

POPULISM AS A LOGIC OF POLITICAL ACTION

Forthcoming in: *European Journal of Social Theory*

Filipe Carreira da Silva; Mónica Brito Vieira

Abstract

In this article we offer a new understanding of populism. Our argument unfolds as follows. We begin by reviewing the populist literature and identify two main approaches: ontic and logic-oriented approaches, the most important of which is the Schmitt-Laclau logic of enmity. While we broadly agree with Laclau's criticism of ontic approaches, we do not endorse either his ontological understanding of enmity, or his claim that populism *is* politics, and enmity the logic of populism. Next, we locate the origins of populism in a paradox at the heart of democracy. Democracy defines itself as a community of inclusion, yet exclusion is constitutive of inclusion, including therefore democratic inclusion. We then discuss what we believe to be the true logic of populism: resentment. Unlike enmity, which functions in Laclau's populist theory as an ontology of non-identity, resentment operates within a rivalrous framework, which presupposes identification between the parts and refers to a set of normative commitments. Finally, we conclude by presenting our own understanding of populism as a specific logic of political action.

Key words: populism; resentment; democracy; political mobilization; popular sovereignty

1. INTRODUCTION

Talk about populism is all around us. Yet with every new use of the term the category of populism seems to get more confused. For some, populism is the nemesis of democracy. For others, populism is the only hope of democratic redemption in an age of rampant inequality and economic globalization. While some emphasize populism's chameleonic quality, others want to give it an all too fixed nature. Often reduced to a specific political style of communication quickly moving from the fringes to the mainstream of democratic politics, populism is sometimes equated with a certain form of political mobilization or a broad anti-elite orientation. Believed by some to be a dangerous politics, it is construed by others as politics itself. But is populism really so ubiquitous? Or are we stretching the concept so indiscriminately that its usefulness is lost? In order to restore the usefulness of the concept – and therefore also in order to enhance our understanding of the reality it describes, informs, and evaluates – this article offers an articulation of the concept of populism that is alternative to the main, well-known understandings of populism.

Our argument unfolds as follows. In section 2, we review the populist literature and identify two main approaches: ontic and logic-oriented approaches, the most important of which is the Schmitt-Laclau logic of enmity. While we broadly agree with Laclau's criticism of ontic approaches, we do not endorse either his ontological understanding of enmity, or his claim that populism *is* politics, and enmity the logic of populism. In section 3, we locate the origins of populism in a paradox at the heart of democracy. Democracy defines itself as a community of inclusion, yet exclusion is constitutive of inclusion, including therefore democratic inclusion. Populism, we argue, emerges out of this paradox, in particular out of the malaise generated by the perceived betrayal of democratic promises. As a result, one part of the people turns against another part of the people in the name of a reconstituted imaginary egalitarian people, which is believed to be the basis of the legitimacy of political authority. In section 4, we discuss what we believe to be the true logic of

populism: resentment. Unlike enmity, which functions in Laclau's populist theory as an ontology of non-identity, resentment, we maintain, operates within a rivalrous framework, which presupposes identification between the parts and refers to a set of normative commitments. But resentment is not of one single kind. Its internal diversity is important for an understanding of where populism starts and where it ends. Finally, in section 5, we conclude by presenting our own understanding of populism as a specific logic of political action.

2. EXISTING APPROACHES TO POPULISM

Populism is notoriously difficult to define. A word that has become a term of abuse, there are hardly any political actors that call themselves populist. In the empirical literature populisms form an eclectic assortment of movements, parties and political leaders, ranging from the Russian *narodnichestvo* and the American Populists of the nineteenth-century to the Latin American charismatic populisms of Juan Péron and Getúlio Vargas of the 1950s, on to the neo-populist wave of the 1990s in Europe and its most recent resurgence both in Europe and the US, exemplified by Jorg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria and by Donald Trump's presidency. As varied as the case studies are the approaches employed to study them. They vary in several regards, such as their degree of abstraction or generality, their primary aim or function, or their preferred methodology. In most cases these differences can be traced back to their epistemological foundations.

These can be broadly divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are ontic approaches that conceive of physical, factual, material reality as existing independently of our knowledge about it. They comprise, on the one hand, empirical-deductive approaches, which are oriented towards explaining populism through the discovery of causal relations between structural determinants and its populist consequences, and, on the other, hermeneutical approaches, whose aim is to provide a thick description of populism through historically detailed case studies. Despite their differences, both empirical-deductive and hermeneutical approaches are oriented towards the *contents* (as opposed to the *logic*) of populism.

In his 1969 essay 'A syndrome, not a doctrine: Some elementary theses on populism', Peter Wiles offers a good example of an empirical-deductive approach. Wiles assumes the existence of a populist genus, a defining essence, which is to be identified ideographically, i.e. by the study of its concrete historical manifestations. From this a variable number of generalizable criteria are induced (in his case, no less than twenty-four) and a 'descriptively useful' definition of populism is thus framed, in

Wiles' own words, 'as to coincide with the natural divisions of the real world' (1969: 171).

