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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# EXCLUDING EMOTIONS: THE PERFORMATIVE FUNCTION OF POPULISM

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**ABSTRACT:** Populists are often excluded from political life on the basis that they are too emotional. Both social movements as well as political parties who are labelled as populist are accused of using demagoguery and manipulation in order to attract support and new membership. Often, these critiques emanate from the political establishment, creating a division between emotional and rational actors in politics. In this article, I argue that instead of seeing populism as a nominal or ordinal category, we should look at how the term itself has performative properties. The article is interested in how populism as a concept is used as a tool for exclusion, and how being 'too emotional' is used as justification for excluding certain actors. This article first contends that this perspective is endemic to political and social theory, and has long been utilised to marginalise women, non-Europeans, or young people. Second, the article demonstrates how this perspective also pervades much of contemporary studies on populism, which do not sufficiently recognise the political implications of employing a strict divide between emotion and reason. Third, the article further contends that by using a Laclauian framework which sees politics as equal to hegemony as equal to populism, one can conclude that populist actors are no different from other political actors; emotions and affects are always central to any political identity. Instead, the division between emotional and rational in politics serves to sediment exclusionary practices against newcomers and challengers of the status quo. I conclude by using the Laclauian framework, focus can be turned to the performative function of populism, and its political implications.

**KEYWORDS:** populism, emotions, exclusion, politics of emotions, political theory, Laclau.

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## 1. Introduction

In July 2018, Brett Kavanaugh was nominated as candidate to the US Supreme Court. In September the same year, Dr Christine Blasey Ford published a statement saying that she had been sexually assaulted by Kavanaugh when she was a teenager. The statement quickly became an inflamed issue, where Ford was accused of lying, and Kavanaugh was by some deemed unsuitable for holding a high office such as Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, Kavanaugh was called to a hearing with the Senate Judiciary Committee, where he gave a statement on the accusation. While vehemently denying any involvement in criminal activity, Kavanaugh also displayed a highly emotional response. While narrating how he and his daughter had together prayed for Dr Ford, he could not hold back his tears, and his voice broke up at several occasions. Kavanaugh had, voluntarily or involuntarily, retorted to emotions. On the other hand, during this same process, Dr Ford remained remarkably calm. Even though her life had been visibly upset by the publicity and the aggressive approach by media and politicians alike, Dr Ford completed all her testimonies, never raised her voice, and shed only a few tears quietly. On October 6, 2018, Kavanaugh was sworn in as Justice, and today serves on the US Supreme Court.

This incident, apart from being a highly topical issue in the wake of the MeToo movement, tells a story about emotions. It tells the story of how emotions are viewed and assessed in political life, and who can and cannot be emotional. Oftentimes, we hear that emotions have no place in politics, and that actors that express ‘too much’ emotion – such as women, people of colour, or the ‘uneducated’, but also populists – should rather stay away from engaging in the political sphere, since they cannot possibly be capable of making rational decisions. This story, on the other hand, is of how a grown man cries in public, and gains nothing but sympathy and realises his professional goals. It was no issue that Kavanaugh decided to display emotion, and there was little criticism for his having done so. No one argued that his claims should be disregarded, or that his emotionality disqualified him from office. In this article, I will argue that the discussion on emotions, in academia and elsewhere, actually has very little to do with emotions, and everything to do with exclusion. Emotion, I contend, is nothing but a code used when wanting to discredit anyone who upsets the status quo and its beneficiaries. I will demonstrate that when discussing populist parties and movements, the claims that populists are too emotional are nothing but an attempt at excluding these actors, like women, young people, or non-Europeans have been excluded on this basis before. Emotions should therefore not be seen as an analytical category, but a *performative* category.

In the past decade, populist politics has so obviously become part and parcel of politics in general, that it is no longer possible to ignore or dismiss the forces which have given rise to this populist 'moment' (Mouffe 2018b), 'zeitgeist' (Mudde 2004), or, as some would say, a 'hype' (Glynos and Mondon, 2019). When discussing populism, many scholars and commentators would like to refer to populist parties and movements as 'highly emotional' (Müller 2016). For instance, established European parties have long discussed how to best avoid the 'populist threat' and argued that politics needs to return to rational dialogue (BBC 2012; Galston 2018). This imposes a strict division between different types of actors in political life, where some are deemed rational and thus worthy citizens capable of government, whereas others are deemed irrational and therefore unworthy of political participation. It defends the status quo and makes it difficult for newcomers to break down the barriers to participation.

Populism is often seen as an emotional enterprise, but what that phrase actually indicates is rarely sufficiently discussed. The assumption rests upon a certain idea of what populism is, of what emotions are, and how the two function together. In this article, I take issue with the definitions of emotions, populism, and their mutual relation. In particular, I resist using 'populism' and 'emotions' as either nominal or ordinal categories, that is, whether we can analytically determine *if* something is populist/emotional or not, or *to what degree* something is populist/emotional. Instead, this article is interested in the performative function of these terms, and their political implications. I propose looking at the terms as markers of exclusion, rather than neutral analytical categories, following a long tradition within poststructuralism which always highlights the politics of categories. In doing so, I follow the emerging set of literature on anti-populism (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis, Nikisianis and Siomos 2018) and the discussion of populism as a signifier, rather than a concept (Dean and Maiguashca 2020; Glynos and Mondon 2019). There is also recent work on how feminist scholarship should inform future research on populism, to avoid repeating the common exclusionary politics of our time (Maiguashca 2019). This article, however, whilst indebted to these works, is specifically interested in how the negative discourse on emotions is pervaded with anti-populist rhetoric.

