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Laclau's theory of Populism: The Royal Road to Totalitarianism?

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Publication date:
2018

Citation for published version (APA):
Hansen, A. D. (2018). *Populism and Democracy: Laclau's theory of Populism: The Royal Road to Totalitarianism?*. 1-17. Paper presented at ECPR 2018 Joint Sessions of Workshops , Nicosia, Cyprus.

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Populism and Democracy -

Laclau's theory of Populism: The Royal Road to Totalitarianism?

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ECPR Joint Sessions, Workshop:

Rethinking 'Militant Democracy': Democratic Dilemmas in the Age of Populism (WS19)

Nicosia 10-14 April 2018

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Abstract: Laclau's conception of populism is the strongest available and the charges against him, and against populism in general from many quarters is unwarranted. But there is still things to think more about in Laclau's theory. Ontologically I don't accept the idea of populism being placed on an ontological level. Normatively, even though there is no necessary link between populism and authoritarianism, neither is there a coincidence between the two. We therefore have to be able to specify which dimensions could be used in order to evaluate to which extent actual populists movements are democratic. In the paper I suggest Inclusion, Participation or active citizenship, pluralism. And go into deeper analysis of Lefort's concept of the empty place of power and the concomitant idea of incarnation in political representation. Keeping the place of power empty is something democratic populisms must consciously recognise and limit themselves in relation to. Analysis of actual populisms should address all 4 dimensions in answering the question of the extent to which they are democratic.

In an appendix I give an introduction to Laclau's theory of populism parted into nine constitutive parts. The introduction draws on examples from the Danish Social Democratic party's successful campaign in the early 1930'ies 'Denmark for the People'.

“Political theology, at least the type represented by Schmitt and Laclau, is what Machiavelli’s Prince was wrongly assumed to be: justification of dictatorship.” (Arato 2013, 167)

“Justification of dictatorship” - so harsh is Arato’s judgment of Laclau’s theory of populism.

According to Laclau’s own point of view his intervention in the debate on populism had helped turning the general attitude towards populism away from the ‘denigration of the masses’. As he stated, for him “it was a matter of fighting the anti-populist crusade on its own terrain. To do this, one had to do what the Christians did with the Cross: to transform a symbol of ignominy into a positive value. We have won some important victories in this confrontation.” (Howarth 2014, 6575 Kindle location) However, at least in the European context, the recent debate over Trump’s victory has shown that populism is still a pejorative term. ¹

In this paper I want to look into some of the normative issues I believe Laclau’s theory of populism raises, regarding the relation between populism and democracy. Very briefly my point of departure is that just as there is no necessary antagonism between the two – populism does not necessarily lead to totalitarianism or dictatorship - there is no necessity in their articulation. Populism might well take authoritarian forms.

If this is so we need to specify which kinds of articulations with which logics turn populisms anti-democratic or authoritarian. But first a few preliminary comments. I am a very unorthodox, perhaps even strange Laclauian because I don’t believe in the ontological primacy of the political (Hansen 2014). Obviously, then it is difficult to accept Laclau’s claim that populism has ontological primacy (Laclau 2005a and b). One might of course argue for less than an 'overall' ontological primacy of populism, and simply say it regards only the 'political'. Even that I find hard to accept. To me populism involves some notion of the people, and despite this figure’s centrality in modernity, it seems premodern forms of politics, as well as (a few) modern forms of politics are not carried out 'in the name of the people'.

In an interview Laclau gave a short hand definition of populism as “a way of constructing the political on the basis of interpellating the underdog to mobilize against the existing status quo.”²

(Howarth 2014, 6580 in kindle edition) Notice two things. First, populism is directed towards the

1 In Danish Radio, the serious news program P1 Morning referring to the (then) upcoming Italian referendum on constitutional change, the host stated: “The question is if Italy becomes the 3rd domino to tumble on the altar of populism.” (P1 Morgen: <http://www.dr.dk/radio/ondemand/p1/p1-morgen-2016-11-29> time: 1.41.30). Since then, Juncker has joined forces with Berlusconi ‘to fight populism’...

2 For an introduction to Laclau’s theory of populism, see Appendix, p. 11f

underdog, which not all political projects necessarily are, and therefore, second, I would emphasize the *a* (particular) way, stronger than Laclau did.