Aware of the limitations of previous approaches such as Wiles', Margaret Canovan, in her book *Populism* (1981: 12), resorts to a hermeneutically-inspired strategy of concept-formation: the ideal-type methodology. She uses the analytical distinction between 'agrarian' and 'political' populisms to propose a typology of populisms, with each group subdivided further in a total of seven types of populism (1981: 13). This analytical distinction proves, however, insufficient, with real-life examples cutting across several categories, and ultimately arriving where Wiles had left us twelve years before.

Wiles' and Canovan's failed attempts at delimiting populism as an ontic category did little to prevent most of the literature from following in their footsteps. As a result, confusion remains as to what type of thing populism is, and what we ought to study as we study it: should we take it for a strategy or mode of organisation (Weyland, 2001: 14; Betz, 2002: 198), a project or repertoire of political mobilization (Jansen, 2011: 82; Brubaker, 2017: 4-6), an ideology (Canovan, 2002, 2004; Mudde, 2004, 2007), a mode of persuasion (Kazin, 1995), a discourse (e.g. Torfing, 1995; Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Pauwels, 2011), or simply as a style of political communication (e.g. Moffitt and Tormey, 2014)? In consequence of this, the question of 'whether populism is essentially left- or right-wing, fascist or egalitarian, forward-looking and progressive or backward-looking and nostalgic' (Minogue, 1969: 200) is repeatedly put and left unanswered. No clear delimitation of populism as a concept and a phenomenon is ever reached. The result is a stalemate. For even if populism could be defined as strategy or as ideology or as discourse or as style, it cannot certainly be all of these at the same time. As populist movements with very different social bases, organisational strategies, and ideological orientations coexist or follow each other, general confusion ensues necessarily.

The alternative to ontic approaches are approaches aimed at identifying the structure and/or logic according to which those contents are organised. Illustrations include Canovan's later work (1999) and Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005a). Canovan moved away from hermeneutics towards structuralism in her analysis of populism: 'we shift our attention from the ideology and policy content of populist movements', she claimed, 'and concentrate instead on structural considerations' (1999: 3). By this Canovan meant three fundamental characteristics she believed all populist politics to share: anti-elitism, a reference to 'the people', and a simple and direct style. As this shows, Canovan's approach is in the end somewhat mixed, and so is, more recently, Cas Mudde's. Despite his ontic definition of populism as a coherent 'ideology', however 'thin', Mudde moves in a structural direction when he treats populism as a particular view about how society is and ought to be structured (Mudde, 2004). He goes on to speak of populism as simply setting up a framework – the antagonism between people and elites against the backdrop of popular sovereignty – with no specific contents. His recognition of populism's fundamental indeterminacy goes together with his distancing from 'thicker' ontic approaches, defining populism as demagoguery, charismatic leadership, or simplistic political discourse (Mudde, 2004). In effect, given difficulties faced by ontic or logic-oriented approaches, several authors have more overtly tried to tread a middle ground and integrate both dimensions in their work (see Arditi, 2007; Canovan, 2002). This has led the so-called 'new populist studies' to shift the focus 'from the social content of populism and the ends toward which it is directed to the means by which it is done' (Jansen, 2011: 82); to study why economic crises need to be 'performed' by social agents as to become effective causes of populist politics (Moffitt, 2014); to examine how the contents of populism seem to be organised by 'discursive frames' (Aslanidis, 2015); and to analyse how populist claims-making follows certain scripts and involves specific rhetorical tropes (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2014), for instance. With the mainstreaming of the so-called 'populist' ways of doing politics, however, this

focus on the means has failed to shed clarity on the distinctiveness of populism, or indeed on the question of whether it is distinctive at all.

Against the dominance of mixed approaches, Ernesto Laclau's work, to which we turn next, stands out for tackling populism from a strictly logic-oriented approach. For Laclau populism is animated by a fundamental logic: an 'oppositional logic' focussed on constructing a unified political subject ('the people') out of a disparate set of grievances defined against the dominating power of a corrupt elite (Laclau, 2005; see also Abts and Rummens, 2007). Laclau's 'oppositional logic' has a clear ancestor: the logic of enmity (or enemyship) that Carl Schmitt made integral to the understanding of the political and his critique of liberalism (Schmitt, 1996). To this day, a distinctively Schmittian conception of populism remains dominant and extensively used in the literature, even if this goes sometimes unacknowledged. It draws on Schmitt's claim that the abstract logic of democracy hinges on a series of identities (e.g., between ruled and rulers, sovereign and subject, will and law, etc.). Rather than being tangible realities, these identities are construed, politically and symbolically. Their nature is that of identifications, dependant on eliciting recognition by those who must identify with. The process of identification is enhanced by the abolition or circumvention of all mediations – e.g., of the formal procedures, counteracting power, and institutions defining the constitutional state. As mediation are abolished, the popular acclamation of the will of the people-as-one is free to occur. The will of the people, as often voiced by a minority or even a single speaker, is thereby given an (illusory) immediacy and fullness of presence, to whose production the logic of enmity is vital. This Schmittian view of populism places it as the Siamese twin of democracy. Its enduring influence can be seen at opposite ends of the political spectrum: that is, both amongst radical democrats endorsing it (e.g., Laclau) and liberal critics dismissing it as subversive of democracy (e.g., Koen and Rummens, 2007, Urbinati, 2014, or even Müller, 2016). This makes it worth inspecting its underpinning logic further.