By analysing the performative function of the concepts of populism and emotion, I will argue that these terms are influenced by particular political perspectives that are often based on exclusionary logics. I argue that current debate has been marked by an unwillingness to recognize different forms of political action as belonging to a democratic society, as well as an unnecessarily strict division between emotions as instrumental tools or as constitutive of political identities. This strict division is still performed by the concept of populism, but is not sufficiently highlighted or questioned

within the field of populism studies. I will show how there are other ways to conceptualise emotions and populism in a way which does not rest upon these exclusionary politics. By employing a more positive reading of the theories of Ernesto Laclau, and specifically his claims that all politics is potentially populist, it is possible to circumvent this exclusionary impasse.

In a first part, I depict how the devaluation of emotion is by no means local to populism studies, but often endemic to the study of emotions. In political and social theory, emotion has been deemed a pathological behaviour for centuries, but the rhetoric surrounding emotion today is still influenced by the foundational perspectives, where disadvantaged groups – whether that be women, non-whites, or young people – are accused of not being in control of their emotions. The prominence of rationality is still key to democratic thought and is not seen as an exclusionary force. I demonstrate how emotion is only acceptable if thought of as a means to an end, instead of as the very foundation of political life. As such, emotion can be beneficial to political life if used correctly; this perspective, I argue, only accepts emotions when *controllable*.

In the second part of this article, I will outline how the field of populism studies have not only struggled to define populism (which is not necessarily a negative aspect), but also to agree on how emotions are defined. Nonetheless, I demonstrate how varying strands of the populism literature, whether defining populism as a threat to or a natural part of democracy, are conceptualising emotions in a largely negative fashion. Importantly, there is not sufficient discussion about how the definitions of emotions and populism function to sediment current power relations, or how emotions are used as a proxy for justifying exclusion. Whilst there is important work on anti-populism, and how populism should rather be seen as a signifier, there is a need to engage with how the hierarchy between emotion and reason can be dismantled.

To do this, I argue that a psychoanalytical approach as proposed by Ernesto Laclau offers a theoretical framework which sees emotion as constitutive of any political identity. Based on a theoretical perspective which sees any identity as created through a symbolic order, affective investment in that order is not something which can be manipulated or used for specific political purposes. In Laclau's eyes, all identities are affective by default, and all are potentially populist. I thus take issue with the criticisms against Laclau who disagree with his interpretation that all politics potentially populist. I contend that it is in fact this type of perspective that can help us overcome hierarchical power relations, where some are deemed more worthy political subjects than others. In other words, the political implications for Laclauian thoughts on populism are far-reaching. If emotional politics is simply the basis for all politics, there is no need to single out populist actors and movements as more emotional than others. Im-

portantly, labelling some actors as emotional and some as rational only works to sediment the status quo, and we therefore need to put the performative function of emotions and populism into question.

## **2. Varieties of exclusion: Emotion as pathology in social and political theory**

For a long time, emotions have been used as a derogatory term, closely aligned with the traditional markers of exclusion. Emotions were largely the ailment of women, of the mentally unstable, or of the non-European 'savage'. This type of reasoning is evident in both political and social thought. Below, I give a few examples of how such thinking has manifested itself over time, in order to later draw parallels with current arguments in populism studies. It is clear that a lack of rationality, or an overly emotional character, has for centuries been used as a proxy for excluding unwanted elements from the political sphere.

Throughout democratic thought, rationality has been central, but not only as a tool for ensuring good government, but as a tool of exclusion. Sovereignty is only possible because individuals are free (and equal), since they choose to enter the social contract and obey the rules of the community. For Hobbes, as well as for the later liberal thinkers, individuals can only make this decision if they are *capable of reason*, which has large repercussions for who can be included in the sovereign People. Rationality was given as one of the main reasons for the large limitations placed on who could be counted as a citizen, and who could not. Whilst sovereignty indeed did reside with the People for thinkers such as Locke (who disagreed with the Hobbesian focus on the Head of State as the only sovereign), the concept of citizenship was heavily limited (Locke 1988; Plamenatz 1963). Women and non-property owners could not vote, and Locke did not see this as a major caveat of democracy. In addition, concomitant to the rise of liberal thought and individualism, was also the idea of market freedom. As capitalism became evermore popular, the concept of the property-owning class as natural guards of the democratic realm was sedimented, primarily through thinkers such as Bentham (1995) and Mill (1937). Even though modern-day liberals sometimes prefer to leave economic liberalism aside, the common foundations of the two must be recognised. The importance of property protection also led to some deeply undemocratic tendencies within early democratic theory. As the fear of popular participation grew, there were concerted efforts to limit the influence of those without property. Democracy, it was said, must protect the natural rights of property owners, not destroy them. This later led to the cleverest move: to portray the masses as a threat to democracy,

rather than its foundation. With the rise of the power of state, and the increased bureaucratic nature of political work, it was argued that such complexities were out of reach for the common man; elected representatives with 'higher capacities' were better suited to a life in government, given their capacity to rationality. Dissent against the 'common good', which was often synonymous with market freedom, should be subject to 'person management', i.e. imprisonment (Foucault 1977; Ignatieff 1978).

