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Left-Populism on Trial: Laclauian Politics in Theory and Practice

Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello

Abstract This paper offers a critical assessment of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism in light of recent populist politics. Following the 2008 crisis and its fallout, Laclau's writings have enjoyed both practical and theoretical prominence, inspiring movements from Podemos to La France insoumise and an energetic section of discourse theory. Recent events, however, seem to testify to the exhaustion of his populist imaginary. Examples include Podemos' internal tensions and its uneasy cohabitation with the Spanish Socialists and Syriza's troubled European pact, while discourse theorists have reconsidered some of the tradition's tenets. This paper investigates this cul-de-sac and hints at possible escape routes. It does so by examining two possible deficits in Laclau's theory of populism as presented in *On Populist Reason*: (1) a tension between verticality and horizontality in Laclau's variant of "leadership democracy" and (2) a descriptive and normative "hyperformalism." The first deficit is explicated with reference to recent developments in European party-systems and how these restructure patterns of political engagement across party lines. The second digs deeper into Laclau's earlier oeuvre for the roots of formalism and insights sidelined in his later work. The paper finishes with suggestions for a research agenda for post-Laclauian populism.

Introduction

Left-populism finds itself at a crossroads—both in practice and in theory. Spanning an impressive ten-year arch, European political movements and parties at the cusp of the Eurozone (*Podemos*, *Syriza*) and in its core (*La France insoumise*) have staked out claims on fresh political subjects, claiming terms such as "el pueblo," "laos," and "le peuple" in opposition to mainstream parties. "Putting aside notions of "left versus right" "workers versus bosses,"" British commentator Dan Hancox noted in 2015, left-populists now decidedly opted "in favour of a single opposition: the people versus *la casta*."¹ As Hancox also notes, a sizeable section of left populists had done so with reference

to the work of Ernesto Laclau. “When Laclau passed away last April aged 78,” he notes, “few would have guessed that this Argentinian-born, Oxford-educated post-Marxist would become the key intellectual figure behind a political process that exploded into life a mere six weeks later.”²

Not that these forces had no pre-histories of their own. Most European populists served as organizational outgrowths of earlier anti-austerity coalitions, as with Podemos’s debt to the 2011 Indignados mobilization, or Syriza’s roots in the Greek square movements (*Kínima Aganaktisménon-Politón*). Yet there is something distinctive about the weaponization of Laclau prevalent on the populist left today. As Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis have noted, using Laclau seems to lead to an increase in actual popularity for left-wing actors and higher polling numbers.³ And as David Howarth (perhaps rather buoyantly) noted in early 2015, “the success of Syriza in Greece has been driven by Marxism, populism and Essex University,” with “three alumni hold(ing) senior positions within the party” and others residing in regional assemblies.⁴ Laclau’s left-populism, so it seemed, had moved from the seminar to the senate.

Howarth’s words were written four years ago. They were also penned at a time of roiling crisis, just before Syriza signed its last Eurozone pact. Recent setbacks for left-populism include Podemos’s pact with the Socialists, a renewed leadership battle between its leaders Íñigo Errejón and Pablo Iglesias, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s uneasy place within the anti-Macron coalition, and the party’s failed catch-up with Yellow Vests (*Gilets jaunes*) mobilizations. Writing in hindsight, left-populism’s track record thus already appears more sobering. The institutional task facing populist actors never seemed more daunting: a radical overhaul of the European institutions, a drastic reform of the Euro-area, a reorganization of national party-political system and a revoking of constitutional designs. The first wave of populist activity has also struggled to solidify itself into institutions and sustainable policy legacies, an argument that can be compared to Samuele Mazzolini’s elsewhere in this issue, which investigates the pushback against Latin America’s “pink wave” by a resurgent neoliberal camp.⁵

Rudimentary explanations for this setback abound. Left-populism’s failure has been attributed to an incapacity to breach the terrain of political economy (or, rather, in a “thicker” way than a mere clientelist redistribution of oil rents); an excessive focus on identity-formation and rhetoric; and a neglect of the European question.⁶ Often enough, however, such critiques have been made from a perspective *external* to Laclau’s theory, mostly from a more materialist-Marxist or a liberalizing viewpoint.⁷

What an *internal* assessment of left-populism’s balance sheet—both in theory and praxis—might look like, in turn, is less clear. It is

precisely such an immanent critique that this paper offers. Put bluntly, our argument arises out of a sense that some of the problems encountered by left-populist coalitions today—resurgent party-political rivalry, insufficient institutionalization, rhetorical over-investment—can be traced back to Laclau’s original theory. It is this theory, not a mere interplay of exogenous factors, that deserves closer scrutiny here. This is not an attempt to downplay the difficulties faced by left-populists or to play the blame game. It would be facile to claim, as Slavoj Žižek did after Syriza’s triumph in 2015, that “the truth of a theory only proves itself in practice.”⁸ Yet when the intertextual ties between left-populist theory and left-populist praxis are this explicit, deeper investigation seems warranted. This paper thus reflects on the potential deficits of Laclau’s theory of populism in order to suggest possible ways of transcending them, always from a sympathetic point of view. As Benjamin Arditi puts it, “one truly honors a great thinker by polemicizing with his ideas, by bringing out the tensions in [his] work.”⁹ To paraphrase Chantal Mouffe’s well-known quip about Carl Schmitt, this paper seeks to reflect upon the theory and practice of left-wing populism both “with” and “against” Laclau.

This paper cannot, of course, do everything. Given the wide conceptual reach of the points addressed, it does not provide a magic escape route out of left-populism’s cul-de-sac. Its purpose is rather more modest: it seeks to raise awareness about some of the limits of Laclau’s approach, driving debate and disturbing some of the theoretical immobilism (stemming, perhaps, from some religious respect paid to the master) in sections of the Essex School and its fellow travelers. Evidently, this exercise could also yield implications for populism theory in general.