This leads to a quite pressing overall question, of how much of Ernesto's theory of populism is based on its ontologisation? Can one 'de-ontologise' the notion of populism and still keep the substantial parts: equivalential articulation of demands under a tendentially empty representation of the people in antagonistic opposition to a pole deemed to be anti-popular? (Laclau 2005a and b, cf. (Stavrakakis 2004))

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For now, I will leave this discussion aside, and instead focus on the normative issues.

Despite my critical comments, I still think Laclau's theory of populism is the strongest, and many of the charges against him, and against populism in general from many quarters is unwarranted.

Normatively my concern is if populism is indeed a logic (and not a 'phenomena' or an 'object', Laclau 2005a and b), it does not need to be democratic. It will be articulated in many different ways, some of which might well be potentially authoritarian or totalitarian – which is of course the reproach often heard.

Confronted with the question regarding populism and democracy³, Laclau stated the following:

“That the relation between the [the horizontal and the vertical] axes is one of tension is something that I fully accept. But that tension belongs to the way society is structured and is not the result of any logical difficulties inherent in my theory. It is true that the privileging of the vertical axis beyond a certain point leads to authoritarian politics – let us just think of Mugabe's Zimbabwe – but when this

³ “A third issue that arises from your theory of populism concerns the relationship between the horizontal and vertical axes of your model. A virtue of your account is that the vertical relationship that connects heterogeneous social demands to a singular signifier and leader in a populist movement or force is always supplemented by a series of horizontal linkages between demands. Both elements must be in some sort of equilibrium. However, the danger of populism for some commentators is the overshadowing of the horizontal by the vertical: populism always runs the risk of a purely vertical connection between the leader and the people at the expense of the overdetermined relations between demands that have been constituted in the various spaces of the state and civil society. A democratic populism, therefore, cannot sacrifice the carefully constructed equivalences between identities and subjectivities on the altar of a leadership cult or a transcendental signifier that promises the end of history. If it does so, then it risks the strong possibility of an 'authoritarian populism'. How would you respond to such views? Does a democratic populism require certain institutional forms and constraints?” (Howath 2014)

happens we can no longer speak of populism. The horizontal axis has been destroyed and it can no longer operate as the source of political legitimacy of a political regime – which, consequently, ceases to be democratic at all.” (Howarth 2014)

Note the question regarded populism’s relation to democracy but Laclau seems to evade the problem by assuming populism as such is democratic, i.e. retains a certain autonomy of the horizontal axis vis-a-vis the vertical, implying authoritarianism is simply not compatible with populism. I have two reservations. First, populism is a logic which strengthens the equivalence between the different positions and demands in the equivalential chain at the cost of their differential identities, and the complete equivalence would be coterminous with the complete subsumption of the horizontal axis under the vertical, and therefore undemocratic. Secondly, Laclau only seems to consider the moments *in* the equivalential chain. Most of the worries from liberal quarters regards the (construction of) the people’s relations to those positions placed outside, in antagonistic relation to, the equivalential chain. Of course Laclau might argue democracy is only possible on the basis of the establishment of a people, which involves the exclusion of the anti-popular, but (modern) democracy involves the acceptance of several attempts at constructing the people. (c.f. Mouffe 2005, 2013). Both reservations implies there is indeed an anti-democratic potential in the populist logic as such, or rather its undeniable anti-liberal logic runs the risk of turning populism anti-democratic.⁴

If populism is not democratic per se, we should be able to distinguish between democratic and non-democratic forms - or at least more or less democratic on a continuum. We should be able to give criteria for when the privileging of the vertical axis has gone too far, something needed both for scientific analysis as well as for political judgments.

First I would argue that we can rule out the left - right distinction in this respect. Not that the distinction between left and right-populisms is not a very serious distinction. It is, and I believe it is quite typical for those denigrating populism as such, as e.g. J W Müller (2014 and 2016) not to distinguish between leftwing and rightwing populisms. Some forms of left populism, if analysed

⁴ As we shall see populism runs counter to pluralism, and in certain conditions, the anti-pluralism can become undemocratic, if it threatens to ‘close the empty space of power’.

properly would reveal their definition to be too narrow.⁵ Partly following Laclau, Judis (2016) has suggested the following distinction between left- and rightwing populism:

“Leftwing populists champion the people against an elite or an establishment. Theirs is a vertical politics of the bottom and middle arrayed against the top... Rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamists, or African American militants. Leftwing populism is dyadic. Rightwing populism is triadic. It looks upward, but also down upon an out group.” (Judis 2016 pos 93-94 in Kindle ed.)

