



Democracy vs. demography: Rethinking politics and the people as debate

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Abstract

Rise of populist politics in the 21st century calls scholars and politicians alike to reflect upon the question of how politics and democracy have been understood. Drawing on the theory of hegemony, this article establishes a distinction between democracy and ‘demography’ as a key line of conceptualization in politics. It highlights a central misunderstanding at the core of the demonization of populism: For radical democratic theory, ‘the people’ is not a demographic, socio-economic, or historically sedimented category tied to some characteristics, but a performative process of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ ‘the people’ as a self-consciously enacted polity. This statement challenges the taken-for-granted status of subjectivities of political struggle and links this approach to other contemporary discussions of politics, democracy, and populism. After discussing how anti, neo and post-foundational theoretical accounts on populism reveal a dimension of politics and representation, this article emphasizes action and performativity over static categories and models characteristic of political realism and political system approaches.

Keywords

democracy, liberalism, people, populism, representation

Openings on the concept of populism

In *For Left Populism*, Chantal Mouffe (2018) triumphantly claimed that the ‘populist moment’ points to a return of the political after years of ‘post-politics’. Her past calls for discussing political frontiers (Mouffe, 2000, 2005) have been answered: there is not only more polarization, but also an emerging rupture in the hegemonic order where traditional

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party alliances are put into question. This is exactly what her work with Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) was seeking to point out: That cross-generational partisan identities and historical polarization trends are simply not enough to provide votes for left-wing parties.

Moreover, 'the global rise of populism' (to borrow Benjamin Moffitt's title of 2016) is accompanied by an increased interest in politics. The relevant sections of bookshops across the largest cities of the West stock a wide range of new analyses and interpretations of this phenomenon. The change manifests in multiple ways: People in multiparty systems organize home-based election debates or decide to support brand new leaders or movements; new voter groups and political parties thrive; political outsiders replace politicians with long-established know-how and careers; and internet forums are filled with polarizing debates that spill to the mainstream, challenging not only the elites but also conventions, practices, and hegemony. Many new political movements challenge existing political parties and their model of representation, seeking to make an impact as 'outsider' political parties and to succeed at the polls (Richards, 2017). At the same time, populism has provoked technocratic and anti-populist responses that contribute to securing the status quo, preventing a contestation on liberal values and/or protecting existing institutionalized positions of power.

Political scientists of all persuasions have had to return to their categories and original priorities to explain what is happening around the world; new understandings of politics and democracy are needed. For example, there is still an emphasis on the relevance of democratic representation. A debated work – Achen and Bartels' *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (2016) – challenges this notion. They question previous claims that elections would lead to responsive governance and that elections and parties are supposed to represent the people and their positions, and thus ensure democracy. Instead, they suggest putting an emphasis on the evaluation of how debating (input) contributes to governance (output).

On the other hand, in comparative politics a 'broad consensus has emerged' around Cas Mudde's (2007) definition of populism, and around an *ideational* perspective that focuses on discourses, ideology, and style (Margulies, 2017; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018). This consensus is also spreading to academic social media: 'I think nearly all of us agree on the people/elite divide, we agree on (most of) the cases, we just disagree on what type of phenomenon we think populism is (ideology, discourse, strategy, style)', Benjamin Moffitt argued on Twitter (@bjmoffitt, 7:10, 7 November 2018). While the ideational approach adds different contents to populism to enable statistical analyses that focus on the contents of the *ism*, the dichotomy between the people and the elite could be understood not as substance but as *form*.

In addition to issues of conceptualization, scholars keep exploring populism's ambiguous relationship to democracy (e.g. Canovan, 2005; Panizza, 2005; Casullo, 2009; Motta, 2011). This is also present in the works of political theorists Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2005, 2018). For them, populism is part of politics and democracy; it emerges through a crisis of representation and brings to the fore new political demands,

giving voice to those who have not had it before (Moffitt, 2016; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015). Sometimes, the connection between democracy, populism, and politics may be too close to call, as we can see in Laclau's account (Arditi, 2010). This paper argues, however, that addressing populism and its meanings in the context of democracy, politics, and representation allows us to better understand current challenges, so the distinctions are worth holding even if they share a close 'family resemblance'.