The first section of the article discusses the tension between “verticality” and “horizontality” in Laclau’s theory and how this expresses itself in some of populism’s historical enactments. This is gauged in two historical “populisms,” that of the American People’s Party of the late nineteenth century and the recent Yellow Vests mobilizations, while also drawing on recent work on evolving party-landscapes in Europe. The second section investigates the effects of Laclau’s focus on the formal logic of populism to the detriment of its more “positive” content, again tested with reference to a set of practical examples. Finally, the two elements are brought together in the concluding section. Using a phrase cherished by Laclau himself, the resulting theory should be seen as both *post-Laclauian* and *post-Laclauian*, standing somewhere between supersession and sophistication—our attempt to go beyond the writer in question, while also building on previous insights.

Left-Populism between Horizontality and Verticality

Laclau was never timid about the centrality of leaders to his populist vision. In a 2006 debate with Slavoj Žižek, for instance, he hinted at the fact that “there is no populism without affective investment in a partial object”,¹⁰ a “Peronism without Peron,” in this sense, would have been impossible. Populist leaders initiate a downward claim on a “new” popular subject that displaces settled hierarchies and creates a new hegemonic order. Unsurprisingly, a recurring point of tension in Laclau’s theory concerns the exact interaction between what one might call the “vertical” and “horizontal” axes of political organizing.¹¹ The latter can be typified by associational activity in parties, unions, associations and protest movements, and how these actors formulate and compose demands. The former comprises more colloquial “coalition building,” mainly through charismatic electoral leaders, stringing these demands into historic blocs. Horizontal action is here seen an essentially “societal” project, while verticalism can also be seen as more openly “statist” and possibly top-down—and, in this way, also potentially clientelist.

There are two questions that stalk this portrait. The first is normative: does Laclau’s model of vertical politics offer an adequately transformative tool, and is it suitable for today’s political movements? The second is more descriptive: can Laclau’s model adequately *capture* expressions of popular agency today and yesterday? To answer these two questions, this section offers two examinations of Laclau’s theory: one an examination of historical evidence gathered by Laclau, and the other a reflection on a “historicist” deficit in his writings.

Deeper issues at stake in left-populism’s negotiation of the horizontal and the vertical are brought out more clearly when contrasted with other philosophical approaches. Contra theorists of the “horizontal” such as Antonio Negri, Joshua Clover and Michael Hardt, Laclau denies that some available political actor can be “read off” from an existing set of social relations.¹² Instead, Laclau’s “people” need to be constructed and molded, something that will have to be done using some central agency—here controversially taken up by the figure of the leader.

Left-populism’s dependence on the figure of the leader has always stirred controversy. It has led many detractors to accuse it of top-down-ism, Bonapartism even. As Ellen Meiksins Wood noted in 1986, “if it is not the revolutionary mass, its interests, motivations, goals, and powers that give the revolution its character as a class struggle, but rather the actions and intentions of the leadership” should Laclau then “also conclude that the ‘mob’ in these affairs is merely an irrational and anarchic force,” manipulated only “by its demagogue ... superiors”?¹³

While accusations of top-down-ism have come from sections of the left, liberal respondents have had different complaints. These mainly concern Laclau's own style of "leadership democracy,"¹⁴ and how this translates into institutional settings. Liberal writers have accused left-populists not only of a primary "anti-liberalism" but of an even more primary "anti-pluralism," in which the leaders' vertical claim erases differences between different social groups and leads to a form of "democratic monism."¹⁵ To critics such as Jan-Werner Müller, Cas Mudde, and Nadia Urbinati, for instance, the notion that liberal democracy can be "salvaged" by sending an occasional surge of populist electricity through the system is unrealistic at best and dangerous at worst. Laclau's and Mouffe's left-populism, they claim, will never be able to keep its promise of safeguarding "real pluralism" in the long run—an argument Mudde and Müller have run through the matrix of Hugo Chavez's "good-populism-turned-bad" and Urbinati with reference to the decline of party-democracy in Italy.¹⁶ Although a corrective in the short term, liberal critics argue, left-populism's reliance on leaders mostly leads to strong leaders instead of strong publics.

Can these claims be tested historically? One way of gauging Laclau's difficulties here is by looking at the movement that served as a prime example for his theory of leadership-formation—the American People's Party of 1891, the first self-declared "populist" movement in history. As Laclau notes in *On Populist Reason*, the American Populist movement had as its "intention... a populist dichotomization of the social space into two antagonistic camps," here "achieved by creation of a third party which would break the bipartisan model of American politics."¹⁷ The "idea of a People's Party" which would displace the two-party system "was the culmination of a long process going back to the Farmers' Alliance of the 1870s," where "several mobilizations and co-operative projects had been initiated without any lasting success."¹⁸ Nonetheless, this early populism only became viable in the 1896 presidential election, in which the People's Party fused with the Democrats and rallied behind the Nebraska radical William Jennings Bryan. "The success of Bryan's campaign," Laclau notes, "depended entirely on constituting the 'people' as a historical actor—that is, on having universal-equivalential identifications prevail over sectorial ones"—and assured its efficacy through the "appeal to a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass."¹⁹ The movement has also retained its attraction to today's left-populist imagination. "In (some) contexts," Chantal Mouffe notes in her latest *For a Left Populism*, "populist movements have been viewed in a positive way," as was the case with the American People's Party conceived in 1891.²⁰ This original, "big P" Populism, she claims, "defended progressive policies aimed at strengthening democracy," which were later "adopted by liberals and were influential in the New

Deal.” At least in America, “the term has remained open to positive uses,”²¹ and also offers symbolic capital to European exponents.

