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Constructing ‘the people’ of populism: a critique of the ideational approach from a discursive perspective

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point the emerging consensus among scholars regarding the core defining characteristics of populism, namely the centrality of ‘the people’ and an antagonistic view of society that pits the former against an unresponsive or illegitimate elite. It suggests that the assumption found in the currently dominant strand of populism studies, the so-called ideational approach, that populism necessarily constructs a homogeneous and morally pure people is problematic and may lead to analytical and normative bias, as it automatically equates populism with an anti-pluralist and illiberal form of politics. To substantiate this point, the article starts from a brief survey of the complex language games involved in the construction of ‘the people’ in democratic modernity. It then moves on to reconstruct the key principles of the ideational and the discursive approaches to populism, suggesting that the latter offers a more robust and flexible framework for understanding how populism creates a sense of unity out of linking a series of heterogeneous demands and identities, without necessarily resulting in a homogeneous ‘people,’ while it problematizes the role of moral framings in populism and politics more broadly. A series of relevant empirical cases of diverse populist mobilisations, ranging from the radical left to the radical right, and from party politics to social movements, are surveyed to provide empirical grounding for the theoretical argument. The suggestion put forth is not to dismiss the ideational approach and its important legacy, but rather to revise two of its key elements, the homogeneity thesis and the morality thesis, opening up the possibility to conceive of ‘the people’ in terms of unity and to understand the latter’s antagonism with the ‘elite’ in terms of politics.

Keywords: populism, the people, discourse, Laclau, Mudde

Introduction

Despite the various disagreements around conceptualising populism, scholars of different traditions seem to have always agreed on the two key features that define it as a way of doing politics: (1) the central place and role attributed by populists to ‘the people’ as an agent and source of democratic legitimacy, and (2) the sharply antagonistic worldview that populists put forth, pitting ‘the people’ against an ‘elite’ or ‘establishment.’¹ Acknowledging the significance of those two aspects is key to defining populism, however, this by itself does not suffice if one wants to delve into the peculiarities, implications and effects of different populist mobilizations.

When assessing diverse populist experiences within certain political systems and institutional contexts, at different points in history and across the world, we need to take a further step and focus on the particular contents of ‘the people,’ the people’s relation to other actors, as well as the terms in which its antagonistic relationship to named opponents or enemies is signified. This inquiry is crucial for understanding the specific character of a populist actor as well as the possible impact on democratic institutions and representative politics. Surprisingly, this important aspect of populism research remains rather contested, with some scholars assuming that the construction of ‘the people’ is – at least to some extent – *a priori* determined,² and others suggesting that ‘the people’ is an *empty signifier*³ and that the terms of its construction depend on the context in which populism emerges as well as on the ideological specificities of actors employing it.⁴ Far from being a mere technicality, starting from the former or the latter assumption has implications for relevant studies both in terms of research design and in terms of potential analytical/normative bias. It is thus an issue worth discussing and resolving.

With these thoughts in mind, this paper focuses on the process of constructing ‘the people’ in populist discourses. My aim is twofold: (1) to clarify the operation of constructing, representing and performing ‘the people’ in populist discourse and practice, through a critical review of the relevant literature; (2) to illustrate the plurality and heterogeneity of different and often contradicting constructions of ‘the people’ by populist actors, focusing on diverse populist experiences in contemporary Europe and the United States. Siding with a Laclau-inspired discursive approach, I purport to constructively challenge two prominent theses found in mainstream approaches to populism which we can label as the ‘homogeneity thesis’ and the ‘morality thesis.’ These two theses are primarily defended by scholars like Cas Mudde, who claims that the people of populism should be conceived as necessarily ‘homogenous,’ ‘virtuous’ and morally ‘pure’ as opposed to an ‘evil’ and ‘corrupt’ elite.⁵ This assumption, I argue, is analytically restrictive and may lead to normative bias, as both the alleged homogeneity and the moralistic framing of politics by populist actors are almost automatically identified as threats to pluralism and liberalism and thus dangers for contemporary democracies.⁶

The counter-argument I develop is that along with the polarising logic of ‘us versus them,’ and thus the *opponent* itself as a point of negative identification, it is rather a sense of *unity* that defines the construction of ‘the people’ in populist discourses, and not homogeneity.

Moreover, I argue that the divide between 'the people' and the 'establishment' is not necessarily a moral one, premised on establishing a 'Good versus Evil' polarity, but is often also (if not mainly) a *political* one, premised on advancing distinct ideologico-political readings of social divisions or the representation of contrasting social and economic interests. Lastly, I suggest that even when populist discourses do draw on moral framings (and they often do), this hardly differentiates them from other actors, as it is rather impossible to find an expression of politics (populist or non-populists) that is not depending or drawing, at least to an extent, on moral values.⁷ To formulate this as a question: if a politics totally devoid of references to moral values/divisions is rare, what is the analytical utility of treating moralism as a key distinctive property of populism?

This critical re-reading of the conception of the people of populism through a discursive lens can have significant implications for socio-political research. Namely: (1) contributing to the development of a framework that helps researchers counter normative and analytical bias; (2) opening new avenues for research and enquiries into different modes of constructing the people outside of (or along with) homogeneity and moralism; (3) avoiding common misunderstandings around the construction of collective subjects, like for example, the often automatic and uncritical conflation of 'the people' with the 'nation,' the 'natives' or with a particular class. Lastly, the endeavour to clarify the significance, complexity and contingency entailed in constructing a 'people,' but also the multiplicity of ways in which this process takes place, is important for both advancing the theoretico-political debate and empirical research on populism and for understanding populism's inherent paradoxes and its ambivalent relationship with democracy itself more broadly.

'The people' of democracy

Before focusing on the peculiarities of constructing 'the people' in populist discourse, it is worth surveying discussions around peoplehood and the collective subject in democratic theory. Indeed, talking about 'the people' is far from unambiguous. Scholars and intellectuals have long struggled with the term, reflecting on its birthplace and contrasting it to alternative conceptions of democratic agency and the emancipatory subject (the *demos*, the multitude, civil society, the citizenry).⁸ The political language of 'the people,' according to most accounts, descends from the *populous Romanus*,⁹ but it is with the passage to democratic modernity and the 'disenchantment of the world' that references to 'the people' and their authority become a constant in political life.¹⁰ From this point onwards, the doctrine of popular sovereignty replaced the 'Divine Right of Kings' as the legitimising cornerstone of the political order. And with the kings' place emptied or rendered irrelevant, the people become the occupants of the so-called 'empty place' of power.¹¹ Ernesto Laclau has captured the significance of this 'emptiness' in terms of a dialectic between particularity and universality: 'If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation.'¹² In a nutshell, 'the people' are never truly *present*, physically, as a whole or coherent totality. Rather it is a part of 'the people' which claims the representation of the whole.

However, '[t]he identity of "the people" who are thought to be sovereign is not altogether clear'.¹³ According to Margaret Canovan, '[t]he English term ('the people') shares three basic meanings with its equivalents in other European languages: the people as sovereign; peoples as nations, and the people as opposed to the ruling elite [...] "the common people"'.¹⁴ This phenomenological distinction is precise in its historical perspective, but can be supplemented with a notion of 'the people' as the bearer of both *constituted* and *constituent* power.¹⁵ In other words, the people are not just sovereign (*constituted* power), but they 'can play an active role in terms of (re)founding and updating the higher legal norms and procedural rules that regulate the exercise of power'.¹⁶ 'The people' as bearer of constituent power seem to appear momentarily and in many cases through mediation and representation. Indeed, it is mostly the *fiction* of popular sovereignty and the representation of popular demands and grievances that characterise modern (liberal) democracies,¹⁷ and not the actual exercise of 'popular power.'