For Laclau and Mouffe, populism implies a return to politics – and although there may be problems with it, unlike many other authors they do not see it as fundamentally undemocratic. For instance, Urbinati (2014) has argued that populism affects our conception of democracy, and that representative liberal democracy is in danger. For Jan Werner Müller (2016), populism excludes the elites from the people. Additionally, Carlos de la Torre (2010: 200) has commented on populist movements in Latin America and argued that populism appears to rely on the people but resorts to unmediated forms of democracy and hierarchical, leader-centred power relations. For post-foundational theorists, it is crucial to keep exploring populism and its relationship to politics and society by considering democracy and subjectivity. Although much of the research on populism adopts a moralizing perspective, this article accepts that actual everyday practices of democracy take many forms – some morally and aesthetically less appealing than others – but it is the duty of political theorists to make sense of empirical realities and not wish them away. There are possible benefits in the practices of populism for democracy (Stavrakakis, 2018; Mouffe, 2018).

Crucially, the question 'is populism a threat or a corrective to democracy?' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013) leads us to the question of whether to consider populism as *substantive* rather than *performative*. As Moffitt (2016: 151) argues: 'While it might be nice to state clearly that populism "is" or "is not" democratic, it is only by acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between the two phenomena, and noting populism's both democratic and antidemocratic tendencies, that we do it justice.' Attempts to reduce populism to a simple phenomenon often overshadow the potential of populism to include previously excluded groups or identities in the 'performance of "the people"'; to enable people to understand complex political phenomena; to 'reveal the dysfunctions of the contemporary democratic systems'; or to offer influencing tools other than mere voting (Moffitt, 2016: 144, 142–9). Populism's performativity has been at the core of Laclau's argument (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Palonen, 2019) – not only exploring it regarding democracy and representation (Thomassen, 2019), but also seeing populism's role in moving from liberal notions of representation to a performativity debate.

Earlier, I have argued that as different phenomena are identified by what is understood as 'populism', the concept of populism retains its looseness (Palonen and Kovala, 2018). Working over a hegemonic understanding of populism is therefore problematic. Furthermore, I insist on an anti-essentialist perspective to populism: it is not the substance of the people vs. the elite that provides the content of populism, *but its form* (see also Palonen, 2020). This includes an empty articulation of *us* and an emphasis on a constitutive dichotomy, set with effects, not as a constant category but as moment(s) of populism. Populist political practice implies generating new *openings* – that is,

articulating new dichotomies. This definition of populism also implies new perspectives to democracy. It establishes the grounds on which we understand politics and the political and, consequently, democracy.

In order to discuss democracy and politics vis-à-vis populism, I will propose a new dichotomy: democracy and demography, in order to take seriously the performative dimension of politics. I lay out this argument in the following way: first, I explore post-foundationalism as our starting point. Next, I discuss representation: what or who is it that populists represent? Then, how do the contemporary performances of populism challenge contemporary political theory perspectives on representation? By analysing different approaches to populism, we look at the metaphors they generate and discuss how they are linked to conceptions of democracy that speak in the name of 'demography'. The final part ties the debate back to post-foundational theory and articulates a theory of hegemony with a perspective on politics focused on process.

Post-foundationalism and affect

One of the most significant ways in which populist movements have had a significant influence is by questioning existing political cleavages. Traditionally, American-style political science emphasizes a direct link between interests and parties and conceives representation as semi-automated. However, the current global movement of populism challenges the interpretation of politics as business management, approaching populism as political meaning-making (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2014). It is important to look at populism's founding processes, which, in turn, should lead us to ask who are considered to be (or constituted as) the people? Post-foundational theory proposes a performative or more precisely *performative-constitutive* dimension in politics, which is particularly useful when analysing how populism *makes* meaning (Moffitt, 2016; Palonen, 2018).

Oliver Marchart (2007) has located post-foundationalism in the theorists of the left interested in hegemony and the establishment of shared meanings in society. A (neo)foundational liberal political theory on representation highlights specific characteristics, unmediated interests, and non-articulated socio-economic groups. Instead, post-foundational theory emphasizes rhetoric and the making of meaning; it studies the articulation of demands as a process between voters and parties.

