripped off', 'fleeced', rendered powerless or badly governed (Moffitt et al. 2014, p. 391).

Another major controversy lies in the so-called 'Atlantic bias', according to which several regional populisms have been overlooked by the mainstream literature, by comparison with the Euro-American ones (Moffitt 2014). The present article adopts Ostiguy's perspective (Ostiguy et al. 2017), and in so doing it conceptualizes populism as a "cultural-relational performative style" (Moffitt et al. 2017, p. 122), therefore distancing itself from a static and monolithic understanding of the political phenomenon. In this sense, Ostiguy proposes a more flexible analytical framework to interrogate populism, based on a continuum of features, thus discrediting an aut-aut approach that could not be applied indiscriminately (*Ibidem*). Bearing this in mind, the study attempts to gain some insights into the antipodean Australian populism and, consequently, it wishes to fill the above-mentioned gap in literature. Beyond the disagreement on its definition, when approaching populism scientifically, it is pivotal nowadays to take into account "the affordances and algorithmic nature of web 2.0" (Maly 2018, p. 8), also given the previously-mentioned digital revolution achieved by social media over time. In this light, the antipodean phenomenon needs to be investigated as a "mediatized chronotopic communicative and discursive relation" (*Ibidem*), namely, an algorithmic event that is geo-historically contextualized and that involves different social and digital actors.

Acknowledging the conformation of social networks, Twitter accounts for a platform that allows political compatibility through what Zappavigna has defined 'searchable talk', that is "online discourse where the primary function appears to be affiliation via 'findability'" (Zappavigna 2011, p. 789). The hashtags/keywords used as search queries presuppose "a virtual community of interested listeners who are actively following this keyword or who may use it as a search term" (*Ivi*, p. 791). In other words, in these online settings, the 'shareability' of values is crucial to political leaders in order to consolidate their leadership and form their electorate. In this light, 'findability' may be valuable, in that allows politicians *to be found* by virtual voters. The same principle has been employed to collect the data for the present study (i.e. tweets were searched and collected by entering the search query, that is the hashtags/keywords selected, onto the platform's search engine).

3.   Methodology

The Twitter research corpus is opportunistic in its nature and comprises a total of 312 Tweets that were collected manually over a limited period of time (April-May 2019). Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to share messages no longer than 140 characters with a virtual audience, pointing to a common social need "to engage with other voices in public and

private feeds" (Zappavigna 2011, p. 790). The search queries for the gathering of data functioned both as hashtags and keywords; keywords were used when the content of the tweet could not be retrieved otherwise. Given the different foci of public discussions taking place in Australia during the time, the hashtags/keywords selected were: manus, nauru, refug*, asylumseeker*, immigr*. The temporal range considered for the collection spans from 2011, when the Australian Government resumed debate on the *Migration Legislation Amendment (Offshore Processing and Other Measures) Bill 2011* (Karlsen, Phillips 2014), up to May 18th 2019, day of the latest Australian Federal Elections.

As regards the collection of data, the geolocation of tweets was also a discriminating factor, considering the peculiarity of Queensland's major political affiliation. As a matter of fact, Queensland accounts for "the cradle of contemporary Australian populism" (Moffitt 2017, p. 123). Consistently, the politicians whose tweet have been under analysis, with the only exception of Charles Smith[1], who is a One Nation member in Western Australia, have twitted mainly from the following cities located in Queensland State: Brisbane, Pauline Hanson and Malcolm Roberts (One Nation); Mackay, George Christensen (Liberal National Party) and Townsville, Clive Palmer (United Australia). The parties represented in the study can be placed in the right-wing spectrum of Australian politics, though to different degrees.

For the current research, a triangulated method (Baker et al. 2008), a combination of Corpus Linguistics (i.e. concordance and collocation) and Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2011) was employed, as it represented the most suitable analytical methodology to investigate contemporary Australian populism and its discursive productions. The DHA is a multi-layered inter-disciplinary approach that allows, through an in-depth qualitative analysis, the investigation of the dialogic relations between the linguistic micro-level of a text and the ideological macro-level of the socio-discursive context in which the text is performed (*Ibidem*).

