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Introduction

The election year 2017 was one that numerous international media and observers predicted to be a showdown between "populists" and their opponents, all the more so after "Brexit and Trump." What made the Dutch, French, and German elections all the more intriguing was that they pitted apparently populist challenges from the left *and* right against embattled ruling blocs – with outgoing Grand Coalitions in the Netherlands and Germany as well as a French administration struggling with record-low approval ratings – that had been at the center of crisis management politics in the Eurozone. The stage appeared to be set for what Yannis Stavrakakis (2014) had theorized in the Greek context as a dominant line of conflict between populism and "anti-populism": competing constructions of "the people" being met by a neo-liberal elite presenting itself as the only alternative to the "populist threat." The first question that arises, then, is to what extent electoral campaign discourses in these countries indeed featured anti-populism in this sense: namely, as an equivalential construction of a populist threat spanning the left, right, and perhaps even the center as a flexible marker (indeed, as a "tendentially empty signifier") for all challenges to the dominant economic rationality as the only viable path for managing the crisis. A related question from a discourse and hegemony analytic perspective is to what extent "populism" as an analytical category – based on the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b) in particular – as opposed to a discursive effect of anti-populism is applicable to the various left-wing and far-right party discourses in these countries and to what extent they indeed pose counter-hegemonic challenges to the technocratic crisis management discourses that Stavrakakis's theory links with anti-populism. As such, the analysis is embedded in a theoretical account going back to Laclau's (1990, 1996/2007, 2005a; 1985/2001 with Mouffe) theory of the political as well as Mouffe's (2000, 2005a, 2005b) critique of "post-politics," of which Stavrakakis's theory of anti-populism can be read as a continuation – with both diagnoses notably pointing to the paradox that the drawing of antagonistic frontiers as an ontological effect of "the political" can also play out in "extra-political" ontic registers, as in the moralizing exclusion of "populists" by "the democrats" representing the post-political or post-democratic consensus. Yet the question is also, conversely, to what extent elements of technocratic crisis management discourses are reproduced as sedimented hegemonic effects in the discourses of "populists" – especially those on the far right whose constructions of "the people" rely on "reductionist" closure onto an essentialized community (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Kim 2017).

From the "political difference" to post-politics to anti-populism

The starting point for the understanding of post-politics and anti-populism to be discussed here is the discourse and hegemony theory formulated by Laclau (1990, 1996/2007, 2005a) as well as the early joint work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001). Laclau presents a

discursive social ontology that Marchart (2007, 2013) has subsequently theorized as "post-foundational": if all social reality is understood as constituted discursively through the production of differences, then a *system* of differences can only constitute itself by equivalentially articulating a common identity of its elements through a common negative frontier – an antagonistic frontier that represents a *political* moment of institution of "the social" as an indeterminate collection of discursive elements – against a constitutive outside. Yet any such attempt at representing a whole out of a collection of parts – which Laclau refers to as *hegemony* – is contingent and constitutively inadequate, as no act of institution can definitively fix the identities of differential signifiers and thus bring about a closure of the social space. In this vein, what we call "society" is always the (partly sedimented, i.e. naturalized and de-politicized) hegemonic effect of previous iterations of antagonistic demarcation – of the citizenry against the aristocracy, of the nation against a foreign power, of labor against capital – that made contingent representations of a social whole possible, yet any hegemonic order – including attempts to fix the meaning of society around some universally valid telos, whether it be class struggle, modernization, or some other forward march of history – will encounter dislocations, or moments in which the hegemonic representation of the social space is displaced and interrupted (Laclau 1990).

In a move typical for post-foundational theories that thrive on the "political difference" (Marchart 2007), therefore, the instituting function of the political as antagonism emerges from the absent ground of the social – the impossibility of its closure as a determinate, sutured totality – and the productive role of this impossibility for "politics" as the never-ending struggle for hegemony between contingent representations of "society." Laclau (1996/2007, 2005a) goes on to argue that this latter operation relies on the production of an "empty signifier" that represents and thus constitutes an equivalential unity by reducing its own differential particularity down to the level where it can function as a stand-in for the absent fullness of a whole constitutively blocked by the antagonistic Other. In Laclau's (2005a, 2005b) theory of populism, the name of "the people" takes on this function of an empty signifier that represents an equivalential chain of unfulfilled demands as an absent, unredeemed fullness against a locus of "power" unable or unwilling to fulfill them – thus pointing to a constitutive gap between "the people" as the subject of democracy and the "power" promised to it (which Canovan (2002) has also theorized as "the democratic paradox"). Laclau (2005a: 154) goes so far as to assert in this vein that "the political becomes synonymous with populism" – with the construction of a "people" being "the political act *par excellence*" – and thus a "moment of institution of the social." Thus, populism is understood not as a determinate content or a fixed state of affairs, but as an articulatory logic that characterizes discourses that are structured (recurrently and over many articulations) around an opposition between the nodal point "people" and "power," but may also emerge fleetingly any time a "people" is interpellated against "power" – just as the political as the irreducible dimension of antagonism and, indeed, the ontological precondition for politics always comes back as the (re-)instituting moment of a field of differential coordinates.

Mouffe's (2000, 2005a, 2005b) critique of "post-politics" is founded precisely on this understanding that politics cannot exist outside the political, i.e. without antagonism, and that even a hegemonic order built on the promise of conflict-free rational consensus cannot reproduce itself without ultimately resorting to the drawing of antagonistic frontiers. Post-politics, according to Mouffe, is the illusion that politics is grounded in rational consensus and deliberation, without the need for such frontiers; the "neo-liberal hegemony," in effect, is built on a post-political promise by positing a rational consensus on the proper economic policy that transcends established left-right divisions and indeed incorporates "Third Way"

social-democratic parties that have accepted the dominant economic rationality and thus abandoned the terrain of "adversarial politics."   Neo-liberalism, in this sense, can be understood as a hegemonic displacement of the frontier that long constituted the political space in many democracies: namely, from left vs. right to rational/right vs. wrong; it follows that the hegemonic consensus tends to dismiss challenges to it as irrational[1] and, indeed, articulates this conflict "in the moral register" (Mouffe 2005a: 56) between those in the right and those in the wrong. In this context, Mouffe (2005a: 51) understands the rise of right-wing populism as a "consequence of the post-political consensus" that challenges the post-political understanding of politics with its appeal to a sovereignty of "the people" against "the elite," thereby inducing the neo-liberal mainstream to constsitute itself equivalentially as a hegemonic bloc – albeit in the moralizing terms of "the good democrats" against "the evil extreme-right" (Mouffe 2005a: 57). The political as antagonism, in other words, makes its return as a Lacanian symptom (Žižek 1989; Stavrakakis 1999, 2007; Arditi 2005) that appears to extend the hegemonic claim to stand for what is "right" but, in so doing, also points to the limitations of the post-political promise of politics as a conflict-free, consensus-driven field.