This distinction does not capture all the complexities of left vs right, but it will suffice for now. The advantage of this perspective over e.g. Müller’s is it makes it possible to at least see movements such as Podemos, Syriza and even Sanders Campaign as populisms. However, the democratic problem remains since even a leftwing populism, one that only expresses its antagonisms towards the ‘elite’, still runs the risk of turning authoritarian. It is probably difficult to imagine a radical democratic populism which is not leftist, but there are plenty (unfortunate) examples of less-democratic left populisms, such as Castro's Cuba, Venezuela – at least after Chavez - and Mao.

If being left-wing is an insufficient qualifier we need to point out which criteria can help us in evaluating the democratic quality of populist movements. In the same interview in which Laclau introduces the authoritarian danger, he dismisses the possibility of giving an institutional definition of democracy:

“democracy can only be constructed within the balance /tension constituted by the joint operation of the two axes. The different language games that this tension inaugurates and makes possible is exactly what we call politics. The institutional forms that will make possible the agonistic exchanges within that

⁵ As Laclau pointed out his opponents in the debate often also follow ”a discursive strategy of enlargement of the notion, but of an opposite sign. It consists in firmly sticking to the primary negative reference – demagoguery, manipulations and so on – but then extending it non-critically to completely different sorts of political movements and practices as a way of disqualifying them.” (Howarth 2014). In a Danish context this is especially clear in M. H. Hansen’s treatment of Podemos (Hansen 2017)

tension will vary from society to society and no blueprint of an ideal democratic society can be given.” (Howarth 2014)

One can agree with Laclau that the institutional forms will vary, and that we should not look for blueprints. However, I still think we need to specify some form of criteria of democracy. In the remaining part of the paper, I shall look into four such dimensions: inclusion, activism, pluralism and the empty place of power.⁶

The two first, inclusion and activism, are to some extent inherent in populism, and are, together with the very (populist) proclaiming of the ‘power of the people’, quite obvious ways populism (often) actually *strengthen* democracy. But not necessary so. Inclusion is a strong democratic logic and is often present in populism - especially in Latin America, but also in e.g. Podemos and Siriza. However most right wing forms take on a potentially anti-democratic form when they combine a strong inclusion of (their version of) the people with an equally strong exclusion of part(s) of the population. Activism, or participation again may or may not be part of actual populist movements. Here the relation to right wing populism is less unequivocal, since these may take the form of actual active movements. More often than not, however they do not, and depend mostly on strong leadership and passive support. Likewise, one can imagine left wing populisms depending less on actual mobilisation, and more on leadership and representation. However populist logics are relatively easily articulated with the democratic logics of inclusion and activism.

This is not the case for the third dimension, pluralism. Even though Laclau consistently argued populism is a relation of equivalence and not of identity, and therefore the ‘internal’ pluralism was guaranteed, my claim is that the populist logic of constructing *A* people, in antagonistic opposition to ‘the elite’ actually is an anti-pluralist logic. However, the question is more complicated than a simple opposition might suggest. What is very often overlooked in (liberal) responses to populism, is the impossibility of absolute pluralism. As especially Mouffe has consistently argued (e.g. Mouffe 2005) pluralism cannot be total. Any regime, even the most democratic, must draw borders and antagonistically exclude that which is incompatible with its principles. This is highly present in e.g. Müllers considerations on ‘how to deal with the populists’ (Müller 2014). No matter the answer, even posing the question shows that borders must be drawn, and exclusions (in some form) carried out. Therefore the real distinction is not between (liberal) pluralists and (populist) anti-pluralists,

⁶ NB: I have only developed the arguments regarding the empty place of power. The notes on inclusion and activism are obviously very sketchy.

but rather *where* exactly the limits of pluralism are drawn. Obviously many right-wing populisms (and some leftwing as well) are drawing their limits in potentially anti-democratic ways.

This leads me to the final, and probably, decisive, dimension, Lefort's notion of *keeping the place of power empty* (Lefort 1988). Keeping the place of power empty can (presumably) take different institutional forms, but would still provide a perspective from where to evaluate actual populisms. It would also be a pretty strong answer to the critics, since many base their arguments on Lefort (eg. Müller 2016, Arato 2013).

Regarding his relation to the question of keeping the place of power empty, Laclau was not perfectly clear. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Lefort and the empty place of power held a quite prominent place (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 186–87). In *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005) (OPR) and later he avoids a straightforward acceptance of Lefort's position. In OPR Laclau mentions that the spectrum of possible arrangements is wider than a simple totalitarian/ democracy dichotomy suggests (Laclau 2005, 166) which is in no doubt true. However, it doesn't really solve the problem of being able to distinguish between the two.