In discussing whether populism *is* about the representation of the people who exist or the people who become, we come to the heart of the discussion about representation. Although much research on populism adopts a negative moralizing perspective, this article takes a more nuanced view and discusses the merits of populism for democracy (Stavrakakis, 2018; Mouffe, 2018). It claims that populism is a particular form of meaning-making and hegemony. Hegemony is synonymous with articulation and representation: it is part of meaning-making on an uneven ground that has been previously called the discursive field 'criss-crossed by antagonisms' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 153).

By making use of a post-foundational perspective, it is possible to demonstrate how in democracy politics is constitutive and affective. This may be in contrast with prevalent rationalizing conventions in political analysis. Yet, as evinced in the cases of emergent populist leaders and movements with divisive rhetoric, sensitivity to the affective – a perspective that focuses on the conflictual, constitutive (even irrational) aspects of

politics – enhances our ability to develop theory and analysis. From a post-foundational perspective, democratic society does not pre-exist articulation, which will always be lacking (and always up for contestation). Representation requires a process that constitutes it over time and across space. In this sense, democracy de-centred should be thought of as not only procedural but processual (Griggs et al., 2014).

Thus, politics is about debate, which may be contesting and defining hegemonies. ‘[I]n a democratic political order no one (god, the nation, the party) can put an end to the practice of questioning. Modern democracy is non-foundational, always open to yet another debate’, Sofia Näsström (2006: 330) wrote with reference to Claude Lefort, who has inspired populism thinkers with the idea that the space of power is empty. These include the theorists discussed in the next section.

Representing the people

As this article deals with democracy and populism, one of the central topics to discuss is representation. What is it that populists represent? How does populism challenge perspectives on representation? In recent years, Saward’s (2006) ‘representative claim’ has added a performative dimension to our understanding of politics – an approach that Lisa Disch (2015) has conceptualized as ‘constructivist’. In order to take the *constructivist turn* in representation seriously, we need to distinguish between *neo-, anti-, and post-foundational understandings of representation*. This can help us identify attempts to conceal contingency (or emphasize nationalist tones) in the theoretical and political circles linked to populist movements.

Rhetorical representation assumes this creative construction. An expert on renaissance rhetoric and political thought, Quentin Skinner, distinguishes between representation as the ‘look the part’ or ‘made to seem present’ way of Cicero versus ‘having authority to act in the name of someone else’ (2008: 228–9). These two ways both assume the de facto absence of who is represented. The same applies to Saward’s representation and Ankersmit’s political representation. Yet Ankersmit has also argued that representation *creates* both the represented and the representative (2002: 115), and his aesthetic approach to representation is somewhat similar to Laclau’s (1996) further discussed through the constitutive power of rhetoric (Laclau 2014).

On the other hand, representation can imply different things. For example, Mouffe (2018) has taken a strong stance in favour of representation in democracy for pluralism, but she also abstained from reducing it to elections or freedom of choice. Here, representation’s constitutive side is central. To populism theory and praxis, the claim of representation usually focuses on the people. Below, I discuss three perspectives on populism that draw on Lefort’s empty space of power for their arguments on populism and democracy and focus on the populist representative claim on ‘the people’. I also discuss the horizontal and vertical constitution of the people.

Müller: ‘The people’ as fiction

A popular book in populism studies is *Was ist Populismus?* by Jan-Werner Müller (2016), which argues for a neo-foundational understanding of the people. This liberal reading of populism seeks to highlight how populism is anti-democratic and, even in

its progressive forms, not very useful (Stavrakakis and Jäger, 2017; Palonen, 2017). For Müller, the emphasis on ‘people’ (or ‘*volk*’ in the original German from where I translated this) is dubious, as ‘populism is an understanding of politics that puts forward a morally clean and homogeneous people (*Volk*) against the immoral and parasitic elite – in the way that they do not belong to the people (*Volk*)’. Thus, for Müller populism is portrayed as an inbuilt danger in modern representative democracy (2016: 28), and ‘the people’ is described as a fiction (2016: 58).

Following Habermas, Müller argues that ‘the people’ is only about plurality (2016: 19). Any expression of totality appears to be a sign of totalitarianism. What is legitimate is an additive version of the people, as in ‘we *too* are the people’, but not ‘we *are* the people’. ‘The people’ is an ever-expanding set of segments of society composed of socio-economic groups. Hence, from this perspective, ‘people’ is never imagined as ‘whole’. Some would say that ‘peopling’ is the whole point of politics, basing their argument on the very same point that Müller makes: there is no *people*. A unitary notion of people would be a worrying concept, as there is only one society composed of different groups and people with interests. For someone to get the mandate to rule in the name of the people would simply be wrong. Why? Because for Müller, representation would be either ‘looking the part’ – a fiction that cannot encapsulate society’s heterogeneity – or a false claim of having acquired the authority to represent all the people.

