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ARTICLE

Nationalism, populism or peopleism? Clarifying the distinction through a two-dimensional lens

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Abstract

Prompted by recent scholarly debates on the distinction between populism and nationalism, we elaborate on the Laclaudian understanding of populism as an antagonistic form of us-building/community-making that relies on the extension of equivalential chains between demands. From this heuristic perspective, populism can be understood as an empty form to be filled with different contents, such as nationalism. Our radically anti-essentialist stance combines Laclau's formalist conceptualisation of populism and Brubaker's work on nationalism. We highlight the ontological dimension of populism, as a form of us-building, and the ontic dimension, as an array of discursive repertoires that fill the form, such as 'the people' for peopleism. We explore the ontological–ontic distinction through the case of Narodism in Serbia. Conceptualising populism two-dimensionally contributes both to debates on the 'core' of populism and to cases where articulations of 'the people' coincide with expressions of nationhood, civilisationalism and culturalism, rather than being entirely the same.

KEYWORDS

Laclau, nationalism, ontology, political logic, populism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The widely contested concept of populism has many competing scholarly definitions, and it can often be confusing to study instances in which nationalism entangles with populism. To add analytical rigour to scholarly work, we address the post-foundational approach to populism. It enables the analyst to engage with existing populisms in the plural but still retain the understanding of populism as a processual logic that may apply to instances which are not traditionally seen as populist (Laclau, 2005, p. xi). The debate that we address in this paper concerns whether populism and nationalism constitute distinct or similar phenomena. The ideas of imagining communities (Anderson, 1983) and making communities (Brubaker, 1996, 2020) resonate with the work of Ernesto Laclau, a theorist of hegemony and populism who emphasised that the political collective subject (or an 'us' [Palonen, 2020]) is formed around chains of equivalence and the constitutive outside. These authors reject the idea that political communities have already pre-formed identities and pay attention to the process of articulating these communities.

We explore how the ontic and ontological dimensions of populism have been confused and propose that they could be studied using a heuristic formula, as a lens through which we can think and speak of populism. By this, we mean the phenomenon's form, that is, its relational structures, and its many ontic manifestations in its worldly iterations, which shape how it can be conceptualised. Vital for research on nationalism, we argue that 'the nation' can provide content for populist discourses, making the two difficult to distinguish. We argue that differentiating the ontological form and the ontic contents of populism can prove useful for analysing how communities are made, as well as processes of demonisation and polarisation that might underpin community-making.

So far, Laclau is the only prominent author to deduce an original theory of an ontology of populism. He argued for an 'enlargement' of the category of populism from mere substance (content) to its form as a mode of articulation, that is, populism as an ontological category (Laclau, 2005; Laclau, 2015a, p. 153; Laclau, 2005, p. 87). In post-foundational discourse theory, ontology refers to the primary discursive terrain of meaning-making, in which meaning is constituted relationally and derived from an ontological lack inherent in discursive structures (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau 2015b [2007], p. 99). Drawing on a Heideggerian tradition, the ontic dimension here relates to the empirical level of human experience and practice (Marchart, 2007).

Our paper addresses a particular debate that emerged between Brubaker (2017, 2020) and De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) around Ernesto Laclau's theory. Their main point of contention was whether populism and nationalism should be understood as discursive repertoires with specific nodal points, or contents (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), or whether the analytical interdependence between them should be blurred because of the polysemy of 'the people' (Brubaker, 2020). We aim to contribute to this debate by addressing the abovementioned theorists' failure to acknowledge the ontological form and temporality of populism, as emphasised by Palonen (2018, 2020) and Anastasiou (2019, 2020). We propose a way to speak of nationalism as a specific ontic manifestation of populism, which is understood as an antagonistic logic of community-making/us-building that relies on extending chains of equivalence. Our two-dimensional lens helps to navigate more easily the vast literature on populism and nationalism, both theoretically and empirically. This lens is particularly useful for contexts where populism appears to intertwine with substantive ideologies such as nationalism, but also with specifically religious and environmentalist populist articulations.