The study is a corpus-based research, which follows a four-level model of analysis and includes a) the socio-political/historical context in which b) the discursive debate/event under analysis collocates - these have been delineated in the previous section; thirdly, c) the text-internal co-text; in other words, a data set of specific micro-texts (tweets) and, lastly, d) the intertextual and interdiscursive relations; that is, "the linkage between discourses and texts across time and space" (*Ivi*, p. 51) that will be examined in the following sections. Central to the analytical dimension of DHA is the concept of *topoi*, which can be defined as argumentation strategies serving as "content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion or central claim" (Wodak 2009, p. 42).

Within a broader framework of persuasive rhetoric that legitimates a positive-self and negative-other representation, the five discursive strategies proposed by Wodak et al. (Wodak et al. 2012, p. 287) were also employed in order to conduct the inquiry: nomination (how refugees and asylum seekers are referred to linguistically), predication (what characteristics, quality and features are attributed to them as human/inhuman social actors), argumentation (what arguments are employed to talk about them), perspectivation (from what perspective discourses about them are formulated), intensification and mitigation (how overtly these utterances are articulated).

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[1] Charles Smith was included in the analysis since his tweeting was reasonably present (and relevant) while collecting the data.

4. Analysis and Discussion

As already highlighted in other studies (Baker et al. 2008), dominant narratives on refugees and asylum seekers revolve around a number of content categories, among which (a) Provenance/transit/destination, (b) Number, (c) Entry, (d) Economic problems, (e)Residence, (f) Return/repatriation, (g) Legality and (h) Plight (*Ivi*, p. 286) can be singled out. The corpus data showed overlapping features present in both Euro-American and Australian populisms, as the results below demonstrate.

Throughout the corpus, a close-reading analysis of the tweets revealed that different adjectives were assigned to refugees and asylum seekers, like, 'economic', 'Carbon' and 'fake' (in contrast with 'genuine' in example 7). However, as can be seen in Figure 1, the most recurrent was 'illegal' (20 hits), which collocates substantially with 'immigrants' and 'refugees', thus depicting the social actors at issue as outlaws. What is also significant is that there is no instance where the word 'immigrant' is presented in a more neutral way.

Occurrences 20 (29.53)	Texts 1	▼ Corpus	Corpus 2	▼ Context	7	▼ Display Text

Left	Node	Right
deaths at sea. Where did I say	illegal	asylum seeker? SOFT ON BORDERS| Letter to
but when it comes to refugees or	illegal,	economic migrants, they give them everything they
as well! Greens policy: Open doors 4	illegal	immigrants but closed doors 4 migrant workers
the vocal activists and is secretly bringing	illegal	immigrants from Manus and Nauru to Australia.
in Australia using Telemedicine (Skype) to evaluate	illegal	immigrants It was an insult to the
been provided for a new surgical facility.	Illegal	immigrants on Nauru have better health access
gutful! -PH WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT	ILLEGAL	IMMIGRANTS ON NAURU/MANUS Which would you prefer:
MP & Senator is going 2 allow	illegal	immigrants to #homestay in their homes! I
that the Federal Liberal government is bringing	illegal	immigrants to Australia from Manus and Nauru,
at sea as a consequence of bringing	illegal	immigrants to Australia. Manus and Nauru have
govt operated a water taxi service for	illegal	immigrants. #lifebeforeabbott Check out homestay FAQ No
up Australia's borders to welfare shoppers and	illegal	immigrants. Australia has a clear and straightforward
us 2 roll out welcome mat 4	illegal	immigrants... & prayer mat as well! Greens
House on national security threat posed by	illegal	immigration & Labor losing control of our
#auspol #Longman Despite knowing weak borders &	illegal	immigration increase the risk of terror attacks,
@OneNationAus supporters? #auspol #ausvotes #wapol 1) Those	illegal	migrants on Manus and Nauru already have
to the Greens' open-borders policies? #auspol Actually,	illegal	migrants on Manus and Nauru enjoy one
are mistreated or living in misery. These	illegal	refugees can always go home if they
murderers from the US in exchange for	illegal	refugees from Manus and Nauru? I know
a deal with Canada to take our	illegal	refugees? Why have the @Greens & @AustralianLabor

