

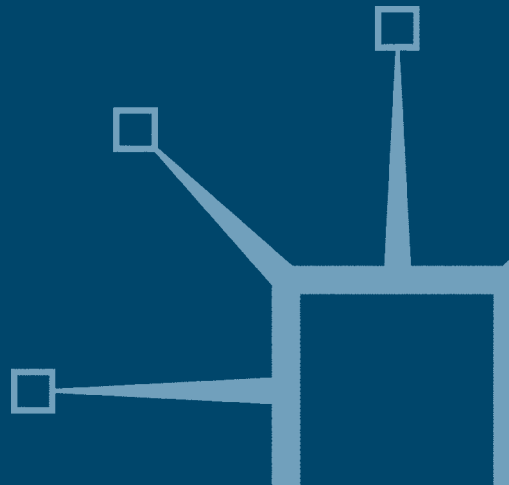
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# Twenty-First Century Populism

The Spectre of Western  
European Democracy

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Edited by  
Daniele Albertazzi and  
Duncan McDonnell



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## The Spectre of Western European Democracy

Edited by

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# 1

## Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre

*Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell*

Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969: 1) began their classic edited collection on populism by paraphrasing Marx and Engel's famous opening line: 'A Spectre is haunting the world – populism'. However, it was not quite the entire world that was being haunted in the late 1960s. Looking through the case studies in Ionescu and Gellner's book, we find chapters on North America, Latin America, Russia, Eastern Europe and Africa, but nothing on that part of the world in which most of the contributors lived and worked: Western Europe. By contrast, the present volume focuses exclusively on that area. This reflects the fact that while the likes of Ross Perot in the United States, Preston Manning in Canada and Pauline Hanson in Australia have all attracted sporadic attention as new populist leaders, the main area of sustained populist growth and success over the last fifteen years in established democracies has been Western Europe.

The rise of populism in Western Europe is, in large part, a reaction to the failure of traditional parties to respond adequately in the eyes of the electorate to a series of phenomena such as economic and cultural globalization, the speed and direction of European integration, immigration, the decline of ideologies and class politics, exposure of elite corruption, etc. It is also the product of a much-cited, but rarely defined, 'political malaise', manifested in steadily falling turnouts across Western Europe, declining party memberships, and ever-greater numbers of citizens in surveys citing a lack of interest and distrust in politics and politicians. Fostered by the media, an antipolitical climate is said to have grown throughout Western European societies in which people perceive politics to be more convoluted, distant and irrelevant to people's lives and politicians to be more incapable, impotent, self-serving and similar to one another than in the past. This perception has in turn affected electoral behaviour as increasing numbers of de-aligned and disillusioned voters either simply do not bother participating or become available and open to new, more radical, alternatives (Mastropaolo, 2005). In particular, these alternatives have emerged in the shape of populists who offer straightforward, 'common sense' solutions to society's complex

problems and adopt forceful 'man in the street' communication styles which are able to galvanize at least some of those who have lost faith in traditional politics and its representatives. They offer a 'politics of redemption' in contrast to the Establishment's 'politics of pragmatism' (Canovan, 1999). They claim that radical changes for the better are possible and that they can make them happen. In short, they promise to make democracy work. Indeed, while people may have less regard for politics and professional politicians, they continue to believe that democracy is the best form of government (Stoker, 2006) and populists vowing to reclaim the sceptre for its rightful owner – the sovereign 'people' – have been able to present themselves not as threats to Western European democracy, but as its saviours.

As a consequence of a combination of more favourable opportunity structures and astute agency, since the early 1990s in Western Europe, populist movements have achieved their best ever results in countries like France, Switzerland and Denmark and have entered national government for the first time in states such as Italy, Austria and the Netherlands. Moreover, as traditional parties increasingly seek out and promote telegenic figures who can communicate simple, all-embracing, crowd-pleasing messages directly to the public through the media rather than through Parliament, we can see evidence of a broad populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe in which not only have dyed-in-the-wool populists been successful, but where many other mainstream political leaders, such as Tony Blair and William Hague in Britain, for example, have regularly dipped into populism's box of tricks (Mudde, 2004). Nonetheless, despite the existence of broadly similar political and socio-economic landscapes and conditions across Western Europe, populism has clearly been far more successful in some countries than it has in others. The aim of this book is to provide explanations for this by showing how, why and in what forms contemporary populism has flourished (or failed) in Western European democracies. Before we go any further, however, we should make it clear what we understand by the term 'populism'.