Laclau observes that Lefort's notion of the empty place of power is a matter of a structural (even if symbolic) position. In contrast Laclau points out a) that emptiness also regards the identities (subjectivities) that might occupy that position and b) emptiness needs to be constantly constructed (ibid: 166-170). Again, I agree with both qualifications, but they don't solve the problem of distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic populisms. Regarding the emptiness of the political identities/ subjectivities I would argue that emptying is a feature haunting all kinds of broader identities; fascists, communists and other totalitarian or authoritarian as well. If this is so, emptiness - in itself - is not a certain sign of democracy (since it haunts all possible political identities).

Rather I suggest only (the agonistic) awareness of the emptiness and recognition of other force's legitimate right to also strive for the occupation of the empty space makes (populist) movements democratic. Laclau pointed out "the place of power cannot be entirely empty. Even the most democratic of societies would have symbolic limits to determine who can occupy the place of power" (Laclau 2005, 166). One way of interpreting this is that in a democracy only agonistic identities should be allowed access to the empty place of power.

It is also true that emptiness needs to be constantly constructed, since democracy is “a community’s whole political way of life” and not just “constitutional arrangements” which “represents only a formal crystallization”, both regarding the place and the subjects that occupy it. However, the fact that the emptiness of the place of power cannot be taken for granted, but should be constantly constructed, doesn’t disqualify it as a marker or criteria.

Emptiness and ‘the two bodies’

One of the consequences of emptiness is the ‘revival’ of a logic of incarnation, and therefore of the two bodies figure. The distinction between the mortal ‘empirical’ body of the King and the transcendental, immortal one. The latter does not disappear, even in democracies. Laclau states: “the immortal body of the king” has not been replaced by “pure emptiness”. “What has changed in democracy ... is that ... the revival ... [of the immortal body] today transmigrates through a variety of bodies.” (ibid: 170)

Interestingly, it is precisely the argument of the revival of the ‘two bodies’ figure which makes Arato (2013) accuse Laclau of being caught in a political theology, which in itself has dictatorial/totalitarian consequences. According to Arato it does not matter if the two body figure is transposed to the figure of the people rather than that of the King. To the extent the people is presented as having two bodies, the reference to the transcendental quality *in itself* effectively rules out possible/legitimate opposition (ibid: 156-66). According to Laclau the ‘two bodies’ remain: The empty signifier representing the populist chain is invested with ‘more than it self’ (the absent fullness) and as such it acquires a two-body quality. To Arato this is the royal road to authoritarianism:

“when one (...) opts for an interventionist political posture, as do Schmitt and Laclau, the authoritarian consequences of political theology may be unavoidable, intended or not. To put a human actor like “the class” or “the people” or “the leader” in the place formerly occupied by theological or religious categories like “God” or “Christ” or “pope” means not only to endow the former with the quality of sacredness but to attribute to them supernatural traits that the empirical referent cannot sustain.

In the face of such constructs the dehumanization of the inevitable enemies follows, along with the need to extricate the genuine agent from its empirical forms. Not only external but internal enemies follow from the conception, one

that entails authoritarian suppression. Not only the leader and his or her group but the analyst participates in that suppression, at the very least by giving tools and useful disguises to a power that can never succeed if forced to act merely in its own name.” (Arato 2013, 167) ⁷

The overall answer provided by Laclau’s theory is to affirm authoritarianism and exclusions as real dangers, but dangers inscribed in politics as such, not an error in the theory. However, I think the theory could get a little further and present more developed answer to the charge. It could be argued there is a difference between pre-modern divine transcendality/ two-bodies and the modern form. The latter owes its existence to an experience of lack or dislocation (in general, negativity) and therefore the (quasi) transcendality ‘elevating’ the empty signifier/ representation of the chain is ‘contaminated’, in a way the pre-modern religious was not. The latter was entirely ‘positive’, even if inaccessible to us mortal humans. It is actually this contamination, this passage through an experience of the negative, that makes it at least potentially articulable with democracy. However, it will only take on a democratic form to the extent it is agonistically articulated with some form of the self restraint inherent in keeping the place of power open. This would underline the need of being able to distinguish between authoritarian and democratic forms of populism.

