

IMAGINING POPULISM DIFFERENTLY. NOTES ON THE PROPOSAL OF A FEMINIST, INTERNATIONALIST, REPUBLICAN POPULISM¹

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ABSTRACT

In the article I briefly discuss four important interventions from Biglieri and Cadahia's *Seven Essays on Populism*: (a) against anti-institutionalist readings of populism, they make a plea for a 'populist institutionalism'; (b) they defend a plebeian version of republicanism; (c) they seek to rehabilitate the nation-form while, at the same time, arguing for a transnational populism, and (d) they argue in favour of the feminization of populism and an 'antagonism of care'. However, while it is argued in the article that their main intervention, i.e., their ontological claim about the intrinsically emancipatory nature of all populism, remains ultimately unconvincing, it could be interpreted as a productive political incantation to make use of the human faculty of imagination and start imagining populism differently.

KEYWORDS

Populism, post-foundationalism, antagonism, imagination

In their *Seven Essays on Populism*, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia present a staunch defense of populism. Of populism *as such*, to be sure, not merely of left-wing or progressive variants of it. Starting from a critique of the widespread mediatic and scientific vilification of populism within the liberal consensual matrix, they make the convincing case that what is behind the pejorative denouncement of populism is a post-political understanding of democracy as a largely procedural affair within a minimalist institutional framework. From such a perspective, populism can

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only be seen as a deviation from the salutary path of liberalism. In contrast to the liberal critique of populism, Biglieri and Cadahia's book provides a perspective much needed in a discussion dominated by scholars from the Anglosphere and Western Europe. They make very clear that other parts of the world have undergone quite different historical experiences of populism. The Latin American experience in particular proves key if one wants to dissociate oneself from the Eurocentric equation between populism and fascism. In many Latin American countries – similar to the forgotten, or repressed, history of the populist party in the US –, populism has been experienced as a largely emancipatory phenomenon: as an anti-oligarchic, egalitarian project geared at integrating the impoverished masses into the political system. Biglieri and Cadahia thus engage in an effort of epistemic decolonization without falling into the trap of an extreme standpoint epistemology that would leave no room for articulation between different epistemic experiences. Rather, they 'attempt to grasp what is universalizable – in the sense of a situated universalism – in the problems, challenges, and responses offered by a locus of enunciation like Latin America within the emancipatory production of knowledge in the Global South and Global North' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: xxiii). And what they seek to contribute from their perspective is an unapologetic view of populism as an intrinsically emancipatory endeavor.

This view is rather controversial as it conflicts not only with the typical denunciations of populism by the liberal mainstream. It also conflicts with the views of some of their fellow travelers from the Essex school of discourse analysis tradition – Mouffe, Stavrakakis, and myself are mentioned – who would insist on the ideologically undefined character of populism. From the latter perspective, which relies as much on Ernesto Laclau's seminal theory of populism as Biglieri and Cadahia do (Laclau 2005), populism only acquires ideological meaning through the articulation of its elements into a 'chain of equivalence' so that all kinds of right, left or even liberal – one may only think of Macron's first election campaign – variants of populism are possible. While remaining hesitant, for reasons developed at the end of this article, concerning this main *volte-face* proposed in the book, I do think that many highly important points are contributed to the populism debate by Biglieri and Cadahia. In fact, the authors' project seems to consist of a point-by-point refutation of the fatuous charges typically leveled against populism in all its variants. By bringing in the perspective of the Global South, they disturb the Euro- or Anglocentric tunnel vision that can only see in populism a 'pathology' or dangerous excess of democratic claims destined to endanger the smooth workings of the institutional machine of liberalism. In contrast, Biglieri and Cadahia's alternative vision allows for an idea of populism that would be emancipatory, plural, internationalist, plebeian-republican, and feminist. I fully subscribe to this political program, even as it is not entirely clear to me whether, or to which degree, their account is meant to be mainly descriptive or mainly normative. Is it a wishing list, in the sense that we all

would want an internationalist or feminist populism, knowing at the same time that it barely exists yet? Is it a normative claim in the sense that populism can only be called emancipatory if it is plural, plebeian, internationalist, and feminist? And would the latter claim not conflict with Biglieri and Cadahia's main wager that populism *eo ipso* is emancipatory? Before tackling these questions, I will first outline where I think the main achievement of the book lies: Biglieri and Cadahia, from a Latin American perspective of feminist militants and scholars, manage to bring into view the progressive aspects of populism and, on top of it, open space for imagining a populism that integrates hitherto unconnected political positions into a new chain of equivalence.