The 'higher capacity' of rational thinking was, however, not only out of reach for women and the poor, but also for non-Europeans. Rationality was explicitly reserved for the white Man, importantly, this racism is not accessory to democratic theory, but forms a core part of how democracies were, and are, constituted. The state of nature, which is the very condition upon which modern democracies are founded (in order to avoid it), is by Hobbes conceived of not as a hypothetical figment of imagination, but as a brutal reality for the 'savage people in many places of America' (Hobbes 1991, 89). The very possibility of escaping the state of nature and create order and a functioning society, lies in the fact that some people are civilised, and some are inevitably not (Mills 1999, 66). The state of nature is thus not only a breakdown of order in absence of sovereignty, but a condition which savages are bound to, and which Europeans would never allow. Locke also made a clear distinction between Peoples and their capacity for an ordered society. Locke, an investor in the slave-trading Royal Africa Company, supported the thought of colonisation with the justification that white civilisations would add value to the land which native populations did not (and were therefore right to be removed from it) (Williams 1995, 103). Furthermore, Kant, who can be seen as the founding father of modern-day liberalism, adds a genius twist to the exclusion of the savage, which will influence democratic thought until this day. By placing increased importance on the presence of rationality and reserving rational capacity for the white European, Kant provided the ultimate justification for racial violence; since the savages could not think for themselves, this had to be done for them. Kant, in addition to providing a modern concept of what a political subject is, also provides ample proof of what it is not: 'So fundamental is the difference between the black and white races of man, it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour' (Kant 1960, 111–113). As pointed out by Emmanuel Eze, Kant's racism is not casual, but only seems accidental since white academia has consistently overlooked it (Eze 1997). In fact, racial difference is key to understanding who is a valid political subject, and who is not. Kant provides us with lengthy exposés on the ineptitude of savages, ranks them, and ultimately concludes that talent (which includes both rationality and the capacity to knowledge), is inherently contingent upon race (Eze 1995). The popular sovereign, and who can be counted as a citizen, is thus not only contingent upon property, but al-

so upon the colour of one's skin. Cleverly, this has been masked as the capacity of reason.

To sustain this narrative, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century theorists developed the concept of the tyranny of the majority, when resistance to the squalid conditions for most people in the early days of industrialisation grew at a steady pace. The hysteric majority, it was said, could under democratic conditions rob legislators of their law-making powers, and further wreak havoc in the careful balance between rulers and ruled. The answer was simple: not only was resistance to state and market power a nuisance, but even pathological, a sign of madness. Individuals who fought for equal rights should not only be prosecuted, but medically treated for their conditions. This was the birth of crowd psychology, which to this day influences common assumptions made about certain political actors, often those who are outside the political establishment. Crowd psychologists such as Gabriel Tarde and Hippolyte Taine were convinced of the unsuitability of 'ordinary people' for high political office, due to their emotional character. The rise of the use of asylums, along with increases in imprisonment (Foucault 1977), were not accidental but fundamental to a society in need of docile labour. The lack of rationality and a 'too emotional' nature was key in establishing whether individuals were unsuitable for participation in politics. Crowds were, according to French theorist Gustave Le Bon, primitive and highly damaging for individuals and society alike (Le Bon 1960 [1895]). Popular sovereignty, in other words, was out of reach for most people, and bestowed on the property-owning classes.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Schumpeter adopted the same ideas when arguing that the citizen 'drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyses in a way which he would readily recognise as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again' (Schumpeter 1976 [1942], 262). Of course, Le Bon did not only influence Schumpeter, but also some of his other referents, such as Pareto (1935) and Michels (1959). Nonetheless, these thinkers also supported the view that politics is reserved for the elites, to ensure a proper implementation of the common good. All of these thoughts could, naturally, be easily adopted by authoritarian tendencies (Smelser 1995, 21; Medearis 1997). Schumpeter heavily influenced years of American political science, which often adhered to the idea that common people were too uninformed or incapable of reason. Allowing the masses to take part in politics is apparently a dangerous endeavour as argued by David Held: participation can go wrong and history is replete with examples of this such as the Bolshevik revolutions or the democratic election of Hitler (Held 1987, 165). Almond and Verba's argue along a similar line *Civic Culture* (1963), or as Phillip Converse has stated: 'what needs repairing is not the [survey] item but the population' (1970,

176). A similar focus on rationality is expressed in deliberative democratic theory, where the foundations of Habermas' work are all reliant on the capacity to rational argumentation (Habermas 1984, 1996). Whilst deliberation, according to Habermas, is open to all, the practical and political implications have strong exclusionary traits, as identified by Young (2001).