A complication arises from this diagnosis, however. Mouffe (2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2013), while sharing the Laclauian premise of the ontologically constitutive role of the political, draws from this the ethico-normative imperative of "agonistic pluralism": if antagonism is an ontological necessity for politics, then political actors ought to recognize the constitutive role of conflict as a condition of their coexistence – and not as a Schmittian struggle with the war of annihilation as its horizon – through some form of acceptance of legitimate political opposition around a common commitment to "liberty and equality for all." Against this normative standard, right-wing populism can be viewed as especially problematic, from Viktor Orbán's claim following his first election defeat in 2002 that "The nation cannot be in opposition" to Alexander Gauland's assertion that there is a conspiracy of "the parties represented in the Bundestag" to "replace the German people" through "human flooding." More generally, "right-wing populism" can be understood as the site of a tension between populism and reductionism, whereby the equivalential articulation of "the people" against some kind of power bloc tends to coexist with attempts to fix the identity of "the people" around some kind of *a priori* privileged differential particularity such as an ethnic, cultural, or nativist essence (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Kim 2017). Thus, right-wing populist discourses can be seen as normatively problematic from an agonist-pluralist perspective – as immigration and its proponents are often constructed as an existential threat to the one and only true "people" – but also as ambivalent in terms of politicizing post-political hegemonies: indeed, reductionist discourses that seek to delimit the boundaries of "the people" around some kind of "transcendental signified" (Stravrakakis et al. 2017) can have deeply anti-political implications from a post-foundational perspective. This point will be taken up again in connection with anti-populism in the next section.

Stavrakakis's (2014) theory of anti-populism can be understood as a further development of Mouffe's post-politics thesis "in the shadow of the European crisis." Stavrakakis argues that, on the one hand, neo-liberal crisis management discourses in the EU point to a "post-democratic" hegemony grounded in the promise of stable governance oriented to the demands of the markets and not of the people (a thesis that has clear resonances not only with Rancière (2009), but also with Streeck's (2013) notion of the "consolidation state"); on the other hand, "the return of the people" with the rise of populist discourses gives rise to an anti-populist reaction whereby the hegemonic bloc

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[1] See, for instance, Thomas Friedman's dismissal of anti-WTO protesters in Seattle as "a Noah's ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960s fix."

constitutes itself as the only alternative to "populism" as the main threat to democracy. This has a number of key implications: the populist threat is constructed as "omnipresent" – indeed, as an empty signifier in its own right – to be found on the left, right, and center, thus equivalentially linking discourses that do not link themselves equivalently (e.g. Syriza and Golden Dawn, Mélenchon and Le Pen); moreover, as Rancière (2016) also points out, anti-populism itself constructs a "people" – one that is irresponsible, irrational, and therefore susceptible to populism (Stavrakakis 2014: 509-10). As with post-politics, the anti-populist antagonistic frontier emerges as a symptom that, on the one hand, showcases the hegemonic bloc's commitment to technocratic rationality – albeit as an internal frontier that points to the limitations of an attempt to organize the social field along differential-technocratic lines; the ontologically constitutive role of the political means that no hegemony can go on reproducing itself without drawing a frontier of constitutive exclusion and thus making its own (otherwise sedimented) hegemonic institution explicit.

Paradoxically, however, both Mouffe and Stavrakakis suggest that this return of the political generates forms of contestation that are somehow not properly political: the struggle for hegemony plays out "in the moral register" (Mouffe 2005a: 56) or even, in the case of anti-populism, with an "extra-political, anthropological" inflection – that is, by constructing populism as "opposed to rationality and common sense" (Stavrakakis 2014: 510). As previously noted, the post-political and post-democratic logics of invoking some form of objective rationality thus find their extension in the constitutive exclusion of those who challenge this rationality; the political as a formal category that implies the ontological necessity of a frontier of constitutive exclusion does not exclude the possibility that this frontier is then articulated in such arguably extra-political terms as moral rectitude, objective correctness, or even belonging to some kind of essentialized community such as nation, race, religion, or – an increasingly popular alternative – "civilization." This latter example suggests the ambivalence of "right-wing populism" as a challenge to post-political or post-democratic hegemonies: such discourses are "populist" (and to some extent counter-hegemonic) insofar as they construct an opposition between "the people" and "power," but there is always some degree of countervailing tendency within these discourses in the form of a reduction of "the people" onto an *a priori* essentialized community[2] – which De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) as well as Brubaker (2017) have variously theorized as a "horizontal" in/out-group exclusion as opposed to the "vertical" populist opposition of people vs. power. To take a simple example: it is easily conceivable (indeed, as will be the case in Geert Wilders' PVV) that a right-wing populist-reductionist discourse would circumscribe its opposition to the ruling bloc accordingly – for example, for sending "Dutch people's" money to Greece and for failing to stop "Islamization," but not necessarily for cutting healthcare and education budgets.

What, then, would a properly "political" struggle for hegemony look like? Here, the implicit boundaries of Laclau's (2005a, 2005b) professedly "ontological" concept of populism (which serve as a key reference point for both Mouffe and Stavrakakis) can be seen: on the one hand, Laclau theorizes populism in formal terms as the preponderance of an equivalential over a differential logic in a discourse – with the premise, however, that the basic unit in the field of discourse is a "demand" that interpellates a locus of "power" as capable of either rejecting or fulfilling it; an equivalential articulation of demands, then, entails a common negative dimension of non-fulfillment that generates a frontier of constitutive exclusion against this locus of power. It follows from this that Laclau consistently refers to

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[2] In the influential theories of Mudde (2004), Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 2017), and Müller (2014, 2016), this combination of an appeal to a pure, homogeneous people and a moralized opposition to an elite (as well as some form of anti-pluralism) is generalized onto a concept of populism as such.

the two sides of a populist antagonistic frontier as "people" and "power" and thus ends up privileging the vertical opposition of people (as "underdog") vs. power as the founding moment of politics. It is in this context that Mouffe (in her later work: Errejón & Mouffe 2015; Mouffe 2018, forthcoming) and Stavrakakis (2014; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014) advocate a left-wing populism that challenges post-political or post-democratic hegemonies on the basis of this vertical people vs. power opposition – and, indeed, extends this frontier onto an opposition to domination in all its forms, not least economic, racial, and sexual. A key question for empirical analysis is to what extent left-wing populist discourses actually pursue such a strategy in displacing neo-liberal and right-wing populist-reductionist frontiers alike – and to what extent this is indeed met by a neo-liberal anti-populism that interpellates left- and right-wing populism equivalentially and even constructs the reductionist elements of right-wing populism, such as ethnic or nativist-grounded exclusion, as problems of "populism" rather than of nativism or racism (Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

It is possible to formulate an analytic concept of anti-populism on the basis of the preceding theoretical considerations, yet with a number of open questions that an empirical discourse analysis would have to answer. Anti-populism entails the equivalential construction of "populism" as a threat to the democratic order and thus as a marker that can be flexibly applied via the interpellation of a subject position as standing outside this order. Thus, "populism" becomes a tendentially empty signifier and equivalential links are attributed to discourses that do not see themselves as equivalentially linked: an example from the 2017 Czech parliamentary election campaign would be a Civic Democratic Party (ODS) election poster that depicted ANO leader Andrej Babiš alongside the Communist Party (KSČM) and far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) leaders to highlight the threat of "Populists and communists" coming to power – and thus as a threat to the post-1989 democratic order – even though Babiš himself repeatedly ruled out a coalition with the KSČM and SPD.[3] According to Stavrakakis (2014), however, anti-populism also constructs populism as opposed to the dominant economic rationality – and thus (in an act of hegemonic displacement *par excellence*) presents the defenders of this dominant economic rationality as defenders of the democratic order against the populist threat. There is a myriad of examples for this in the articulations of decision-making elites across the EU, such as in Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso's reaction to the 2013 Italian general election results:

> I hope we are not going to follow the temptation to give in to populism because of the results in one specific member state […] The question we have to ask ourselves is the following: should we determine our policy, our economic policy, by short-term electoral considerations or by what has to be done to put Europe back on the path to sustainable growth? For me the answer is clear (Reuters 2013).