What allows them to build such a new chain of equivalence is their politico-theoretical perspective that clearly falls into the post-foundational camp (Marchart 2007; Marchart 2018). Against liberal or autonomist approaches, which would best be described as *anti*-foundational, the authors assume that, despite the absence of an ultimate ground, *some* ground needs to be politically instituted. Populism is a political attempt to construct a provisional ground of the social by way of an antagonistic division of society between the people, in the plebeian sense of the term, and an order dominated by an oligarchic elite. The people is therefore not understood to be a pre-existent assemblage of individual wills, as in liberalism or autonomism. Rather, in Gramscian terms, a 'collective will' needs to be constructed through a strategy of antagonization. Biglieri and Cadahia do not go as far as explicitly making the following claim, but, in my view, 'the people' are established by populism precisely as the contingent ground of society. The fact that this ground is contingent (as every ground), that, in other words, it is a groundless ground, must not detract from the fact that it still *is* a ground. It is not merely a legal fiction, as in liberal constitutionalism, nor is it an unarticulated multitude, as in autonomist approaches. The people is the political subject which, from a populist perspective, is supposed to ground, shape, and order the social in the 'popular' interest, thus serving as society's political foundation. As soon as such a perspective, which I think is integral to Biglieri and Cadahia's project, is adopted with all its consequences, we arrive at an entirely different view of populism as a truly political project that dares to fundamentally reshape society. And it is at this point where some of their most significant contributions to the debate can be found. I will briefly discuss four of these interventions.

First, if populism is an attempt at grounding the social, we must abandon the anti-institutional penchant of many descriptions of populism. Biglieri and Cadahia do a great job at refuting the useless dichotomy between populist mobilization on one side and institutions, including state institutions, on the other. Against anti-institutionalist readings of populism, they make a plea for a 'populist institutionality' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 51) which, of course, cannot be congruent with the proceduralist liberal take on institutions. The state theoretical thrust of the argument is

clear and has been spelled out before by Marxist state theorists from Nicos Poulantzas to Bob Jessop: the state is not a monolithic bloc detached from struggles in civil society; the state is itself a relational terrain of struggles that cut across the state/civil society division. It follows that popular struggles, even when suppressed by coercive state apparatuses, can and must penetrate state institutions. A merely ‘abolitionist’ perspective, based on the sweeping anarchist injunction to get rid of the state altogether, is not only intellectually unsatisfying, given its simplistic nature, but it is also politically unpromising. The point is, in again Gramscian parlance, ‘to become state’. It is from their Latin American position that Biglieri and Cadahia contribute a particularly salient dimension to the debate. While the state in the Latin American countries belongs to the legacy of colonialism and until today can be described as ‘oligarchic state’, this does not preclude the possibility of wresting state institutions from the hands of the wealthy few: ‘It was the oligarchy that made the state the property of the few, so why not think that it might be the act of popular desecration that transforms institutions into a space for the nobodies to express their antagonisms’ (51). The greatest innovation of populism, they continue, is ‘to risk building a state-form that can account for the irruption of the people into politics’ (51), since ‘populism takes the risk of “working with” the antagonism that this irruption implies’ (51). State institutions, from a populist perspective, need to be envisaged as a terrain that ‘incorporates the contentious dimension of equivalential logic to compete with those on top for these same (oligarchic or popular) state forms. In other words, the state (and institutions) become another antagonistic space in the dispute between those on the bottom and those on top’ (67). In this sense, state institutions, as soon as they are partially conquered by a populist project, may become an instrument that helps interrupt oligarchic domination.

The Latin American experience, to which the authors refer, is a case in point. The Kirchner governments in Argentina, the populist governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, of Lula da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, or Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, have managed – in different ways, and with varying success – to establish for some time a ruptural institutionality by linking popular demands with state institutions, thus strengthening the egalitarian dimension of the state (67). These projects proved that ‘it is possible to process political demands constructed at the popular level through the state’, whereby, the state is ‘not reduced to a mere manager of market health, but, instead, by embracing the inherently political dimension of the state’s role, populism tries to keep alive democratic imaginaries of social justice, equality, and political freedom’ (60-1). What is hardly conceivable from a liberal, Eurocentric perspective makes perfect sense within the Latin American realm of experience. What populism does, in short, is bring antagonism to the state, by using its conquered institutions to address popular demands and repress oligarchic domination. The fact that other state institutions may strike back, as the authors illustrate with the many

attempts at getting rid of populist leaders through judicial means and the newly discovered instrument of the ‘legal coup’, does not disprove their point. As long as state institutions exist, they remain a key terrain of popular struggle.