Some might say that such negative views on emotion are long gone, and that we cannot possibly argue that political participation is frowned upon today. I contend that whilst emotions are not as demonised as before, there is an over-reliance on rationality and cognitive aspects in much scholarship on political participation and emotions. Even though emotions now have a definite place in social theory (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000, 2005; Ferree 1992; Kingston and Ferry 2008; Clarke, Hoggett and Thompson 2006), their place comes with certain limitations and caveats. Most studies on emotions in politics are concerned with how social movements and parties *use* emotion to gain political advantage, i.e. how can emotions incite participation, and attract and sustain membership (Taylor 1996; Jasper 1998). For instance, the Pride movement is cited as a key example of how emotions can be used to gain political advantage (Gould 2009; Scheff 1988). Further, Romanos has argued that emotions are highly important in sustaining high-risk activism, and cites specifically the anarchist movement (Romanos 2014). Similar thoughts have been expressed by Perugorria and Tejerina, who, when analysing the anti-austerity movements in Spain after 2011, argued that the movements 'DRY strategically 'mobilized' the emotion of indignation to motivate and then broaden participation. In doing this, it turned this emotion into the stepping stone for the construction of the movement's collective identity' (Perugorria and Tejerina 2013, 432). Here, it is clearly evident that emotions are part of a movement's repertoire, that it is a tool which the movement can use to its own advantage. The acceptance of emotion is therefore not necessarily unconditional. The emotional repertoire should be able to demonstrate efficacy in reaching certain goals and interests, i.e. have certain rational qualities. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta even admit that 'the emotions most relevant to politics, we suspect, fall toward the more constructed, cognitive end of this dimension' (2000, 79) and Jasper argues that 'emotions involve beliefs and assumptions open to cognitive persuasion. We often can be talked out of our anger on the grounds that it is too extreme a response, or that we are misinformed' (Jasper 1998, 401). It could be argued that emotions are thus only accepted conditionally, upon the presence of rationality. The political implications of such a perspective are several. Emotional political actors, whether social movements or political parties, must be able to demonstrate a certain *end* for their emotional *means*. Without a greater goal in mind, whether that is social change or electoral success, the emotional has no value.



Political actors who do not manage to showcase successful outcomes, such as the Occupy movement, are immediately branded as ‘inefficient’ and their emotional character is seen as a hindrance rather than an asset.

From this brief exposé, we can see that emotions are by no means apolitical and occupy a contested space in political and social theory. Emotions have for a long time been disregarded as something which is undesirable for politics, following the argument that rationality is indispensable to make political decisions. I argue that this focus on rationality is used as a proxy to devalue or exclude or certain groups from the political sphere, and that when we are discussing emotions, we are simply using a euphemism for describing groups who are not deemed worthy of inclusion. The performative function of emotions, in other words, has for a long time been to create hierarchies between political identities. In the next two sections, I demonstrate how this performative use of emotions has deeply influenced contemporary discourses on populism.

### 3. Emotions in Populism Studies

To a large degree, populism studies struggles with a similar commitment to rationality. A nowadays crowded field, populism studies hosts views which are openly hostile to emotional expressions in politics, as well as more moderate and nuanced takes. Interestingly, the perspectives on emotion and the perspective on populism are strongly correlated, where the works most critical towards populism are also the most critical towards emotions in politics. Even though there is a large spread in the attitude towards emotion, I contend that there is a need for further engagement with the performative function of populism, and how emotions play into the sedimentation of exclusion. In this section I show how such engagement, whilst entirely compatible with the current discursive scholarship on populism, has yet to be formulated and studied; what do the concepts of emotions and populism *do* in politics, what do they *perform*?

In the, as of yet, quite limited research on specifically emotions and populism, emotions are treated much the same as populism is in the more traditional accounts of the field: as a nominal or ordinal category. Most research on the topic attempts to determine if populists are more emotional than ‘regular’ politicians (Breeze 2019; Skonieczny 2018), and, if so, what type of emotions they are exhibiting (Salmela and von Scheve 2017), or if they are more convincing due to their emotional appeals (Wirz 2018). These works, however, do not engage with the *performative* aspects of populism. There have been recent efforts to recognise the political aspects of the term populism, most notably in the works of De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon (2018) and Mai-

guashca and Dean (2020), who contend that research on populism could should also include how the very term itself is used as a signifier for political purposes. There is also the emerging literature on anti-populism, which sees the label 'populist' latched on to anything which challenges the status quo (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Cossarini and Vallespín (2019) have also highlighted how emotions, or passions, are central to understanding populism, and how they are central to various populist movements across the globe. This article is very much in agreement with the conclusions in these works, but also wants to emphasise how specifically emotions are used to exclude populist movements. It is therefore essential to investigate the classic works on populism, and which assumptions regarding emotions and rationality that underpin them.

Some of the most famous works on populism, such as Jan-Werner Müller's 'What is Populism', exhibit a rather pessimistic view on the role of emotions and populism. Whilst Müller does not agree that one should simply explain populism saying that the people are angry and frustrated, he also agrees that populism could be characterized by the 'striking image' depicted by Benjamin Arditi: 'populism resembles a drunken guest at a dinner party: he is not respecting table manners, he is rude, he might even start "flirting with the wives of other guests"' (Müller 2016, 8). Müller here reveals a common, rather condescending, view of what popular participation might look like. Nonetheless, Müller asserts that he is in no way convinced by the socio-cultural or socio-psychological perspective on populism, which would emphasise the emotional components of politics. He argues that this equates popular participation with resentment, which, in Müller's view is an impossibility since 'the resentful are always incapable of anything like autonomous conduct' (Müller 2016, 16). The resentful, he argues, should by no means be confined to political sanatoria, but instead we should recognize 'the basic democratic duty to engage in reasoning' (ibid). The perspective on emotions here may seem contradictory in that it advocates a move away from seeing populists as simply emotional victims of demagoguery, but still argues that populism is something damaging for democracy. The crux of the matter lies in Müller's commitment to reasoning as a condition for participation. He clearly sees reason as a precondition for political action, and if populists want to be recognized as valid political actors, they must engage in reasonable dialogue. Müller here aligns with most of political science which is built upon reason as a foundation of democratic thought.