Finally I want to address the question of Liberal democracy. Laclau has always - and rightly so - underlined the contingency of the link between liberalism and democracy. My question is whether keeping the place of power open is not based on some kind of organization including moments which he refers to the liberal tradition: “elections, division of powers, etc.”? (in Howarth 2014) And one should add freedom of speech and of assembly? Even if this is not so, if the place of power could be kept open without any articulation of democracy with liberalism, would a radicalised liberal democracy, with its articulation of democratic equality with liberal/ individual liberty, not still be the most attractive regime? That used to be Chantal Mouffe’s position (Mouffe 2005, 201) (even though I’m in doubt now). Laclau stated he was proud of an “institutional deficit” in his theory. But underscoring the *contingency* of the articulation of democracy with liberalism does not answer the question of its’ desirability – or the opposite.

⁷ Müller (2016) argues along the same lines: to him populism as such involves a moralistic logic of pureness of the people, which leads to the exclusion of those who do not belong to the pure people.

Conclusion

To sum up. Populism, in both its right and left wing forms, may or may not be democratic. So we need a set of dimensions in order to evaluate whether – or rather to which degree – actual populisms are democratic or authoritarian. I suggest that inclusion and activism, which to a high degree is inherent in populist logics as such, populism, which largely runs counter to populism and especially Lefort's notion of keeping the place of power empty could function as such. Laclau has posed at least two reservations about the purity and institutionalization of emptiness in Lefort's model, regarding both the place and the (lack of view to) the subjects that might occupy it. However, as I see it, none of the objections disqualifies the figure as such: democracy is still dependent on the openness of the place of power. Both in the subjectivities occupying it – who agonistically have to accept the legitimacy of other forces striving to occupy it. And in the place itself, which, despite the fact that limits to the occupiers must be drawn, must be kept open: i.e. all the forces fighting in a democracy must accept that they can only temporarily occupy it.

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Appendix: Laclau's theory of populism⁸

The following is a brief introduction to Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism. Here populism is not understood as a well-defined phenomenon, but rather as a set of logics which primarily involves a construction of the 'people' in antagonistic opposition to the 'elite'.

Like the rest of the Laclau's theory, his conception of populism (2005a; 2005b) is complex and relatively difficult to access. I therefore unfold it in 9 points and review them sequentially.

According to Laclau, populism is not an object or phenomenon, but rather:

- 1) a form of politics, a specific articulatory logic (to be distinguished from a contradictory logic), and therefore
- 2) a matter of degree which
- 3) in times of deeper crises
- 4) constructs a popular pole, which
- 5) in antagonistic opposition to the elite / power block, make
- 6) a variety of demands and identities equivalent vis-a-vis the power-block, by which it creates
- 7) a particular political identity (an offer of identification), which
- 8) are represented through a tendentially empty symbol (an 'empty signifier'), which is often
- 9) the name of the leader.

Let's take them step by step.

An articulatory logic

Rather than giving yet another 'positive' definition of populism, Laclau's strategy is to see populism as a specific form of politics, a 'discursive logic of articulation' (Laclau 2005a, 106; 2005b: 33-4). That it is a discursive articulation does not mean it is a surface phenomenon, for example simple rhetoric. The fact that something is discursively articulated means it takes its form from the context in which it is linked to the other elements within that specific context (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The difference to the Marxist notion of class is therefore clear. The working class in Marxism is precisely not dependent on the historical relationships it may be part of. It remains the same, whether it is actually part of wider alliances at any given time.

Via Gramsci Laclau and Mouffe reached the conclusion that the Marxist idea of social actors can not be maintained. The relationships a given social force (which does not need to have a class identity) forms, is not taking place at a superstructure level. They modify the identities involved. That was exactly the realization that made Gramsci speak of 'collective wills' rather than classes (Gramsci 1971). Laclau and Mouffe generalized the insight and pointed out that there is nothing which simply is (what it is). Everything is articulated and thus modified by entering into certain relationships, rather than others, which were also possible at some point (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; for introductions see Hansen 2005; 2017). It does not mean everything may always be articulated with everything else, but there is no more basic ontological limits for articulation. No relationships have a non-articulable core or essence.

The presence of articulatory logics is most evident when social conditions become 'shaked', when one can not just go on as usual. Laclau's concept for such shakings is dislocation (Laclau 1990, 5f) The point is that when a social relationship is 'shaken', dislocated, there is a need for new articulations, i.e. answers to how such dislocations can be overcome. There will usually be more

⁸ The following is a translation of an article by me in Danish: 'The People does not Exist – Therefore We Have Populism' in *Politik*, 2017

bids of what are the best solutions, and therefore there is an element of conflict involved in articulation, right up to the fact that the old order itself, the one which is shaken or dislocated is the problem and must be replaced by something new. As we will see, populism is precisely an attempt to such radical re-articulation which problematises the shaken order.