Moreover, the notion of 'the people' is constitutively ambiguous and polysemic. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, it refers to both the totality of a given political community, to the citizenry as a unitary body-politic (hence the constitutional references to '*We, the people ...*'), and, at the same time, indicates 'the poor, the disinherited, and the excluded'.¹⁸ These ambiguities manifest vividly in populist experiences. Canovan affirms: 'the people' is simultaneously *part* and *whole*, both a privileged part of the population, claiming universality, and the excluded part of the *plebs* fighting for inclusion.¹⁹

In this context, 'the people' in democratic societies constitutes the alleged ultimate authority and source of legitimation of the polity, but as a subject, it never truly appears in a tangible manner, flesh and blood, exercising its power in a direct and unmediated way. What we see is rather partial and often institutionally mediated – sometimes even contradictory – incarnations of 'the people,' in the form of electoral arithmetic, referendum results, partisan blocs in national assemblies or that of massive movements in the streets. It is in this sense that 'a single and compact referent for the term "people" [...] does not exist anywhere'.²⁰ In fact, 'the impossibility of incarnating the essence of democracy and of representing its figure, alongside the necessity of "democratically" keeping open this impossibility' remains a key feature of the democratic polity today.²¹ The fact that the physical simultaneous presence and action of 'the people' is practically impossible in mass societies, is also what makes contemporary representative democracies open and pluralistic polities that can rejuvenate themselves, with political actors challenging and redefining the meaning of its constituent subject and its 'will' through processes of symbolic recognition as well as economic/political inclusion.

Drawing on Jacques Rancière, the people can thus be understood as the specific subject of politics, where *politics* (as opposed to *police*) is conceptualised as a disruptive process which, through the constitution of egalitarian discourses, brings into question established identities and norms, re-opening the field of contestation.²² Such momentary enactments of the people towards an emancipatory and egalitarian orientation can pose a challenge to a given

institutional order and a force of democratic renewal. However, discourses and movements around peoplehood can also take a regressive direction, closing-up the collective subject and demarcating it against perceived outsiders and enemies, as exemplified in the strategies of far right anti-immigrant parties in Europe.²³ The people thus becomes ‘a political category’ *par excellence*: ‘not [...] a datum of the social structure [...] not a given group, but an act of institution that creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements.’²⁴ This ‘act of institution’ might entail particularities bound together by their common struggle against a common enemy or threat (thus defined by *negation*) or particularities bound together under a common cause/aspiration (thus defined by *affirmation*) or indeed both at the same time. The orientation and the specific contents, the democratic or undemocratic, liberal or illiberal character of this new agency will always vary, depending on the historical, socio-economic and cultural context in which it emerges as well as the accompanying ideologies of the actors involved.

To sum up, the constitution of ‘the people’ in contemporary democratic societies is always context-dependent, historically specific and thus highly contingent. Indeed, the internal tensions and paradoxes in defining and grasping it are inescapable for any actor that employs it in their discourse, including populist ones.

‘The people’ of populism: foundations

The problems of defining the people, their identity and sovereignty, have a long history in the practice of democratic struggle, in political philosophy and democratic theory. It comes as no surprise that populism scholars had to deal with the significance of constructing the people from very early on in the development of the field. Edward Shils, in the mid-1950s, located at the heart of populism the supremacy of the will of the people (over other standards, principles and institutions) along with the direct relationship of the latter with a leader, adding that ‘[p]opulism identifies the will of the people with justice and morality.’²⁵ In 1967, during the landmark London School of Economics conference themed ‘To define Populism,’ a similar discussion emerged.²⁶ Summing up the key findings of the conference, Isaiah Berlin stressed the need to focus on the notion of ‘the people’ and on the interplay between particularity and universality as well as the role of representation in order to better understand the emergence and distinctiveness of populism:

One must again return to the notion of the people. Who the people is will probably vary from place to place. [...] it tends to be [...] those who have been left out. It is the havenots [...]. It is peasants in Russia because they are the obvious majority of the deprived: but it might be any group of persons with whom you identify the true people and you identify the true people with them, because the ideology of populism itself springs from the discontented people who feel that they somehow represent the majority of the nation which has been done down by some minority or other. Populism [...] stands for the majority of men, the majority of men who have somehow been damaged.²⁷

Accordingly, one can suggest, populism refers to actors claiming to represent the interests of 'the people' in this particular sense: the excluded, the havenots, the marginalised, those feeling that they have been alienated, not heard by the powerful. Indeed, the second crucial element in the construction of a populist people, the opposition to an establishment or elite is only implied in the above excerpt. Fast-forward a dozen of years, and an emerging consensus around populism as a *distinct form of politics* (be it a discourse, ideology, or style) is captured in the classic 1980s book of Canovan, *Populism*: 'All forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to "the people" and all are in one sense or another anti-elitist.'²⁸ To-date, this has been the gist of most definitions of populism that have been advanced in both theoretically oriented and empirical studies of the phenomenon.

However, significant differences in understanding the specificity of populism persist. What is more, these differences are focused on issues that influence the ways that scholars assess the character of populist phenomena as well as their relation to and impact on democracy. Such an issue is located firmly within the process of constructing and representing 'the people.' For the currently hegemonic strand in populism studies,²⁹ as already noted, 'the people' of populism are always constructed as *homogeneous* and morally *pure*. This assumption is often put forth in a rather uncritical and un-reflexive way, as scholars ascribing to this tradition have rarely explicitly tested it in terms of rigorous qualitative or quantitative inquiry. Indeed, there are studies in which scholars use this approach while acknowledging the possibility of a more open, inclusive and pluralist conception of 'the people,' yet without revisiting their initial theoretical assumptions.³⁰ Note, for example, how Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser include Evo Morales in their examples of 'inclusionary populism,' without acknowledging that at the core of his conception of the popular subject lies a vividly pluralistic understanding of society, encapsulated in the constitutional renaming of Bolivia as a *plurinational* state.³¹

Before highlighting the problems arising from the homogeneity and morality theses by looking at a set of empirical examples, I first reconstruct the core arguments of the theoretical traditions contrasted in this paper: the *discursive*, inspired by Laclau, and the *ideational* one, spearheaded by Mudde. Let's start from the latter.

The ideational approach: a morally pure and homogeneous people?

The 'ideational' approach to populism was first introduced by Mudde in 2004 and has been further elaborated through his collaboration with Rovira Kaltwasser³² and enriched through an ongoing dialogue with scholars who operate within the same paradigm.³³ This rendition of populism is now the most popular and widely used among comparativists, gaining increased visibility among media pundits, journalists and think tanks. It is no exaggeration to say that it has accumulated great power in setting the agenda in the field while also influencing public discussions in an unparalleled way when compared to other scholarly approaches. Mudde, understands populism as

*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.*³⁴

Tailored to conform to the criteria of Giovanni Sartori's 'minimal definitions',³⁵ this approach has facilitated the proliferation of empirical studies which have moved beyond mere single case studies, paving the way for broad cross-regional comparative research. The key merit of minimal definitions is that they seek to reflect the *lowest common denominator* among all manifestations of a given phenomenon,³⁶ getting hold of the common and constant core of every manifestation of populism throughout history and across different regions. The aim is not to capture every possible characteristic that a populist actor may exhibit, but to grasp the ones that are always there and can help to pin down the phenomenon in all possible contexts. The merits of a minimal approach to populism have also been acknowledged by scholars working in other traditions.³⁷