It is in *The Concept of the Political*, first published in 1927, that Schmitt presents the friend-enemy distinction, the distinction ‘to which political actions and motives can be reduced’ (1996: 26). Schmitt’s focus is on the figure of the enemy, which he depicts as ‘the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in an especially intense way, existentially something different and alien’ (1996: 27). The emergence of the people as a self-evident presence depends on, and is maintained by, the antagonistic divide between itself and this other.

In his writings on politics as hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), as well as in its application to populism, Laclau draws heavily on Schmitt’s insight. Their treatments of enemyship differ however in one crucial respect. Whereas in Schmitt enemyship leads to a *Volkish* conception of populism, in Laclau the ‘people’ and the ‘enemy’ are conceived of as empty signifiers, whose instability allows for unceasing contestation and redefinition. This is because Laclau, under the gaze of semiotics, dispenses with contents altogether. In his work, populism becomes therefore pure logic: ‘Its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group’, Laclau observes, ‘but in a particular mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological contents’ (2005b: 34). As a result, populism comes understood as immanent in politics as such, a logic that inheres in social and political experience.

This is not an epistemic logic, however, but a logic operating at a deeper ontological level: antagonism is in Laclau an *ontology* of political identity. Identity entails denial, because the other’s presence is *inherently* a threat to me. Identity is therefore a relational concept always founded in difference, and never complete. Hence, antagonism, struggle and conflict are inevitable in politics. No social actor can ever stand for the totality of society. This ultimately eludes representation. Society is rather founded on impossible objects of discourse, such as ‘the people’, which represent the whole in its absence. The unity of this ‘people’ is a representation, not a thing in itself, much less a thing pre-existing its own representation, which always

presupposes a constitutive division between self and other. It effectively constitutes the paradigmatic case of political representation, whereby the representative creates the very authority it presupposes in incarnating its (impossible) symbolic unity. In other words, acting from a contested social terrain of competing interests and demands, the representative articulates 'the people' as a unifying political authority, while legitimising her action through an appeal to that authority's authorising will (2002: 163). This also means that 'the people' becomes the logic that structures the political, i.e. that all politics *is* populism (2002: 47), and the 'the people' an empty signifier, uniting all struggles in a chain of equivalences, deployed to advance particular political projects. When the *plebs* sees itself as the *populus*, the part as the whole, it constructs a 'people' against the structure of language and its abstract system of contrasts. In this specific sense, the ways in which 'the People' is constituted are strictly arbitrary: they make no reference whatsoever to anything beyond the structure of language itself.

The question remains, however, whether Laclau is right in claiming that all politics is populism and that the populist reason or logic is fundamentally that of enemyship. We submit Laclau is wrong on both accounts. This is for two main reasons. First, for both Schmitt and Laclau enmity is not only the logic of populism, but of politics as such. Yet if enmity is believed to govern the whole political domain, from democratic to non-democratic solutions of various ideological guises, then what exactly is specific about populism? Second, according to this logic, the friend is pitted against an entity that is, in Schmitt's words, 'existentially something different and alien'. This goes well together with the much-repeated idea that what distinguishes populism is that it conjures up an image of a unified, homogeneous people. This also means populism implies a radical rejection of whatever it sees as inimical to such unity and homogeneity: foreigners, enemies, oligarchy, elites (Rosanvallon 2008). But notwithstanding the severity of processes of exclusion and 'othering' that afflict modern liberal democracies facing populist outbursts, especially those with a right-wing orientation, and notwithstanding the fact that claims like 'we are the 99%',

where 'we' is the 'we, the people', can effectively exclude the 1% from it, there is a complexity in populist claims that the enmity thesis disregard. 99% is still 99% of a whole that is the 100%. In other words, the divide is still primarily within the people, or fellow citizens, rather than between the people and its radical outside. The 'people' remains here a political community bound together by certain norms, procedures and values, however contested or betrayed. It remains also the grounds of legitimacy of political authority: hence the typical structure of populist claims, as claims of the part made in the name of the whole ('the people') that might authorise them and confer them legitimacy. The conflict opposing the many (the popular subject) to the few (or the elite), or indeed that pitting part against part within the many (e.g., its silent or heard versus the vocal or heard parts), does not oppose mortal enemies but rivals or competitors. Populism, we contend, is not synonymous with politics as such, but an outgrowth of popular sovereignty and its egalitarian promise. Its primary logic is not an oppositional logic of friend versus enemy, but a logic of resentment between fellow citizens.