Figure 1.
Concordance plot of the node 'illegal' using #Lancsboxv. 4.x (Brezina et al. 2018)

Within the corpus, there were also instances in which refugees were labelled as 'boatpeople', to emphasize the means of transportation they use in the attempt of reaching the Australian soil. This process of nominalization may account for a perlocutory act with ill-fated consequences, which on the long term risks to consolidate discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes against refugees and asylum seekers both at an institutional and a public level. As a matter of fact, regarding the former sphere, since the 2001 Tampa Affair especially, the ocean came to be the new 'space of exception' (Agamben 2003), a space where the Australian government continues to exercise its sovereign power of regulating lives. In other words, it decides who may 'suit the Australian identity' (example 1) and who should be warded off, or even more dramatically, who shall live and who shall die (Perera 2007, p. 12). According to Mbebe (Mbebe et al. 2003, p. 17), such a conceptualization of sovereignty is a recurring feature of the functioning of modern states, although being at the same time a clear sign of "moral failure" (Devetak 2004, p. 107). In the following instances, the humanitarian side of the refugee

issue is, in fact, violently ignored and neglected. In examples 2, 3 and 4, especially, the economic implications are prioritized over the philanthropic aspects:

1. We have a most generous refugee intake which everyone supports. We all agree we should help refugees ... Just not the ones who come illegally by boat. And we should be able to choose the ones that will suit our national identity.
2. $2b cut from families in #budget while $1.7b spent sorting out #boatpeople crisis & $5.8b spent on #foreignaid: where's govt priorities at?
3. Govt's #boatpeople policy: 4 every 1 Malaysia gets, we get 5 & we pay $300m 4 it all! It's the ponzi scheme of immigration policy. #auspol
4. Australia has 65 health specialists on Nauru & has spent $11m on a new medical clinic at processing centre, $26.5m upgrades at the Nauru hospital & $2.7m has been provided for a new surgical facility. Illegal immigrants on Nauru have better health access than rural Australians.

With regards to perspectivation, some important considerations should be made. In spite of the technical definition of certain juridical terms, the findings indicate that populist leaders tend to use inaccurate terminology strategically, in order to support their thoughts, while challenging institutional authorities and information agencies, through what Lakoff calls a 'deflection strategy' (Lakoff 2017). This rhetorical technique is used to generate distrust in the public and establish the utterer, in this case the political representatives, as the sole source of truth. As can be seen in example 5 and 6, the authority and reliability of the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the United Nations (UN) and are questioned of 'misrepresenting the country' (example 9). At the same time, and in opposition to such misrepresentations, the sovereignty of Australia is claimed back. In example 7, the same deflection strategy applies, resulting in the self-representation of Australians as victims of the establishment, given that they have been deceived by "shockingly biased and inaccurate piffle" (Moffitt et al. 2014, p. 391). Feelings of diffidence and hostility are infused even towards 'fake' refugees presented in example 8 are as petty criminals, who take advantage of the Australian welfare system.

5. ABC being accused by the Nauru government of 'blatant interference' & 'lack of respect'. No different to the ABC's coverage of politics in Australia.
6. The UN does not get to dictate to Australia what a refugee is. As a sovereign nation, Australia has the right to decide what constitutes a refugee & what constitutes an economic migrant. We will decide who comes to this country & the manner in which they arrive, not the UN!
7. For $1.2 billion a year, Australians are being fed shockingly biased and inaccurate piffle on asylum seekers, immigration and a host of other issues. #TheirABC #auspol
8. Economic migrants, who arrive illegally, should not be allowed to take advantage of Australia's generosity and make a mockery of our refugee program. In America Donald Trump is acting to prevent this, Scott Morrison should do the same and not bow down to bleeding hearts!
9. What you have just tweeted is not based in fact. If you come to Australia by boat we will not settle you here. But we have a huge and generous legal refugee intake. We treat genuine refugees with a high level of dignity and respect. Stop misrepresenting our country.
10. And when you vote for Labor you are voting for a ALP/Greens marriage that bought us the destructive carbon tax and 50,000 fake refugees by boat.