Second, the authors locate their institutionalist theory within a rich discussion that is developing in the Spanish-speaking world around a plebeian version of republicanism. While most republicanism in history was oligarchic or, as I would prefer calling it, senatorial, the popular or democratic variants of republicanism seem to belong to a submerged and half-forgotten past with very few authors defending them, most notably Machiavelli and arguably Spinoza (McCormick 2011; Negri 2004). Given the relatively scarce number of texts or passages to which one usually refers, I must confess that, from an intellectual history point of view, I remain sceptical about the actual historical importance of this tradition – if it is a tradition. The overwhelming majority of republics was far from democratic. Rather, republicanism – very much like liberal democracy – was the name for a political order meant to co-opt the populace into as marginal institutional places as possible in order to avoid social uprisings – *tumulti*, as the Italian authors would say – and protect the property of the wealthy casts. Biglieri and Cadahia are of course well aware of this. But again, the Latin American perspective brings an important and politically up-to-date aspect to the debate. As the authors claim, following Eduardo Rinesi, ‘Latin American populism is the form through which republicanism has developed in Latin America’ (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 72). Populism and republicanism, they claim, need to be thought of jointly.² One reason for thinking populism and republicanism together is structural and lies in the fact that republicanism, in its democratic variant, allows for the productive integration of conflict in the institutional setting (a point repeatedly made by Claude Lefort regarding Machiavelli’s two conflicting *umori* of the people and the nobles) – which neatly matches the idea of a ‘ruptural institutionality’. But another reason is historical: viewed against the larger background of the democratic revolutions in Latin America and the Caribbean, beginning with the Haitian revolution, a history of ‘plebeian republicanism’ unfolds ‘that runs parallel to the official story of the oligarchic and exclusionary nation-states inherited from colonial rule. As if Latin American and Caribbean independence secretly inaugurated two forms of institutionality and citizenship, two ways of thinking about the role of the state and the law, two competing historical forces split between the construction of an unequal and elitist society and an egalitarian popular society’. The black Haitian slaves assumed ‘that it was their responsibility to universalize the secret of plebeian republics: that there can be no truly republican freedom if it is not possible to build equality’ (74). It is this tradition of plebeian Jacobinism that lives

² This is why we need to ‘begin speaking in terms of a republican populism as the antithesis of neoliberalism, as a way of naming one of the ways that plebeian republicanism has been taking shape in Latin America’ (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 73).

on in today's democratic understanding of republicanism. However, as I will argue in my concluding remarks, I do think that this 'universalist' understanding is a particularly modern feature of republicanism and can hardly be found in the antique or medieval republics. It only comes to life with the democratic revolution.

Third, and presumably to the distress of many, Biglieri and Cadahia seek to rehabilitate the nation-form while, at the very same time, arguing for a transnational populism. Here again, the historical experience from the Global South of an emancipatory nationalism – just think of the many national liberation projects that accompanied the process of decolonization – is key to understanding the argument. And again, they direct our attention to the ambivalent, if not split tradition of nation-building from below and nation-building from above. There is not one idea of the nation, there are two ideas:

The first of these is built 'from above' by Latin American oligarchies. While coinciding with the emergence of independent republics, this idea of the nation internalizes all of the culturalist remnants of colonialism, promoting – despite its avowed cosmopolitan liberalism – the separation and isolation of peoples. This is, therefore, an idea of the nation that tends to invisibilize and impede the cultural and political production by oppressed subjects, reproducing the framework of colonial contempt for and the exclusion of the people from the construction of the national ethos. The second, on the other hand, is the idea of a nation constructed 'from below,' by those subjects historically excluded from the other national narrative. This idea inherits the entire imaginary of popular struggles and transformations that have unfolded from the conquest to the present day. (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 89-90)