3. POPULISM'S ORIGINS: THE DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

While Laclau argues that the logic of populism is the key to understanding politics as such, we argue that populism is an outgrowth of democracy and its logic cannot be understood apart from democracy's fundamental commitment to the principle of equality. To put it more simply, populism results from a paradox at the heart of democracy. An impulse towards universal inclusion is inscribed in the democratic project. However, it so happens that exclusion is constitutive of inclusion.¹ Exclusion is therefore unavoidable. With every attempt to broaden inclusion, new forms of exclusion emerge. No matter how hard democracy attempts to dissolve boundaries, new ones keep cropping up. See, for instance, how the principle of democratic inclusion of all those *subject* to the law naturally evolves into the inclusion of all those *affected* by it; but then it clashes with the existence of borders, defining enclosed communities of solidarity. Or consider, for instance, how in a constitutional democracy rights have an inherent dynamic towards universal inclusion, but will very often remain reserved to citizens alone, and informally out of reach for even some of them. Exclusions affecting noncitizens, let alone those affecting citizens themselves, are especially unsettling in democracies because they contend with the understanding of democracy as an inclusive community, built upon perfectly symmetrical relationships, hinging on the recognition of universal freedom and equality. Being constitutive for inclusion, exclusion is inescapable, but concrete exclusions are not necessarily so. Given their normative foundation on the principle of equality among persons, democracies are the regime in which such exclusions become more insufferable and their contingent character most visible. This is especially the case, for instance, in times of escalating economic inequality like ours. The cardinal democratic promise of equality of conditions and opportunities remains visibly just that, an ideal to look up to but often too distant to be of practical import. The political causes and consequences of this escalation also become more apparent. Modern democracy's normative and institutional commitment towards counting everyone equally succumbs before glaring evidence of the exacerbation of long-

standing inequalities of political influence over the political system that might mitigate, if not counteract, them (Bartels, 2016).

That democracy is fundamentally oriented towards inclusion is hard to deny. Democracy means literally ‘rule by the people’ or ‘the power of the citizens’. Modern democracy attempts to combine this legacy with the liberal idea that the place of power remains empty (Lefort, 1988: 17). This means ‘the people’ is not a unity but at best a whole made of contending parts, any given part being entitled to occupy the seat of power only temporarily. As a result, conflict is institutionalised but never really goes away. By keeping the locus of power as an empty place to be occupied by those coming before the people, professing to represent or embody their will, liberal democracies have always lived under the suspicion of being but an opaque machinery operated by, and guaranteeing the circulation and reproduction of, elites (e.g. Laclau, 2005a: 164-170). The latter’s promise is to include (via representation) that which they exclude (at least directly, from rule). The promise remains that although we may not exactly rule, we are not simply ruled, because we remain sovereign in overseeing and being the ultimate judges of rule. But this is also a promise that sometimes strikes us as a false one (Garsten, 2012).

The promise of ‘voice’, in particular, is of paramount importance in a regime in which everyone is supposed to have an equal ‘say’ and stake in politics, if sometimes only to express confidence or distrust in those who rule. Citizen participation under conditions of equality (formal and substantive) forms much of the bulwark around which liberal democratic political institutions are organised. The available data on democratic inclusion as the enjoyment of citizenship rights, including the several types of political participation, shows this is no mere ‘rights talk’ either (Kaase, 2007: 786-791). Those who belong *de jure* to modern liberal democracies do enjoy a historically unprecedented *de facto* degree of ‘say’ on the conduct of their collective lives. But voice can be distributed rather asymmetrically, with some voices finding themselves disproportionately amplified, while others are

muted and relegated to the periphery of the circles of power. The condition of silent citizenship, whereby one feels deprived of an effective voice in the democratic process, is a fairly common one in modern democracies (Green, 2015; Gest and Gray, 2015). Where such a silence takes root, it might reflect significant democratic deficits, or the exclusion of certain groups from the circles of influence, will-formation and decision-making. Silence need not imply here lack of speech, but a refusal of uptake or an incapacity of listening out for differently located ways of speaking, which political theory sometimes comes only to reinforce. Habermas' influential ideal of a political public sphere as an arena of rational inclusion, for instance, has long been exposed as a myth perpetuating the conditions of exclusion of all those who do not conform to it (Fraser, 1990). It also reflects (rather than questions) the hegemonic definitions of who ought to speak and what ought to be listened. All too often different kinds of exclusions (founded on race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) intersect in the life trajectories of concrete individuals, intensifying the sense and reality of exclusion. Collectively, declining class trajectories can also intersect with ethnic and gender identities, feeding support for fringe candidates and political forces, and giving rise to 'resentful nationalist' orientations (Fenton, 2012). This is the case, for instance, with the US and the UK's 'white working class', once at the middle of their societies and their national politics, now angry at their loss of status in their community's social hierarchy and at the inability of mainstream parties to give proper hearing to their views in the policy-making process (Gest, 2016).