Even though Müller sees emotional populists as, in least in some way, salvageable from the abyss, other scholars are less positive. The very significant and far-reaching studies conducted by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that populism is in direct opposition to liberal democracy, whilst recognizing also material factors such as eco-

nomic inequality. In doing so, they also contend that it is the presence of rationality that makes democracy work, and that without a capacity to reasoning, civic participation becomes suboptimal (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Another key approach to populism which has become one of the most used definitions is Cas Mudde's ideational approach (Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Mudde follows on from Freedon (1996) who argues that populism, unlike socialism or liberalism, is a thin ideology. A thin ideology, unlike its thick or full counterpart, only has a limited range of concepts that it covers, and does not provide a comprehensive ideological approach to political problems (Freedon 1996; Mudde 2004). This means, as Mudde puts it rather bluntly, that it lacks intellectual refinement and consistency. Whilst the ideational approach does not regard populist voters as uneducated illiterates, it is clear that populism is not on par with other 'thick' ideologies, and is clearly in need of sophistication. Populists are identified as the clear outsiders, and at odds with the bases of liberal democracy. In this sense, the outside and the emotional are grouped together; excluded groups are emotional, and emotional groups are excluded. The terms emotions and populism here *perform* exclusion against actors which they identify as less rational, less intelligent, or less sophisticated.

Populism studies also houses a less categorically negative faction, which sees populism as a more complex phenomenon, influenced by cultural and social factors. These approaches are more positive towards emotions, but the performative function of labelling actors as emotional, is not at the centre of the agenda. Pierre Ostiguy's work is particularly pertinent, as he argues for a socio-cultural approach to populism. Here, we can see that there is a clear preponderance to differentiate between varieties of populism; not all populisms are the same, and they have different political outcomes. Ostiguy turns against the categorically damning perspective proposed by Müller, but is also unconvinced of Mudde's ideological approach. Even though Mudde recognizes that discourses are important to political identities, there is a lingering essentialism in his works. Mudde adheres to an ontological framework which sees political identities as prior to articulation or identification. That is, a discourse is a sign of a political identity or ideology, not a part of it.

Ostiguy is hesitant to agree with this, and is rather saying that populism, like other political identities, are created relationally through identification. In that sense, populism can be studied performatively (Ostiguy 2017, 74). The main contribution of Ostiguy lies in his proposal to define populism as a distinction between the high and low of politics, where populism is unmistakably the 'low'. Ostiguy proposes a sophisticated model of this dimension, which is orthogonal to the left-right axis in politics. His works have identified how populist actors often make use of 'raw' or improper forms of poli-

tics, which are often scorned by the establishment. Populists thus challenge the politically correct, and play on a certain relatability, or ‘appeal’ of their humanity. As Ostiguy puts it, ‘agitation, indignation, provocations become ontologically decisive in populism, since wilful political action is absolutely “all there is”’ (Ostiguy 2017, 77). He thus presents a model which posits the high of politics, often associated with institutions, impersonal authority and proceduralism, against the low: personalism and nepotism, strong leaders, and the uninhibited.

Similar thoughts have been expressed by Benjamin Moffitt in his recent works on populism as a political style (Moffitt 2016). Moffitt is clearly inspired by the discursive approaches to populism, and argues populism should be seen as a political style, instead of an ideology or simply a rhetorical model. Moffitt successfully breaks down the sometimes rigid limits between content and style, and demonstrates how populism is performative, and consists of ‘the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domains of government through to everyday life’ (Moffitt 2016, 29). Populism as a political style has, according to Moffitt, some key features, including appeals to the People versus the Elite, bad manners, and references to crisis, breakdowns or threats. The most interesting aspect for this article lies in the bad manners, where Moffitt is largely in agreement with Ostiguy’s (2017) and Canovan’s (2005) lines of thought supporting that populism has a ‘tabloid style’. The ‘low’ in populist performances can be seen in the ‘use of slang, swearing, political incorrectness, and being overly demonstrative and “colourful”’. In opposition, established politicians exhibiting a ‘high’ behaviour would rather display ‘rigidness, rationality, composure, and use of technocratic language’ (Moffitt 2016, 43). We can see clear examples of such behaviour, argues Moffitt, by looking at the US context, and compares Sarah Palin to Al Gore. Gore would display ‘seriousness, earnestness, gravitas, intelligence, and sensitivity to the position of others’ while Palin would display ‘directness, playfulness, a certain disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready to resort to anecdote as “evidence” and a studied ignorance of that which does not interest her of which does not go to the “heart of the matter”’ (Ibid.). We can clearly discern here how populists are considered inferior, exhibiting less intelligence and capacity to rational thinking.