The "populist threat" can find equivalential extension onto a range of other issues – as seen, for example, in Council President Herman van Rompuy's designation of "populism" (and not, for example, racism or xenophobia) as a threat to "the free movement of persons within our borders," which he went on to defend as a "sign of civilization" (EUObserver 2012).

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[3] It should be noted that ANO subsequently shifted its strategy after the election to pursue equivalential links with the KSČM and SPD in a number of areas (e.g. in the election of parliamentary committee chairs) and that, at the time of writing, an ANO minority government tolerated by both parties remains a possibility; in the context of the pre-election campaign, however, the observation that ANO (as well as the KSČM and SPD, in large part) avoided an equivalential link and the ODS nonetheless constructed them as one bloc still holds. This example is also suggestive of a structural similarity between anti-populism and anti-communism, which has often entailed accusations of social democrats and social liberals secretly harboring equivalential links with Leninists (which are, in turn, denied by the former – a common strategy of the ODS against the Czech Social Democratic Party in the post-1989 period).

As these observations suggest, it is possible to think of anti-populism in gradations: it may be possible to speak of a "thin" anti-populism, for instance, if the populist threat is constructed equivalentially but not linked to an opposition to neo-liberal economic rationality (as in the case of Babiš who, as the originator of the promise to "run the state like a business," could hardly be accused of economic irrationality) or if the populist threat is localized onto a particular form or party (as will be the case in Dutch case, where "populism" tends to be reduced onto the figure of Wilders). Yet the 2017 elections in the Netherlands, France, and Germany offer particularly interesting case material where it would be possible to expect anti-populism in the strong sense as theorized by Stavrakakis, as they pitted *prima facie* populist challenges from the left *and* right against embattled ruling blocs – featuring outgoing Grand Coalitions in the Netherlands and Germany as well as consecutive (and historically unpopular) iterations of center-right and center-left government in France – that had been at the center of decision-making in the crisis management politics of the EU. The empirical analysis that follows examines the field of populism and anti-populism in these three cases: to what extent was not only anti-populism present, but to what extent did these *prima facie* populist discourses of the left and right indeed pose counter-hegemonic challenges to the wider crisis management discourses and to what extent is "populism" as an analytical category – based on the understanding of Laclau (2005) as presented here – as opposed to as a discursive effect of anti-populism indeed applicable in these contexts?

The method used here is the expanded framework of Essex School discourse analysis as developed by Nonhoff (2006, 2017) and Marchart (2017). The basic Essex School paradigm, which draws on the discourse and hegemony theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) to conduct discourse analysis centered on the identification of relations of difference and equivalence as well as their structuration around nodal points (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000), has been expanded with Nonhoff's (2006, 2017) introduction of the concept of contrariety to refer to relations of negatory exclusion among individual elements; an antagonistic relation is thus understood to consist not only of two opposing equivalential chains, but also of relations of contrariety between individual elements across the opposing chains – with the empty signifier playing a representative function by taking on relations of contrariety with the greatest number of elements on the opposing side. Marchart (2017) proposes in the context of protest movements that a discourse can be analyzed in terms of its demand structure, contrariety structure, and subjectification structure: in addition to a differential or equivalential articulation of demands (in contrariety to other demands), therefore, a discourse entails the interpellation of subject positions (e.g. the working class, the precariat) as part of an imaginary collective unity tied to these demands.[4] This aspect is particularly useful for the analysis of party discourses in relation to coalition signaling, i.e. whether other parties are marked as incompatible or as desired partners for a potential coalition. The main research questions, then, can be reformulated in the following terms: to what extent multiple party discourses converge around anti-populist interpellations of "populism" of the left and right as an opposing bloc and in what ways left-wing and right-wing populist discourses differ in their demand and subjectification structures – in particular, to what extent they indeed exhibit a "populist" subjectification structure organized around the nodal point "people" against "power" tied to a strongly equivalential demand structure in contrariety to the crisis management politics of the "power" bloc.

Analyses

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[4] This concept thus refers back to the Althusserian category of "interpellation" as the ideological production of subject positions and is understood as such throughout this paper.

Netherlands

Background

The Dutch case is notable for the early emergence of the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) as an "exceptional case" of a "militant" liberal nationalist discourse that constructed an opposition between liberal values, including women's and gay rights, and the supposed intolerance and backwardness of Islam (Akkerman 2005). Fortuyn's discourse could thus also be understood as "civilizationist," pitting "backward" Islam against "modern" Dutch attitudes and explicitly positing a "clash of civilizations" between "Judeo-Christian humanistic culture" and "Islamic culture" (Brubaker 2017: 1194-96). Tied to this was an element of populism directed against the established political parties, yet with the contrariety articulated primarily in terms of social and economic policy rather than Islam or immigration; Fortuyn (2002) published a book in time for the 2002 election campaign on *The Ruins of the Eight Years of Purple* – with "purple" being a (also more widely used) signifier for the Grand Coalition government of Labor (PvdA) and the liberal right (VVD) – but focused his critique mostly on issues of healthcare and other public services; in a 2002 interview, he proclaimed that "CDA, PvdA or VVD, it's completely the same. They are part of the elite that people intuitively or intellectually see that has to be broken open" – and when asked how he came to this realization, pointed to "purple" mismanagement of the national rail company and the health sector (*De Volkskrant* 2012).

The discourse of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV), formed ahead of the 2006 election, has built on Fortuyn's civilizationist discourse by combining liberal attitudes toward abortion, euthanasia, and LGBT rights with a rejection of "intolerant and backward Islam" and declaring that "our Judeo-Christian culture is far superior to Islam" (Vossen 2011; Brubaker 2017: 1197). This took on a clearly populist inflection in the party's 2010 election program, which formulated the underlying problem thus: "elites are knocked loose from reality and are doing things on their own that ordinary people are not getting better off out of" (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2010) – and tied this to an equivalential chain of demands not only "for Islam suppression and against mass immigration," but also "for security," "for a social Netherlands," "for a better environment," and even "for animals, farmers and fishers".[5] After the 2010 election, however, the PVV reached an agreement to tolerate a minority government of the VVD and CDA; the agreement, titled "Freedom and responsibility" and centered on wide-ranging spending cuts to counteract the Dutch "competitive fall," promised measures "to limit the migration of low-opportunity migrants," tackle the "important problem" of "illegal immigration," and "intensif[y]" a "return policy" of deporting immigrants without legal status – while also emphasizing the two coalition parties' recognition of "Islam – unlike the PVV – as religion" (VVD & CDA 2010). This center-right strategy of differential incorporation of PVV demands lasted until April 2012, when Wilders walked out of budget negotiations citing disagreements over further spending cuts affecting pensions, declaring a "definitive" break with the coalition and stating that "we do not accept that the elderly pay for the nonsense Brussels demands" on budgetary policy (NU.nl 2012).