Researchers who work within the ideational paradigm agree on the centrality of three elements when defining populism: the *people*, the *elite*, and the invocation of a *general will*. What sets them apart from other orientations is: (1) the construal of populism as an ideology, and thus as a belief system with a discernible core; (2) the assumption that what defines this ideology is a predominantly *moral* view of socio-political divisions; and (3) the argument that 'the people' and the 'elite' are constructed by populists as essentially *homogeneous* collective subjects in a manner ultimately incompatible with liberal/pluralist worldviews.³⁸

This set of assumptions carries implications for both theoretical enquiry and empirical analysis, which bear on the categorisation of political actors as populist or not. Let's start with the suggestion that populism is a 'thin-centred' ideology. The term was first coined by Michael Freeden to reference ideologies which display an identifiable yet restricted morphology.³⁹ 'Full' ideologies are bodies of normative ideas (beliefs, values, etc.) which concern how the world is and how it should be, how society functions and how it should be organised. They do not encompass only abstract worldviews, but also specific principles, beliefs, values, even detailed programmatic agendas. Liberalism and socialism are two cases in point. However, when we turn to the empirical study of populism, we are confronted with so many variations of its ideological articulation, ranging from the internationalist radical left (e.g. Podemos in Spain) to the nationalist radical right (e.g. Lega in Italy) and sometimes centrist or polyvalent hybrids (e.g. the 5 Star Movement / M5S in Italy), that it makes little sense to try and flesh out a common ideological core. Indeed, it is broadly acknowledged that there is no specific way of organising or transforming society that we can call 'populist' without further qualification. Hence scholars suggesting that populism is lacking core values,⁴⁰ that it is an 'empty shell,' ready to be filled with different aspirations, ideas, programmatic agendas.⁴¹ Mudde tries to tackle this problem by claiming that populism's is a *thin*-centred ideology which necessarily attaches itself to 'full' or 'thick' ideologies, generating a variety of possible combinations or 'subtypes'.⁴²

Despite this refinement, sticking with ideology as the genus of populism comes with certain implications.⁴³ Crucially, treating populism as an ideology (however ‘thin’), means also to attribute a more fundamental role to the corresponding set of ideas and beliefs in identifying the distinctive character of populist actors. Put simply, populist actors are expected to either manifest those ideological attributes or not, which marks a move from the formalist/structural level that we see in Laclau and the late Canovan,⁴⁴ to that of a more fixed ideological content, that we see in Mudde.⁴⁵ According to the ideational approach, populism suffices by itself to determine the actions of a given political actor or even of voters, and thus even act as a predictor. For example, populists are expected, by definition, to be rather hostile to minority rights, as this would undermine the alleged homogeneity of ‘the people’ and their sovereign will.⁴⁶ Hence ideational scholars often talk about ‘populist *attitudes*’ among politicians and the general population.⁴⁷

In this context, a dividing line can be identified between ideational, and discursive/formalist accounts of populism. In the latter,⁴⁸ scholars see populism as a discursive logic that primarily refers to the way that specific (ideological and other) contents are organised, arguing that this logic can be employed with varying frequency, intensity and consistency by political actors, advancing a *gradational* view on the phenomenon. This means that a given actor can be more or less populist, at different points in time and in different contexts.⁴⁹ It also means that specific actors might advance their policies by utilising a populist discourse, but that these policies do not causally derive from their populist or non-populist character. This is crucial in order to be able to discern what populism itself *does*.

Another point made by ideational scholars is the assumption that political actors are defined as populist primarily because they divide society in terms of a *moral* struggle between the virtuous people and the corrupt elites. In Mudde’s words, *moralism* is ‘the essence of the populist division.’⁵⁰ Kirk Hawkins suggests that populism ‘assigns a moral dimension to everything, no matter how technical, and interprets it as part of a cosmic struggle between Good and Evil.’⁵¹ Jan-Werner Mueller agrees that the ‘moralistic conception of politics advanced by populists clearly depends on some criterion for distinguishing the moral and the immoral, the pure and the corrupt.’⁵² For these scholars, if the dimension of moralism is not salient, then any actor that organizes its strategy around appeals to ‘the people’ versus an elite (on the basis, for example, of competing interests) cannot be considered a populist; they might be merely anti-establishment or anti-systemic, but *not* populist.

A problem immediately arises here concerning the complex relation between the political and moral dimensions more broadly. Put in other words, aren’t moral framings a constant in political life, whether one looks at populist, non-populist or anti-populist discourses? Indeed, in a gesture that seems self-contradictory, when Mueller tries to deal with the distinctively moralistic character of populism, he admits that ‘it’s not just populists who talk about morality; all political discourse is shot through with moral claims.’⁵³ Moreover, what Chantal Mouffe has highlighted is the essentially moralistic character of mainstream consensus-oriented political actors of the centre-left and centre-right in contemporary Europe, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, when ‘Third-Way’ social-democratic forces were hegemonic in

Germany and the UK.⁵⁴ In this sense, the inclusion of morality as a defining criterion for populism seems to obscure the specificity and distinctiveness of the phenomenon, but also undermine the operationality of the ‘minimal’ definition.

An additional claim made by ideational scholars that is worth discussing is that populism is an essentially *anti-pluralist* type of politics, that it ‘fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the “institutional guarantees” that should protect them.’⁵⁵ Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser and Hawkins designate pluralism as one of the opposites of populism, because, rather than conceiving society in terms of a homogeneous people, it recognises minorities, individuals and fragmented groups, and finds it impossible to achieve a unified ‘general will.’⁵⁶ Thus, populists are supposed to construct a people that is not just good, morally superior and ‘pure,’ but also essentially homogeneous, suppressing differences and particularities.

Hawkins attributes a series of characteristics to pluralism, almost hypostasising it, as a concrete set of beliefs shared by all its advocates. In his words, what makes a pluralist worldview distinct is that ‘human individuality is valued, and minority rights become an important complement to majority rule.’ He adds that pluralism ‘openly respects formal rights and liberties, and it treats opponents with courtesy, as legitimate political actors,’ while it ‘avoids making any mystical connections between current issues and historical figures or global problems, and it avoids reifying history. The discourse tends to be more technical and to focus on narrow, particular issues.’⁵⁷ It is then implied that populism is always against this set of attitudes and beliefs. However, a problem that emerges is that if one fully adopts the homogeneity/anti-pluralist thesis as a core defining element of populism, we end up with excluding most populist actors at the left of the political spectrum; actors that ideational scholars too identify as populist.⁵⁸ One can think of SYRIZA’s record in office in Greece (2015-2019), a period when several laws protecting minority rights (from immigrants and refugees to LGBTQ people) were passed, Podemos’ understanding of the Spanish people as essentially heterogeneous and *plurinational*, or Bernie Sanders’ discourse for the United States Democratic primaries in 2016, when stressing the diversity of the American people was elevated at a core feature of his campaign as a response to Donald Trump’s nativist and exclusionary appeals.⁵⁹

Despite the contradictions noted above and the fact that these aspects of the ideational approach have been challenged on different grounds by several scholars,⁶⁰ advocates of the former have not yet provided a convincing argument responding to critique and demonstrating how these alleged defining elements of populism manifest in practice in a way that is clearly distinct to other types of politics. This leaves the field vulnerable as these principles continue to be applied, almost mechanically and often non-reflexively, in theoretical and empirical research, while their premises have been seriously challenged and no adequate counterargument has been offered. I maintain that these problems can be remedied by drawing on the key theoretical principles of the discursive approach as exemplified in the work of a series of scholars that have been building on Laclau’s framework.