Besides the liberal and non-aesthetic concept of representation, Müller bases his argumentation on a literal reading of Lefort (1986: 279): if the space of power should be empty, as the French theorist claimed, then it should be empty. Müller omits both contingency and the temporal dimension that are important for Lefort (Näsström, 2006). He engages with the *contents* of populism – the people – rather than the *logic* of populism. Arguably, Müller is actually re-mystifying rather than demystifying what is going on under the heading of populism. As he connects populism with ethnic homogeneous people – and only discusses examples of right-wing populism – it seems that he discusses nationalism rather than populism (Palonen, 2017).

Canovan: The people as myth

What Müller argued as fiction may also be seen as a powerful myth, and even as the central myth of democracy tying us together. One of the key perspectives on the power of populist movements left, right or centre is Margaret Canovan’s (2005). She explains the disappointment at the heart of democracy:

The foundation myth according to which we, the People, are somehow the source of political authority, gives the impression that we ought to be able to exercise power as a body and enjoy a sense of powerful agency. But although all democratic processes allow to have an input into politics (as individual voters or as members of groups of various kinds) there is rarely any clear connection between activity and effect, and certainly no sense that we as the people are in control. (2005: 285)

Populism emerges in this sense of a lack of control, and from the pluralism that is visible in established democracies:

Everyday politics is concerned with the things that divide us, not the things that unite us. Citizens of a democracy may believe half-heartedly in the myth that we the People, are the ultimate sovereign, but what we actually see in the place of power reserved for people is the squabbles of politicians, lobbyists and spin-doctors. (2005: 128)

Canovan masterfully points to the myth of the people in power and its inevitable limits in the praxis of democracy, which in turn lures the citizen to back movements that replace the empty space of power. She writes about the ‘grudging acceptance of democracy and the craving for the real sovereign People’ (2005: 286), and stresses that it is precisely this people that ought to be seen as a fiction. In her conclusions, Canovan writes against the search for authority: ‘the most important (and most misleading myth) of all is surely the belief that somewhere behind the mundane surface of everyday politics, there must be some ultimate source of authority that could save us from the responsibility of muddling through as best we can’ (2005: 238).

In her discussion of myths and their role in politics, Canovan quotes on many occasions George Schöpflin, a scholar of nationalism and politics in Eastern Europe before he became a Fidesz member of parliament in Hungary. Schöpflin (2000) claimed that myths are vital in politics. Myths are not simply about right or wrong, or false/alternative facts or verified facts; their role is to fix meaning in the fluid spaces of contestation. They anchor legitimation but also offer points of contestation. Schöpflin (2000) also discussed the role of legacies in transformation: even where the myths are changed, the discursive field is still marked by the legacies of the previous era. Fiction, thus, is crucial for democracy.

The key thing about the people lies in its contingency. Canovan proposes an anti-foundational vision: ‘We have seen that people often seems to refer to mobilizations that appear unpredictably and fade away again’ (2005: 240). It is in anti-foundationalism that lies the force of Lefort’s empty place of power. It is not even supposed that ‘the people in power’ would institutionalize themselves as powerholders.

Laclau and Mouffe: The people as praxis

Post-foundationalism is the perspective that Laclau and Mouffe – and several others – take to populism. According to this view, the myth of the people is a crucial tool in politics. As with the two previous authors, they draw on Lefort’s ‘empty space of power’. To them, the people identity is always a fleeting relation in the need of re-articulation: ‘Populism is a mode of political identification that constructs and gives meaning to people as a political actor’, Panizza (2017: 1) explains. It is the temporary constitution of the people that matters.