The Socialist Party (SP) has been classified as "left-wing populist" in a number of influential approaches (Mudde 2004; March 2011), with March (2011) arguing that the party's clear anti-establishment profile in the 1990s has given way to a "post-populist" democratic socialism since the 2000s. Indeed, when the party peaked electorally with 16.6% in the 2006 election, its program was centered on the more traditionally socialist nodal point "more

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[5] This set of demands is particularly meaningful for illustration because it points to the PVV's attempt to equivalentially incorporate demands already prominently represented by other parliamentary parties in the discursive field (namely the Socialist Party, GreenLeft, and the Party for the Animals, respectively).

solidarity" as an answer to the "major concerns over care, social security, and safety" but also the "fear of more criminality and ethnic tensions" – while conspicuously lacking a recurring, overarching signifier for the power bloc, apart from the notable, but more localized, articulation of contrariety to the threat of a "European superstate" and the rejection of "even more Brussels paternalism" (Socialistische Partij 2006). Populism was a stronger element in the SP's 2010 and 2012 campaigns – with the 2010 program blaming "politicians from the right to the left" for falling for the "neoliberal thought" that had led to "the crisis of casino capitalism" and the 2012 program designating an entire spectrum of parties from GreenLeft to PVV as complicit in "the government of VVD and CDA" that "cuts billions from the citizens"; in both cases, the SP presented itself as the alternative for a "social government," thus highlighting the combination of populist and socialist discursive structuration characteristic of the SP (2010, 2012).

The 2017 campaign

On May 7, 2016, Wilders (2016) announced the PVV's election priorities with a simple tweet: "Core PVV election program: more boss over own country; de-Islamize; borders shut, riff-raff out; billions to the Dutch ordinary man/woman". In August 2016, the PVV released its 2017 election program on a single A4 sheet; under the title "Netherlands ours again," the document centered on the demand to "de-Islamize the Netherlands," including a moratorium on all refugees as well as immigrants "from Islamic countries," a ban of the Koran, and the closure of all mosques, in addition to making "the Netherlands independent again" by leaving the EU (Partij voor de Vrijheid 2017). The nationalist nodal point "the Netherlands" in contrariety to "Islam" consistently structured the PVV discourse in the campaign, culminating in the Wilders-Rutte TV debate two days before the election in which Wilders declared, "I want the Netherlands to become the Netherlands again, and Islam does not belong to it" and appealed to voters, "If you want the Netherlands to become ours again, chase that man [Rutte] away and put me on that tower" (*De Standaard* 2017). There was, then, little actual populism in the sense of a central people-power opposition in the PVV campaign discourse; while the signifier "ordinary people" had been used previously and again in the Wilders tweet – and the one-page program included the demand "citizens get power" through binding referendums – this clearly did not play the recurring structuring function of a nodal point. The lack of a populist interpellation of a power bloc encompassing a wide spectrum of forces is particularly surprising given that the outgoing government, just as in the 2002 election with Fortuyn's rise to prominence, was a Grand Coalition of PvdA and VVD (albeit with a VVD prime minister); the common populist strategy of equivalentially interpellating the main parties of the left and right, or even coming up with signifiers such as "UMPS" or "PPSOE," was conspicuously absent from the PVV discourse.

The SP's campaign discourse, centered on the program title and social media hashtag #PakDeMacht ("take the power"), was a more strongly populist one that articulated a central contrariety between the nodal point "a social Netherlands" and "the politics of the elite" tied to a call for a "politics not only for the elite, but for everyone" (Socialistische Partij 2017). The party thus interpellated an "elite that is richer after the crisis than before it" thanks to government policies: "The gap between the high earners at the top and the rest of the population has increased deliberately through the government. Premier Rutte has taken good care of the directors and managers, of the banks and multinationals" (Socialistische Partij 2017). This central opposition was tied to an equivalential chain of demands that featured calls for a single-payer national health system, minimum wage and pension rises, investment in social housing, "equal rights for all Dutch" by fighting labor-market discrimination and "bifurcation and segregation" in schools and neighborhoods – as well as a continued rejection of "Brussels coercion," criticism of the EU as a "project that undermines

democracy and gives all space to multinationals," and a call for "a referendum on a new European Union"; also included was a pledge to "prevent migration flows" by improving development aid and ending "unfair trade," while also "respect[ing] and implement[ing] the Refugees Treaty" (Socialistische Partij 2017). The SP, while far from incorporating the PVV's flagship policies in these areas, likewise articulated a contrariety to both the EU and "migration," albeit in terms of the "social" values that structured its equivalential chain.

While the SP's social-populist discourse articulated a more direct counter-hegemonic challenge (and across a wider range of demands) to a ruling power bloc than the PVV's nationalist one, therefore, it is worth noting the symptomatic internal limits within both. As already seen, the first Rutte cabinet took office with a technocratic promise to curb the Dutch "competitive fall," above all with spending cuts and limits on immigration – an agenda that Wilders supported until he drew a line at "the elderly" as the target for such cuts; the second Rutte cabinet continued this line with the central pledge to lead "the Netherlands stronger out of the crisis" with detailed tables of spending cuts designed to increase "purchasing power" and encourage "entrepreneurship," with Rutte also promising ahead of the election "no cent more to Greece" (VVD & PvdA 2012). When Rutte argued in his March 2017 debate with Wilders that "The most important promise I made to the voters in 2012 was to bring the Netherlands out of the crisis. That has now happened," Wilders responded that "You were not going to send more money to Greece, but that has happened" (*De Standaard* 2017). Wilders thus displaces the Rutte cabinets' technocratic crisis management discourse in a nationalist direction by maintaining that the only way its promises can be fulfilled is by leaving the EU framework altogether, while not questioning the rectitude of these promises; this is also the case with refugee policy, with the PVV demand for "borders shut" feeding on Rutte's appeal to would-be refugees in 2016 "to stay home." The SP, on the other hand, positions itself within this hegemonic framework in constructing migration – and labor migration, with an SP MP even declaring in February 2017: "Own workers first! That is not Trump, that is not PVV, that is SP" (NOS 2017) – as a threat, yet with the articulation of this threat around the "social" nodal point still setting it apart from the VVD and PVV discourses.