The discursive approach: constructing ‘the people’ as an open and contingent process

In his 1970s monograph, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau developed his critique of sociological theories of modernisation, which were hegemonic at the time. These narratives construed populism as a result of the transition of Latin American societies from a traditional model to an industrial one. Following a different path, Laclau described populism as a discursive political phenomenon that is not bound to a specific sociological structure, particular social classes, a concrete ideology or programmatic agenda. What he emphasized already back then, adopting a non-essentialist ethos, was that populism is a specific *logic* of the political, one way of doing politics among many others. Capturing the two core elements of populism discussed in previous sections, he stressed that a ‘reference to “the people” occupies a central place in populism,’ and that such reference is formulated within an antagonistic view of society.⁶¹

Surely, this early work was heavy with Marxist jargon and problematic normative assumptions, like the claim that the ‘highest forms of populism can only be socialist.’⁶² But its theoretical innovations have proved remarkably lasting in time, even though often ignored or downplayed.⁶³ Laclau further refined his theorization thirty years later, in *On populist reason*. Advancing a more formal understanding of populism, he stressed that ‘a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are.’⁶⁴ This logic can be summarised in three steps: (1) ‘the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating “the people” from power’; (2) the creation of links among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by an unresponsive ‘elite’ (*chains of equivalence*); and (3) the representation of ‘the people’ of populism as a marginalised and underprivileged *plebs* which claims to be the legitimate community of the people, the democratic sovereign.⁶⁵ This conceptualisation not only provides a blueprint of the fundamental structure of every populist discourse, but also offers a glimpse into the social presuppositions for such discourses to succeed, as it is premised on an idea of malfunctioning representation at the roots of populist ruptures; what other scholars have described as ‘crisis of representation.’⁶⁶

The advantages of operationalising Laclau’s theory for empirical research have already been appreciated in relevant studies, while there is now a significant pool of empirical research demonstrating the utility and applicability of the method⁶⁷ making the often cited critique about the supposedly too abstract and over-theoretical, normative character or the lacking analytical utility of the approach⁶⁸ rather obsolete. Scholars working within this tradition, acknowledging the novelties of Mudde and Kaltwasser’s work, have suggested two ‘minimal discursive criteria’ for identifying and scrutinising populist phenomena: (1) *people-centrism*, and (2) *anti-elitism*.⁶⁹ This rendition of populism helps to make Laclau’s theory more applicable to empirical analysis, but it also enables us to amend some problematic normative choices. If in Laclau’s early work the problem was the near equation of populism with socialism, in his later work the problem returns in the effective elision of populism with politics.⁷⁰

In this rendering of Laclau's framework, *people-centrism* refers to the primacy given to 'the people,' who are constructed by way of linking a series of different subjects, groups and demands that share common grievances and frustrations. The signifier 'the people' is identified as the most often deployed central reference (*nodal point*) in populist discourse, however it is stressed that a sense of popular unity and collectivity can be nurtured through the use of equivalent signifiers, such as the '99%,' 'the many,' or simply 'us.' In this sense, people-centrism implies privileging a collective subject that is perceived as the democratic sovereign. *Anti-elitism* implies the construction of a fundamental division within society between an 'us' and a 'them,' which generates the conditions for the antagonistic identification of 'the people' through their opposition to given opponents. These are depicted as the 'elite,' the 'establishment,' or the 'oligarchy,' which act against the people's interests and well-being.⁷¹

The merit of this discursive reading of populism, especially when contrasted to the ideational one, is that it avoids a priori assumptions about the specific contents and the ideological or programmatic features of populist actors. Discursive scholars start from the question: 'What is specific about how populists formulate their demands and interpellate citizens?'⁷² The way in which 'the people' of populism is construed, as well as the meaning that is imputed to the antagonistic divide between the opposing camps of peoples and elites are key questions to be investigated and clarified. In fact, our answers to those questions will reveal the specific character of a populist project, its orientation and its possible effects on democratic and representative institutions. For example, if 'the people' are represented as an exclusive collective subject, united through references to a common ethnic origin, language, heritage and religion, and they are opposed not only to an 'establishment' but also to alien 'others' (e.g. immigrants, ethnic or religious minorities), then it is rather safe to assume that this is a case of exclusivist, radical right populism, which will tend to undermine minority rights, nourish nativism and promote intolerant attitudes.⁷³ On the contrary, if 'the people' are signified as an open, inclusive and pluralist subject, confronting an unresponsive and repressive elite, then we are dealing with a progressive brand of populism, able to embrace and protect minorities and advance a more tolerant view of society.⁷⁴

What we see then in discursive accounts of populism is a more open and flexible understanding of the process of constructing 'the people.' Working within this framework, the researcher does not assume a priori the way in which a populist actor will speak about the popular subject, the meaning that they are going to attribute to them and to their opponents. This means that conceiving of a populist movement, leader or party that is compatible with liberal democracy becomes possible, broadening the scope of possibilities and facilitating a more accurate representation of the vastly varied empirical field of populist politics as well as democratic politics in general. It also means that relevant analyses will have less normative baggage and will be less vulnerable to analytical/political bias, as the supposedly moralistic or homogenising effects of a given populist actor and thus their compatibility or incompatibility with liberal politics remain to be revealed through empirical scrutiny. They are not presupposed. They are treated as questions, as hypotheses that need to be validated or invalidated; not a given.

After highlighting the deficiencies of the ideational approach, related to the adoption of the homogeneity and morality thesis, and demonstrating how a discursive framework can remedy them, the remainder of this article looks at a series of relevant cases to provide further empirical grounding to the theoretical/methodological argument that has been advanced so far.

Constructing ‘the people’ in practice

The populist movements of the Great Recession

Let’s start with an example that has been also used by advocates of the ideational approach:⁷⁵ the social movements of the Great Recession, as exemplified by the *indignados* of the Spanish and Greek squares and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in the US.⁷⁶ Social movements, populist or non-populist already come with their own peculiarities.⁷⁷ Often lacking a specific leader, comprising myriads of different groups and individuals, they rarely speak in ‘one voice.’ What is more, their common identity is not dictated or constructed from above, but rather performed collectively, from below, by the people that are mobilising in the streets.

The so called ‘squares movements’ burst into the global scene after what seemed to be a *demonstration effect*⁷⁸ of the ‘Arab Spring,’ sparking mobilisations in Greece and Spain in the late spring and summer of 2011 to then spread across the Atlantic. Among the distinctive characteristics of those movements were their sharply anti-elitist and anti-establishment character, but also the generalised use of the signifier ‘the people’ (or equivalent signifiers: ‘the 99%,’ the ‘citizenry’) and the emphasis they put on revitalising popular sovereignty. Not surprisingly, this led scholars to recognise those movements as genuinely populist.⁷⁹

However, those movements did not embrace an understanding of ‘the people’ as essentially homogeneous nor did they portray social struggles as primarily a battle of Good versus Evil. Indeed, what has been highlighted by researchers is the insistence of those movements on stressing and protecting their pluralistic character as well as the role of individuals and particularities within them.⁸⁰ Therefore, discourses around the people within these movements were often accompanied by invocations of the individual and its value, of the citizen and the citizenry, stressing a conception of the collective subject that is the result of linking a series of differences and forging a sense of *pluralistic unity* rather than homogeneity. Trying to cope with this seemingly paradoxical configuration, Paolo Gerbaudo has coined the term *citizenism* to describe this subtype of populist politics that actively embraces internal heterogeneity and individualism within a broader (unified) collective.⁸¹

A second point of focus are the terms along which these movements signified the ‘sovereign people’ and their opposition to named opponents. The emphasis here was primarily put on different and antagonistic groups and socio-economic interests. In the case of Greece and Spain, protesters targeted the parties of the ‘old establishment’ that were deemed responsible for the economic downfall of their countries and the imposition of harsh austerity

programmes that hit mostly the middle and lower social strata. At the same time, the movements prioritised a political issue par excellence: that of *democracy*, oscillating between calls for more participation and direct democratic processes, on the one hand, and for better and more meaningful representation on the other.⁸² Slogans stressing the corruption and cronyism of the governing elites were indeed present, but they hardly defined the character of these movements. The primary issue was not that the political elites were 'corrupt,' but that they were imposing policies that were severely affecting the well-being of most of society and which did not have a popular mandate.⁸³ What is more, even the claims around corruption, that were present in the movements' discourse, were soon proven to be true both in Spain and Greece, with top party officials and former ministers being convicted for cases of corruption.⁸⁴ This brings to light a further implication regarding the normative status of moral framings in politics. Far from being a distinctive characteristic of a political movement in ideological terms and a potential danger for liberal-democratic politics, moral framings might simply be the result of actual corruption which people perceive as a problem and thus worthy of public opposition and condemnation.