Two types of articulatory logic

The debate about populism clearly shows us the absence of essence. For Laclau, populism is the clearest example of a specific type of articulate logic, the logic of equivalence. I unfold it further below below, but generally an equivalent logic is one which (contributes to) eliminate differences. The individual elements which are linked in the chain become more and more identical, they can be exchanged for each other, in common opposition to something they are not. In contrast to the equivalent logic, we have a differential logic, a logic of 'positive' differences (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 127f). In it the individual elements are chained side by side and retain their particular features. Laclau calls this logic institutional, and in politics it is seen in, for example, the welfare state, where (the logic is) there are no demands or policies that can not (in principle) be included and met. But the logic can also be found in, for example, clientelism (Laclau 1997, 130; 2005a, 123).

There are thus two significant differences between a differential and equivalent logic, or between populism and institutionalized politics. First, in the differential logic there is not (explicitly) an opponent, which by definition can not be included. In contrast, the equivalence between individual elements is based on their common (negative) relation to what threatens them all. As a consequence, the second difference is that the individual demands and policies in institutionalized politics retain their identity. In contrast, an equivalent relationship is the diminishing of particularities, so that the individual joints can be replaced by the others. In institutionalized politics, environmental and cultural problems can be treated relatively differentially. In a populist rupture all the different demands will tend to represent the same dissatisfaction with the ruling order.

A matter of degree

However, it is important to keep in mind that the two logics will never be present in pure form. There is no political order that can achieve complete institutionalization or universal inclusion. There will always be limits, and different issues and demands will be chained together as representations for the same. Conversely, even the most open, revolutionary rupturous situation will have certain relationships to an institutional complex. That is precisely why it is logics which may be more or less dominant, but as always will exist in a blend relationship. Therefore, the right question to pose, is not so much whether this or each leader, movement, etc. as such is populist. The question is more to *what extent* that is the case.

Crises

I have mentioned populist rupture. A little more precisely, Laclau's claims that populism occurs during periods of deeper crises, i.e. dislocations in connection with institutions, representation and society in general. This is so, because populism rather than being bound to a particular historical phase - transition from traditional to modern society - manifests itself in situations of ruptures when a given hegemonic order is under pressure. Discourse theory takes its inspiration from Gramsci's concept of organic crisis, with which he refers to deeply ruptures, such as the collapse of the Weimar Republic. According to Laclau, we have populism when a crisis creates a situation where the ruling discourse can not provide answers to the frustrations and demands existing in society.

When the institutionalized (differential) order can not meet these demands, the possibility is created that they no longer exist relatively separately but, on the contrary, are made equivalent to each other. As we shall see, it is through such an equivalence of identities and demands (that they can be exchanged for each other) the people is constructed.

A popular pole

In such situations it becomes apparent that political identities are not given by basic categories and established on a more primal ontological level like the notion of class in Marxism, but is the result of articulation processes. That is, they are the result of contingent linking of relationships that do not have a prior necessity with each other. With a simple rewriting of a famous quote of Laclau and Mouffe, one can say that *the people does not exist*. In more everyday terms, it simply means that the people articulated by populism does not exist prior to the specific political process. Canovan describes the people as a "promiscuous concept", with a ghostly elusiveness (Canovan 2005, 140; see also Korsgaard 2001). That is why processes of articulation are so evident in populism's active construction of the people.

Antagonism: People vs. elite

A dividing line between the people and its 'Other', a division of society into two contradictory poles, is characteristic of populism. The populist logic is a boundary drawing logic. Society is not seen as a whole where everyone can be accommodated. On the contrary, there is an illegitimate elite that is antagonized (Laclau 2005a; 2005b). According to Laclau, this antagonization is the only way a popular identity can be united. Since there is no previous necessary internal link between the elements which will be included in a construction of the people, its unity must be created, articulated. It happens through an active exclusion of what the people is *not*. In the same movement as populism designates the people, it also denotes the opposition of the people: the power, the elite, the oligarchy, etc. All the demands and identities constituting the popular pole are a unity only to the extent they are linked through an antagonistic opposition to the non-popular.