The election campaign was characterized by anti-populist articulations by spokespersons of the VVD, PvdA, D66, and GreenLeft, yet of a largely "thin" variety localized onto the PVV as representing the populist threat. In the case of Rutte, who articulated the threat of "wrong populism" in technocratic terms as a source of "chaos" with the Brexit and Trump victories, this threat was localized onto the PVV and pitted against the VVD as the only force capable of stopping it: "The risk with such a small difference [in opinion polls] with the VVD […] that ultimately a result comes out where the PVV is bigger is huge" (BNR 2017). Yet while telling Wilders in the TV debate that "I will never work with you" (*De Standaard* 2017), Rutte continued to pursue a strategy of differential incorporation of PVV demands, as with his widely publicized appeal to immigrants: "If you do not like it here, leave the country, leave!" (*Trouw* 2017). Arguably the "thickest" anti-populism was found in PvdA leader – and Rutte's vice-premier – Lodewijk Asscher, who criticized Rutte for this remark and called him "a thin strain of a populist," thus linking his own coalition partner to "the evil" of populism (*De Telegraaf* 2017). This flexible application of the populist threat as a highly equivalential category was a rarity, however, with D66 leader Alexander Pechtold (2016) equating populism with the figure of Wilders (as well as Trump, Boris Johnson, and Norbert Hofer) as "a conservative, nationalist mishmash without ideals of community. Hate and fear is what binds them." The reduction of "populism" onto the right found a notable left-wing agonist inflection in GreenLeft leader Jesse Klaver (2016), who declared that "I want to be an alternative to right-wing populism with progressive parties –

PvdA, D66 and SP"; Klaver thus coupled a thin (anti-PVV) anti-populism with an agonistic displacement of the frontier onto left vs. right and even named the SP as his most preferred coalition partner in a newspaper poll. Speaking after the results came out on election night, Klaver asked the GreenLeft supporters, "Has populism broken through?" – inducing chants of "No!" – while Pechtold declared that "Here in Netherlands the populist noise has stopped" and Rutte stated that "Netherlands says 'stop' to wrong populism" (Bregman 2017; NU.nl 2017).

A key application of the theory of anti-populism in the Dutch case is the way in which Rutte's technocratic anti-populism and Wilders' nationalism mirror each other: as noted, Wilders displaced Rutte's crisis management discourse in a nationalist direction, while Rutte's hegemonic claim consisted precisely in the promise that only the VVD and its management of the crisis can prevent "wrong populism" from coming to power. The VVD's strategy of hegemonizing the wider demand for anti-populism also meant interpellating the PVV as its main challenger; this "thin" anti-populism largely ignored the explicitly counter-hegemonic social populism of the SP, as opposed to linking it with the PVV threat as a "thick" variant might have done. The SP, for its part, circumscribed its counter-hegemonic claim by articulating a contrariety to migration – in contrast to GreenLeft, which extended its counter-hegemonic claim of speaking for a "progressive" bloc and a "realistic majority" with its demand for Greek debt relief and a liberal refugee policy (*Trouw* 2016). GreenLeft's success in the election suggests that its strategy of positioning itself outside the nationalist vs. thin anti-populist dichotomy on the key issues of EU and migration was more successful (if only slightly) in interpellating a "progressive" bloc against the right than the SP strategy of interpellating a popular camp against "the elite."

France

Background

The case of the National Front (FN) in France is notable not least for its changing inflections of populism and reductionism. It has been noted that an attempt at "normalization" took place leading up to Jean-Marie Le Pen's first-round success in the 2002 presidential election, with the party dropping a number of ethno-reductionist demands from its program such as mass repatriation of non-European immigrants (Shields 2014). Marine Le Pen, who took over the leadership in 2011, has explicitly pursued a strategy of "de-demonization," including purging the party's discourse of explicitly anti-Semitic and homophobic elements and even working toward equivalential incorporation by displacing the antagonistic frontier onto a common one against Islam – as exemplified in her assertion that it is unsafe in some places "to be a woman, a homosexual, a Jew, or even French or white" under the "Muslim occupation" of the country (*Le Parisien* 2016). Whether the FN discourse remains predominantly reductionist on the question of sexual orientation is ambiguous; when then-MP Marion-Maréchal Le Pen articulated a reductionist defense of "the traditional and natural family" against homosexuality and suggested that the legal status of same-sex marriage in France could lead to legal recognition of polygamy, Marine Le Pen dismissed the connection to polygamy (*Le Parisien* 2016), while having maintained, in her 2012 presidential program, opposition "to all demands for creation of same-sex marriage" coupled with an acceptance of same-sex unions within the PACS framework (Le Pen 2012).

Le Pen's 2012 campaign was characterized by an increasing emphasis on populist opposition to the main parties of the left and right, designated by the signifier "UMPS"; her program, titled "The Voice of the People, the Spirit of France," promised a "total break with

the politics of the UMPS" in relation to "the utmost priority" of restoring full employment as well as "the choice of the UMPS" of "reducing wages and dismantling the system of social protection" in order to retain the euro, which she rejected with reference to both social security and national sovereignty (Le Pen 2012). The party's long-standing demand for "national preference" for French nationals in jobs and social services was reformulated as a "national priority […] applied to all French, whatever their origin," indicating the loosening of ethno-reductionist closure (Le Pen 2012). It is worth noting that Nicolas Sarkozy, much like in his 2007 campaign, attempted to dislocate this anti-UMPS frontier by presenting himself as the outsider candidate and appealing to "the people of France, to the France that suffers" in demarcation from "our elites" – a strategy that was less successful than in 2007 not least due to his subject position as incumbent and the lack of an articulation of this people-elite opposition around issues of social insecurity (Mondon 2014: 306-08).

The 2012 election was also notable for the candidacy of Jean-Luc Mélenchon for the Left Front (FG), which had been initially formed as a joint list incorporating both the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party (PG; a left-wing split from the Socialist Party (PS)) for the 2009 European Parliament election. Mélenchon presented a left-wing populist discourse tied to a strategy of mass open-air rallies – under the slogan "Place [or square, *place*] to the people!" – and of interpellating "the people" equivalentially with "the left," as exemplified in the slogan "The Left Front is the front of the people"; the joint FG program, "The Human First," declared that "The Left Front is rightly born out of the need to reinvent the left by leaning on the popular implication" and called for a "citizens' revolution" against the "financial oligarchy," with a participatory constituent assembly leading to a "parliamentary Sixth Republic" (Front de Gauche 2012). It is worth noting that Mélenchon adhered to the left vs. right camp logic long established in French politics in appealing to "our political family, the world of labor and its demands" to support François Hollande "without demanding anything in exchange for beating Sarkozy" in the second round (France TV Info 2012). In August 2014 – after a disappointing result for the FG in its second European election – Mélenchon announced the intention "to federate the people" in a new movement for a Sixth Republic, signaling a break from the FG framework; in February 2016, he announced the formation of La France Insoumise (FI; "Unsubmissive France").

The 2017 campaign

For the 2017 presidential election, Le Pen (2017) presented a program titled "144 Presidential Commitments," declaring that "The object of this project is first to give France its liberty and voice to the people" and that the presidential election will be "a choice of civilization" between two visions: "The 'globalist' choice on one hand, represented by all my opponents, which seeks to destroy our great economic and social equilibria, which wants the abolition of all frontiers, economic and physical" and "the patriotic choice […] that puts the defense of the nation and the people at the heart of all public decision and that, above all, wants the protection of our national identity, our independence, the unity of the French, social justice, and the prosperity of all." The articulation of this patriotism vs. globalism frontier in "civilization[al]" terms, with "the people" – featured prominently in Le Pen's campaign slogan "In the name of the people" – being referred back to the signifier "nation" and lacking an opposing signifier like "UMPS" interpellating some kind of power bloc against it, meant that Le Pen's discourse was now primarily nationalist rather than populist. While the EU was marked as an external locus of power in contrariety to the demand of "restoring to the French people its sovereignty (monetary, legislative, territorial, economic)," this took the form of a more localized contrariety rather than a nodal point structuring the discourse

– the latter function being played rather by the aforementioned "patriotism" signifier that also linked demands for "a new patriotic model in favor of employment" as well as an "economic patriotism" favoring "French agricultural products" and even renewable energy investments.