The oligarchic idea of the nation is associated by the authors with the name nationalism. The other idea has been called in the work of Gramsci and in the Latin American discussion that leads back to the eminent Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui 'the national-popular'. Now, the important point to understand, according to Biglieri and Cadahia, is that the national-popular has nothing to do with a self-enclosed, identitarian, and jingoistic nationalism but, rather, is intrinsically open and internationalist. The popular idea of a nation stems from an experience of injustice and exclusion, thus carrying 'within itself the secret of an openness toward the other, an openness that tends toward the inclusion of the excluded' (93). And as they point out with reference to Mariátegui: 'National-popular projects did not exclude the possibility of constituting internationalist solidarity among oppressed subjects' (91), for local struggles have a vested interest in building networks of solidarity across the borders of a given nation-state. This consideration leads the authors to expand the argument to the case of populism. Confronted with a severe lack of research on the trans- and international dimension of populism, they boldly claim that a populist project can only be successful when combining a national-popular dimension with an internationalist one. On the one hand, the mobilizing success of a populist project depends to a significant degree on the national-popular heritage which cannot simply be ignored or dismissed by an enlightened elite as the nationalistic ideology

of the ignorant masses. The failed attempt at constructing a pan-European populist (or quasi-populist) movement with DiEM25 by Yannis Varoufakis attests to the fact that 'a people', in this case, a European people, while of course always resulting from a political construction, cannot be forged at will. Preceding moments of national-popular forms of identification need to be taken into account. On the other hand, a populist project that would deliberately restrict its political scope to a single country would clearly damage its chances. What Biglieri and Cadahia propose, in Laclauian terminology, is a chain of equivalence among different national populist projects. On a regional or sub-continental level, such articulatory effort came to light with the rejection of George W. Bush's plans for establishing the FTAA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and the subsequent alliance of nations, led at the time by populist governments, that constructed a progressive alternative with the Mercosur Parliament in 2005 and the Union of South American Nations in 2008 (97-98). Transnational populism is not a fancy dream, one can conclude; it does exist in the form of networks, mutual support, and collaboration, and even in the form of transnational counter-institutions.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Biglieri and Cadahia investigate the missed encounter between feminism and populism to explore what link could be forged between the feminine and the plebeian. In fact, the encounter is blocked on both sides of the equation. From the feminist side, populism is, as a rule, identified with a masculinist form of politics. Several approaches - autonomist, communitarian and Spinozist feminisms are mentioned in the case of Latin America, 'difference feminism' (a habitual misnomer for a feminist current whose adequate name should be identitarian feminism) is mentioned in the case of Europe - reject the idea of antagonism or negativity as constitutive for the political (117). This produces a problem, because a feminist populism, to the extent that it *is* populist, will have to be consistent with the main tenets of populism, most fundamentally with a politics of antagonization. Thus, the authors point out, correctly in my view, the danger inherent in the 'feminization of politics into an ethics of care that, by politicizing what has historically been called "domestic," runs the risk of turning the "domestic" - the sphere of reproduction of social life - into the only possible horizon of the political'. For such a move would not only ignore the importance of more traditional terrains and organizations of struggle (such as political parties, labor unions, etc.), it would also result in over-emphasizing 'a non-conflictual form of politics, as if conflict and rupture fall on the masculine side, and reconciliation and closure of antagonisms fall broadly on the feminine side' (120) - an assumption that would perpetuate an existing binarism, only that the latter is now inversely evaluated.

On the populist side, the encounter between feminism and populism is blocked due to an unwillingness to theorize 'the feminization of the popular and the role of the political category of care in the construction of the people' (117). The only way out of this dilemma - between the expulsion of antagonism on the feminist side and

the expulsion of the feminine and the category of care on the populist side – lies in the articulation of a link between populism and care, resulting in what the authors provocatively call the ‘antagonism of care’. Obviously, they are far from having a blueprint solution to the quandary of articulating populism and feminism, but they do provide a few hints by illustrating the antagonistic politicization of feminist issues, as a necessary step, with the case of the ‘Not One Less’ (*Ni una menos*) movement against femicide that started in Argentina and spread over Latin America. Also, the ensuing 8M International Women's strike of 2020 managed to politicize the ‘International Women’s Day’ of March 8. These examples, however, are not entirely convincing. While feminist issues were publicly articulated in a forceful antagonistic way, these examples fall under the category of social movement mobilization without reaching the point of populist articulation. For instance, the figure of a popular leader – a necessary prerequisite for populist movements according to Laclau and according to Biglieri and Cadahia themselves – is oftentimes not present, or is even discarded in the case of social movement mobilization. The step into the field of representational politics, a step taken by Podemos for instance, is not always dared or wanted.³