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005) argues that populism as a logic of articulation dichotomizes social space and places the people against their oppressors or political opponents. Following this performative and relational thinking, ‘people’ can be any relatively inclusive (yet limited) collective, and the ‘oppressive regime’ can be any system or opposing totality that impedes the full identification or presentation of the constitutive demands of ‘the us’. For Panizza (2005) and Laclau (2005), people means *plebs*, taking the representation of the *populus*. This does not mean that *plebs* would be equivalent to the people, but to a particular group: ‘a part’ that claims to represent ‘the whole’. This claim is contestable and temporary. Even if ‘the people’ is the defining

signifier of populism, ‘the people’ is not always the name of that temporary collective subject; it does not have to be directly referred to (Panizza, 2017: 8). Naming is retro-active and often makes the constitutive otherness or the lack in the collective subject present, as Panizza’s examples of ‘the 99 percent’ or ‘ordinary folks’ show.

Laclau insisted that there is no political ‘us’ prior to articulation: whereas interests appear as a given, demands emerge in articulatory processes. They (re)articulate an antagonistic and constitutive frontier in politics. Becoming the people temporarily is a logic of political articulation – a basic form of populism. As this does not require a reference to ‘the people’ itself, the form of the political ‘us’ is the crucial anti-essentialist essence of populism. Laclau stresses the capacity of populism to generate bonds among the people through relational ties or what he calls ‘chains of equivalence’, where, instead of sameness, the equality of relation within the form of meaning-making is emphasized. This can only be conceived of in a process of generation of demands. Going back to the different understandings of representation in rhetoric, ‘playing the part’ would here mean constituting the part as the part itself.

For Laclau, populism is also constituted through what it is not: as a logic of articulation or a mode of political identification. The opposite of populism for Laclau is institutionalism. It fulfils the criteria of traditional views in liberal democracy: fixed positions to vote from and groups to represent. It cannot be enough for a radical democracy, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) contended already in the 1980s. For them, the democratic ‘we’ is not a fact per se, but the state of belonging is always renewed. As Stavrakakis argues:

Populism typically implies the creation, emergence and construction of a particular political and collective subject that will be able to push forward social demands which have been previously excluded. Populism allows sectors that have been suffering or excluded from politics to emerge, to win concessions and influence decision-making. (Stavrakakis, 2018: 35)

From this perspective, ‘the people’ is both horizontally and vertically articulated. There is both an extension of horizontal relations and a chain of equivalence between different groups, and a naming process that temporarily constitutes this collective as, for example, the ‘ordinary folks’ or the ‘99 percent’.

The empty space of power: Going back to Lefort

As the above accounts show, the importance of Lefort for populism theory is paramount. Authors such as Müller imply with their criticism that only one group at a time can claim to represent the people, and none of them are allowed to stand as a representative of the people as a whole. This was not Lefort’s idea (Näsström, 2006). In Lefort’s words:

This means that the people is one, but that it is necessary to come back to the people once and again in order to know what that one is. Universal suffrage has as its function – I do not say as its principle – to mobilize society. It is a great moment in which everybody is required to concretize their opinions. This factor gives birth to forms of association and the organization of society in parties, which are going to become new sources of decision. At the beginning we don’t quite know what that people is, what that sovereign people refers to.

Moreover, because of the periodicity of suffrage, today's power is not the power of tomorrow, exactly like the people of today are not necessarily the people of tomorrow. (Lefort in Rosanvallón, 2012: 9)

As Lefort admits to Rosanvallón, this view is not that encouraging for many, especially those in power. It does not mean that we should be without anybody who makes decisions for us. In order to understand democracy, one must see that 'On the one hand, the people are heterogeneous, multiple, in conflict, and on the other hand there is power, which is the power of nobody' (Lefort in Rosanvallón, 2012: 10). In Lefort's view, the space of power can be filled but always just temporarily, bearing in mind that power is not totally in the hands of men holding the highest positions.

The ambiguity over the strength of one's own mandate and the realization of representation may be difficult to swallow for those who have given elected leaders a popular mandate over a term. Yet, this is the crux of democracy. Between elections, the space of power is filled – but never fully, as the distance between the represented and the representative is not fixed. What is crucial is the looseness of democracy, which is prone to self-destruct. The resistance to totalitarianism is inbuilt into the system, but at the same time totalitarianism could also emerge from within.