If we compare example 8 and 9, it is still quite unclear what distinguishes a 'fake' from a 'genuine' refugee. Apparently, it seems that it is the mode of transportation by which asylum seekers try to reach Australia that makes a distinction. What is not told overtly, though (but is well hidden behind these discourses of exclusion), is that refugees, for a number of complex reasons, *cannot* enter the host country through legal ways. For instance, they cannot apply for visas from their own countries of origin, which is part of a precise governmental strategy to confine them forcibly into a legal and administrative impasse (Devetak 2004).

An additional recurrent feature was the use of the linguistic processes of 'aggregation' and 'collectivization', according to which refugees and asylum seekers are discursively constructed as a homogeneous entity with intrinsically similar characteristics. This rhetorical device annihilates the singularity of individuals and generates mental representations in which they are dehumanized and reduced to "an out-of-control, agentless, unwanted natural disaster" (Baker et al. 2008, p. 287). The 'topos of numbers', in conjunction with the 'topos of threat', were frequently used according to what Lakoff has defined the 'trial balloon' strategy, which is employed to create sensationalistic effects on readers (Lakoff 2017). Indeed, as visible in the tweets below, a 'terrifying picture' is mounted (example 13), whereby Australians will be inundated by a 'flood' of immigrants (example 12) and consequently will end up living 'like battery hens' ('topos of cause-effect'). In examples 11 and 14, numerals are also presented in an intensified manner to increase 'moral panic', that is irrational preoccupation among citizens with respect to a potential envisaged threat (Martin 2015).

11. IMMIGRATION | Did you know? @TurnbullMalcolm has opened the floodgates for an influx of Dog Handlers and Massage Therapists while 2-million ppl in OZ are on TEMPORARY VISAS! Meanwhile unemployment is RISING + Aussie jobs are being sent O/seas!

12. It seems strange that so many who think this is true also want to flood Australia with immigrants & refugees #PleaseExplain #LeftLogic #PHON

13. END MASS MIGRATION | No backyards, fewer jobs and 'living like battery hens': The 'terrifying' picture of our cities in 2046 - as experts claim immigration threatens the Australian dream. @MailOnline #auspol

14. LABOR LEFT FOR HUGE REFUGEE INCREASE A Labor for Refugees policy documents shows they will seek to lift the number of refugees given humanitarian visas from 12,000-18,000 to 50,000.

Figure 2.
Concordance plot of the node 'mass' using #Lancsboxv. 4.x (Brezina et al. 2018)

As visible from Figure 2, the word 'mass' appears 16 times in the Word Frequency List, while being pre-modified repeatedly by 'END'; plus, it collocates mostly with the words 'migration/immigration', pointing out the (unrealistic) urgent priority to put an end to the migratory phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at understanding what kind of representation strategies populist leaders employ to represent the migratory crisis within the Twittersphere and, ultimately, unveiling the propagandistic intentions that lie behind them. As the data analysis suggests, there are different parallels that can be drawn between Euro-American and Australian populisms, especially regarding the content categories through which refugees and asylum seekers are framed. As a matter of fact, they are pictured, alternatively, as fake, outlaws and/or petty criminals, who come *en masse* to Australia to usurp the country's resources while taking advantage of Australia's welfare system. Ultimately, they are portrayed as a threat to the unity of the Australian nation and its sovereignty, as a menace that should be neutralised to safeguard the integrity and the future prosperity of the country.

Evidence from the study suggests that, with the development of the new media, the humanitarian crisis has hence landed into virtual settings and been concurrently instrumentalized to increase consensus (or create divisiveness) among voters. At the same time, populism too has virtualized and trespassed on the mere political sphere, becoming an online as much as an offline phenomenon. As a consequence, it would be of a blindfold approach not to consider the implications of this mediatization and its impact, both on social media platforms and the real world. The research results, in this vein, aspire to make a contribution to the body of literature in the field.

However, the generalizability of these findings is subject to certain limitations. For instance, the relatively restricted corpus size could still be increased in order to include more tweets and possibly find differentiations in the discursive strategies used by populist leaders online. Secondly, much more could be said with regard to the intrinsic racism of certain tweets and the islamophobia connected to them. Further research should be developed in this respect, since it is crucial in nowadays' society to knock down prejudices and dismantle dangerous stereotypical construction on what should not be considered the Other.

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