The question remains how such claims square with scholarship on the nineteenth-century Populist movement. As noted by Jason Frank, it is unclear whether the American People’s Party itself really did conform to the characteristics set out by Laclau. This is most evident in movement’s combination of horizontal and vertical modes of decision-making, and the fiercely *economic* (rather than identity-based) focus of the Populists. American populism’s “forms of institutional experimentation,” as Frank notes, resists “the more familiar emphasis democratic theorists have placed on the political dilemmas of popular identity,” moving the terrain from the question of “who the people are” (the Laclauian focus) to “how the people act, how their will is represented, or institutionally embodied.”²² Frank even claims that the opposition posited between vertical populism and horizontal pacification “secures a highly suspect formulation of populist politics,” keeping “both liberal critics and radical democratic admirers from exploring the limitations of the theoretical model they share.”²³

A more thorough look at Populist history also does much to destabilize the primacy of the “vertical” in Laclau’s thesis. In the 1880s and ‘90s, Populist Farmers’ Alliances and Granger clubs were known for their heavily horizontal modes of decision-making, coupled with a refusal to submit to any discretionary leadership. As the American Populist S. O. Daws put it in 1887, the movement should be “beware of men who are trying to get politics into this non-political organization, instead of trying to devise means by which the farmers may have the opportunity to emancipate themselves from the grasp of political tricksters.”²⁴ It was only when the People’s Party embarked on its long march through the institutions—its attempt to “change America’s political culture,” as historian Lawrence Goodwyn put it—that its national leadership was able to gain independence from its base. That base, in turn, continued to jealously guard its influence, insisting on strict transparency in party procedures.

Daws’s statement provides an important counterpoint on the nature of “Populist populism.” Rather than a diffuse set of actors looking for top-down guidance, Populism was able to achieve consistency long before the arrival of Bryan’s leadership. It was exactly through the usage of bodies such as co-operatives, churches, brotherhoods and associations that a coherent notion of a populist “interest” was able to form itself. In the end, it was only due to the *weakening* of this rich coalition in the face of Democratic intimidation and voter fraud that Populists turned to strongmen to solve their problems.

This contrasts heavily with Laclau’s own rendering of the Populist revolt, which can be traced back to his thinking on representation. Laclau’s populism, as Benjamin Arditi notes, offers a mode of political

representation of “virtual immediacy” in which an “imaginary identification” “suspends the distance between the people and their representatives,” achieving a state of libidinal wholeness.²⁵ Since Laclau’s populist “people” cannot conceive their identity or interests before a “representative claim”²⁶ is posited by a leader, intermediary bodies such as parties, co-operatives and unions will invariably vaporize when faced with the populist coalition. As Laclau put it, only when William Jennings Bryan—the 1896 presidential candidate on the “Demo-Pop” ticket—was able to unite this string of demands into a “chain of equivalence,” a coherent populist people was constructed.

This schema hardly works in the late nineteenth century. American Populism itself was fiercely “intermediary” and flourished precisely by uniting farmers without an assertive leadership. This leadership wanted to navigate a tricky electoral terrain without democratic oversight. Once it was installed, Populism thus lost its claim to universality by turning into a pressure group for planter elites and merchants, who had much to lose from a rank-and-file militancy. As Michael Schwartz argues, the social make-up of the leadership made it so that they “had to protect their own interests” and thereby “suppress information, suspend democratic decision-making, and impose a policy that only benefited a small minority.”²⁷ In this sense, populist leadership equaled Populist decline.

The limits of Laclau’s toolkit can still be observed today. Phenomena such as the the Yellow Vests and the restructuring of the British Labour Party, although tangentially in accord with Laclau’s writing, also diverge from it on crucial points. The Yellow Vest movement has stuck to a dogged line of “leaderlessness,” going as far as to heckle and obstruct those that were seeking out presentation as delegates for the movement.²⁸ While the chain of equivalence constructed might deploy their own “empty signifier” — here exemplified by the vests kept by drivers in cars — they have not lent this chain to any superior leadership and insist upon the movement’s essentially anti-mediational ethos. As noted by Etienne Balibar, the “accent on affect and the need for an incarnated and personalistic leadership corresponds little with the actual aspirations of the movement,” while other commentators noted how the Vests lack “leaders and those who proclaim that role for themselves are immediately disowned, especially from the moment they agree to use the media.”²⁹ In this integral rejection of representation, the Vests have pursued a radically anti-representative program: “Nobody represents anybody.”³⁰

To Laclau these descriptive issues also have their practical counterpart. What is clear from recent experiences of left-populist leadership is critics’ persistent *uneasiness* with the fact of leadership. Leaders do not simply impose organizational unity on a populist coalition, anti-populist critics claim. They also function as agents that impart

ideological coherence to such coalitions in the first place and overdetermine their life cycles. This, in turn, implies a wholly different set of dependencies between base and leadership—not merely the recognition that “someone” has to decide when push comes to shove, or that the “iron law of oligarchy” will assert itself eventually.

Rather, critics see left populism as living in the perpetual shadow of a Caesarist derailing. This derailing becomes visible in the rise of the so-called “hyper-leader” like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez or Jeremy Corbyn, as political scientist Paulo Gerbaudo has called it. These are leaders who not only tie together a disparate set of demands but also provide roadmaps for movements themselves, setting out their trajectories before any declaration of principles has been put forward. The digitization of democratic life plays a paramount role here, offering a direct shortcut across party mediation and procedure. Today’s hyper-leaders, Gerbaudo notes, “invert the relationship between politician and party” through a “representative model of democracy where politicians were figureheads and parties were the true repositories of power.” Instead, they attain “a far larger social media base than their organization,” floating “above the party” and “lifting it into the air through their personal visibility.”³¹

Although powerful in the short term, the requisites of such hyper-leadership can be tricky. As Matt Bolton noted in an earlier reflection on Corbynism, left populism is in danger of remaining “as much of a top-down mediated phenomenon as classical liberalism,” easily susceptible to forms of “clicktivism” and “gesture politics.”³² “Since the figure of the leader is so vital,” Bolton notes, “the tenacity to hold onto leadership trumps questions of whether this leader is actually able to wield it in parliament.”³³ And if left populism here really did represent the rebirth of militant politics on the Left—“with well-organized new members embedded within their local parties, taking up positions of power, standing for office”—then the importance of the leader would be “correspondingly reduced.” Rather than mere logistical expediency, populism’s dependence on the leader might even testify “precisely to the lack, the weakness, of the social movement of which the leader is the supposed avatar.”³⁴ Similar to Mazzolini’s comments elsewhere in this issue, without a strong horizontal subculture to sustain it, populists can easily usher in a form of bureaucratic stasis.