In the case of OWS, the emphasis that the movement put on the socio-economic dimension of division between 'the people' in 'the elite' was clear from the movement's choice to mobilise right outside a site that symbolises the core of the financial elite of the country. The movement targeted Wall Street as the beating heart of a capitalist system that had nurtured extreme inequalities and social injustices and defended the vast majority of the population (the 99%) against a tiny minority of financial elites and their political allies who profit in the expense of everyone else.⁸⁵ In this sense, OWS was primarily a protest against the excesses of neoliberal financial capitalism and it built its public appeal on highlighting the incompatibility between contrasting socio-economic interests and corresponding class-groups.⁸⁶

In this sense, it is striking that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser do not acknowledge the inconsistencies of the ideational framework when discussing this movements as a populist mobilisation. In fact, they suggest that the '99%' of OWS refers to a 'homogeneous people,'⁸⁷ yet make this assumption without elaborating further or providing adequate justification. Interestingly, they seem to contradict themselves when reluctantly acknowledging that both the *indignados* and OWS 'tried to develop a definition of "the people" that was inclusive to most marginalised minorities – including ethnic, religious, and sexual.'⁸⁸ Indeed, it seems paradoxical to suggest that a movement privileges a homogeneous and anti-pluralist notion of 'the people,' while simultaneously acknowledging that it adopted an inclusive discourse that was welcoming to a plurality of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. After all, isn't this exactly what pluralism is about? It seems, then, that it is often the rigidity of the ideational approach that prevents scholars employing it to openly acknowledge the possibility of a pluralist articulation of the populist subject, even when this is evident from several perspectives and in different occasions or indeed in their own writings.

The populist radical right and its 'people'

One might dismiss critiques to the ideational approach based on the experience of social movements, suggesting that these might have not been populist at all. This would probably be the reaction of Mueller, who has dismissed political actors broadly recognised as populist in the literature, even those considered archetypal, because they did not conform to his own definition.⁸⁹ However, the same issues seem to arise when focusing on actors of the populist radical right, a party family that has defined the study of European populism.⁹⁰ The combination of populism with nativism and authoritarianism in the discourse of these actors admittedly facilitates a more homogeneous conception of the people-as-nation as well as a more romanticised portrayal of the popular-national community as virtuous and pure, rooted in local tradition and bound by common religion, language and history.⁹¹ But even in this case, when populist radical right parties develop an upward dynamic that may allow them to challenge traditional political actors or even compete for office, addressing different social, economic and professional groups within society seems to become a strategic necessity. This leads them to broaden their appeal, making it less exclusive and monolithic. Yves Surel has introduced the term 'catch-all populism' to describe the latest development within the French Front National.⁹²

Let's look at this 'catch-all' strategy of Marine Le Pen's Front National (now renamed as National Rally) as exemplified in a certain 'moment' of a recent campaign. During the 2017 presidential campaign, the FN aired a series of videos. In one of them, titled 'I need Marine',⁹³ we see several individuals, coming from different social and economic groups, expressing their grievances and aspirations, identifying Le Pen as the person most suitable to address them. A middle-aged fisherman, a woman pensioner, a young woman, a male athlete, a mother, a male factory owner, a female teacher, a male farmer, a male web designer, a policewoman, a male nurse and a female student. The video seems gender-balanced and inclusive in terms of representing different social and economic groups, different demands and aspirations. Interestingly, it almost acknowledges different ethnic origins, as some of the individuals have characteristics that could be linked to Maghreb origin (e.g. male athlete and female student). The individuals representing aspects of the French people, however, are overwhelmingly white, devoted to their national identity and invested in their direct relationship with a leader (all statements concluding with the phrase '*I need Marine*'). In this sense, it would be correct to suggest that they almost speak in one voice and thus in unity. However, it remains problematic to equate this with a depiction of the people as essentially homogeneous, since social heterogeneity and differences among groups/individuals are acknowledged. Moreover, moral arguments are rather absent, with individuals emphasizing their sectoral interests, concerns about security, the economy, immigration and the effects of European integration.

What rallies those individuals and corresponding groups together in Le Pen's campaign video is rather a state of accumulated unmet demands along with aspirations that are channelled through a leader that is perceived as strong and genuinely patriotic. This indeed brings these groups and individuals together, in what looks like a 'chain of equivalence.' What emerges is a sense of unity and not just homogeneity. In this sense, it is the particular demands and aspirations behind each individual that may reveal the social and political preconditions for

the success of the party, but also operate as predictors for its programmatic agenda if it rises to power.

To put it in other words, populism, in this case, can explain *how* all these different demands and corresponding social groups can be discursively linked (both due to their common rejection of an unresponsive establishment and in their aspiration for ‘better days’), but it is different sociological references and ideological-programmatic principles that define the political aims that are channelled through each demand and individual. Populism thus, cannot be conflated with securitisation, euroscepticism or nativism, to name just a few of the themes and corresponding frames that emerge from the video under scrutiny and are prominent in the public discourse of Marine Le Pen and her party, as well as among the populist radical right party family more broadly.⁹⁴ Each frame operates according to a different logic and has its own discursive architectonics.⁹⁵ ‘The people’ as a label for the national community might appear as homogeneous and pure indeed, but this is due to the party’s *nativism*. Once populism is employed as a discursive frame and ‘the people’ are invoked as the majority of the citizens, those that are not heard even though they are the democratic sovereign, their heterogeneity is almost automatically acknowledged, be it reluctantly.