So, what could the ‘antagonism of care’ contribute to a feminist radicalization of populism? Far from rejecting the category of care, they propose ‘to reflect on the political role of care through a different matrix that takes antagonism as its starting point’ (122). Recognizing that the strict dichotomy between the feminine and the masculine is itself a masculine construct, they try to subvert this construct by resorting to a left-Lacanian ‘ethics of the not-all’ (122) encapsulated in a revamped notion of love. The latter, as a stand-in for care, is not portrayed in the romantic mode of a supposed fusion between the sexes, but, rather, as a vector of de-totalization: ‘the ethics of the not-all is the possibility of thinking about feminism as a disruption of the logic of the totality, short-circuiting the biologization of the feminine and masculine as man and woman’ (125). If it is the dominant masculine logic that produces the totalizing fantasy of two mutually complementing biological sexes – a totalizing logic that would remain intact if one wanted only to invert it or eliminate one of its two sides –, then a post-foundational feminism would perceive of the feminine and the masculine as two mutually contaminated positions neither of which coincides with itself. They are two ‘modes of naming the antagonism that constitutes us as subjects’ (126). To engage in an antagonistic ethics of care, or ‘love’, is then to accept the incomplete and failed nature of one’s own identity and to engage in the effort ‘of building a collective we (self) through the other of the self’ (130): ‘The emancipatory structure of populism’s logic of articulation (...) proposes a different self-

³ On the other hand, political parties or labor unions are often dominated by men, but Biglieri and Cadahia insist that these organizations are not exclusively masculinist but have been used in the past as platforms for the promotion of feminist demands as well.

relation, a different labor of the self, a different way of working through opposition. We would even dare to say that it is affirmed through a care for the self as the other of the self' (130). And yet, the moment of antagonism remains present. More than that, the process of care necessitates a constant effort at 'working through' negativity and antagonism, at embracing 'the other of the self as that *polemos* that must be cared for in order for things to flourish' (131).

As they present it, antagonism seems to appear in a double role in this account. There is the Lacanian 'antagonism' of psychoanalysis that cuts through both the feminine and the masculine, thus making impossible any neat fit between the sexes. But there is also the populist antagonism, i.e. the line drawn vis-à-vis the political enemy, an oppressive oligarchy for instance, and, by extension, vis-à-vis any homogenizing discourse. If the first antagonism requires an ethics of care, in order to work through negativity rather than disavowing it, the latter requires a clearly oppositional, if not destructive stance:

Opposition is therefore not against the other, but against that form of identity that seeks to destroy the irreducible (or heterogeneous) through the configuration of inequality and exclusion. It is not about destroying the other but about destroying a position that prevents the existence of the other (the heterogeneous), what is to come. It antagonizes that power that seeks to assert itself as domination of the self. Emancipatory populism opposes and seeks to destroy the position that tries to eliminate what - from the totalizing point of view - is considered other, i.e. peasants, indigenous people, women, LGBTI+ people, etc. (131)

Now, this passage is of interest for many reasons, but one reason is the quite revealing conjunction 'emancipatory populism'. Were we not told that all populism is emancipatory? Why the need at the very end of the book to once more specifying it? Before tackling the question as to whether the main thesis of a constitutively emancipatory populism is sustainable or not, I would like to register some minor points of skepticism. But I want to insist up front that I'm in full agreement with the general aim of rehabilitating populism and with all the features of an emancipatory populism as described by Biglieri and Cadahia.

As regards the authors' discussion of plebeian republicanism, I suspect that much more historical work needs to be done, or presented, to prove that it actually existed as a remotely relevant political ideology in the past. A line of heritage that enlists, in a quote approvingly cited by the authors, Ephialtes, Pericles, or Protagoras, would hardly do the trick as we know next to nothing about Ephialtes, and Protagoras' pro-democratic position is mainly passed on via the potentially distorting account of a Platonic dialogue. More importantly, one needs to specify, in my view, that an understanding of (republican) freedom as a principle in need to be *universalized* is entirely modern, despite its perhaps Christian roots, and cannot be