## Populism

Much like Dylan Thomas's definition of an alcoholic as 'someone you don't like who drinks as much as you', the epithet 'populist' is often used in public debate to denigrate statements and measures by parties and politicians which commentators or other politicians oppose. When an adversary promises to crack down on crime or lower taxes and yet increase spending on public services, it is 'populist'. When one's own side does so, it is dealing with the country's problems. 'To each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds' wrote Peter Wiles (1969: 166) in Ionescu and Gellner's volume and among scholars the term is often employed in loose, inconsistent and undefined ways to denote appeals to 'the people', 'demagogy' and 'catch-all' politics or as a receptacle for new

types of parties whose classification we are unsure of. Due to these inflationary, vague and partisan uses of 'populism', there are scholars who have discarded the term altogether in favour of other labels (for example, Collovald, 2004). Another factor held to diminish the value of 'populism' is that, as Margaret Canovan (1981: 5) notes, unlike labels such as 'socialist' or 'conservative', the meanings of which have been 'chiefly dictated by their adherents', contemporary populists rarely call themselves 'populists' and usually reject the term when it is applied to them by others. However, if this were a good enough reason to stop researchers from using a category they found useful, then the same treatment should be extended to 'far', 'radical' and 'extreme' – all labels that are rarely, if ever, willingly embraced by parties of the Right or Left. We believe, therefore, that if carefully defined, the term 'populism' can be used profitably to help us understand and explain a wide array of political actors.

We define populism as:

an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.<sup>1</sup>

Like those of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Pierre-André Taguieff (2002), this view deliberately avoids conceiving of populism in terms of specific social bases, economic programmes, issues and electorates. Put simply, we believe that populism should not just be seen *against* such backgrounds, but *beyond* them. Consequently, our aim in this volume is to look at populism *per se* in contemporary Western European democracies, rather than exclusively as an appendage of other ideologies to which it may attach itself, for to do so is, as Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2002: 17) rightly argue, to miss out on populism's 'crucial specificity'.

In recent years, the dominant tendency in scholarly literature has been to identify and analyse the rise of populism in Western Europe as a phenomenon exclusively of the Right (for example, Betz, 1994). While this reflects the kind of issues, such as immigration and taxation, which populists have sought to capitalize on, we believe that the equivalence of populism with the Right can be misleading. In fact, the claim that the people (however defined) are the only legitimate sovereign and have been deprived of power can sit quite easily with leftist ideologies. Moreover, unlike Fascism, for example, populist propaganda insists on the values of equality (among the people) rather than hierarchy and it is the community rather than the state which is said to be paramount.

If they are not necessarily of the Right, then populists obviously cannot always be classified as 'extreme' or 'radical' Right either. According to Piero Ignazi (1994), in order for a party to be catalogued among the 'extreme



right', its electorate must position itself at the extreme Right of the political spectrum (relative to other parties) and this must be combined with an ideology based on or reliant on fascist values and ideas and/or one which positions itself as alternative and in opposition to the democratic system. Following this logic, labelling parties such as the Lega Nord as 'extreme right' is, at best, highly problematic, as Ignazi himself acknowledges (Ignazi, 2003). Moreover, in general terms, we find that:

- (a) voters who support populist parties do not always position themselves on the extreme Right (quite the opposite in fact);
- (b) a discernable link between certain parties and Fascism, while sometimes present – as in the cases of the *Front National* in France and the Freedom Party in Austria – is by no means the rule (Biorcio, 2003a: 7);
- (c) in some instances, populists fight not for the demise of an existing liberal-democratic system, but for its preservation (see the example of the *Schweizerische Volkspartei/Union Démocratique du Centre* in Switzerland).