Bolton also provides an important counterpoint to the standard narratives offered for left-populism’s successes. These explanations tend to attribute this success exclusively to left-populism’s capacity to reaffirm socioeconomic or political cleavages, which have grown to such extreme sizes in recent years. Bolton’s story is different. Instead, he points to left populism’s compatibility with a larger trend in European party systems, casting the rise of “verticalism” as a cross-party phenomenon. In an era of plummeting party membership and declining

voter participation, classical political markers lose their saliency and give way to a facile form of “catch-all,” “cartelized” politics. Peter Mair famously described this as a process in which politicians “rule the void,” presiding over an empty civil sphere.³⁵ Edging towards what Mair termed “party-less democracy,”³⁶ parties have increasingly decoupled themselves from social bases and outsourced policy provision to technocratic bodies.

The consequences of this process are dire, in Mair’s eyes, but they might be revelatory for left-populism. “Post-party” democracy implies that politicians’ relationship to a support group undergoes a drastic change. Instead of listening to a partisan base or attending to the wishes of a party machine, politicians come to rely on spin-doctors for periodic reports on public opinion (aptly termed a “neo-popular” bubble by Hungarian critic Peter Csigo³⁷). Parallel to capitalists’ flight from the “productive” economy in the era of financialization, the ascent of the spin doctor – who seeks to inform politicians about “what the people really want” – is inextricably bound up with the withering away of a base in parties themselves, which now lack adequate transmission channels to a substructure.³⁸ As Chris Bickerton noted in 2018, “today’s parties of the left tend to be” so “socially deracinated” that they hardly have any idea “what it is that people want.”³⁹ Lacking these bases within parties, politicians are therefore condemned to a form of ceaseless speculation as to the popular will.

The results of this process become visible in what Joe Kennedy has termed the politics of “authentocracy.”⁴⁰ Compatible with today’s media-driven debate, this performative mode of politics is essentially speculative in its reliance on focus groups, polling and PR advice. Its main obsession is a concern for “authenticity” – what does it mean for a politician to be “likeable” and “electable”? Kennedy’s authentocrats profess a conservatism imputed to a notional “forgotten working class” and obsess over a working-class opposition to immigration. Kennedy’s prototype is the Labour MP Owen Smith. When Smith decided to run for Labour leader in 2016, he pretended not to know the name for a latte, calling it a “frothy coffee” instead. He also constantly strutted his popular credentials, using words such as “birds” and “lads” on Twitter.

Smith can here serve as a prototype of a specifically “speculative” mode of leadership. Precisely because many European parties have been hollowed out internally, Mair argues, their leaders have been forced to take on a more assertive role. This is where populist logics come into play as a systemic *necessity*, rather than a fortuitous choice of tactics. Mair’s “party-less” democracy denotes a form of political marketing in which spin doctors and experts urge party bosses to convince voters that what they are saying is, in fact, what the voters wanted all along. This leads to a fraught feedback loop between interests and the

expression of those interests of external actors, and a disturbance of regular representative practices. In the late 1990s, for instance, supporters of the Dutch populist politician Pim Fortuyn claimed that the latter's slogan "He says what we're thinking" was the reason they cast votes for him. When asked what they did in fact think, a perturbing response emerged: "Well, what he's been saying, of course."⁴¹

Mair's model also forms a marked contrast to twentieth-century mass parties. Classical parties consistently rooted their "representative claim" in a specific segment of the population, often articulated through intermediary bodies. Left-wing parties, for instance, saw themselves as advocating workers' interests, liberal parties spoke for sections of the employing class or the petite bourgeoisie, while Christian Democrats took up the mantle for a society of "persons and families."⁴² All such voices were first formed through a set of intermediaries such as parties, association and unions, which could filter wants and needs before will-formation in parliaments. What Pierre Rosanvallon termed forms of "secondary democracy"⁴³ were crucial to this system, in which plebiscitary modes of leadership were foreclosed by tight pattern of associations. One could think of the "counter-society" constructed by the French Communist Party—schools, clubs, bicycle associations and unions—or the "lost worlds of British Communism" of Raphael Samuel.⁴⁴

As horizontal networks of trust and solidarity, these organizations offer an important counterpoint for theorists that seek to read back populist logics into a previous era. In such a setting, Chris Bickerton claims, "a strong leader is of secondary importance, since it is the rank-and-file that remains at center of the party."⁴⁵ Populist parties, in contrast, have a different hierarchy of interests, forced "to fight themselves into the system" in a heavily mediatized public sphere. This, coupled with a "downturn in union membership and the unions' loss of public standing" and "a wider trend of decline afflicting all representative institutions,"⁴⁶ makes left populism's reliance on the leader seem more of a symptom than a conscious tactic, reproducing the very ailment it objects to in mainstream parties.

Mair and Bickerton's analyses thus allow for a thicker context to the vertical-horizontal tension presented in Laclau. At the same time, this crisis of intermediary institutions also has important consequences for the outlook of states and how they negotiate pressure from below and above. Since the 1990s, Western societies have undergone a dramatic rupture between two activities conjoined in the post-war era—"politics" and "policy."⁴⁷ We can think of the latter as the work of state negotiation and technical adjustment, the "bargaining basis" on which states order their societies and intervene in their economies. The second comprises the intricate process of popular will formation: inter-party competition, campaign building, electoral outbidding, the

crafting of coalitions. It is through this agglomeration and reordering of demands that “politics” takes place in the first place.

The 1990s—the moment Mair identifies as the closing decade for classical party democracy—saw a drastic change in how these two moments interacted. “Policy” became the exclusive domain of “unelected power”⁴⁸—organs such as the Eurogroup, the Commission, and the Bank of England, populated by neoliberal actors. “Politics,” in turn, was relegated to a media sphere addicted to novelty. Mair and Bickerton here offer a portrait of “populism” and “technocracy” as two hostile brothers who nonetheless share a deeper consanguinity. While technocracy offers “policy without politics,” populism offers with “politics without policy.”⁴⁹ This corresponds to news modes of government innovated in the post-1989 era. European states are “hard but hollow,”⁵⁰ as the Italian political scientist Vincent Della Sala put it—powerful and capacious, mainly in their executive branch, but insulated from any pressure from below. The result is a form of “unmediated democracy,” in which decision-making and will-formation have become increasingly severed.