The paradox affecting democracy defined as an all-inclusive community underpinned by strong egalitarian commitments means that exclusion – especially when perceived as largely one-sided and systemic – is a problem that undermines the legitimacy of this form of government in a particularly acute way. Nowhere is the distance between the promises of inclusion and the reality of exclusion felt more strongly than in a system whose validity and facticity – i.e. whose normative underpinnings, procedures and institutions – are explicitly oriented toward inclusion, and whose 'psychology' includes things like a suspicion of power and hierarchy and a

mistrust of representatives. Non-democratic forms of government are not oriented toward inclusion. Legitimacy in dictatorships stems from a wide range of alternative sources, ranging from theological authority or communal tradition to military brute force and economic growth. With a much lower threshold for inclusion and principles of cohesion that double as justifications for (partial) exclusions (e.g., by pointing to trade-offs between civil and political freedoms and economic stability and growth), non-democratic forms of government produce and cohabit with exclusions that go often unnoticed are endured stoically. But in the case of democracy this is much less likely to be so. Subjective status deprivation (status being here understood a matter of economic, political, and social attainment) – or the discrepancy of expectations and perceived or expected fulfilments (through decrease in social mobility) – create great opportunity for a politics of resentment (Gest, 2016).

4. THE LOGIC(S) OF RESENTMENT

The association of populism with resentment has been made before (e.g., Shils, 1956; Barbalet, 1992; Mudde, 2004: 547; Müller, 2016: 88; Engels, 2016; Cramer, 2016). Yet for all their insightfulness earlier works either use resentment as a concept that is not worked out exactly, but inferred from its concrete manifestations (e.g., Cramer, 2016); or take it for an emotion prone to rhetorical manipulation (e.g., Engels, 2016). This article differs from previous approaches in that it argues that populism is first and foremost a logic, and that the logic of populism is resentment. In referring to resentment as a logic rather than an emotion we are not denying that resentment is an emotion with both cognitive and affective valences (see e.g. Demertzis, 2006: 115ff. on how feelings of resentment illuminate the initial phase of populist mobilization). We are rather claiming that our attention turns to the logic of this emotion. Logic is here not a formal system of inference, nor is it Laclau's 'special grammar governing each sphere of human activity' (Laclau, 1999: 102). Our project is very different in its underpinning assumptions and claims. We move away from Laclau's claim that enmity is a (onto-)logical feature of all politics (and therefore also of populism) to the much narrower claim that, for all its redefinition in the changing context of history, populism has certain necessary features that are amenable to logical analysis. To be precise, we claim that populism is moved by a logic of resentment, operating within and mobilized by democracy's egalitarian commitments. This logic, we maintain, determines much of 'the objects which it is possible to constitute' and 'the relations that are possible between those objects' (Laclau, 1999: 102), but it does not determine them fully. Still it gives us sufficient grounds to distinguish certain phenomena as populist.

To delve further into the logic of resentment, we need to start where it all begins. Book 2 of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* opens with a long discussion of anger (*orgê*), which alongside 'spite and slander are productive of enmity (*ekhthra*).' But while 'anger is also accompanied by pain [to the one who feels anger], hate is not.' This is

because, explains Aristotle, ‘the former wants the one he is angry at to suffer in his turn, the latter wants [the detested class of persons] not to exist.’ (2007: 128) In other words, not unlike enmity, hate entails denial, and therefore the exclusion of something. Anger does not: it needs the other to continue to exist, so that suffering can be inflicted upon her and universalized.

Towards the end of Book 2 Aristotle turns his attention toward a subset of emotions that are directed at people other than close friends or enemies. Contrary to anger and hatred, these are emotions oriented toward the fortune of others. They are rivalrous or competitive emotions insofar as they centre on the pain or distress caused in us predominantly by another’s possession of goods such as wealth, power or public office. The three emotions considered are indignation (*nemesis*), envy (*phthonos*), and emulation (*zêlos*), which together produce *resentment* (2007: 154ff.). They are therefore worthy of closer inspection. The distinctions by which Aristotle classifies these emotions relate to the reason why one resents another’s worthy goods. In the case of *emulation*, this is because one wants them oneself. Aristotle defines it as a ‘kind of distress at the apparent presence among others like him by nature of things honored and possible for a person to acquire, [with the distress arising] not from the fact that another has them but that the emulator does not.’ (2007: 146) In the case of *indignation*, this is because they have been unjustly acquired. In the case of envy, out of simple malice. The upshot of Aristotle’s discussion is that the operation of the logic of resentment, under which the three emotions fall, supposes the two agents involved in it to be parties to the *same game* (see Geuss, 2016: 170ff.). If this is obviously the case with emulation and indignation, where the parties are still construed as moral partners, sharing a common moral framework, Aristotle is clear that even in the case of envy some sort of identification is required as we envy only those whom we perceive to be ‘*like us*’ in some respect. Aristotle writes: ‘The kind of people who feel envy are those who have, or seem to themselves to have, [more fortunate acquaintances among] those like themselves. I mean those like themselves in terms of birth, relationship, age, disposition, reputation, possessions, as well as those who just