This article is largely in agreement with Ostiguy’s and Moffitt’s works – especially relating to their discursive approach to populism – but would like to place a larger emphasis on the performative function of the concept of emotion. Much of what Ostiguy and Moffitt refer to as being cultured or ‘high’ can also be subsumed under the term rationality. What is considered propriety is often equated with a capacity to reason,

which forms the foundation of political thought in Europe, and the absence of propriety, the improper, is also the emotional and the hysteric (Devenney 2020). There is a need to also engage with the exclusionary performativity of the definition of populism as the 'low' or 'unrefined'. Ostiguy already makes the observation that the high is a 'propriety (and even distinction and refinement) that is legitimate by prevailing international standards, especially in the more developed countries' (Ostiguy 2017, 79). At the opposite end of the spectrum, we can consider how 'the popular classes' and certain "third-world" practices often appear more "coarse" or less "slick" (Ibid.). As such, being 'populist' already carries a negative and exclusionary connotation, which is already tightly linked to exclusion of certain groups, such as women, non-Europeans, or young people. The aspect of emotions simply works to strengthen the distinction between who is a worthy political subject, and who is not. The challenge of populism studies is to engage with how this exclusionary logic is rearticulated within the field, and how distinguishing between the high and the low, between the good and the bad manners, is still influenced by a commitment to rationality which has in the past produced a highly unequal and often violent reality for excluded groups, such as women, non-Europeans, or young people. Emotions, in other words, is only a proxy which tends to follow extant exclusionary lines. Here this article strongly agrees with the work of Maiguashca, who argues that populism must be treated as a signifier, and that we must engage with the 'performative effects of this term on our contemporary political discourse and political imagination' (Maiguashca 2019, 769).

There are also recent efforts to relabel populism as a more valid political project, especially from a left-wing perspective. In particular, Chantal Mouffe has been leading the way to propose how a left-wing populism can produce a more equal society, and be the main carrier for egalitarian politics. Mouffe proposes that populisms based on equality, so-called inclusive populisms, should not be considered dangers to democracy, but rather the key to true democratic innovation. This perspective has become highly appealing in studies on left-wing populism, and is supported by studies on the most common European left-wing populist, such as Podemos and Syriza (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2016; Markou 2017). Interestingly, however, while Mouffe agrees that passions are important for creating a viable political alternative of the left, she is more concerned with articulating a coherent strategy. It is true that Mouffe is defending the emotional when she argues that populists are excluded from politics 'by establishing a "moral" frontier so as to exclude the "extremists" from the democratic debate, the "good democrats" believe that they can stop the rise of "irrational" passions' (Mouffe 2018a, 22). Nonetheless, Mouffe is highly critical of the social movements in the wake of the financial crisis in 2008 and whose 'refusal to engage

with the political institutions limited their impact' (Mouffe 2018a, 19). She contends that movements, while worthwhile, must be followed by a structured political entity, in order to reach results, and one clear way of doing so is to have an explicit strategy. Podemos, claims Mouffe, has exactly such a strategy and can play on emotions in order to construct a 'People'. In other words, Podemos can use emotions to reach their political ends.

The take on emotions becomes somewhat blurred in this instance. While agreeing that affects are key to any political identity, Mouffe still believes that emotions and affects can be controlled by political actors, more in line with the recent works on emotions in social movement theory: 'recognising the crucial role played by affects in politics and how they can be mobilised is decisive for designing a successful left populist strategy' (Mouffe 2018a, 76). Here it becomes clear that Mouffe believes that affects are the result of an intended strategy. If we, as Mouffe says, should indeed conceive of emotions and affects as central to political identities, does this mean that they can be controlled or manipulated by political leaders? Can emotions really only be means to an end? Similarly, the question of strategy is vital when considering emotional expressions for political change. Here, Mouffe is again inconclusive since she argues that the movements who do not engage with institutions are insufficient to bring about political change and should be more strategic. On the other hand, she holds that 'artistic practices can play a decisive role in the construction of new forms of subjectivity' (Mouffe 2018a, 77). As such, the role of affects and its relation to strategy remains underdeveloped, and the political implications of valuing strategy and rational thinking over 'inefficient' protest are not sufficiently explored. To what extent does this type of reasoning favour certain political subjects over others?

In sum, populism studies house very varying approaches to emotions, ranging from a complete disregard and devaluation of the emotional reminiscent of the rationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century political theory, to the more nuanced admittance that emotions are present, and do play an important role. Nonetheless, I argue that the current definitions of populism are not sufficiently recognising how the strict divisions between the emotional and rational are not simple analytical categories, but play a very strong part in exclusionary logics. Even though the ambition may be to help categorise political behaviour, the constant insistence that emotional populism is uncivilised, unsophisticated, or 'low', run the risk of perpetuating rationalistic tropes about what political participation can and should look like. As such, I would like to propose an alternative reading of the emotional in relation to populism, embracing Laclau's somewhat controversial statement that politics is always hegemonic, which means that it is always, to some extent, populist.

#### 4. Populism: The Affective Approach

The affective approach takes the performative function of populism seriously, based on Laclau's theory of populism. It does this by stating that all political expressions are based on affective investment, which makes the emotion-reason divide obsolete. Any effort to create hierarchies between emotional and rational actors will be nothing but attempts at exclusion.