We believe, therefore, that this insistence on making 'populist' and 'extreme right' synonymous or lumping all populists under the 'radical Right populist' banner for ease of comparison (for example, Norris, 2005) is detrimental to our understanding both of specific mislabelled parties (the *Lega Nord* and the *Lega dei Ticinesi* to name but two) and populism itself. Like Taguieff (2002: 84), we also view populism as being highly compatible 'not only with any political ideology (Left or Right, reactionary or progressive, reformist or revolutionary) and any economic programme (from state-planned to neo-liberal), but also with diverse social bases and diverse types of regime'.

That said, as the reader will see, the populists discussed in this book do not generally seek legitimacy through the adoption of internationally recognized 'sacred texts'. Rather, while they merge their populism with more 'established' ideologies, notably liberalism, nationalism, conservatism, federalism and socialism, this occurs as part of a broader mission to restore democracy and government to the people. Ultimately, whatever their positioning on the Left/Right spectrum, the key feature of populists is their claim to be the 'true democrats', fighting to reclaim the people's sovereignty from the professional political and administrative classes (be they in regional or national capitals, or at supranational level in Brussels), as well as other elite 'enemies' who, through the sleight of hand of representative and deliberately arcane and complex politics, have stolen and perverted democracy.

Like all ideologies, populism proposes an analysis designed to respond to a number of essential questions: 'what went wrong; who is to blame; and what is to be done to reverse the situation?' (Betz and Johnson, 2004: 323). Put simply, the answers are:

- (a) the government and democracy, which should reflect the will of the people, have been occupied, distorted and exploited by corrupt elites;

- (b) the elites and 'others' (i.e. not of 'the people') are to blame for the current undesirable situation in which the people find themselves;
- (c) the people must be given back their voice and power through the populist leader and party. This view is based on a fundamental conception of the people as both homogeneous and virtuous.

The people constitute a community, a place where, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001) says, we feel 'warm' and 'safe' and where there is mutual trust. Moreover, the community is a place where 'it is crystal-clear who is "one of us" and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion' (Bauman, 2001: 12). By contrast, the enemies of the people – the elites and 'others' – are neither homogeneous nor virtuous. Rather, they are accused of conspiring together against the people, who are depicted as being under siege from above by the elites and from below by a range of dangerous others. The strength of the people, and the reason that they will triumph over their enemies – if they make their voice count through the populist leader/party – is precisely their homogeneity and virtue. This view of the people as an exclusive community is linked to what Paul Taggart (2000: 95) refers to as the populist 'heartland' in which 'a virtuous and unified population resides'. This is not a Utopia, but a prosperous and harmonious place which is held to have actually existed in the past, but has been lost in the present era due to the enemies of the people. By vowing to return sovereignty to the people, the populist leader/party also commits to restoring this heartland and, with it, the 'natural order'. In this way, populists play on the idea of communities which have lost what they once had and will lose everything if they do not find their voice now and make it heard – rather than remaining as the silent, oppressed majority.

Populists therefore invoke a sense of crisis and the idea that 'soon it will be too late'. However, while they preach impending doom, they also offer salvation. Populism and its leaders offer the people, as Francisco Panizza (2005: 23) says, the 'promise of emancipation after a journey of sacrifice'. This journey is usually led by a charismatic leader who is portrayed as knowing instinctively what the people want. As Canovan says, 'populist politics is not ordinary, routine politics. It has the revivalist flavour of a movement' and 'associated with this mood is the tendency for heightened emotions to be framed on a charismatic leader' (Canovan, 1999: 6). The cornerstone of the relationship between charismatic populist leaders and the people is that while they remain one of the people (whether in terms of their vocabulary, attire, declared pastimes etc.), their unique qualities and vision mean that only they can be the saviour of the people.

Of course, the greatest sacrifice is made by the populist leaders themselves who are forced to put to one side their normal (and preferred) profession and instead enter the dirty arcane world of politics in order to save democracy. Seeing the normal procedures of parliamentary politics as frustrating the popular will (Crick, 2005), the populist advocates a direct relationship

between 'the people' and their government. This can be reflected in calls for more ways for the people to express their opinions and for directly-elected leaders and reductions in the powers of parliament and other bodies. Most of all, however, as Cas Mudde says, populist voters want leaders they can trust and who give them hope: 'they want politicians who know (rather than "listen to" the people), and who make their wishes come true' (Mudde, 2004: 558).