The people of the populist left

Finally, let’s focus on political parties and leaders of the populist left. References to such parties in Europe were rare in the literature before the economic crisis that hit the continent in 2009.⁹⁶ This changed after the impressive electoral performance of parties like Podemos in Spain and the rise of SYRIZA to power in Greece. These parties, expanded their electoral appeal and brought about major realignments in both countries, challenging the hegemony of established centre-left parties and even affecting the parties of the centre-right.⁹⁷ Their breakthrough would be hard to imagine without their close, organic links to the grassroots anti-austerity social movements mentioned earlier. Of course, SYRIZA and Podemos were not the first parties to exhibit certain characteristics that justify the label of populist left. One can include here Jean-Luc Mélenchon and La France Insoumise (Unbowed France) or the Left (Die Linke) in Germany, among others.⁹⁸

One of the distinctive characteristic of left populist parties, as noted by Luke March, is that they emphasize ‘egalitarianism and inclusivity rather than the openly exclusivist anti-immigrant or anti-foreigner concerns of right-populism.’⁹⁹ This implies that populist actors of the left envisage ‘the people’ in a distinct way, asserting inclusion rather than exclusion, advocating an egalitarian vision of society, fighting inequalities and opposing strict hierarchies.¹⁰⁰ Of course, this is a consequence of their ideological principles as actors that mostly draw on various versions and mixtures of socialism, social democracy, egalitarianism and (in some cases) radical ecology. A similar argument is advanced by Mouffe, who contends that ‘the people’ of left populism ‘is a discursive construction resulting from a “chain of equivalence” between heterogeneous demands whose unity is secured by the identification with a radical democratic conception of citizenship and a common opposition to the oligarchy.’¹⁰¹ Mouffe further notes that left populism should be better grasped as a specific

discursive 'strategy of construction of the political frontier between "the people" and "the oligarchy" [...] not a fully-fledged political programme. Parties or movements adopting a left populist strategy can follow a diversity of trajectories.'¹⁰²

Parties related to this tradition have been around for decades and despite their occasional successes, they never seemed able to break through into the mainstream. This changed after the economic crisis hit Europe and especially the more vulnerable countries on its periphery. Responding to rising social grievances, new populist left formations moved beyond the traditional class-based interpellations to address 'the people' against national and European elites and oligarchies. Podemos called upon '*la gente*' against '*la casta*'; SYRIZA called upon 'the people,' the 'non-privileged' against the 'old establishment' and 'extreme neoliberal circles within the EU.'¹⁰³ The people were represented as the vast majority of the population that had been hit by austerity policies despite the fact that they never gave such a mandate to the governing elites. In this sense, the key message of both SYRIZA and Podemos during the peak of the crisis had two equally significant dimensions: one that was socio-economic and another one democratic; one that stressed the injustices and negative implications of enforcing austerity (rising inequalities, impoverishment, unemployment, etc.) and another one that highlighted the radical incompatibility of the popular mandate with applied policies.

On a second level, both parties also campaigned against the corruption of the 'old parties' of the centre-left and centre-right. However, this is something that can hardly differentiate them from other non-mainstream parties in Greece and Spain, as the corruption of traditional political forces has always been a problem in both countries after their democratic transition and has thus occupied significant space in political debates.¹⁰⁴ What is more, both SYRIZA and Podemos represented a notion of the people that was explicitly inclusive, heterogeneous and plural; a notion that was also compatible with a robust rights agenda.¹⁰⁵ What unified the essentially pluralistic people that they called upon was their common opposition to an unresponsive political elite and a set of corresponding policies that were perceived as directly and negatively affecting their lives and well-being.

In the case of SYRIZA, the articulation of populism with an inclusive and pluralistic understanding of the popular subject can be tested not only on the level of discourse, but also in terms of applied policy, as the party held office for more than four years (January 2015-July 2019). SYRIZA's populism, that was defined by an anti-austerity agenda and a vehement opposition to what they castigated as parties of the 'old establishment' (PASOK and ND), explains their unusual alliance with a nationalist and conservative right-wing party in government, the Independent Greeks (ANEL). However, this did not undermine SYRIZA's long commitment to egalitarianism, tolerance and minority rights, already registered in their profile as a new left party with its roots in the Eurocommunist tradition.¹⁰⁶

Not surprisingly, ANEL and SYRIZA clashed when the latter proposed a bill in June 2015 that would grant full citizenship rights to most second-generation immigrants and especially immigrant children. The bill was eventually voted down by ANEL but passed with the support of parties of the liberal centre and the centre-left (RIVER [Potami], PASOK). The same

happened with the new legal framework concerning same-sex civil unions passed by the Greek Parliament on 23rd December 2015. Accordingly, the two parties clashed whenever issues around the composition of the 'Greek people' or that of the 'Greek family' arose, ranging from the recognition of the right of citizens to change sex identity over the age of fifteen and granting same-sex couples the right to foster children to diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. This would eventually result in a major dispute that caused the withdrawal of ANEL from the government when Tsipras reached an agreement with the country now called Northern Macedonia on a decades-long bitter (nationalist) dispute over which of the two countries owns the name and the identity of 'Macedonians.'¹⁰⁷ To simplify an extremely complex issue, one can suggest that SYRIZA's civic understanding of the popular community and a commitment to solidarity amongst peoples and nations, was ultimately irreconcilable with ANEL's ultranationalist view of the popular subject as a community of blood and soil and a corresponding view of relations among nations as essentially antagonistic.

To return to the theoretical and methodological implications of such cases, if one was to use populism as a predictor, drawing on the ideational approach to populism to understand SYRIZA's trajectory in power, they would have failed to anticipate the party's position on the issue of citizenship and minority rights as well as on the Macedonia name dispute. This might explain why, despite the fact that SYRIZA's profile and programmatic agenda was broadly known to area experts, Mudde had noted in early 2015 that the party was *not* 'a committed liberal democratic party, built upon the values of pluralism and minority rights' and that they would 'come to terms (grudgingly) with accepting pluralism and minority rights.'¹⁰⁸ The misreading of SYRIZA's core ideological features here is quite astonishing, since a pluralistic view of society and a strong agenda of protecting and enhancing minority rights have always been at the very core of the party's programme.¹⁰⁹ Again, it seems that the commitment to a restrictive understanding of populism that conflates it with anti-pluralism has led to such a reversal of reality here; what can also be described as the imposition of theory-driven assumptions upon data-driven findings, to put it in a more technical language.

The discursive approach, however, does not present similar problems, as it offers a flexible framework that facilitates a more rigorous analysis of SYRIZA's populism as the logic that fostered the linking of different demands, groups and individuals into a *unified* (yet explicitly heterogeneous) popular front. Populism, in other words, explains the *how* of this process, without limiting the researcher as to the *what* of the elements that were discursively articulated together. The New Left profile explains the policies pursued regarding minority rights and foreign relations. Indeed, if one puts aside the homogeneity and morality theses, the ideational approach can still offer a useful broader framework according to which the 'thin' ideology of populism was articulated with other ideological/discursive elements (socialism, egalitarianism, post-materialism, etc.) in order to produce distinctive narratives and concrete policies. In this sense, it seems like the task at hand is to make the ideational approach truly 'minimal,' by stripping it from its unnecessary rigidities.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have attempted to bring into dialogue two different theoretical traditions of populism studies in order to highlight certain deficiencies and suggest a way to remedy them. I maintain that the homogeneity and morality theses found in the now dominant ideational approach to populism are problematic and potentially counterproductive for scholarly research. After briefly surveying the literature on the construction of 'the people' as a collective subject in democratic modernity, I moved on to the ways that populism scholars have tried to deal with certain ambiguities in their own approaches and definitions. By contrasting the ideational to the discursive approach, I highlighted how certain limitations and biases that manifest in the former can be remedied by the more open and flexible framework developed in the latter. By suggesting that a homogenising effect on 'the people' and an essentially moralistic view of society constitute defining elements of populism, the researcher working within the ideational paradigm is severely limited in terms of questioning the modes of constructing and representing the popular subject in populist discourse but also assessing its antagonistic relationship to its 'Other' and thus the possible impact on democracy.

As I have shown, an essentially homogeneous 'people' is rare, even if one looks at populist actors at the far right of the political spectrum, while moral framings of social stakes are only one element among several others that give meaning to populist binaries of 'us versus them.' I have also highlighted the problem of imagining a morality-free and supposedly 'proper' politics, that is contrasted to 'pathological' forms, like populism. Moral framings are indeed prevalent in political discourse and it would be not only extremely hard to do without them but probably also counterproductive for democratic politics.