found in the ancient or traditional republics.⁴ As in the case of the particularly despicable Venetian republic, run by an aristocracy, these regimes were built – admittedly or secretly – on a caste system, regardless of the apparently equal distribution of citizenship among their members. I thus disagree with Biglieri and Cadahia when they assume that ‘if we are all equal, there is no way to justify inequality within a republic, and, similarly, the law and institutions cannot be understood as the property and privilege of the few, but as mechanisms for expanding the rights of the majority’ (71). The passage insinuates that there is something like an institutional automatism for the egalitarian expansion of freedom in republics. There are of course cases of revolts, the Florentine Ciompi revolt being the most prominent one, but what these revolts lack is an idea of the potentially limitless universalization of liberty and equality. Only the modern democratic revolution, which of course includes the Caribbean revolution, installs a horizon of freedom, equality, and solidarity that can be expanded well over the boundaries of the republic (hence the boundary problem in today’s political science) and may potentially encompass non-citizens as well. Only within the ‘symbolic dispositive’ of modern democracy – against what I would call the *democratic horizon* – are we all equal; not so in traditional republics. For this reason, the republicanism of the modern revolutions is, in fact, a democratism.

This is far from having historical relevance only. The question reappears on a systematic level when the emancipatory nature of populism is to be evaluated. For Biglieri and Cadahia, populism is intrinsically emancipatory, implying that it is inclusive and respects plurality and heterogeneity. To start with, I am wondering whether fighting *against one’s own exclusion* necessarily implies fighting *for the inclusion of others*. I’m not convinced that the latter fight is a direct consequence of the former. (We can easily imagine a populist mobilization aimed against the exclusion of the plebeian masses that does not really care about the inclusion of other excluded groups). It can indeed be discursively constructed as a direct consequence, but this involves a political effort that can hardly be read into the logic of populist mobilization per se. For this reason, I would take care to distinguish between populism and democracy, even though an intrinsic relation exists. Populism is an intrinsic feature of democracy for at least two reasons: (a) ‘the people’ as the sovereign ground of a democratic order will always be invoked by political actors in one or the other way, and an antagonistic – i.e., populist – construction of the people remains an ever-present possibility. And (b), democracy is the only truly political regime, because only in democracy a hegemonic struggle over the incarnation of the universal by particular actors takes place; and therefore antagonism, as a name for the political, will be an intrinsic feature of a democratic polity. But this does not

⁴ I am using the attribute ‘modern’ for lack of a better word and to point out the seismic historical shift instigated by the democratic revolutions.

imply that every antagonism will be constructed democratically or that every populist project will have democratic goals. So, while populism is an intrinsic feature of democracy, not every populism is democratic.

This is the reason why I remain unconvinced by Biglieri and Cadahia's attempt at identifying populism and democracy. While I do not wish to deny that there is an intrinsic relation, it does not work both ways. Populism follows democracy like a shadow, to use Canovan's metaphor, but this shadow could be frighteningly undemocratic. For this very reason we are forced – and Biglieri and Cadahia are forced as well – to add further criteria to determine the democratic credentials of a given political project. Merely invoking the people does not make a project democratic, as Biglieri and Cadahia would agree, who add criteria such as respect for plurality and the heterogeneous and an idea of tendentially universal inclusion. This is what they describe, in a left-Lacanian vein, as an ethics of the non-all. Yet, it is hard to see how such an ethics can be an intrinsic part of any antagonistic politics, as it sits uneasily with the political aim of expanding a given hegemony (or chain of equivalence) by means of antagonization. There is nothing in the logic of antagonism, or equivalence, that could be read as a predisposition to an ethics of democracy.⁵

In fact, the position I would be prepared to defend differs from Biglieri and Cadahia's as much as from Mouffe's position. 'In the case of Mouffe, Marchart, and Stavrakakis,' they observe, 'it seems that two types of people can be built through populism: one authoritarian and exclusionary, the other emancipatory and egalitarian' (35-6). Well, I would think that many more types of people can be built through populism. The range of political options is not exhausted with a choice between either authoritarianism or emancipation, either exclusion or egalitarianism. An equivalential chain can be built in many more than only two ways. Likewise, the range of political positions is not exhausted with a binary choice between left and right. Other than Mouffe (2018) I think 'left populism' remains too unspecific for a recommendable project because one can easily imagine a left populism that is authoritarian and exclusionary. As if the tradition of the left had never seen authoritarian currents. Of course, what can be done is, through a definitional operation, to define these currents out of an idealized picture of the left or populism. While sympathizing with the political aim of rehabilitating populism, such a nominalistic declaration of populism as emancipatory strikes me as symmetrically inverse to Jan