On the basis of the definition of populism provided above, we see four intertwined principles at the core of this ideology:

(1) *The people are one and are inherently 'good'.*

They are a homogeneous and virtuous community. Divisions within them are false, created and nurtured by the intellectual and political elites, and can be overcome as they are of less consequence than the people's common 'nature' and identity. Who constitutes the people (and, by extension, 'the others') can be decided on the basis of race, class, local/national identities etc. or a mixture of various categories; however, what is common to all populist discourses is this juxtaposition of the 'good', besieged people with the 'bad' elites and dangerous 'others'. While the latter category may include groups sharing regional/national identity with the people, the main 'others' in contemporary Western Europe tend to be immigrants, due to the threat they are said to pose to native cultures and the social and economic problems they allegedly cause.

(2) *The people are sovereign.*

Those who govern are morally obliged to do so in the interests of the people who must once more become 'masters in their own homes', in the widest sense of the term. If the people unite and make their voice heard through the populist leader and party, then they can make democracy work as it should: as a pure reflection of the will of the people. As Gerry Stoker puts it, populism 'posits that the people are one, and their voice, if properly understood, has a unified and unifying message' (Stoker, 2006: 139).

(3) *The people's culture and way of life are of paramount value.*

This is (alleged to be) rooted in history and tradition and is thus solid, 'right' and conducive to the public good – hence the need to 'love', 'save', 'protect', 'treasure' and 'rediscover' *our* culture. Populism's ideological flexibility also originates from this principle. When populism meets exclusionary forms of nationalism and regionalism, loving one's culture translates into rejecting 'others' – those who are not of the community.

(4) *The leader and party/movement are one with the people.*

Populism celebrates 'the ordinariness of its constituents and the extraordinariness of their leaders' (Taggart, 2000: 102). As Max Weber says, whether or not charismatic leaders really possess the qualities claimed is not so relevant, the important point is that their followers are convinced that they are

their man (or, occasionally, woman) 'of destiny' (Weber, 1978). They 'incarnate' the people's culture, articulate the will of the people, 'say what people are thinking', can see through the machinations of the elites and have the vision to provide simple, understandable solutions to the problems portrayed by the elites as complex and intractable. However, while blessed with qualities which are far beyond the norm, these leaders have remained in all other ways 'one of the people' and, hence, one 'with the people'. Two consequences of this principle are that the charismatic bond between leader and follower is absolutely central to populist parties and that populist leaders, since they need to be seen to be still ordinary men and women untainted by their association with the murky world of politics, tend to break the conventional linguistic registers and codes employed by the political class, adopting instead a 'direct' and at times even offensive language and style of communication. Finally, loyalty to the leader equals loyalty to the people. As a result, those within the party who disagree with the leader tend to be swiftly branded as traitors and added to the list of the 'enemies of the people'.

### The book

As mentioned earlier, while almost all Western European democracies have seen populist actors emerge, not all of these have enjoyed the same levels of success or have been able to insert themselves as fixed points in the political lives of their countries. This is despite the fact that many of the same economic and social conditions apply across Western European states, most of which are members of the European Union. One of the reasons we embarked on this project therefore was to explore the question of why populism is not present in every Western European country in the same way and with the same degree of success and/or durability. Hence, unlike the overwhelming majority of work on contemporary populism, this study focuses firmly on countries, rather than parties. We are not concerned with providing descriptions of specific parties *per se* so much as understanding what kind of populism (if any) is present in a country and investigate why that is, or is not, the case. In particular, we are interested in the structural conditions which facilitate, or hinder, the rise of populism and the successful (or flawed) agency of those populists who try to exploit these conditions.