Agnosticism on policy has also proven most difficult to maintain for left-populists. As mentioned, one of left-populism’s most persistent problems has been the *partial* death of the world lamented by Bickerton and Mair. Rather than a void, there has only been a relative and non-integral erosion of party system. Even in cases where their shrinkage has indeed been spectacular—as with the Greek and French socialists—not all old-style party democratic organs have disappeared simultaneously. For Laclauians, Mair’s “void” was never empty enough. Facing a resistant but hollow set of institutions, populists have not been able to capitalize on full “dis-affiliation.”

This incomplete void has also meant that left-populists’ main ambitions—a conquest of power, after unifying unsatisfied demands against an elite—tended to have more rhetorical than institutional effects. Once populists have their chance at winning a majority (one can think of the failed *sorpasso* of the Spanish socialists by Podemos, or Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s inability to reach the second round of the French presidential elections), they usually seek an entente with mainstream parties. This also implies positioning oneself on the left-right axis, forging alliances with the “traditionalists” or assuming a tributary role. Most visibly, Laclau’s left-populists have had to “institutionalize,” going beyond a sloganesque “beyond-left-and-right” rhetoric, and give up on their claim to represent “the 99%.” Like others, they have had to restrict themselves to a narrower social base.

Juxtaposed with the age of mass parties, then, left-populism’s growing pains become more understandable. An incapacity to craft deeper social linkages and intermediary bodies (associations, cooperatives, unions and organizational forms that do not rely exclusively on

digital shortcuts) goes hand in hand with the absence of a vision for left-populism's *historical* mandate. The emancipatory task endowed to socialist and communist parties not only set out a specific "counter-society" that could survive in a predominantly bourgeois civil sphere. It also meant that the increasingly vertical forms of representation envisioned by Laclau only became a structural necessity in electoral contexts, in which such parties had to reach beyond their core bases and stake a broader representative claim. "Verticalism," in this sense, is more of a necessity than an option to such parties, given the underlying "life-world" that sustains these coalitions—which might also explain the "formalist" nature of populist movements, a feature that deserves further scrutiny.

Excesses of Formalism: Returning to Class and Norms

Laclau's theory is famous for its insistence that "populism" can never be defined by a particular ideology, policy program or political project. It is, in every conceivable way, a *formal* theory of populism. This feature has older historical roots. As Yannis Stavrakakis has pointed out,⁵¹ Laclau's theory evolved, from his early writings on populism in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*⁵² to his book *On Populist Reason*,⁵³ towards an increasingly thinner and more generic definition of the concept. As Laclau himself admitted, "the concept of populism" he put forwards was "a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation—the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic—independently of the actual contents that are articulated."⁵⁴

To be sure, the formalism of Laclau's approach has also constituted one of the main virtues of Laclau's theory. It has remained one of the cornerstones of his work and a considerable breakthrough with regard to previous definitions, as it is part of a conscious attempt to provide a *full* theory of populism that tries to explain its core characteristics, applying to various historical and geographical appearances and, last but not least, providing social and political actors with a hand guide to "radicalize democracy" through their own populist strategy.⁵⁵

Among the advantages of this formalism at least four stand out. Firstly, by identifying populism with a logic coterminous with the political as such and inherent to democracy, Laclau weakens the pejorative connotation attached to the term both in colloquial and academic debates.⁵⁶ He thereby also lowers its polemical content. Secondly, Laclau's theory ceases to conceive of the vagueness and ambiguity of populism as an inherent flaw, which would render it immune to any attempt at generalization.⁵⁷ Rather, he renders this vagueness as one of populism's *constitutive* features.⁵⁸ Thirdly, the reduction of populism

to a formal logic of articulation allows for a separation of populism's social, normative and programmatic contents, identifying precisely the common features that *all* populist movements share, while at the same time not losing track of their heterogeneity. This move still constitutes a considerable improvement from previous attempts by scholars to come up with a viable definition of the term. Finally, Laclau's theory dissects from theories that reduce populism to the political expression of a new cleavage between the "losers" and "winners" of globalization,⁵⁹ or warriors in an epiphenomenal contest over status hierarchies.⁶⁰ As Laclau sees it, these theories systematically overlook the role populist *agency* plays in bringing together movements and electorates. Taken together, these four points provide a framework for approaching the rise of populism as an interactive, dynamic and performative process.

This formalism also comes with its limits, however, both theoretical and practical. Most readers of Laclau have been perturbed by a move undertaken in *On Populist Reason*. There Laclau gradually departed from a conception of populism as one specific political logic ("a way to construct the political" or "the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political such") to develop a more ambiguous formulation where populism "amounts [...] to *political* reason *tout court*."⁶¹ This is a stronger shift towards an open formalism — whereby populism "becomes synonymous with politics,"⁶² as equated with the sole extension of the equivalential logic and is "no longer associated with the location of the *point de capiton* 'the people.'"⁶³

Laclau's statement has puzzled scholars ever since. Above all, his claim seemed to blur "the difference between an antagonistic discourse articulated around 'the people' and any other such discourse," losing, as one critic put it, "the conceptual particularity and operationality of 'populism' as a tool for concrete political analysis" and thus weakens "the empirical applicability of this whole approach."⁶⁴ In doing so, Laclau seems to conflate altogether his ontological theory of the political with his account of populism as an ontic object, ending up with an equation between hegemony, politics and populism that makes the added value of the third concept difficult to understand.⁶⁵ Beside the aforementioned lack of conceptual precision (and the subsequent problem of empirical applicability), this approach completely disregards the repertoire and political project that are articulated through a populist logic, and barely reflects upon the material structure of power which populist actors put themselves up against, as Wood argued earlier. In other words, the exclusive focus on the *form* taken by the two conflicting logics of articulation — the populist/equivalential logic versus the institutional/differential logic — tends to overlook the *content* that is being articulated in both cases.