⁵ There is a tendency in Biglieri and Cadahia's argumentation to shift, with a sleight of hand, between the logics of equivalence and the politics of egalitarianism, but the latter does not follow from the former because the expansion of an anti-egalitarian hegemonic formation would also have to proceed by building chains of equivalence. I'm wondering, by the way, whether Biglieri and Cadahia's ethical description of populism would equally fit with what in Laclau and Mouffe's earlier work *Hegemony and Social Strategy* was described as 'radical and plural democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Doesn't Biglieri and Cadahia's description of an intrinsically democratic populism remind very much of 'radical and plural democracy'? And if yes, why not call it so? Why not speak, for instance, about a radical democratic populism? Wouldn't such a move solve, in one strike, all the problems?

Werner Müller's nominalistic fallacy in his book on populism. Where Müller decrees that inclusive cases (such as Podemos or Syriza) do not fall under the category of populism, because they don't fit his description of populism as intrinsically evil, Biglieri and Cadahia decree that authoritarian cases have nothing to do with populism because they don't fit their description of populism as intrinsically good.⁶

The problem reappears with the authors' reading of their main inspirational source: Laclau's theory of populism. Very interestingly they make out a difference between Laclau and Mouffe. Laclau, they observe, 'never claimed that this orientation (of a given populism) should be based on the left/right distinction, nor did he establish the fundamental features for establishing a binary distinction in these terms. Mouffe, by contrast, when determining the content of her distinction, favors an ontic classification of populism' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 22). But, if this is correct, Laclau's agnosticism about the particular ideological orientation of populism can be read in two ways. Biglieri and Cadahia suggest that, given his Latin American experience, Laclau does not take the left/right distinction as the main axis of analysis (22) – which may very well be the case. But to conclude from this that populism was for Laclau an emancipatory phenomenon would only be partially true. Perhaps one could say that it was *and it wasn't*. The particular experience of a militant of the left wing of Peronism opened his eyes to the emancipatory side of populism, but at the same time Laclau, the theorist, ascribed to populism an ontological character that goes far beyond the Latin American experience. No doubt, compared to European or Anglophone scholars, he was much more aware of the emancipatory potentials of populism, and yet he would abstain from attributing any intrinsic content to populism. On many occasions he even claimed that, given the 'open' nature of a populist logic of articulation, fascism was a form of populism. So, when Biglieri and Cadahia accuse Mouffe of filling left-wing populism with an ontic content such as equality and social justice, couldn't the same charge be held against Biglieri and Cadahia? Are they not themselves smuggling an ontic content (emancipation) into an ontological category (populism)?

Hence, the status of their argument remains somewhat unclear. There are several options. It could be a normative injunction: 'this is how populism should be!' But there is little indication that would warrant such a reading. Secondly, it could be a merely descriptive account (all populist phenomena can be described as emancipatory), but then one would need to first nominalistically purge undesirable variants from the concept of populism. A third option is to retreat to a standpoint epistemology: 'If the left/right distinction seems unavoidable in the case of Europe, we need to ask why this is not the case for Latin America. Or perhaps to ask ourselves whether we can offer reflections on populism from the Latin American locus of

⁶They thus propose to re-baptize them, i.e. to speak of neoliberal fascism rather than authoritarian populism.

enunciation that might disrupt some of those arguments constructed from Europe' (24). This is certainly the more convincing option because a certain standpoint allows you to see things – in this case: emancipatory variants of populism – which would be ignored from a different, Euro-parochial standpoint. Yet their claim as to the intrinsically emancipatory nature of populism *eo ipso* is much broader than that and can only lead to further problems: If it is an ontological claim, does it hold for Latin America only? If yes, it cannot be a truly ontological claim because such a claim must hold for populism in all possible worlds. If no, i.e., if it does hold for all possible worlds, how to account for the European experience of right-wing populisms – described by the authors themselves as ‘unavoidable in the case of Europe’ –, which flies in the face of any emancipatory ontology of populism.