fall short of having all of these on an equal basis.’ (2007: 144) Hence if we see the mass of Athenian citizens envying the aristocrats ruling it is because, despite all their differences in wealth and power, they still conceive or see the latter as ‘like’ or ‘equal to’ them in some respect – that is, as competitors or rivals in the same game (of democratic politics). The issue at stake here is the perceived relative positions of the few and the many: whether one part of the people perceive their situation as inferior or superior to that of the other part of the people. This is why envy is different from hatred. We hate enemies, and feel not simply different but denied by them. But we envy only those who are sufficiently like us to be perceived as some kind of rivals or competitors. Unlike enmity, then, the rivalries of resentment presuppose identification.

Resentment implies therefore some degree of identification, and some of this identification will be given by the normative boundaries defining the community. In other words, resentment will often concern the identification and protection of certain norms regulating our social and political relationships, notably, in the case of populism, the democratic principles of equal concern and respect, and therefore it will be sensitive to the issue of the perceived fairness of the situation. We resent the (perceived) violation of norms of justice; we resent the harms committed and suffered by us in result of this violation; and we resent those whom we deem responsible for the violation. However, the question of the deservingness (equity, fairness) of the situation in the subject’s eyes poses itself differently according to the emotion in question. One feels *indignant* out of a general moral concern for justice, before the denial of moral entitlements or the breach of obligations that constitute our relationships with other agents. Present in the case of indignation, such an appeal to a shared normative framework seems to be absent in the case of envy. Aristotle, for one, seems to rule out any notion of what is warranted, deserved or merited from his account of envy, which he defines as ‘a certain kind of distress at apparent success on the part of one’s peers in attaining the good things that have been mentioned, not that a person may get anything for himself but because of those who have it.’ (2007: 144)

Envy of another's good fortune works not only regardless of the way they act or judge us, but also regardless of any expectation of acquiring the good for oneself (if suffices that other are deprived of it). This type of envy is very problematic politically because it can result in universalized injury, or in a deepening of social injuries befalling the envious themselves. Think, for instance, of those instances in which lower-class citizens strongly oppose public policies seeking to offset social and economic equality, from which they would arguably benefit (Cramer, 2016). They might feel they are not getting their fair share. But the feeling that others are but do not deserve can become their primary political driver. We have mentioned deservingness here. In effect, Aristotle, at least implicitly, seems to think that even envy might not be entirely immune to questions of 'personal desert,' i.e. to claims that are grounded in the value people themselves perceive to have (one's 'fair share'). He says people are particularly envious of things that they themselves 'desire or think they ought to have' (2007: 145). There is a difference, however, in the ways indignation and envy relate to norms. While a more general moral concern for justice underpins indignation, in envy our concern is a particular, personal concern for what we consider as our undeserved inferiority.

But if envy might still imply a modicum of resentment, understood as a 'moral' emotion, resentment does not necessarily imply comparison. To explain, resentment can be sensitive to the normative question of the fairness of the subject's situation while ignoring the issue of the perceived relative positions of the subject and the object. We can therefore resent another/others for considering they unjustly and intentionally caused us injury, without comparing ourselves with them or considering them to benefit from undeserved good fortune.

With these distinctions between different forms of resentment in mind, we turn to a discussion of the way in which they illuminate the phenomenon of populism.

5. POPULISM OVERHAULED

Although we claim that the logic of populism is the logic of resentment, not all sub-logics of resentment are populist. The populist logic of resentment moves in the space between pure indignation and radical envy. This means it must include certain elements in simultaneity: a normative element, i.e. a reference to democratic *norms*, notably democracy's superordinate commitment to equality and popular legitimacy, or the idea of the people as the ground of political legitimacy (Morgan, 1989); a comparative element imbued with that normativity: i.e., a sense of undeserved *inferiority*; a *rivalry* between parts, where one part is deemed *responsible* or to *blame* for the underserved inferiority of the other in view of shared commitments; an appeal to the restoration of democratic equality made for the part in the name of the whole – 'the people', hence the –ism, populism.