Studies of populism have tended, understandably, to focus on those cases where populist movements have been significant political forces, rather than question those in which they have not. Given the logic of this book, however, alongside countries in which populists have enjoyed unprecedented levels of success and even participated in government such as Italy, Holland and Switzerland, we felt it necessary also to consider those like Britain, Sweden and Germany where the new wave of populist parties has apparently affected politics to a far lesser degree. After all, fears about the effects of globalization and feelings of disenchantment towards political institutions can

be found in both Britain and Sweden and yet no populist party has managed to establish a significant and lasting parliamentary presence in these countries. To what extent is this due to an electoral system that heavily penalizes new political formations (structure) rather than simply the lack of a charismatic and capable populist leader (agency)? Or is it the case that populist key words and strategies have permeated the political discourse of the main parties to such an extent in Britain that the space for a more obviously populist challenger has been greatly reduced? Or is it that the political culture of the country makes it more impregnable to populism, as Gianfranco Pasquino argues in this volume? As for Sweden, the first question that springs to mind is: why has no populist party akin to those which have been so successful in Norway and Denmark taken root? Is this because the major Swedish parties have managed to isolate populist challengers with a *cordon sanitaire* to such an extent that anyone attempting to go down the populist route can instantly be successfully branded and dismissed as 'extremist'? Finally, and moving on to another country apparently immune from populism, can strong populist leaders emerge at all when the political environment is so 'historically encumbered', as Frank Decker notes in his chapter on Germany?

As these brief examples show, more work is needed on the structural conditions which provide fertile ground for populism, how they interact with or even negate each other in different national contexts and how they have (or have not) been exploited by political entrepreneurs. It is only by studying how political actors, armed with specific and varied resources, are at the same time both constrained and enabled by a variety of structural factors, in ways peculiar to specific national contexts, that we can explain why populism has spread swiftly and relatively easily in some places, while making apparently few inroads in others.

The aims of this book therefore are:

- (1) To assess the degree of 'openness' of Western European democracies to the new populist *Zeitgeist*;
- (2) To examine the general Western European and country-specific structural factors which have created increasingly favourable conditions for the growth of populism or which, by contrast, have impeded its emergence and success;
- (3) To identify the role of agency in the fortunes of populist movements. How have they exploited favourable structural conditions? How have they turned unfavourable conditions to their advantage?
- (4) To discuss the degree to which populist themes and methods have been adopted by mainstream political actors, whether as a reaction to populist challengers or not.

With these aims in mind, contributors in part I were invited to set the stage for the country case studies of part II, by dealing with a number of key

general topics that we have already touched on here: the relationship between populism and democracy (Chapter 2); the extent to which the rise of populism has been facilitated by the metamorphosis of traditional parties (Chapter 3); and, finally, the role of increasingly tabloidized media in facilitating the emergence of populism (Chapter 4).

Contributors to part II were asked to look at the interplay between structure and agency in promoting (or hindering) the appearance and growth of populist movements in specific countries. Among the structural factors to be considered (where relevant) were political culture; issues of religion and identity; immigration; the economy; the electoral system; disenchantment with politics and institutions; the party system; the role of the media; European integration; corruption. To be clear, we have followed Herbert Kitschelt's definition of opportunity structures as 'specific configurations of resources, institutional arrangements and historical precedents for social mobilization, which facilitate the development of protest movements in some instances and constrain them in others' (Kitschelt, 1986: 58). While structures constrain however, they also make possible and enable by defining 'the potential range of options and strategies' (Hay, 1995: 200). 'As their name implies', adds Sidney Tarrow, they 'emphasize the exogenous conditions for party success and, in so doing, contrast to actor-centred theories of success' (1998: 18). However, as Giovanni Sartori (2005) has famously argued in relation to parties, we believe that actors both influence and are influenced by structures so it is therefore important to understand the relationship and interaction between structure and agency rather than arbitrarily favouring the explanatory value of one over the other.