The affective<sup>1</sup> approach turns against social movement theory and its instrumentalization of emotions, but also against the negative conceptualisation of emotions as seen in much of traditional populism research. In many aspects the affective approach overlaps with the socio-cultural approach to populism, which argues that identities, populist or otherwise, are created through articulation, and that this articulation is always political. The key focus for this article lies in the fact that emotionality is paired with exclusion, but is often only seen as a simple analytical category. The that populists need to be excluded from politics based on their emotional character becomes a circular, almost tautological, and self-reinforcing logic. Populist actors are emotional because they are excluded but are at the same time excluded because they are emotional.

I argue that instead of an analytical category, emotions should rather be seen as a euphemism for someone who does not belong in politics. This performative function of populists as emotional is, therefore, to justify exclusion. In addition, I propose that if emotions are seen as simply instrumental, as something which can be *chosen* as a form of action, it is not emotions per se that are being criticised by their political opponents. It is the political identity that the populists are presumed to have that is rejected. In this sense, if emotions are decoupled from identification – since they can be used, or not be used – the critique against overly 'emotional' political actors must stem from something else. As such, if emotions are not part and parcel of the political identity, if they are simply chosen as a tactic, they cannot be the problem. In other words, I argue that emotions, as currently conceptualised, are a proxy for saying that you disagree with something ideologically: it is the high against the low. The performative function of the term populism, i.e. exclusion, is made possible under a veil of rationality.

Is there a way to think about emotions which recognises this performative element of its articulation? Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau offers us exactly this type of theoretical framework. Even though Laclau's works have frequently been used

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst I recognize the literature in cultural studies (Massumi 1995; Gregg and Seigworth 2013; Berlant 2006) which argues that affect is different from emotions (in that the latter is more cognitive and the former more corporeal), I see this as yet another hierarchization between emotion and reason.

to analyse populism (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Kioupkiolis 2016; Markou 2017; Stavrakakis, Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis and Siomos, 2016), it has become common for scholars to avoid Laclau's argument that all politics is based on hegemony, which means it is always potentially populist, since this is interpreted as being too vague, or not analytically helpful (Arditi 2010; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019, 8; Moffitt 2016, 24). Instead, I would argue that it is precisely this argument which can enable a perspective on populism which does not rearticulate the rationalistic mindset, and instead makes populism – and emotions – part and parcel of any political identity.

For Laclau, the foundation to his argument is that no identity is present prior to articulation, and that this articulation needs affect to function in the first place (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis 2007; Glynos 2012) and his works are heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan 1964; 1966). Identities are formed through language, and the idea that the political subject is coterminous with the *ego cogito* is heavily refuted. Laclau and Mouffe reject this already in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985, and in particular took issue with 'the view of the subject as an agent both rational and transparent to itself; the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions; and the conception of the subject as origin and basis of social relations (the problem of constitutivity in the strict sense)' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 115). For Laclau, the start of the subject lies in the impossibility of signification, as developed by Lacan. Here, Lacan refers to how we often try to create a necessary relation between a signifier (the Symbolic) and the signified (the Real), but that this is an impossible endeavour. There is no necessary relation between the two, simply a historical pattern. Essentially, however, there is a constant desire to create some form of necessary relation between the signified and an objective reality. We want to believe that when we say 'chair', it is because this signifier could not mean anything else. What is actually happening, however, is that we are constantly trying to tie down our reality into some form of Symbolic order, but this Symbolic order, which consists of different signifiers, is only an attempt at doing so; it will never capture the Real. As such, when we use language to try to capture our own identities, the signifiers we use are never actually grounded in any objective reality. We are, therefore, caught in the logic of the signifiers; we must succumb to the Symbolic order available to us through language if we want to try to realise who we are (Stavrakakis 1999).

This attempt to realise who we are and to use signifiers to try to capture our identities, but never actually succeeding in doing so, results in what Lacan refers to as the constitutive lack. This lack is fundamental in understanding how identities are formed. The subject, for Lacan, is thus never complete, but is carrying an essential split, a part



of itself which cannot be reflected in the Symbolic. This split is nonetheless crucial, since it creates a desire to overcome it. What Lacan refers to as the impossibility of signification, also indicates the impossibility of identification. Laclau argues that the very desire to fix meaning emanates from the constitutive lack: 'lack is precisely the locus of the subject, whose relation with the structure takes place through various processes of identification' (Laclau 1990, 210). Identification, as such, is a radical investment in a signifier. The concept of radical investment is central to his idea of the subject, and is, in other words, 'making an object the embodiment of a mythical fullness' (Laclau 2005, 115). Investment represents the affect stemming from the lack, and radical is the contingent chimerical satiation of the lack.

Affect, in other words, a desire to fix meaning – but also the impossibility of fixing meaning – is what makes identities possible in the first place. Already here Laclau differs from the vast majority of literature on political subjectivities and emotions, in that the emotional is not something which can be used for political ends, or an inherent trait which is bestowed upon some and not others; affect is central to all political identities, and cannot be negotiated away, but must remain at the centre of analysis. Affect is not something which political actors can choose to engage with or not; it is a *sine qua non* for any identity creation.