As such, pure indignation at the violation of democratic norms and principles, or what is sometimes called 'moral' resentment, does not constitute on its own a basis for populism. It is possible for one to resent the perceived violation of those norms without one or one's group being perceived as directly affected – i.e., made inferior by such violations. A case in point would be white opposition to the Apartheid segregationist regime in South Africa. They resented the violation of democratic norms of justice in their political community even though they did not perceive themselves as consigned to an underserved position of inferiority by that violation (in effect, they were all too aware of being privileged by it). Their political action did not therefore fall within the remit of populism. Similarly, social movements motivated by indignation at the violation of democratic norms and principles, where this involves a perceived inferior positioning brought about by their negation, are not necessarily populist. Consider, for instance, a movement such as Black Lives Matter. Both the normative and the inferiority aspects of resentment are present therein. But instead of claims of the part in the name of the whole ('the people'), the claims brought forward envisage primarily the recognition of the part by the other part in its difference. Our

definition of populism as a logic, which is primarily a logic of socio-political action, also allows us to see more clearly why populism ought not to be equated with any particular ideological contents. A good illustration of this is Marxism. Although Marxism posits class struggle as the engine of history, both parts capitalists and workers, are deemed victims of the same system: capitalism. As such, Marxism resents systemic inequalities, but in recognizing their structural nature, ultimately frees the agents from responsibility or blame. Its impetus is not moralising. This is not the case, however, with Latin American movements under the banner of twenty-first century socialism. Their efforts at political mobilization rely often on resentment being directed at the attitudes and intentions of the alleged perpetrators of workers' suffering. Their action expresses not mere frustration or malaise, but imputation of responsibility. The basis of their claims is not class, but popular sovereignty (hence, they are made in the name of the 'people'). This places it firmly within populism.

Once one scrutinises the logic of resentment defining populism, it is easy to see why populism remains such an ambiguous phenomenon and its relationship to democracy so contested. Populism can have both a preventative and a restorative role within democracy. Democracy implies self-rule and some level of resentment against being ruled. Preventatively, resentment towards the ruling elite, and the threat of conflict implied in it, might work against elites transforming their disproportionate power and influence into full-blown disregard for other groups' interests and the common good. Understood as indignation, populism bears a close relationship with the fundamental principles and values grounding democracy, in particular its egalitarian commitments. Restoratively, therefore, populism might point to their violation and address the community at large with a view to the restoration of broken promises and shared commitments. Hence, we see populism being often symptomatic of important democratic exclusions which are largely being overlooked or not dealt with. Populist outbursts work regularly the outward expression of frustration, exasperation, or anger at the lived experience of that exclusion.

Insofar and as long as resentment relates to a normative *fundus*, and that it mobilises citizens around its breaching, it bears a potential of democratic awakening. Yet the potential need not be realized. Resentment is a notoriously fickle and slippery logic of action. At its extreme, it can either fixate obsessively on particular objects or become virtually objectless and all-encompassing. As a result, the understanding to what might be provoking loss or injury might be compromised. There is always a chance that populist denunciation awakens and engages the community in a discussion of what might best restore and protect the norms and principles that have been found to be compromised. But there is also a possibility it simply closes off that discussion. This closure can happen in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, the problem at hand – the causes of collective or systemic injustice faced, and even their reach – lend themselves to misdiagnosis when one fixates in one single ‘cause’ or when every possible cause can be the cause. Second, a problem thus misdiagnosed lends itself to an immediately available solution or a redemptive all-encompassing one. Considerations of how or why the problem might have been misdiagnosed or how and why even agreed ideals might entail different modes of interpretation and implementation, and face opposition within democratic politics, can thereby be ruled out.

Populism is never merely about moral resentment. It is not mere frustration at the violation of a normative *fundus* or at systemic injustices stemming from it. It also establishes a conflictive relationship between rival groups, insofar as responsibility or even fault for such violations are imputed to certain actors and actions. This populist impulse towards moralisation and culpabilisation inevitably opens the door to risks. It tends to portray politics as a zero-sum game, where the other’s gains are necessarily my losses. When indignation devolves into envy, social cooperation becomes difficult, and the residual normative reference in envy struggles to address the community at large, let alone the perceived offenders. Unlike indignation, envy is both painful and nonconstructive. How can the many cooperate with the few, or the part within the many address the other part within it, if they do not wish the few or the

other part to have some good, *even if* they themselves do not want it; *even if* they prefer to deprive others of the good to acquiring it for themselves; *even if* the few or the other part do not harm them? An exclusive focus on envy, comparison of fortunes, and allegedly intentional culpable agents and actions, can sacrifice progressive politics at the hands of passivizing victimisation. It can easily distract from, or even preclude engagement with, the collective and systemic inequalities and injustices that might lie behind one's felt injuries and the politics that shapes them. As Michael Ure rightly explains, 'it is because socio-political resentment', identifying and addressing collective and systematic injustices, 'responds to the political regulation of basic ontological risks and contingencies – misfortune, irreversibility, loss and so on – that it runs the risk of sliding into ontological *ressentiment*', a form of radical envy or envious hatred, 'and with it indiscriminate, unremitting blaming, envious spoiling of the good and dangerous attempts to make politics the locus of metaphysical redemption.' (Ure, 2015: 608) This radical envy is particularly dangerous because it can become obsessed with the tinniest of marginal gains, and thereby undermined possibilities of trust and cooperation further. As Raymond Geuss explains, radical envy can initiate 'a diabolic cycle in which envy refocuses itself on increasingly minor advantages, and it is tempting to think that the remedy for every failure is a search for yet further dimensions of human life that have not been 'equalized'' (2016: 183). At that point any vision of progressive politics can turn into a dystopian vision of egalitarian perfectionism or monism.