By this we can clearly see the contingency, the absent essence of the 'people'. Unlike classes in Marxism, which also only exist in their conflict of interest to each other, but where both working class and bourgeoisie are given by the underlying economic structures, neither the people nor the elite are given in advance. What and who is actually designated as being part of the people or the elite is a concrete historical question.

Equivalent demands and identities

As we have seen, a number of specific demands and identities are made equivalent through the antagonism to the non-popular, the power-block or the elite. That is, they can be exchanged for each other in their common negative relationship with the elite, the non-popular. This is a negative relationship because (the assertion is that) the individual elements do not share a deeper 'positive' quality that predetermines them to form part of a popular pole. Whether a given identity comes to do so is an open political question, a result of concrete historical articulations.

A little more (an excursus) on demands

One of the elements in Laclau's theory, which I have not specified so far, demands, requires a more careful consideration. It's one of the places I disagree with him. Laclau claims that the minimum

unit for the analysis of populism should be demands, not groups (Laclau 2005a, 72f; 2005b, 34f). This is because he wants to de-essentialise the 'group'. Articulation goes all the way, and therefore there are no groups that have any necessary status. Economic classes, according to this logic, are also the result of concrete articulations, which the labour movement's historical problems of creating unity indicate. If we extend the considerations to the so-called new political identities, it becomes even more apparent. Gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, religion, environment, animal welfare etc. are all identities that do not represent 'objective' group affiliations, but are the result of concrete articulations. Which group or social sector will act as identity-bearing is not given in advance.

The other theoretical point is that the denominator 'demand' has a built-in double identity that helps capture the situation of rupture populism grows in. According to the distance between request and demands corresponds to the distance between institutionalized politics and (the beginning) of a popular rupture. In normal, relatively stable periods, the political system (in the traditional sense) is open to the treatment of 'requests'. The different problems lead to requests for solutions which can, to a certain extent, be met by the prevailing order: in relation to infrastructure, hospitals etc. However, if these requests are increasingly disappointed and can not be met, they change into demands. If there is a sufficient number of unsatisfied demands, equivalent relationships can be created between them and we see the beginning of the formation of a populist popular pole in contrast to the power or the elite, up to (the possibility of) a demand for a real regime- or system change.

I completely agree with Laclau's efforts to avoid 'groups' as under theorized essential categories (see his reading of group psychology in 2005a, 21-64). We are all included in countless contexts, subject positions as it is called in the theory, and which subject positions become crucial to our identities (and not least political identities), depend on specific historical situations and articulations. However, I think Laclau makes the perspective one-dimensional claiming that only demands can be the minimal unit of populism.

For a first look, demands fit well into Laclau's effort to determine populism at an ontological level. A claim is formulated because there is a lack of something which is not as it should be. That is, demands create a connection to a dislocation, a demand marks a shaking, a negativity. But I would argue that claims are not (and can not be) an ontological category. It is contingent whether the experience of a failure, i.e. of a dislocation, is translated into demands or, for example, parked as destiny, something nobody can do anything about, or the like. In addition, it is also apparent that demands, as Laclau himself points out, has a number of positive specificities, which suggest that it can not be elevated to an ontological category. For example, a claim is aimed at something, or someone, an authority which is expected to meet it or if we have an antagonization, is perceived as the obstacle to achieving the desired new situation. All in all, demands can not be said to be an ontological category.

If that's right, it opens up a question which Laclau does not even raise, whether not other 'elements' could be included in the (construction of) the people? In his previous discussions (Laclau 1980; 1985) he spoke of 'popular positionalities', not just demands. There are also identities, which are also called social sectors or groups. These are themselves the result of contingent articulations and do not have a deeper ontological necessity built-in, as they are modified by being articulated into a popular pole. But they are functioning as identities and play an important role in populist equivalences. Empirically, the designation of the identities which make up the people is also a central part of populism. But other 'elements', not least the leader and the movements' symbols, play a key role, without necessarily being articulated as demands.