My aim, through this study, however, is not to dismiss the ideational approach to populism and its important legacy, but rather to suggest a crucial theoretical revision: namely, to reconsider or even drop the homogeneity and morality theses as defining elements of populism. This can be done by drawing on the flexible yet rigorous framework of the discursive tradition, that facilitates a more accurate understanding of the *plurality* of populist articulations and provides a more reflective theoretical basis in order to counter analytical and normative biases in empirical research. In this way, we would be able to account for the variety of ways in constructing 'the people' by means of producing *unity* out of heterogeneity and to critically evaluate the different modes of signifying antagonism between peoples and elites, from contrasting socio-economic interests to competing ideologico-political values and beyond.

- ¹ E. Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005); M. Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,' *Political Studies*, 47 (1999), pp. 2–16; C. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist,' *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), pp. 542–63.
- ² C. Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' in C. R. Kaltwasser et al. (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 27–47.
- ³ Laclau, *On populist reason*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.
- ⁴ See Canovan, 'Trust the People!' *op. cit.*, Ref. 1; P. Taggart, 'Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2004), pp. 269–88.
- ⁵ Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 2.
- ⁶ See J-W. Mueller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
- ⁷ Y. Stavrakakis and A. Jäger, 'Accomplishments and limitations of the "new" mainstream in contemporary populism studies,' *European Journal of Social Theory*, 21 (2018), pp. 547–65.
- ⁸ M. Canovan, '"People", Politicians and Populism,' *Government and Opposition*, 19 (1984), pp. 312–27; P. O. Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); J. Rancière, *Disagreement* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- ⁹ M. Canovan, *The people* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), pp. 10–11.
- ¹⁰ M. Gauchet, *La révolution moderne: L'avènement de la démocratie I* (Gallimard, 2007); E. S. Morgan, *Inventing the people* (New York: Norton, 1988).
- ¹¹ C. Lefort, *Democracy and political theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- ¹² E. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 35.
- ¹³ C. Morris, 'Sovereignty,' in P. B. Clarke and J. Foweraker (Eds) *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 831.
- ¹⁴ Canovan, *The people*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ A. Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); J.-L. Nancy, *The truth of democracy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 38–9.
- ¹⁶ C. Rovira Kaltwasser, 'The ambivalence of populism: Threat and corrective for democracy,' *Democratization*, 19 (2012), p. 189.
- ¹⁷ Morgan, *Inventing the people*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 10; G. Nootens, *Popular sovereignty in the West* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
- ¹⁸ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 176.
- ¹⁹ Canovan, *The people*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 5.
- ²⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 18, p. 177.
- ²¹ Nancy, *The truth of democracy*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 15, p. 39.
- ²² J. Rancière, *Dissensus* (Continuum, 2010), pp. 36–7.
- ²³ R. Wodak, *The politics of fear: what right-wing populist discourses mean* (London: Sage, 2015); C. Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ²⁴ Laclau, *On populist reason*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 224.
- ²⁵ E. Shils, *The torment of secrecy* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1956), p. 98.
- ²⁶ G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (Eds), *Populism: its meanings and national characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).
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- ²⁸ M. Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), p. 294.
- ²⁹ Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 2; D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (Eds), *Twenty-first century populism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Mueller, *What is Populism?*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6.
- ³⁰ L. March, *Radical left parties in Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); D. Hough and D. Keith, 'The German Left Party,' in G. Katsambekis and A. Kioupkiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 129–44; C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism,' *Government and Opposition*, 48 (2013), pp. 147–74.
- ³¹ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Ibid.*
- ³² C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ³³ K. A. Hawkins, 'Is Chávez populist?: Measuring populist discourse in comparative perspective,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 42 (2009), pp. 1040–67; B. Stanley, 'The thin ideology of populism,'

Journal of Political Ideologies, 13 (2008), pp. 95–110; M. Rooduijn, 'The nucleus of populism: In search of the lowest common denominator,' *Government and Opposition*, 49 (2013), pp. 572–98.

³⁴ Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 243; italics in the original.

³⁵ Mudde, *Populist radical right parties*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23, pp. 15–20.

³⁶ Rooduijn, 'The nucleus of populism,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 33; G. Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,' *American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), pp. 1033–53.

³⁷ Y. Stavrakakis and G. Katsambekis, 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery: The case of SYRIZA,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19 (2014), pp. 119–42; T. S. Pappas, *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³⁸ Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 2.

³⁹ M. Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 98.

⁴⁰ Taggart, 'Populism and representative politics,' *op. cit.* Ref. 4, pp. 274–5.

⁴¹ Y. Mény and Y. Surel, 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism,' in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (Eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 6.

⁴² Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 7, 19. It is crucial to note that the very use of the concept of 'thin-centred ideology' by Mudde remains problematic, as it seems to be premised on a misinterpretation of its status as outlined in a critique by Freeden himself. Freeden, in his critique of Mudde's use of the term, 'argues that populism is not an ideology at all,' but something even thinner, 'more akin to a discourse, style, or mode of language.' B. Moffitt, *Populism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), p. 15; M. Freeden, 'After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22 (2017), pp. 1–11.

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⁴⁴ Laclau, *On populist reason*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1; Canovan, 'Trust the People!' *op. cit.*, Ref. 1; Y. Stavrakakis, 'Antinomies of formalism: Laclau's theory of populism and the lessons from religious populism in Greece,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2004), pp. 253–67.

⁴⁵ Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, p. 34.

⁴⁶ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 81.

⁴⁷ A. Akkerman, C. Mudde and A. Zaslove, 'How Populist are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters,' *Comparative Political Studies*, 47 (2014), pp. 1324–1353.

⁴⁸ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 37; B. Moffitt, *The global rise of populism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁹ E. Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a Name?,' in F. Panizza (Ed.) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 47; Moffitt, *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁰ Mudde, 'Populism: An Ideational Approach,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, p. 29.

⁵¹ K. Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and populism in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 33.

⁵² Mueller, *What is Populism?*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 18.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018); C. Mouffe, *On the political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵⁵ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 81.

⁵⁶ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, pp. 7–8; Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 51, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Hawkins, *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 49, 51.

⁵⁸ M. Rooduijn et al., *The PopuList* (2019), available at www.popu-list.org (accessed 1 June 2020).

⁵⁹ G. Katsambekis, 'The Populist Radical Left in Greece,' in Katsambekis and Kioupiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, pp. 21–46; Ó.G. Agustín and M. Briziarelli (Eds), *Podemos and the new political cycle* (Cham: Springer, 2018); C. Schoor, 'In the theater of political style: Touches of populism, pluralism and elitism in speeches of politicians,' *Discourse & Society*, 28 (2017), pp. 657–76.

⁶⁰ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 37; P. Ostiguy, 'Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach,' in Kaltwasser et al. (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, pp. 73–97; Stavrakakis and Jäger, 'Accomplishments and limitations of the "new" mainstream,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 7; B. De Cleen et al., 'Critical research on populism,' *Organization*, 25 (2018), pp. 649–661.