The usefulness of this approach can be tested by considering two of the countries discussed in this volume where populists have performed particularly well over the last decade: Switzerland and Austria. In Switzerland, the 'agent' Christoph Blocher, a prominent leader of the SVP/UDC who has led the radicalization of the party, successfully reorganized its Zurich branch, arguing that more professionalism was needed (also, importantly, in communicating with prospective voters). A consequence of the electoral success of the SVP/UDC in Zurich was that the example soon spread to other cantonal branches of the party, which also set out to reorganize themselves along the same lines. Blocher's work, therefore, has now left a lasting legacy that goes beyond his electoral success at the local and national levels. In a political environment that is still characterized by some degree of voluntarism, the SVP/UDC is now a much more professional election-fighting machine at the national (and not only cantonal) level. This is an excellent example of how agency, in its turn, affects structure. The Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria provides us with an example of the opposite development, i.e. how structural developments may be essential in order to trigger changes at the level of agency. As Reinhard Heinisch notes in this volume, it was in fact the structural reforms of the FPÖ which, by exacerbating the party

orientation towards its leader, effectively enabled Jörg Haider's leadership to 'flourish'. Once free to take control of the party and unencumbered by internal opposition, Haider led the FPÖ to considerable electoral success.

Discussion of structural factors in the country case studies has therefore served as a platform for the analysis of populist agency in this book, by which we mean how populists have taken advantage of the opportunity structures present along with factors such as leadership, party cohesion, use of media, relations with other parties, etc. Furthermore, we asked authors to reflect on, where relevant, the degree to which populism has influenced and permeated mainstream politics in specific countries and, in particular, the question: 'who borrows from populism and how?' Where applicable, contributors were also encouraged to examine what happens to more moderate and traditional forces when they participate in government with populists for, as Meny and Surel (2002: 19) note, populist parties 'can also contaminate the other parties by influencing the style of leadership, the type of political discourse and the relationship between leader and followers' and this remains, in our view, an under-explored area of study.

### The Spectre of Western European Democracy?

While Canovan (1999: 3) argues that 'populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself', Benjamn Arditi objects that 'we might want to refer to populism as a spectre rather than a shadow of democracy' as the reference to a spectre 'addresses the undecidability that is inbuilt into populism, for it can be something that both accompanies democracy and haunts it' (Arditi, 2004: 141). Using the same metaphor, Sir Bernard Crick recently wrote that 'populism is indeed a spectre haunting democracy from which it is hard, perhaps impossible, to escape entirely in modern conditions of a consumption-driven society and a populist free press' (Crick, 2005: 631). Irrespective of their different interpretations, what is clear from the above is that populism and democracy are inextricably linked. Moreover, like Crick, we too believe that Western European democracy's spectre will be around for some time. Indeed, the evidence so far in the twenty-first century is that, while Taggart's (2004: 270) observation that 'populist politicians, movements or parties emerge and grow quickly and gain attention but find it difficult to sustain that momentum and therefore will usually fade fast' may apply to cases such as that of the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* in Holland, it is also true that populists like the *Lega Nord* in Italy, the Freedom Party in Austria and the Front National in France have all been significant members of their national party systems for decades now.

Moreover, not only have populists in Western Europe been more successful in the twenty-first century than ever before, but they have also entered government. Yves Mény and Yves Surel asserted in their 2002 volume that

'populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government. Their fate is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain permanently in opposition' (Mény and Surel, 2002: 18). Yet, events in recent years suggest that this may no longer be the case. Against all expectations, in 2005 Silvio Berlusconi became the longest continuous serving Prime Minister in the history of the Italian Republic, supported by a centre-right coalition which also included the Lega Nord. Moreover, neither Berlusconi nor Umberto Bossi (leader of the Lega Nord) did anything to shed their populist identities and become more like mainstream, traditional politicians. Furthermore, although it has long been believed that charismatic leaders are almost impossible to replace (Weber, 2005), the 2006 general election result of the post-Haider Freedom Party in Austria suggests that, while charismatic populist leadership is difficult to pass on, in the right circumstances, it can be seized and the party can go on to further successes (see Reinhard Heinisch in this volume). Populism has thus proved far more dynamic, resilient, flexible and successful than many commentators imagined. As we will see in this volume, in twenty-first century Europe, in the name of the people, the spectre continues to pursue the sceptre.

## Note

1. To be clear, we understand ideology as a system of beliefs, values and ideas characteristic of a particular group (adapted from Williams, 1977: 55). Used in this way, the term refers to belief systems whose function is to explain why things are as they are by providing an interpretative framework through which individuals and/or organizations make sense of their own experiences, relate to the external world and plan the future.



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