While indignation can be directed at abstract objects (e.g., the violation of norms of justice), and be directed at those further away from us, envy is most commonly directed at our neighbours – or fellow citizens, those close at hand. This combined with radical envy's centrifugal nature renders the boundary separating resentment from enmity very porous. The dangers of trespassing such a boundary have been fully grasped by the Minnesota populist Ignatius Donnelly in his dystopian novel *Caesar's Column* (1890). The term 'populism' had not yet been coined in the English language, when Donnelly drafted the Platform of the Populist Party (1892) in

America. He believed his literary efforts to be integral to the populist political project as he saw it. *Caesar's Column* puts us before a society in which there is a growing sense of loss of status and control over events that affect one's life, with the concomitant assignment of such control to corporations, wealthy individuals, and unresponsive urban elites, at home and abroad. Resentments of all kind are mounting, without being addressed. Systemic solutions such as Marxism are found discouraging and frustrating in the face of the growing repressed anger. The scenario is one of impending civil war, of a polity at war with itself. This is where populism, an ambivalent companion of democracy, leads to democide.

Notes

¹ While this paper focuses on the relationship between populism and democracy, populist research has focussed both on democratic and non-democratic forms of government. See, e.g. Worsley 1969; Germani 1978.

References

- Abts, K. and Rummens, S. (2007) Populism versus Democracy. *Political Studies* 55: 405–424.
- Aslanidis, P. (2015) Is Populism an Ideology?. *Political Studies* 64: 1-16.
- Arditi, B. (2007) *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Aristotle. (2007) *Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barbalet, J. (1992) A macro sociology of emotion: Class resentment. *Sociological Theory* 10: 150–163.
- Bartels, L.M. (2016) *Unequal Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Betz, H.-G. (2002) Conditions favouring the success and failure of radical right-wing populist parties in contemporary democracies. In: Yves Mény and Yves Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, pp. 197-213.
- Brubaker, R. (2017) Why Populism? *Theory and Society*: 1-29.
- Canovan, M. (1981) *Populism*. London: Junction Books.
- Canovan, M. (1999) Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies* 47: 2-16.
- Canovan, M. (2002) Taking Politics to the People. In: Yves Mény and Yves Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 25-44.
- Canovan, M. (2004) Populism for political theorists? *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9:3: 241-252.
- Cramer, K. (2016) *The Politics of Resentment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Demertzis, N. (2006) Emotions and Populism. In: S. Clarke, P. Hoggett and S. Thompson (Eds.) *Emotions, Politics and Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 103-122.
- Donnelly, I. (1890) *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century, by Edmund Boisgilbert*. Chicago: F. J. Schulte & Company.
- Engels, F. (2015) *The Politics of Resentment*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Fenton, S. (2012) Resentment, class and social sentiments about the nation. *Ethnicities* 12: 465–483.
- Fraser, N. (1990) Rethinking the Public Sphere. *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80.
- Garsten, B. (2012) 'Being Represented', unpublished manuscript, delivered at the Stanford Political Theory Workshop, March.
- Gest, J. and Gray S. (2015) 'Silent citizenship: the politics of marginality in unequal democracies', *Citizenship Studies* 19: 465-73.
- Gest, J. (2016) *The New Minority*. Oxford University Press.
- Green, J. (2015) 'Solace for the Frustrations of Silent Citizenship: the Case of Epicureanism', *Citizenship Studies* 19: 492-506.
- Germani, G. (1978) *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Howarth, D. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2000). Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis. In: D. Howarth, A. J. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 1-23.
- Jansen, R.S. (2011) Populist Mobilization. *Sociological Theory* 29: 75-96.

- Kaase, M. (2007) Perspectives on Political Participation. In Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 784-796.
- Kazin, M. (1995) *The Populist Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books.
- Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2005a) *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2005b) Populism: What's in a Name? In: Panizza, Francisco (Ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso, pp. 32-49.
- Lefort, C. (1988) *Democracy and Political Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morgan, E. (1989) *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- Mudde, C. (2004) The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39: 542-563.
- Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Müller, J.-W. (2016) *What is Populism?* University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Pauwels, T. (2011) Measuring Populism. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 21: 97–119.
- Schmitt, C. (1996) *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Orig. pub. 1927.
- Shils, E. (1956) *The Torment of Secrecy*. London: Heinemann.
- Urbinati, N. (2014) *Democracy Disfigured*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ure, M. (2014) Resentment/Ressentiment. *Constellations* 22: 599–613.

Weyland, K. (2001) Clarifying a Contested Concept. *Comparative Politics* 34: 1–22.