At least two potential problems follow from this. On the one hand, the reduction of populism to a strictly formal logic precludes any chance of distinguishing between left- and right-wing populisms – or, to use a different nomenclature, between “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” variants.⁶⁶ Similar to Palacios’s and Sabsay’s comments in their contributions to this symposium, the formalist impulse makes it difficult to conceive of the *specificity* of right-wing populist movements against left-wing versions. It also implies that any attempt to account for the differences between both variants, be it from a descriptive (what are the features of populism in its various forms?), explanatory (how to account for the rise of the various forms of populism?) or normative point a view (how ought one to assess the potential of populism and its relation to democracy?), must necessarily be external to the theory. Do the similarities between a reactionary and an emancipatory form of populism exceed their differences? Leaving aside the idea that all populist movements rest upon a contingent process of discursive articulation, is there any factor that helps explain the rise of a specific kind of populism rather than another? Moreover, the normative status of the possible criteria of differentiation remains unclear as well: should we welcome populism in general (as a way to radicalizing democracy, channeling unsatisfied social demands and challenging the allegedly post-political status quo) or should we promote a left-populism and condemn its right-wing counterpart – and on what basis?⁶⁷ On the other hand, disregarding the actual *content* of populism can hamper critical assessment of populist experiences in a contemporary European context. How should one assess the counter-hegemonic potential of a specific populist movement – that is, its capacity to challenge the current status quo and to put forward an agenda of radical change that could ultimately give birth to a new, alternative hegemonic order⁶⁸ – without having theoretical tools to analyze its ideological consistency, the coherence of its policy program, its degree of externality to (and the depth of its critique of) the current political order, and the nature of the material, legal and institutional obstacles that it will face in its quest for political power and social transformation? In this regard, it is symptomatic that the recent relative failures of left populist movements (Syriza, Podemos, Sanders, La France insoumise) have not (yet) led to a strong critical re-assessment of their trajectories in the light of Laclauian theory. This is precisely because such a theory does not provide any clue to understand what went wrong with them, forcing many observers to fall back on simplistic denunciations of Alexis Tsipras’s “betrayal” of the Greek people and the neoliberal inflection of the European Treaties.

Faced with such difficulties, four strategies are on offer. First, researchers can conclude that the advantages of Laclauian formalism exceed its pitfalls and thus decide to retain it without reservations. In

this case, the task of the analyst would be to combine, at a reasonably high level of abstraction, the theorization of populism as a formal logic of articulation consubstantial to politics and, at the empirical level, the analysis of the way this logic is deployed by specific political agents. These empirical analyses, in turn, must be able to show both *how* specific political movements attempt to weld equivalential links between social demands around a nodal point – which might differ from a classical “people” – and how they construct this chain of equivalence by deploying it in an antagonistic fashion. It must also critically reflect upon the ideological and programmatic content articulated by these political movements, their reactionary or emancipatory nature as well as their counter-hegemonic potential.

To do this, however, Laclau’s theory must also appeal to explanatory factors that appear *external* to the Laclauian framework – the features of a specific national political culture, the rhetorical efficiency of a particular political slogan, the structure of the party system, and so on. It would thereby fall back onto ad hoc explanations that rub against the all-encompassing ambition of a theoretical frame. The only rewarding tool drawn from Laclau would be to compare various populist movements, and critically assess their “counter-hegemonic” potential, based on the “extensiveness” of their equivalential logic. Laclau himself argued that, in order to extend the chain of equivalences, the empty signifier must necessarily shed its particular content (as a condition for the process of universalization through which the signifier comes to represent a broader chain of signified), thus gaining in *extension* what it loses in *intension*.⁶⁹

Following this idea, one could argue for a correlation between the degree to which a political movement extends its chain of equivalences and broadens its electoral appeal (since it is capable of unifying more heterogeneous elements) but the less it is likely to put forward a credible counter-hegemonic agenda (since it must become vaguer and more ambiguous in order to be able to unify those heterogeneous demands), and vice versa. Such an analysis could account for the different trajectories of Southern European populist movements that emerged in the wake of the economic crisis, from Podemos in Spain to the Five Star Movement in Italy.⁷⁰ Excluding this specific tool, this strategy seems to elude the problem rather than fixing it; it relies mainly on factors and concepts external to the Laclauian approach to introduce distinctions between the various forms of populism.

A second strategy is to lower the “dose” of formalism implicit in Laclau’s theory. This would make it easier to apply in empirical analyses and to offer more precise distinctions between populism and other adjacent concepts. This is the path undertaken by adherents of the discourse-theoretical approach, which moves one step backwards from Laclau’s conflation of “populism” and “the political” by introducing a

proviso that such a populism represents only *one* political logic among others, rather than the political logic *par excellence*.⁷¹ Instead, it reasserts the centrality of the reference to “the people” in the populist logic *sans phrase* – which in turn allows for a neater distinction with other political movements that also base appeals on other sets of signifiers (such as nationalist or right-wing authoritarian movements).

Although useful, this perspective does not fully excise the remnants of formalism in one go. Most painfully, it remains unclear when exactly a political movement is *deserving* of the appellation “populist” – even if a lot of effort is made to develop reliable indices⁷² – rather than “nationalist,” especially given that the two logics may coexist within the same political movement. A possible answer here might be that, even if competing logics are present at the same time in a given movement, these will never share the same *degree* of presence, nor will they always be placed on an equal footing. The task of the analyst thus becomes to identify which of those logics *prevail* in the movement in question. The success of this tactic then depends on the extent to which this can subtract, rather than add, confusion in a debate dominated (mostly in the European context) by the “reified association” between extreme right and populism.⁷³ In such a perspective, it is the definition of the “people-as-underdog” rather than the “people-as-nation” that offers the *differentia specifica* between populism and nationalism.