- ⁶¹ E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 165, 173.
- ⁶² Laclau, *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7.
- ⁶³ Notice how Laclau’s discursive approach is missing from the otherwise extremely thorough and theoretically rich *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (*op. cit.*, Ref. 2). While it is broadly acknowledged that Laclau’s approach has been one of the most influential ones for the field of populism studies, probably *the* most influential when it comes to political theory, the editors have chosen to exclude it, while including one chapter on the political-strategic approach of Kurt Weyland (*Ibid.*, pp. 48–72), which only seems to apply to some cases in Latin America and is revealed as problematic when applied to Europe, where there are several populist parties that are deeply institutionalized with complex internal organization structures, and another one to the socio-cultural approach of Pierre Ostiguy (*Ibid.*, pp. 73–97), which has been a new and indeed meaningful addition to the literature, yet with rather limited (indeed a handful of) applications to empirical cases so far. The editors of the massive volume maintain that they did not include a chapter on Laclau’s understanding of populism because the ‘ideational approach developed by Mudde [...] stays in close relationship with the work of Laclau,’ yet this is hardly convincing, especially if one takes into account the significant differences outlined here.
- ⁶⁴ Laclau, *On populist reason*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 33.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 81, 94, 98.
- ⁶⁶ K.M. Roberts, ‘Populism, Political Mobilizations, and Crises of Political Representation’, in C. de la Torre (Ed.) *The Promise and Perils of Populism* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), pp. 140–58.
- ⁶⁷ G. Katsambekis, ‘Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece,’ *Constellations*, 23 (2016), pp. 391–403; Y. Stavrakakis et al., ‘Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: revisiting a reified association,’ *Critical Discourse Studies*, 14 (2017), pp. 420–39; S. Kim, ‘The populism of the Alternative for Germany (AfD),’ *Palgrave Communications*, 3 (2017), DOI: 10.1057/s41599-017-0008-1; B. De Cleen et al., ‘The Potentials and Difficulties of Transnational Populism,’ *Political Studies*, 68 (2020), pp. 146–66.
- ⁶⁸ C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Populism and (liberal) democracy’, in C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds) *Populism in Europe and the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 6–7.
- ⁶⁹ Y. Stavrakakis, ‘Discourse theory in populism research,’ *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16 (2017), pp. 523–34.
- ⁷⁰ Laclau, *On populist reason*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1; Laclau, ‘Populism: What’s in a Name?,’ *op. cit.*, Ref. 49; Laclau, *Politics and Ideology*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 62; Stavrakakis, ‘Antinomies of formalism,’ *op. cit.*, Ref. 45.
- ⁷¹ Stavrakakis, ‘Discourse theory in populism research,’ *op. cit.* Ref. 71; Laclau, ‘Populism: What’s in a Name?,’ *op. cit.*, Ref. 49.
- ⁷² De Cleen et al., ‘Critical research on populism,’ *op. cit.* Ref. 60, p. 4.
- ⁷³ Stavrakakis et al., ‘Extreme right-wing populism in Europe,’ *op. cit.* Ref. 67; Wodak, *The politics of fear*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23.
- ⁷⁴ G. Katsambekis and A. Kioupkiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, ‘Left-wing populism in the European periphery,’ *op. cit.*, Ref. 37.
- ⁷⁵ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 48.
- ⁷⁶ P. Aslanidis, ‘Populist Social Movements of the Great Recession,’ *Mobilization*, 21 (2016), pp. 301–21.
- ⁷⁷ D. Della Porta and M. Diani, *Social movements: an Introduction* (Blackwell, 2006); C. Flesher Fominaya, *Social Movements and Globalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- ⁷⁸ C. Rovira Kaltwasser, ‘Explaining the Emergence of Populism in Europe and the Americas,’ in C. De La Torre (Ed.) *The promise and perils of populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 68, pp. 204–206.
- ⁷⁹ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 48; P. Gerbaudo, *The mask and the flag: populism, citizenism and global protest* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017); L. Grattan, *Populism’s Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ⁸⁰ A. Kioupkiolis, ‘Populism 2.0,’ in Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, pp. 168–93.
- ⁸¹ Gerbaudo, *The mask and the flag*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 79.
- ⁸² G. Katsambekis, ‘The multitudinous moment(s) of the people,’ in A. Kioupkiolis and G. Katsambekis (Eds) *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); M. Prentoulis

and L. Thomassen, 'Autonomy and Hegemony in the Squares: the 2011 Protests in Greece and Spain,' in G. Katsambekis and A. Kioupkiolis (Eds) *Ibid.*, pp. 213–34.

⁸³ D. Della Porta, *Social movements in times of austerity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); V. Georgiadou et al., 'Plebiscitarian Spirit in the Square,' *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 32 (2019), pp. 43–59; Kioupkiolis, 'Populism 2.0,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 80.

⁸⁴ K. Hope, 'Former Greek defence minister jailed for 20 years for corruption,' *Financial Times*, 7 October 2013, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/32a685c0-2f6d-11e3-8cb2-00144feab7de> (accessed 26 July 2019); S. Edwards, 'Spain's Watergate,' *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/mar/01/spain-watergate-corruption-scandal-politics-gurtel-case> (accessed 26 July 2019).

⁸⁵ Grattan, *Populism's Power*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 79.

⁸⁶ C. Calhoun, 'Occupy Wall Street in perspective,' *British Journal of Sociology*, 64 (2013), pp. 26–38.

⁸⁷ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 32, p. 48.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Mueller, *What is Populism?*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6.

⁹⁰ Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23.

⁹¹ See Wodak, *The politics of fear*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23.

⁹² Y. Surel, 'How to stay populist? The Front National and the changing French party system,' *West European Politics*, 42 (2019), pp. 1230–57.

⁹³ Marine Le Pen official YouTube channel, 'J'ai besoin de Marine,' 26 February 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfDD8fnn6bE> (accessed 26 July 2019). I am grateful to my former student, Rebecca Hopkins, for bringing this video to my attention during my classes on populism at Loughborough University in the 2017–2018 academic year.

⁹⁴ D. Stockemer, *The Front National in France* (Cham: Springer, 2017); H. G. Betz, 'Facets of nativism: A heuristic exploration,' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 53 (2019), pp. 111–35; C. S. Liang (Ed.), *Europe for the Europeans* (London: Routledge, 2016); Mudde, *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23.

⁹⁵ Think, for example, the difference between the vertical down/up axis operating in populism, pitting the suppressed or ignored 'people' from below to an unresponsive and alienated 'elite' from above, to the horizontal in/out axis operating in nationalism, rallying the members of the national community considered as the in-group to threatening outsiders. For a full elaboration of this conceptual distinction, see B. De Cleen and Y. Stavarakakis, 'Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,' *Javnost*, 24 (2017), pp. 301–19.

⁹⁶ With the exception of the masterful study of Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30.

⁹⁷ A. Kioupkiolis and G. Katsambekis, 'Radical left populism from the margins to the mainstream,' in Agustin and Briziarelli (Eds) *Podemos and the New Political Cycle*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 60, pp. 201–26.

⁹⁸ Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30.

⁹⁹ March, *Radical left parties in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, p. 122.

¹⁰⁰ G. Katsambekis and A. Kioupkiolis, 'Introduction,' in Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, pp. 1–20.

¹⁰¹ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 54, p. 80.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 80.

¹⁰³ Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 'Radical left populism from the margins to the mainstream,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 97.

¹⁰⁴ K. Koutsoukis, 'Political corruption in Greece,' in M. Bull and J. Newel (Eds) *Corruption in Contemporary Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 24–36; F. Jimenez and M. Cainzos, 'Political corruption in Spain,' in Bull and Newel (Eds), *Ibid.*, pp. 9–23.

¹⁰⁵ Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 'Radical left populism from the margins to the mainstream,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 97.

¹⁰⁶ I. Balampanidis, *Eurocommunism* (London: Routledge, 2018); Y. Katsourides, *Radical left parties in government* (Palgrave, 2016).

¹⁰⁷ Katsambekis, 'The Populist Radical Left in Greece,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 59.

¹⁰⁸ C. Mudde, 'After Syriza's landslide,' *OpenDemocracy*, 25 January 2015, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/after-syrisas-landslide-five-predictions-of-much-similar-future> (accessed 15 June 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Balampanidis, *Eurocommunism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 106; Katsourides, *Radical left parties in government*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 106; Katsambekis, 'Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece,' *op. cit.*, Ref. 67.