Mélenchon, using the campaign slogan "The force of the people," again campaigned on a left-wing populist discourse, yet with the key difference that he positioned himself outside the framework of the political parties, including the PCF-associated left camp. In announcing his presidential candidacy for FI at the PCF media festival in September 2016, Mélenchon (2016) declared that "I am a candidate outside the parties but I am not a candidate against the parties," while introducing the new program, "The Future in Common," as a populist reiteration of "The Human First": "If it's the human first, then the human is all men, all women, whatever his/her social condition, whatever his/her education, whatever his/her religion […] which is the mass of the French people." The program opened with a renewed call for a Sixth Republic through which "the sovereign people must redefine our democratic rules and define anew social, ecological, and emancipatory rights" as well as abolish "the presidential monarchy" that serves "the oligarchy and the caste in power" (La France Insoumise 2017). The nodal point "people" took on a structuring function in linking demands for a justice system "in the name of the people," a "popular cultural policy" as opposed to "culture for a minority of the privileged" – but also alongside the more traditional left-wing signifier "solidarity" referring to a "solidaristic protectionism" (as opposed to the FN's "patriotic" articulation of this demand), a "solidarity tax" on wealth, and "a guaranteed and solidaristic retirement."

Mélenchon's strategy was thus centered on turning the FN's people-as-nation into a floating signifier and re-articulating it around new oppositions. Notable in this regard was Mélenchon's (2017a) speech in front of a mass rally "for the Sixth Republic" on March 18, 2017, in which he repeatedly interpellated "the people" gathered before him as the subject of a "citizens' revolution" – even citing Victor Hugo to proclaim that "The name of France is revolution" – against "the presidential monarchy," against "the privileges of finance," but also against the dual menace of "an ethnic coup d'état or a finance coup d'état," explicitly opposing "the extreme right that would like the ethnic nation." In denouncing a "European Union that confiscates the sovereignty of the people and submits it to the sovereignty of money," Mélenchon blamed it for "encourag[ing] the most blind nationalisms and the most absurd xenophobias," thus preserving the contrariety to the FN's nationalism even on the terrain of critique of the EU. Mélenchon's balancing act of opposing "the people" to both nationalism and financial oligarchy can be seen in the specific articulations of demands superficially similar to the FN's – as already seen in "solidaristic protectionism," all the way to "control[ling] the causes of migration that are wars, climate warming, and free trade" while "reaffirm[ing] the right to asylum" and "respect[ing] the human dignity of migrants" (La France Insoumise 2017).

In this context, the ultimately successful strategy of eventual winner Emmanuel Macron was not an anti-populism that lumped Mélenchon and Le Pen together, but a hegemonization of an anti-nationalist frontier against Le Pen tied to a re-articulation of the floating signifier "patriotism" and a populist contrariety to "the system." Macron claimed to stand for an "open patriotism" that represented "the French spirit" in demarcation from "narrow nationalism and the reduction onto a chimeric identity, and on the other hand a blissful multiculturalism"; at a campaign rally, Macron denounced "the project of multiculturalism" for "nourish[ing] communitarianism" – thus incorporating one of the FN's favorite targets – but also "the reactionary forces" bent on "stigmatiz[ing] those who do not resemble the idea that they make of France" (20minutes 2017). At a TV debate ahead of the

first round, Macron denounced Le Pen's support for leaving the Eurozone as "economic war" and declared that "nationalism is war" (BFMTV 2017). At the same time, Macron positioned his candidacy outside the framework of established parties and as one that "comes to upset the established order because it worries the system," as he declared at his first open-air rally in July 2016 (Boudet 2016). While the notion of Macron being "anti-system" was immediately derided by political opponents, Macron's strategy hinged on being able to draw his frontier of constitutive exclusion against nationalism *and* the system – indeed, being supposedly the only anti-nationalist but patriotic candidate not part of the system. On election night after the first-round results were announced, Macron (2017a) declared in his speech that he wanted to be "the president of the entire people of France, the president of patriots in the face of the menace of nationalists" who "breaks to the very end with the system that has been incapable of responding to the problems of our country for over 30 years."

Macron, in interpellating nationalism as his opponent rather than populism, displaced Le Pen's patriotic vs. globalist frontier by turning "patriotism" into a floating signifier while insisting that "I am not a rootless multiculturalist globalist"; he even accepted the label "populist" for himself with the reasoning that "If being populist is speaking to the people in an understandable way without intermediary apparatuses, then I sure want to be populist. […] So call me populist if you want" (Le JDD 2017). Ironically, the most anti-populist articulations came from the François Fillon campaign – which itself made use of populist logic in appealing to "the people" while opposing (and taking up Le Pen's signifier) "government of judges" – in branding Macron as a case of "worldly populism" and hailing the Dutch election results as a victory "against populism and extremism" that provided hope for the battle against "the extreme right" in France (*Le Parisien* 2017; *Le Point* 2017). In presenting himself as the alternative to the FN, Macron, the former Minister of Economy under Manuel Valls (2014-16), took up a key element of the technocratic reform discourse of the Valls cabinets that, in a latter-day French iteration of TINA, had defended wide-ranging neo-liberal reforms (such as the contentious Labor Law, a.k.a. El Khomri Law) by interpellating the FN as the only alternative to them: "Is there an alternative politics to what we are doing? Yes, there is, it is what the extreme right is proposing"; Valls even remarked to Matteo Renzi in this vein that "There is no alternative on the left, the only other deal is the National Front" (Lacassagne 2015). It is worth noting that while Valls had declared his intention to "go all the way" with labor reform, Macron said in a May 2016 interview that he would go even further than the El Khomri Law (Les Echos 2016) – and, in his presidential program, called for a "society of work" that would "free labor and the spirit of enterprise" by, for example, "reduc[ing] the cost of labor" for employers still further (En Marche! 2017); at least part of his contrariety to "the system," then, was for not going far enough with neo-liberal labor market reforms.