Näsström highlights the point in a way that is worth quoting at length:

Totalitarianism, Lefort writes, is a power from within. It arises when power 'rules as though nothing existed outside the social, as though it had no limits (these are the limits established by the idea of a law or a truth that is valid in itself)'. If the king was both above the law and subject to law, both father and son of justice, the totalitarian regime is a 'oneness'. It is secularized and omnipotent at the same time. Can democracy ever escape this problem? The radical indeterminacy of modern democracy – the fact that the source of its power always remains hidden and anonymous – makes democracy into an unstable regime. It yields a totalitarian quest for unity. But to Lefort, this is a risk that comes with the overthrow of absolute power, and, as such, a risk that every democratic project must learn how to live with. The central point is that this lack of a clear and institutional definition of the people also guarantees the continuity of the democratic struggle. (Näsström, 2006: 329)

The in-built risk of totalitarianism only highlights the precarious character of democracy and how it is not simply a state that is reached at the end of a linear process. Democracy should not be taken for granted; rather, it is a constant struggle.

Demography and democracy: Reflections on liberal and left thought

However, democracy is often taken for granted. For the neo-foundational perspective articulated by Müller, it is something else than the mere reproduction of the plurality of society. That could be called bureaucracy by Näsström (2006: 335), who insists: 'representative politics that seeks to close the gap between representatives and their constituencies is misguided. What one achieves in the move is not democracy, but bureaucracy.' Here, we call it '*demography*', whereby this term is interpreted to refer to the focus between interests or societal positions and the idea that representation should

correspond to these. It generates a dichotomy between democracy and demography that encapsulates the mode of representation in the neo-foundationalism of different socio-economic groups, where no process of mediation takes place between representing and generating links with those represented. The idea is that an electorate is already composed of a set of groups, in contrast to the generation and articulation of those groups. Clearly, if the emphasis was laid on *demography*, we could see the grafting of the demos. Nevertheless, a performative dimension is missing from those binary understandings of politics and democracy that are criticized here.

Mouffe (2018) criticizes the idea that social agents are a direct expression of their 'objective' positions, because representation is a process of meaning-making, where subjectivities are made. In contrast to demography, (radical) democracy is the process through which links between different political demands are articulated, and within them different people and groups with their multi-level identification processes. Democracy always fills the empty space of power temporarily. The representative vertical relation, equally as the horizontal relation of equivalence, is imagined.

It is then true that the people are a part that represents the whole (population, *populus*), a sort of fiction, as Müller (2016) pointed out, or a myth for the anti- or post-foundational theorists Canovan (2005) and Laclau (2005)? In populism, the excluded people-as-part summon against the power-holding people-as-whole to expand their notions of the people (cf. Canovan, 2005: 90) – or, as often happens, to replace them. This relation is generated discursively and through practices in the same way that the *populus* is not already existing with clearly demarcated interests. Instead, '[s]ociety is divided and crisscrossed by power relations and antagonisms' (Mouffe, 2018). On the other hand, the role of the leader worries many theorists on populism, as it may overshadow the multiplicity of society. Laclau questioned both the universalizing and particularizing arguments and demonstrated that arguing from either position needs the other. Representation of the whole is never static or full but is, instead, lacking and needs to be continuously articulated. Laclau and Mouffe's account of populism is also set in contrast to the institutionalization or segmentation of identities into given positions.

In some streams of Marxism, 'the people' become valued over institutions such as the state, which are considered to be oppressive structures (Badiou, 2016: 31). Visiting the Lenin Museum in Tampere, Finland, I was reminded also of Laclau's (2005) discussion of the slogan of the Russian Revolution – 'bread, peace and land' – as a symbol of revolution where the peasants, workers, and soldiers were seen collectively as 'the people' against the oppressive regime. Gürhanlı (2018) has shown in practice in Turkey how populism overdosing goes beyond democratic populism when the love for the leader can become absolute. Demographically defining the workers and peasants and institutionalized left meant everyone else was excluded. 'People's democracies' were infamous because of their pseudo-democratic ethos: since they did not live up to this claim, they became increasingly legitimated through some forms of nationalism and 'progress'. This ended up doing away with the notion of democracy altogether, replaced by bureaucracy and a form of demography. Demography can also prevail in authoritarian regimes that have origins in populist mobilization. Laclau was quite aware of the two sides of populism, which I have recently discussed as the Janus-face of populism (Palonen,

2018); just as Casullo (2009) has argued, there are two sides to democracy: populist and deliberative.