Importantly, however, Laclau's argument on identification is only the starting point for his work on populism. Accepting the impossibility of identification, of fully reflecting one's identity in the Symbolic, through signifiers, is also valid beyond the individual level. Laclau's work on radical forms of collectivity is one of his main contributions, and most relevant to the discussion on populism and emotions. For Laclau, the fact that the subject is always split opens up a range of uncertainties when it comes to political identities. No longer can we argue that collective identities (such as class or ethnicity) exist prior to the articulation of that identity. In other words, identities are only formed once we try to articulate them in the Symbolic order, once we try to capture the Real, an imagined objective reality.

This enables two movements, according to Laclau: the logics of equivalence and difference. If we imagine any identity as having a particular, differential content (be that gender, class, or anything else), there is also an empty part of that identity which cannot be captured in the Symbolic, through a signifier. This empty part is always the same for all groups and individuals, and indicates that we all share a commonality in this emptiness, and this is referred to as the logic of equivalence. There is therefore always a potentiality of a shared emptiness, a potentiality for a common identity, regardless of the particular content that the group may have otherwise. This is also how any collective identity is formed, through investment in an empty signifier, whose emptiness res-

onates with the lacking definition of the Subject. This is, according to Laclau, how populism works, and that empty signifier is then likely to be “the People”, but the same mechanism is true for all identities. When the logic of equivalence is at play, there is a potentiality for creating a populist demand, i.e. an empty signifier which assumes the role of a false universal for a chain of different demands (Laclau 2005, 107). The reason why this happens in the first place, is because there is an inherent quest for order: ‘In a situation of radical disorder, the demand is for some kind of order, and the concrete social arrangement that will meet that request is a secondary consideration (the same can also be said of similar terms such as ‘justice’, ‘equality’, ‘freedom’, etc...)(Laclau 2005, 96). What is crucial to realise about Laclau’s argument is that there can be no separation between affect and signification. All meaning – be that language, ideologies, values – is created through affective investment in a signifier, and that does not differ between a social movement, a traditional party, or a populist party. Laclau’s argument that politics is hegemony is populism is in this case not a sign of lacking analytical utility, but should be seen as the way to circumvent the emotion-reason divide. It should be clear, however, that Laclau’s work can and often is read in a formulaic fashion where antagonistic relations are seen as necessary and even desirable, which diminishes some of the potentials of his conclusions. Whilst it is true that Laclau’s work has much to do in terms of empirical or theoretical foci on exclusion in terms of race or gender, this should not prevent a more historicised reading of his theory. Laclau’s works are heavily reliant on the *contingency* of the social, which means that power relations always have to be put into their historical context. Exclusion is never disjoint from historical patterns, which I have also aimed to demonstrate in this article. Social antagonism, in other words, is not created out of nothing, but will be influenced by past injustices.

If we assume Laclau’s affective approach to populism, the division between emotion and reason emerges as politically charged. Since any identity is always by default affective, the reason for labelling populist as more emotional, less civilised, and less sophisticated must be sought in the *politics* of these categories. I contend that the labelling of populists carries both overt and oblique traces of rationalism, which in the past have disadvantaged excluded groups, and often been used as the justifying narrative for exclusion. In many senses Laclau does argue that all politics is populist, but this need not only be a cause for concern about conceptual slippages, it could also be the path that makes us question exclusionary narratives. Emotions, in the case of populist movements and parties, should be considered as another façade for resistance to popular participation. In addition to showing concern with conceptual slippages, we need to be clear about what conceptual rigidity *performs*.

## 5. Conclusions

The benefit from addressing emotions in populism through Laclau's affective approach are clear. Conceptually, the affective approach encompasses all movements, and thus does not create unnecessary hierarchies between the emotional and the rational. As such, there is no political ideology or identity that precedes the populist articulation, and to discredit political actors due to their 'emotional' character becomes an illogical statement. More important, however, is the possibility to recognise how the very term populism has its own performativity. When the term is used to create new insides/outside and new highs/lows of politics, the political implications of this term must be critically assessed. By using Laclau's idea of political subjectivity, we can see that all identities are from their very inception the creation of fault lines, of creating an inside and an outside, and a theory of hegemony and populism enables us to see how those fault lines are by no means a given, but always political and hierarchical.

The future of populism research must therefore focus not only on how to conceptualise or define populism and/or emotions, but to also see how these very conceptualisations and definitions works to sediment exclusionary structures already at play. By consistently devaluing emotions, or keeping strict analytical divides between emotion and reason, populism research risks perpetuating a narrative of rationalism, which has for so long been used against women, against social movements, and against non-Europeans. There is, however, an important clarification to be made about inclusion and acceptance of all populist actors. I have above argued that it is necessary to look beyond the mere definitions of emotions and populism, to see which forms of exclusion are produced in their wake. This is not to say that all political actors who claim to be subject to exclusion are automatically so. It is important to keep in mind that strong figures of the establishment often claim to suffer exclusion (because they are populist), when they are in fact at the very centre of the political debate. As such, it is vital to consider the structural patterns produced by our definitions. To return to Brett Kavanaugh, this article is in many ways not about emotions at all, but about how actions and behaviours are judged differently depending on who enacts them.

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