The two-way contest of Macron and Le Pen in the second round thus suited the strategies of both camps: on election night, Le Pen once again rallied "the patriots" against "the globalists" and, in a populist moment, subsequently appealed to Mélenchon voters by incorporating part of Mélenchon's constitutive outside against Macron – "It is the project of Macron that is built entirely for the benefit of the oligarchy, the great financial powers and to the detriment of labor" (*Paris Normandie* 2017) – while Macron (2017b) reaffirmed the equivalential link between the FN and "the system" not only in terms of a common negative frontier, but a direct causal link: "It's the system of old political parties that has nourished the National Front for so many years." Mélenchon (2017b), for his part, retained his dual constitutive outside by opposing the "two candidates who approve and want to extend, both of them, the current institutions" in the interest of "mediacrats and oligarchs," refusing to

make a recommendation for the second round apart from not voting for the FN. The 2017 French case, then, comes close to something of a populist conjuncture, in which populism as a dynamic articulatory logic was used in shifting constellations across a spectrum of candidates – with Mélenchon's, Macron's, Le Pen's, and even Fillon's discourses exhibiting varying degrees of populist structuration and Macron, on the night of his election, quickly shifting gears onto an institutionalist discourse that, in the name of bringing the nation together, no longer pitted "the people" against a constitutive outside; particularly notable is Macron's use of populism against "the system," yet partly as a continuation of a technocratic reform discourse that interpellates the FN as the only alternative and presents itself as capable, unlike "the system," of overcoming it – indeed, precisely by placing itself outside "the system."

Germany

Background

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is another notable case of shifting iterations of right-wing populism and reductionism, albeit within a much shorter timeframe. Since its founding in 2013, the AfD has shifted from a "competition populist" (Bebnowski & Förster 2014; Bebnowski 2015) discourse, in which "the people" and German "competition" interests jointly structured a negative frontier against "the *Altparteien*" primarily with reference to the euro and banking bailouts, toward an ethno-culturally reductionist construction of "the people" as the "only 64 million native-born Germans" built on "the classical family" as "the nucleus of society and state" in the discourses of Björn Höcke and Alexander Gauland, yet also coexisting with partial openings toward the LGBT community in the Berlin context in particular through a displacement of the frontier onto a common one against "Muslim immigrants" (Kim 2017). The AfD discourse, by linking "the people" with a biological essence under existential threat from "human flooding" initiated by "the *Altparteien*," displays the highest degree of reductionism of the far-right discourses examined here, but is also notable for its consistent structuration in contrariety to the power bloc "*Altparteien*" as well as Angela Merkel's heavily technocratic discourse of "*Alternativlosigkeit*" around the euro and banking bailouts that the party (beginning with its name) directly challenges.

On the left, the discourse of Die Linke ("The Left") can be understood as a joint articulation of the more traditionally socialist nodal point "social justice" with a left-wing humanist populism pitting "the people" (or "the human beings"; *die Menschen*) against the "profit" interests represented by the "neo-liberal consensus." Since its founding in 2007, the party has recurrently deployed the slogan "People before profits" – often in conjunction with demands such as "Against Hartz IV" and "Against the care emergency" – while opposing the banking bailouts with the slogan "A safety net for the people" and defending a liberal refugee policy in terms of "human dignity." In the face of the AfD's reductionist turn and dramatic rise in the 2016 regional elections in particular, Die Linke co-chairs Bernd Riexinger (2016) and Katja Kipping (2016) have pursued a strategy of displacing the frontier onto a "conflict between top and bottom and not between inside and outside" and calling for a "revolution of justice" or a "social offensive […] that benefits all people" – while parliamentary group co-chair Sahra Wagenknecht has generated controversy by attempting to partly incorporate the AfD's constitutive outside by criticizing Merkel's decision to suspend the Dublin Agreement – which she also blamed for "mak[ing] the AfD strong" in

the first place (*Focus* 2017) – thus highlighting a difference in strategy within a broadly left-wing populist orientation.[6]

The 2017 campaign

The election year 2017 began with markedly anti-populist articulations by Christian Democratic Union (CDU) general secretary Peter Tauber, who compared Free Democratic Party (FDP) chairman Christian Lindner with "Mr. Gauland from the AfD" and referred to Die Linke as a "red AfD," declaring that "Sahra Wagenknecht and [AfD co-chair] Frauke Petry are the twin sisters [*das doppelte Lottchen*] of populism in Germany"; he ruled out any form of cooperation with Die Linke and the AfD and added that "I expect such a clear demarcation from the SPD and Greens as well" (*Die Welt* 2017). This textbook case of anti-populism entailed the construction of "populism" as a highly equivalential category that marked opponents across the spectrum (who themselves did not articulate equivalences with each other) and thus defined the frontier of legitimate democratic politics; Wagenknecht herself criticized this strategy as an attempt to "make the AfD the reference point of politics" (*Focus* 2017). This anti-populist strategy continued after the selection of Martin Schulz as SPD chancellor candidate in January, with Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) referring to Schulz as "almost literally Trump" for using the slogan "Make Europe great again" and criticizing Schulz's style "at a time when the temptation of populism has increased worldwide" (Spiegel Online 2017).

This anti-populist course continued primarily in the form of the CDU's hegemonic interpellation of the SPD as its main challenger that, unlike itself, is incapable of upholding the democratic frontier against populist challenges from the left and right – especially after the Saarland election in March in which the SPD suffered unexpected losses after refusing to rule out a coalition with Die Linke. Tauber declared in an April interview that "there will be no election campaign against the AfD" and "the question is as always whether a Christian Democrat or a Social Democrat will sit in the chancellor's office" – whereby "The CDU says very clearly that there will be no alliance with the populists of the right and the left, that is the AfD and the Left Party. Here, the SPD is blind in one eye" (*Rheinische Post* 2017). Angela Merkel (2017) declared in a similar vein at her annual press conference: "Indeed the CDU says, the Union of CDU/CSU says: We will not work with the AfD and we will not work with Die Linke. Social Democracy, unfortunately, has not made such a clear statement in both directions." In a sense, the CDU's anti-populism was a continuation of the party's anti-communist "Red Socks" strategy in the 1990s of painting the threat of an SPD alliance with the PDS (the legal successor of the East German ruling party and predecessor of Die Linke), but the threat had a new name – populism – that could travel from the left to the far right. Schulz, for his part, while not definitively ruling out a range of options including coalitions with Die Linke and the Greens or with the Greens and the FDP, expressed a preference for a "Grand Coalition under SPD leadership" in May after losing three consecutive state-level elections to the CDU, thus renouncing an agonistic left vs. right bloc strategy and circumscribing the extent to which he could position himself as a challenger to Merkel in the context of the more directly counter-hegemonic challenges of the AfD and Die Linke.