Demography's shadow can also exist in left-wing responses to populism that assume that 'the people' does not exist without considering the performative, constitutive side. For example, Rancière argues that 'populism serves to draw the image of a certain people', with the stress on the 'certain' as an already defined and limited group (2011a: 102). These figures of people are constituted or staged in a process (Rancière, 2011b). Following Rancière, populism is in *plural* rather than singular: multiple antagonistic populist groups gathered around or articulated through some common denominators. They also gather brute force and become entangled with racism, as Rancière points out – although he is quick to remind his audience that institutionalized racism exists in the system (2011a: 102). His value to this discussion is to deny any universal status to the people.

For Müller, the notion of the people is already dubiously founded upon (ethnic) content and limit. Laclau does not deny this limit but demonstrates how this limit bracketing out and bracketing in are processes that always emerge and are contested. While Müller argues that there are different groups so one cannot call itself the people, for Laclau and Mouffe heterogeneity implies that people would always be a temporary articulation of unity, and Rancière argues it is always in plural: peoples, not people. This understanding echoes demographic bases of peoples, rather than the constitutive temporary and democratic moment, which is even present in Alan Badiou's (2016) theorizing. Müller and Rancière perceive 'the people' as something that claims the position of the universal, denying other claims for power as morally dubious; Laclau sees it as a constitutive universalizing (but always failing) category. For Laclau, the people is performative (Moffitt, 2016), constitutive (Laclau, 2014), and elusive.

Democracy is about becoming temporarily the people, not about representing numerous groups. When 'Who are the people?' turns into a question of what groups there are in a society to be represented in politics, we move from one set of foundations to another. Eventually, Müller's doctrine goes logically against itself: the counterbalance of 'immoral populists' comes as a matter of undeniable moral right. This route may lead to polarization, just as I have previously theorized in regard to the case of Hungary (Palonen, 2009, 2018).

The logic is similar to that in Venezuela. Sara Motta (2011) demonstrated how new forms of organization, mobilization and re-politicization occurred in Venezuela in the 2000s, and penetrated far deeper in their criticism of liberal democracy and the sedimented roles of voters and delegates than merely the body of the leader and its representations of populism as *Chavismo*. The trouble is that typical performative representations of populism are embodied expressions (Diehl, 2017). Just as there was a flux taking place at the local level in Venezuela, the regime institutionalized into one leader and his shadow, with these two levels of 'becoming the people' – one keeping structures and positions open and the other fixing them – in dissonance.

The concept of underlying heterogeneity may resonate with a foundational or demographic perspective as the plurality of interests and groups. Yet, for post-foundational theorists of hegemony, heterogeneity is marked by antagonisms (Mouffe, 2018). The extension of the chain of equivalence is a political practice for Laclau. In a

chain of equivalence, there is no smoothness. As Norval (2009) has shown, there is a tendency to overshadow the hierarchies in these chains of equivalences, but it would be important to demonstrate deprived voices and hierarchies between voices. Yet the liberal extension of ‘us, too’ not only overshadows hierarchies between those included; it denies the possibility of ever realizing the moment of us, or contesting what is opposed.

‘The political’, or politics as such, is related to the process of including and excluding people/s and challenging current regimes of inclusion and exclusion. Democracy is not a smooth place where hierarchies or exclusion do not exist. Democracy is the very operation of that process, which includes contestation of existing hierarchies and exclusions rather than being blind to them. I would like to argue that politics consists of not only convincing people rationally but generating common ground. Read from the perspective of a theory of hegemony, politics can be seen as an operation where the always temporary ‘us’ emerges. Furthermore, the radically democratic ‘us’ is not grounded on uncontested grounds, although these kinds of rhetoric persist. Rather, it is always circled around the issue and the stance: the political demand. The articulation of political demands is a process of people building and, as we know from structural linguistics, already ‘what is not’ is equally constitutive of us as what is assigned as the contents of identity. Moreover, the articulation of demands does not happen in a void; it happens in interaction in a relational space through debate.

For Laclau, politics, besides existing through frontiers, is about the generation of empty signifiers, of common points of identification that can generate the temporary us. Politics is precisely the operation that challenges the current horizons of possibility. From a theory of hegemony, it is the challenge that would bring organic intellectuals (Gramsci) or the ideological state apparatuses (Althusser). As with most things moved from the 20th century to the present, these are also ever fluid and contingent (cf. discussion of post-Althusserianism in Boucher, 2019). Therefore, tackling the complex process of the political involving position-making, generation of meanings and political frontiers is ever more important.