A special political identity (an identification offer)

Laclau rejects that groups have a predetermined objective existence. If 'the people does not exist', if there is only the people who appears as a result of specific political articulations and struggles, what does actually bind it together - and further determines which specific construction of identity gains support and becomes hegemonic, as it is called? The response Laclau gives in his later writings is affect, affective attachment to a project which goes beyond or rather fills the distance to simple rational interest, support for a populist (and any other political) project, has (Laclau 2005, 101f). The theoretical point is that because we are talking about crisis and breakdowns, there is a lack and distance. Something is not as it should be. The deeper the crisis goes, the more the different identities are shaken – dislocated – the less the support for a project that presents itself as the solution to the problems is given by 'rational calculus' and interest assessment.⁹ For Laclau this point is general. There is no identity (in fact no signification at all (Laclau 2014)), which does not, to some extent, involve an 'investment'. But we see it very clearly in populism, not least in the symbols used. For example, think of the Danish Social Democracy in 1933 and the song "When I see a red flag billow"¹⁰ or more contemporary Dannebrog (the name of the Danish Flag) for the Danish People's Party. What do these symbols mean more generally? Laclau's answer is they represent what one could call the 'negation of the negation', i.e. the delivery of the solution to the situation that is perceived as wrong, or as lacking. The more inadequate the situation is, the deeper the crisis strikes, the less the symbol will signal something concrete and the more the affective dimension will dominate.

The empty signifier

The unity of the popular pole is created through a common negative demarcation of the non-popular. But in order for the people to be able to appear as a unity, there must be something that represents the equivalential chain as a totality, a whole (Laclau 1996). The question is how such a representation can take place. If the different demands (and identities etc.) in the equivalency chain shared a common core, there would be no problem of representation. But because there is no such common element, the representation must take place differently. This is a general problem that applies to all identities. What is going to signify and thus represent a given totality cannot be 'the essence', since there is no such thing. What we have is a crystallization of a unity, of a totality. Therefore, the representing signifier must empty itself himself of (its particular) meaning in order to be able to represent the entire chain.

Again, this general logic (of creation of unity through the emptying of a particular signifier) is something which is highly visible in populism because so many heterogeneous elements are linked together. The characteristic emptiness of populist symbols is a particularly clear example of a general problem. Because the different elements of a populist chain of equivalence have no common element, the symbol which joins them must become increasingly empty, the more the chain is extended. The more dislocated the situation is, the longer the popular chain of equivalence stretches, the more the empty signifier (the unifying symbol) will signify a hope of something beyond the present state. The central symbol must also be emptied because it serves as a

⁹ Whether a given political project is experienced as serving or, on the contrary, opposing one's interests, is of course, the result of former articulations: There simply is no such thing as 'objective interests'. This logic is absolutely necessary to understand the Rust-belt workers' support for Trump and the many former Communists in France, now supporting Front National.

¹⁰ For an English translation of this very famous song from Danish Social Democracy, see: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/n%C3%A5r-jeg-ser-et-r%C3%B8dt-flag-sm%C3%A6lde-when-i-see-red-flag-billow.html>

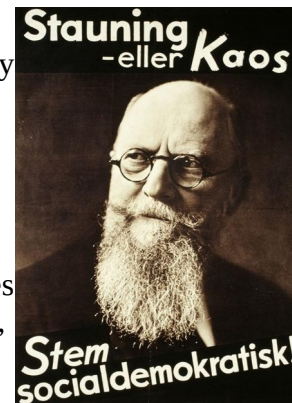
representation of very different aspirations, ie. affective investments, to the new state to be instituted.

The Leader

In the populism debate, the leader occupies a very central place (for an overview, see, for example, Panizza 2005, 18). One of Laclau's favourite examples of an empty signifier is Peron in Argentine (Laclau 2005a, 214f), and there is no doubt the leader is often a very central figure in populism. Many, like Žižek (2006), base a normative condemnation of populism on this, and names such as Erdogan, Orbán and Trump are, of course, not representatives of constructions of the popular with strong democratic appeal. However, two things should be emphasized. Firstly, even though the leader often functions as the empty signifier, it is not a necessity. In fact, the two 'original' populist movements, the Populist Party in the United States and the Narodnics in Russia had no strong leader figure. Secondly there is no necessity between a leader who acts as 'empty signifier' and an authoritarian development. Laclau (2005a, 100) points to Nelson Mandela as an obvious example, and in Denmark, Stauning in the Social Democracy's campaign on Denmark for the People is another.

One of the most famous slogans from Danish political history, and a very famous poster shows this clearly:

Stauning or Chaos. It can hardly be said more clearly. The alternative to the Social democratic project is 'chaos', generalized dislocation and negativity. Who can prevent this? Who can gather the people in the movement towards the 'absent fulness' (the overcoming of all the problems)? The leader, Stauning, can. Thus, the figure Stauning becomes an empty signifier, symbolising the content of the project and, of course, became the target of widespread affectionate investment.¹¹



¹¹ The Social Democracy achieved 46.1% of the votes in the 1935 election; a result that has not been passed since.

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