On the right, the AfD (2017) presented a joint articulation of populism and reductionism that opposed the central signifier "*Volk*" to "a small, powerful political oligarchy"

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[6] In response to Wagenknecht, Riexinger made clear the limits on the articulation of the party's constitutive outside: "We do not criticize Ms. Merkel for not closing the borders or even introducing reception camps or similar things" (*Die Zeit* 2017).

that had to be reined in through limitations on the power and funding of political parties, term limits, and referendums through which "The people must once again become sovereign" – while also reducing it to a nativist essence under threat from a "peoples' migration," highlighting the need for "self-preservation, not self-destruction of our state and people." The people-oligarchy opposition meant that the AfD discourse exhibited an arguably stronger populist structuration than their Dutch and French far-right counterparts, but also with a more strongly reductionist closure from other "peoples" deemed fundamentally incompatible with an *a priori* differentially inscribed essence of "our people." This reduction was radicalized – i.e. the constitutive exclusion extended from the threat of future migration onto domestic targets on ethnic grounds – when Gauland responded to federal Integration Commissioner Aydan Özoguz (SPD), who denied the very existence of such an *a priori* essence in arguing that "A specifically German culture is, beyond the language, simply not identifiable," by stating that "we […] can dispose of her in Anatolia," and when party co-chair Jörg Meuthen asserted in the election night party leaders' debate that "A successive dissolution of our nation" is taking place, supposedly proven by the fact that "Germans" are "only sporadically" visible in inner cities (*Augsburger Allgemeine* 2017; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 2017). Amid all this, it is worth noting how the AfD's discourse sought to dislocate the crisis management politics of the Merkel cabinets on both the euro (the AfD's founding terrain) and refugee policy: the AfD (2017), in supporting withdrawal from the Eurozone, held that the euro had become a "transfer union" due to "liability for the debts of other countries" – which Merkel (2010) had precisely said would be avoided thanks to German support for the First Economic Adjustment Program for Greece in May 2010 ("Concretely, there was the threat of a path to a transfer union […] This had to be avoided") – and demanded "The borders must be immediately closed" in order to end "uncontrolled mass immigration" that only heightens rather than solves demographically rooted "problems of the social security systems."

Die Linke (2017), with the campaign slogan "Socially. Just. Peace. For All," structured its campaign discourse around the dual nodal points "social justice" and "all [people]," thus aiming at radicalizing (i.e. extending onto a more far-reaching chain of demands) the Schulz SPD's nodal point "justice" while displacing the AfD's populist-reductionist frontier onto an opposition between "mak[ing] the future for the people [*die Menschen*] more just and better" on the one hand and "the rich and powerful" on the other, including "the upper ten thousand," "corporations, super-rich, and their political allies," and "economic power translat[ing] itself into political power." The structuring function of the opposition between "people" and profit interests came out in slogans such as "People and nature before profits" and "For a Europe of the people instead of the banks and businesses," which headlined a wide range of demands for democratizing the economy, environmental justice, and an end to "the cuts diktat in Europe that is being pushed forward especially by Germany" (Die Linke 2017). The party directly confronted Merkel's technocratic discourse of a "market-conform democracy," blaming it for a "crisis of democracy" and "the rise of right-wing populists" (Die Linke 2017) – thus reaffirming the negative equivalential relation of neo-liberalism and right-wing populism via direct causal link. On refugee policy, the party's policy was headlined by the slogans "Defend and expand the right to asylum" and "Fight flight causes and not refugees!" Petra Pau, the party's lead candidate in Berlin, heightened the element of left-wing humanist populism by declaring at multiple rallies around the city (at which the author was present) that the election will be about "whether Article 1 of the Basic Law still holds: 'The dignity of the human being is inviolable.' I emphasize: Of all people, not only of the wealthy and beautiful, not only of the whites and Germans" – thus explicitly countering the attempt at reductionist closure in the AfD discourse.

The German case, then, points to a clear clash of competing populisms of the left and right, which interpellated very different popular subjects – "all people" understood as human subjects on the one hand and an ethnically reductionist "*Volk*" on the other – against a power bloc, while the CDU deployed an anti-populist frontier in order to interpellate the SPD as its primary, albeit weaker, challenger, coupled with a continuation of the differential-technocratic promise of solving problems as "the best answer to every form of populism" (Christlich-Demokratische Union 2016). The SPD, while actively deploying the nodal point "justice" ("Time for more justice"), was veritably squeezed between Die Linke's radicalization of "justice" discourse, which it chose not to bind equivalentially into a left-wing agonistic bloc against the right, and the CDU's anti-populist frontier that it failed to displace. The AfD and Die Linke presented very different counter-hegemonic challenges, with the AfD notably displacing Merkel's long-standing technocratic promise of "no transfer union" onto opposition to the euro as a *de facto* transfer union and pursuing radical opposition to "mass migration," while Die Linke consistently structured its opposition to the crisis management politics of the Merkel cabinets around the "social justice" interests of "all people" against power and profit interests.

Conclusion

A number of patterns emerge in the three cases examined here: in all of them, the strongest forms of populist discursive structuration are to be found on the left, with all three left-wing populist discourses deploying more traditionally socialist nodal points such as "social justice" or "solidarity" alongside the name of a "people" against a power bloc defined in economic and political terms. It is worth emphasizing that the main far-right discourses in the Netherlands and France were primarily nationalist (or civilizationist) rather than populist – and, indeed, were interpellated as "nationalist" by opposing discourses in the French case; while this has been demonstrated here from a discourse analytic perspective that emphasizes a central opposition of people vs. power as the key element of populism, the wider argument holds that there is little analytical value in conflating "populism" with promises to cleanse the Netherlands of "Islam" or to lead a "civilizational" struggle of "patriots" against "globalists." The AfD in Germany, on the other hand, displayed a particularly high degree of reductionist closure of its "people" onto an ethnically defined essence, continuing a trend in its discourse since the leadership coup of 2015 (Kim 2017). When we move to populism as a discursive effect of anti-populism as opposed to an analytical category, we can see that anti-populist logics tended to reduce "populism" onto the threat of Wilders in the Netherlands – which was tied to an extension of technocratic crisis management discourse in the VVD case and to an agonistic left vs. right frontier in GreenLeft – and equivalentially linked the left and far right as part of the German CDU's strategy of interpellating the SPD as its main opponent that is unable to uphold the same anti-populist frontier of legitimate democratic politics. The virtual absence of anti-populism in France is perhaps indicative of the sheer lack of candidates in this electoral cycle willing to assume a subject position of incumbent power, with Socialist Party (PS) candidate Benoit Hamon openly renouncing much of his party's record in government; indeed, it was up to Fillon – the former prime minister under Sarkozy – to show even a glimmer of anti-populism, even as he himself, much like Sarkozy, made use of a populist logic of incorporating part of the FN's constitutive outside.

Apart from the French exception, therefore, it can be seen that anti-populism indeed functions as a key extension of hegemonic crisis management discourses built on the technocratic promise to lead the country (or Europe as a whole) out of the "crisis" and, in its latest iteration, to guard it from the threat of "populism." Even in the French case,

Macron's temporary use of populism extended a key element of the predecessor government's agenda – namely, far-ranging liberalization of the labor market – while presenting itself as capable of stopping the FN where "the system" cannot. Indeed, the manner in which Macron, the technocrat from the financial sector and a former minister in a cabinet of technocrats, temporarily assumed the role of populist tribune has a symptomatic quality for how neo-liberal post-politics takes on antagonistic confrontation, if only temporarily, as an extension of its hegemonic defense of the dominant economic rationality: one need only look at the campaign speech in which Macron waves his arms passionately and thunders at the prospect of Le Pen coming to power: "*Pas ça, pas ça, pas ça!*" There is hardly a better illustration for the Lacanian symptom as a locus of *jouissance* and a mechanism of ideological fantasy: the candidate who knows he is putting on a show just for the election cycle, but also all those who rise behind him in rapturous applause and the millions who voted for him knowing exactly what they were getting – they are all "enjoying their symptom" in the shadow of the European crisis.

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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project involved a comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS endorses a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.