This emphasis on others and frontiers does not imply that politics should necessarily polarize. Rather, sedimented polarization is another sign of institutionalization and lack of democracy (Palonen, 2009). Still, people-making or ‘peopling’ is a profoundly political and democratic activity, one that is overlooked by institutionalist and ‘demographic’ approaches to politics, alongside foundational interpretations of populism. Rather than power-seeking indecision, this is the moment of antagonism, of choice, in radical democracy. The political decision is founded on contestable grounds rather than religion or ethnicity. Without this moment that cuts the extension of the chain of demands, the political would disappear. But it also disappears if it is not repoliticized.

Concluding remarks

Through interrogating the representative claim on the people, this article has sought to make three key points, drawing on three dichotomies or sets of categories as a contribution to theorizing on populism and democracy in the tradition of Claude Lefort. First, the article discusses the approaches of anti-, post-, and neo-foundationalism to the representative claim of the people in populism, with respect to three perspectives on

populism: liberal democratic, traditional anti-foundational, and radical democracy. Second, it articulates a dichotomy between ‘demography’ and democracy, to discuss the performative character of the people and what is represented in democracy. Third, in contrast to a consensus on definitions of populism as such, and in keeping with the theory of hegemony, it has expressed the worry over sedimentation of socio-economic groups, or articulated and institutionalized characteristics that would erase the creative performative character of democracy, representation and populism.

Of these three approaches, the liberal democratic perspective includes a neo-foundational suspicion of peopling where ‘populism’ is associated with ethnically-based radical right claims or welfare chauvinism is tied to the nation or a particular ethnic group (Müller, 2016). Populism is seen as purely vertical; democracy as purely horizontal. ‘People’ is not a contingent category but is already filled with content. The demographic approach to politics impedes a full understanding of what is going on with the global rise of populism and operationalizes a fluidity of meanings.

In contrast to this, the traditional approach to populism, drawing on Margaret Canovan, values myths in meaning-making. This perspective can be seen as anti-foundational, and it acknowledges the positive role of mobilization and a vertical approach to the representation of the people through myths. This approach allows for the populists in power to continuously reproduce political myths to legitimate their rule.

The radical democratic approach departs from this by highlighting the constitutive role of not just myths but political demands. From this post-foundational perspective, as there is no pre-given people or interests, politics is the process of constituting collective subjects through political demands. Populism is a particular mode of political articulation where the collective subject is formed through otherness and common signifiers, horizontally and vertically at the same time.

How to deal with populism? The problem with the liberal approach is that it essentializes the already contingent, complex and heterogeneous character of populist movements. These would serve to legitimate a rationalistic basis for the powerholders, reluctant to hear different voices – e.g. by dismissing them as misguided ‘deplorables’. At the same time, this exclusion would mainstream some of the essentializing arguments the populists themselves were arguing, such as racism and xenophobia, as these could become key signifiers for all their concerns. Contesting the idea of pre-given interests as something that democracy is based on, the argument here is that populations with interests do vote. This stresses the importance of politics, not just as a representation of the people, but as debate that enables articulation of their demands, wishes and obstacles.

At the core is mobilization, which is a more messy and processual phenomenon than mapping preferences: democratic in the processual sense rather than the demographic outlined here. People mobilize politically as peoples through shared myths and political demands. The traditional populism theory does not discuss how mobilization occurs beyond the resonating myths. The dilemma is similar with those post-foundationalists who focus on leadership as a feature of populism. Populism is not simply a question of a part becoming the whole, or the name of a leader; it is about a heterogeneous set of demands articulated into an affective construct that constitutes the people as a political ‘us’ and a temporary unity distinct from that of political opponents.

Current positions in liberal democracy and the non-articulated nature of the nation prevent an understanding of populism as a process of people making. Scholars with an understanding of the theory of hegemony have emphasized the performative or constitutive aspects of populism (e.g. Moffitt, 2016; Laclau, 2014; Mouffe, 2005). Here, the stress is on articulation rather than on pre-given or simple identities as the basis of politics. The value of both populist movements and post-foundational political theory is to bring the political back into politics and enable discussion about what we mean by democracy and representation. They direct attention to the emergence and crystallization of demands not simply through inclusion but through decisive debate.

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