This raises a further question, however. Laclau’s solution here seems to imply that most of the right-wing political movements currently identified as populists in the current literature (such as the Front national, UKIP, Lega Nord, FPÖ, AfD, etc.) should be denied the label “populism” altogether. To be sure, this option would form the logical extension of this perspective. Post-Laclauian discourse theorists that do support this tack do not always seem to be ready to go that far, however, mainly since they would probably isolate themselves from most of the current debates on populism. As such, they find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place.

A third strategy would imply a return to Laclau’s early writings such as *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. A younger Laclau was here driven into the entrails of an interesting paradox: while his theory was undoubtedly less consistent than in later phases, it did provide a rich conceptual toolkit to analyze real-world manifestations of populism (Nazism, Maoism, Peronism) and, more importantly, to capture the similarities and differences between these variegated forms. At the time, Laclau had not yet completely abandoned the more classically Marxist emphasis on classes when he stuck to an older Althusserian framework. Simultaneously, he edged towards a theory of “interpellations” that sought to overcome a residual reductionism – a fact that naturally explained his attraction to populism-theory.

There is a biographical side to this as well. A tension (not to say a contradiction) between more classical Marxian and new poststructuralist toolkits was definitely present in this early period—especially when looked at retrospectively, bearing in mind his later “post-Marxist” leanings. This tension enabled a distinction between what Laclau labelled a “populism of the dominated classes” and a “populism of the dominant classes,” describing the latter in the following terms:

When the dominant bloc experiences a profound crisis because a new fraction seeks to impose its hegemony but is unable to do so within the existing structure of the power bloc, one solution can be a direct appeal by this fraction to the masses to develop their antagonism towards the State [...] but articulated in a way which would obstruct its orientation in any revolutionary direction.⁷⁴

This populism of the “dominators”—to which Laclau assimilates Nazism and earlier modes of Continental fascism—posits an antagonism while at the same time trying to neuter its subversive potential by deploying a set of distortions, much like racist logics do in other settings. Laclau’s approach approximates the concept of “authoritarian populism” coined by Stuart Hall in the early 1980s to describe Thatcherism and which has been widely deployed to analyze the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and in the United States.⁷⁵ Interestingly, the term also provides an ideal description of the so-called “populism of the elites” in vogue today, which has often proven enigmatic to observers. In short, the question of how the agents of monopolistic capital (the Berlusconi, Trump, Le Pens of today, etc.) can be considered as populists in the same way as radical left movements (today’s Syriza, Podemos, La France insoumise), and still allow for a dividing line between them.

In an earlier phase, Laclau’s answer to that question was rather straightforward. Both are populists “not because the social bases of their movements [are] similar; not because their ideologies [express] the same class interests but because popular interpellations appear in the ideological discourses of all of them, presented in the form of antagonism and not just of difference.” In this sense, “opposition to dominant ideology may be more or less radical, and therefore the antagonism will be articulated in the discourses of the most divergent classes,” yet it remains “present, and this presence is what we intuitively perceive as the specifically populist element in the ideology of the three movements.”⁷⁶ The nuances of this earlier work suggest that a convincing analysis of today’s populist movements that captures both their formal logic and their differences in terms of content requires a joining of formal analysis with a more classic analysis of the infrastruc-

tural and material bases of social power, without lurching back into the former's reductionist tendencies.

A fourth strategy heads in a completely different direction. This consists of radically separating the concrete appraisal of populism from a purely "formal" theory of the political. The argument would here run as follows: when populism almost appears as an ontological category (as it does in Laclau), it becomes applicable far beyond its contemporary contexts, and any political actor that based its success on the extension of the logic of equivalence in a given context may be considered as "populist," from Pericles to Berlusconi by way of Perón.

Questions remains whether one can really apply such a category to concrete movements and actors prior to the lexical appearance of the term itself. Should one not consider that the emergence of the category "populism" at the end of the nineteenth century has some *specific* significance? Following the "lingering suspicion"⁷⁷ that Laclau's work on populism is mainly a re-writing of the theory of politics-as-hegemony, one could consider drawing a sharper line between the two, thus circumscribing Laclau's theory to the analysis of the ontological nature of the political (the primacy of the political over the social, the totality as an impossible object and the irreducibility of antagonism, the role of contingency, etc.) and infusing the concept of populism with a specific historical content. In this case, populism would indeed have as its formal principle the extension of the "logic of equivalence" – admitting that, after Laclau, populism is where this extension reaches its apex – but would also be intrinsically related to a specific normative horizon and rooted in a the particular historical context of modernity. For all the populist experiences have in common is the project of *empowering the people* against the oligarchic tendencies of the ruling elites. In the contemporary context, populism is necessarily linked to the double structural constraint and political imaginary constituted by the nexus "representative democracy – capitalism," which means that the empowerment of the people always takes the form of "deepening and enforcing equal liberty and elevating the socio-economic and political status of the popular sectors vis-à-vis the ruling elites through the establishment of social rights and redistributive and participatory policies."⁷⁸ In other words, this declination of populism represents a form of "plebeian politics" adapted to the norms of modern electoral competition that tries to perpetuate the plebeian "experiences" and "interpellations"⁷⁹ by giving them a structure, a permanence and a counter-hegemonic ambition beyond the pure moment of secession of the "part-that-has-no-part."

Such an interpretation of populism as a contemporary appearance of "plebeian politics" comes with at least three dividends. First, it enables researchers not only to grasp populism as a particular historical instance of the political, but also to replace it within a "discon-

tinuous history” of political freedom,⁸⁰ thus opening up the space for a subtler conception of the vacillations between populism as a modern political phenomenon, and pre-modern instantiations of the “political.” Second, it offers new conceptual tools to problematize the relation between horizontality and verticality (in particular, the role of the leader) within populist movements, such as the interplay between the desire for freedom and the desire for servitude. Finally, it also paves the way for a radical critique of the juxtaposition between populism and radical right that is regularly made in the (mostly European) mainstream literature on populism, since it would be clear that a political movement that uses a “people vs. elites” rhetoric to pursue an exclusionary political project (often based on an homogenous people-as-ethnos) could simply not be considered populist *at all* – a claim that would possess more solid foundations here than in the first of the two strategies outlined.