So the argument in the book continuously shifts between a rather bold ontological claim and the much more modest aim to bring to the debate a Latin American perspective. While I think the ontological claim, which amounts to an emancipatory apriorism, is difficult to sustain, the latter goal to ‘disrupt’ the Eurocentric view on populism, should be welcomed as a much-needed intervention. But maybe I’m wrong and, perhaps, it is precisely the irritating aspect of the ontological claim that is meant to increase the disruptive quality of the intervention. Perhaps the ontological claim has the status of a provocation; perhaps it should be read as an injunction to turn the negative image of populism on its head and provocatively present liberal Eurocentric scholars of populism with a mirror-image of their own one-sidedness. For in place of an entirely negative assessment of populism we are confronted with an entirely positive one.

Now, there is a fourth option to which I now turn by way of ending these notes on Biglieri and Cadahia’s *Seven Essays on Populism*. It is not fully elaborated, though, or only elaborated in Chapter 7 with respect to a feminist populism. Let me call it the ‘imaginative option’. Biglieri and Cadahia take their start from the widespread feeling that the very idea of a (better) future has been canceled or rendered unimaginable. The neoliberal matrix leaves us ‘trapped in a total immobility that forecloses on any idea of the future. Isn’t the most spontaneous and paradoxically durable image of our present precisely the absence of a future?’ (115). We are desperately confronted with a ‘lack of imagination’ (115). Worse than that, in the co-optative process that Gramsci would have called transformism or ‘passive revolution’, ‘the reactionary powers of the present have managed to recycle those same emancipatory images, turning them into affective pastiches and mobilizing popular sectors toward their own reactionary ends’ (115-6). Hence, we are in dire need ‘to connect differently to our canceled futures’ (116); and the two figures of the popular and the feminine ‘can give us clues for imagining that which does not yet exist’ (116). It appears that in these lines, which open the Chapter on feminist populism, a fourth option takes shape. Their argument, one can be sure, is neither normative nor descriptive; and their standpoint epistemology cannot fully account for the ontological

valence of their claims. So what if their book should be read as a political incantation to make use of the human faculty of imagination and start *imagining the popular differently*? But how to do this? How to engage in the labor of political imagination?

Biglieri and Cadahia approach this problem by revisiting Carlo Ginzburg's micro-historical method and what they describe as his 'evidential paradigm'. For Ginzburg, historical cases of knowledge production associated, for instance, with the plebeian and the feminine, proceed through the conjectural combination of clues, very much like Sherlock Holmes or Sigmund Freud proceeded. When, in an eastern fable, three brothers (re-)assemble the image of a camel, an animal they have never seen, through a number of clues, they exercise 'sensibility and intelligence to put imagination to work' (118). Such a method resembles the symptomatic reading strategy proposed by Lacan and Althusser:

Unlike the positivist paradigm, which assumes that things are what they are and each object coincides with itself in a game of truth by correspondence, the evidential paradigm seems to suggest that things are not what they are since the thing cannot coincide with itself. (...) We can only refer to the thing through its effects: its symptoms, evidence, and footprints. Recall that this paradigm functions as a way of knowing from the place of not-knowing, from conjectural knowledge. In other words, it is experienced through clues that allow for the articulation of affects and intelligence in the very production of knowledge. (118-9)

While the evidential paradigm is meant to help the authors imagine the *coincidentia oppositorum* of an 'antagonism of care', it is also of relevance for their very object of research. Populism, it could be said, is not what it seems to be. It definitely is not what is described in the positivist paradigm by mainstream liberal scholars of 'populism research'. Precisely because it does not coincide with itself, because it is nothing that could be grasped in its positive presence, it is an object whose footprints need to be followed. This might explain why, even in mainstream populism research, this object has typically been described as fuzzy and hard to grasp. It is as if even the most hard-boiled empiricists felt a peculiar absence at the heart of their object of research. Following Biglieri and Cadahia, populism, precisely because there is no such thing as *the* typical case of populism, needs to be reassembled in a symptomatological way - which leaves space for re-imagining populism differently. This may explain the very nature of the authors' political wager: they present us with an image of how populism *could* be: i.e., with an alternative, not yet fully articulated image of an intrinsically emancipatory populism. Yet, their labor of re-claiming populism should not be mistaken for a purely 'mental' or theoretical activity, for a form of abstract speculation, disconnected from the world of actual politics. It is political through and through. For to re-imagine populism differently, as Biglieri and Cadahia do in their *Seven Essays on Populism*, is nothing short of a highly needed political intervention in the post-political matrix of liberalism.

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