Here the formalism inherent to Laclauian populism-theory could also turn from a boon into a blind spot. The conflation of the “political” *qua* ontological category and populism as one of its ontic instantiations runs the risk of obscuring and even impoverishing the concrete analyses possible through the latter. Without wedding this formalism to a more careful and fine-grained analysis of historical contexts in which populist logics play out – including the “discontinuous historical traditions” that these movements draw from – researchers run the risk of wielding a hollow theory that might capture populism’s conditions of possibility, yet remain incapable of explaining its manifestations beyond a very narrowly circumscribed set of formal characteristics. Needless to say, this version is a slightly ham-fisted interpretation of Laclau’s theory. As populist praxis itself has repeatedly shown, however, this formalist drift stands as an unsolved issue, and needs continued excavation into its descriptive, explanatory and normative implications.

Conclusion

Nearly a decade and a half after *On Populist Reason*, Laclau’s left-populism has moved out of the academy and into the assembly. From Syriza to Podemos to La France insoumise, political forces have drawn richly from his writing and contributed to the idea of a “Laclauian” moment. At the same time, these movements have also run into limits both intellectual and practical. This article has argued that some of these can be tracked back to Laclau’s original approach, which provided the initial roadmap for these movements. This article has sought to offer an etiology of these practical deadlocks by returning to tensions in Laclau’s populist oeuvre itself. It has done so by reference to two issues – horizontality and verticality and formalism – within Laclau’s oeuvre, gauged through a series of empirical examples.

Obviously, there is a possible payoff for mainstream researchers to this as well. It is a known fact that the populism industry is a booming field. According to numbers assembled by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser in their *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017), the number of Anglophone publications containing the word “populism” in the title rose from 300 in the 1970s to more than 800 in the 2000s, rising steadily to over 1000 in 2010. This rise has not come without caveats. In a recent concluding study for the journal *Comparative Political Studies*, for instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser urged new researchers to populism-studies “(to) work with clear definitions of populism” and “delimit the boundaries of the phenomenon” instead of “developing ad hoc concepts, which treat the specificities of national or regional manifestations of populism as generalizable.” Rather, “they should incorporate some of the lessons that the existing scholarship offers us.”⁸¹

Laclau’s approach still offers one of the best springboards for researchers and activists to face this populist wave. Yet even if Laclau’s populism theory retains virtues lacking in the mainstream populism-literature, examining the potential of the deficits of Laclau’s populism-theory – or, alternatively, “thinking” with Laclau “against” Laclau – might assist both theorists and political actors to overcome its caveats. While the “populist moment” has now become a lived reality for politicians, pundits and political scientists alike, the main question confronting them all remains unchanged: what it would truly mean to seize it.

Notes

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65. Arditì, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics?"; De Cleen, "The Populist Political Logic and the Discursive Construction of 'the People.'" See also, in this issue: Samuele Mazzolini, "Populism is not hegemony: a Re-gramscianization of Ernesto Laclau."
66. Cas Mudde and Cristobal R. Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 147–174.
67. The problem gets even more pressing given our current intellectual climate, in which Cas Mudde's conception of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 [2004]: 541–563; Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 27–47) is broadly recognized as the dominant approach and therefore receives a lot of media attention. Mudde's perspective, in the same way as Laclau's, also implies that populism can be associated with various repertoires. However, Mudde's approach often tends towards a condemnation of the various forms of populism for their alleged moralistic, anti-pluralist and illiberal stances. In this context, the absence of endogenous arguments within Laclau's theory that allow us to differentiate between right and left populism is potentially dangerous, leaving the impression that he also subscribes to a simplistic "convergence of the extremes" thesis.
68. Samuele Mazzolini and Arthur Borriello, "Southern European populisms as counter-hegemonic discourses? Podemos and M5S in comparative perspective," in eds. Oscar Garcia and Marco Briziarelli, *Podemos and the New Political Cycle. Left-wing Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 227–254.
69. Laclau, "Populism: what's in a name?," 40.
70. Mazzolini and Borriello, "Southern European populisms as counter-hegemonic discourses?," 227–254.
71. De Cleen, "The Populist Political Logic and the Discursive Construction of 'the People'," *passim*. On political logics, see Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
72. Yannis Stavrakakis, Ioannis Andreadis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "A new populism index at work: identifying populist candidates and parties in the contemporary Greek context," *European Politics and Society* 18, no. 4 (2017): 446–464.

73. Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Nikos Nikisianis, Alexandros Kioupiolis and Thomas Siomos, "Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: revisiting a reified association," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017): 420–439.
74. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, 173.
75. See Stuart Hall (1980) "Popular Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of Taking Democracy Seriously," in *Marxism and Democracy* (Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1980): 157–185 and Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal. Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London, New York: Verso, 1988). See Biko Agozino, "Trumpism and Authoritarian Populism," *Ctheory*, September 2016; Priya Chacko, "Trump and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, January 2017; Kenneth Surin, "Authoritarian Populism: Viewing Trump, Reviewing Thatcher," *Counterpunch*, February 2017; and Jeremiah Morelock, ed, *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018).
76. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, 174.
77. Arditì, "Populism is Hegemony is Politics?," 491.
78. Camila Vergara, "Populism Contra Totalitarianism: Towards a Normative Conception of Populism," in *Constituent Power: Law, Popular Rule, and Politics* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming in 2020).
79. See Martin Breugh, *The Plebeian Experience. A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) and Ricardo Peñafiel, "Les actions directes spontanées au-delà du virage à gauche. Les conditions de possibilité de l'interpellation plébéienne," in *L'interpellation plébéienne en Amérique latine. Violence, actions directes et virage à gauche* (Paris, Québec: Karthala et Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012).
80. Breugh, *The Plebeian Experience*, 43.
81. Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser, "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda," *Comparative Political Studies* (July 2018), 1667–1693.