Hence, we pursue Borriello and Jäger's (2021) recent challenge to discourse theorists to distinguish more clearly between the form and content of populism, its ontological and ontic dimension. Until recently, this distinction has largely been neglected, apart from some exceptions in the most recent works. For instance, Palonen (2020) has made the case for the empty form of populism, expressing it in a formula; Panizza and Stavrakakis (2021, p. 24) have claimed that 'Laclauian discourse theory performs a significant displacement of emphasis from *content* to *form*'; while Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) claim to go beyond Laclau's discursive ontology and into the performative dimension of discourse. Both Casullo (2020, p. 25) and Eklundh and Knott (2020, p. 1) have recognised that 'populism is a form rather than a content'. In a key contribution to the Laclauian discussions of populism, 'The populist manifesto', Knott (2020, p. 11) has pointed out that populism has no ideological core, but can be characterised as 'a style, logic

or discourse of doing politics'. We discuss what kind of 'doing politics' it is, captured in a simple logic that entails community-making/us-building around identifiable demands emerged out of grievances and antagonistic relationships to what impedes the fulfilment of those demands (Laclau, 2005). Despite the distinction between form and content, none of the prior works devotes significant analytical attention to (a) the ontological and the ontic dimension of populism or (b) its practical entanglement with nationalism that we seek to explore.

Our guiding question in this article is how *populism can be conceptualised through its content (ontic dimension) and its form (ontological dimension) and how an ontological understanding of populism could open up space for nationalism research*. For this, we present a radically anti-essentialist, immanent reading of Laclau. Some former students of Laclau disagree with the theorist's formalism: Stavrakakis (2006) and Arditì (2010) worry that populism is the general logic of politics. We argue that a measure of populist formalism is needed to address entangled phenomena such as nationalism and polarisation.

For some scholars, populism is a strategy of leaders based on organisational resources and opportunism (Weyland, 2017) or a set of ideas usable for comparative analysis (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). For De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) populism entails a discourse around the people (as the underdog) and nationalism a stress on the 'nation'. Other 'people'-centric (or in our reading: peopleist) scholarship includes those emphasising the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' as the thin core of populism (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017; Müller, 2016; Stanley, 2008). Margaret Canovan (2002) emphasised 'the people' as the content of populism and the subject of politics. Even though she recognises the ontic/ontological split we address here, her account remains peopleist, focusing on the signifier of the 'people'. Michael Freeden (2017) recognised the inability of either 'the people' or 'the elite' to act as stable reference points in any political movement or project. He defined populism not as an ideology, but having an 'ideationally insubstantial fingerprint' (2017, p. 10) and a core that is 'emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred' (2017, p. 3). Proposing to distinguish populism as a mode of articulation at the ontological level implies that peopleism is but one of populism's many contents or iterations at the ontic. In our view, populism is about antagonistic community-making based on equivalence, and it does not always rely on the concept of 'the people' but could also use nationhood as a reference point.

Despite the origins of the term populism in *populus*, theorised to deep abstraction, 'the people' is neither necessarily the signifier nor the signified—even though it may become such in political struggles. We would call 'peopleism' those articulations centring not on the ontological form of populism but on 'the people' as a core signifier. Ontically, populism can be perceived at the level of empirical analysis and as the ideology around the affective signifier 'the people'. While we are sympathetic to the need to equate populism with existing political struggles in the ontic, on universalised principles, we propose disentangling the ontic–ontological distinction and explore the deeper dynamics of populism to better analyse the diversity of past, current and future populist articulations—and their entanglement with nationalism (c.f. Palonen, 2018).

For us, populism contests the pre-existence of political communities and demonstrates how they come about. Here, we show how, ontologically, populism can be understood as a logic with a particular form, but empty of content: a logic of us-building through drawing affective political antagonistic frontiers (Laclau, 2005; Palonen, 2020; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021) by extending chains of equivalence between demands, grievances or ideas. This logic is constitutive of many political and ideological projects, such as nationalism, fascism, authoritarianism, racism or even liberal democracy. As a particular logic of politics, populism is filled with radically different, *particular* contents, drawings from specific discursive repertoires and sedimented significations. Hence, the ethical judgement of populism must be made on the ontic level.

We share Eklundh's (2019, 2020) view that affects and emotions inform all kinds of politics—particularly populism. Affectivity is central for Laclaudian populism (Laclau, 2005; Palestrino, 2022; Stavrakakis, 2007) as the *force* of discourse, which explains the potency of populist articulations. As Laclau (2005, p. 116) argues, 'there is no populism without affective investment in a partial object'. Although populism's logics can be recognised in a variety of movements and parties on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, their affective economies will differ depending on the situation and the enemy opposed (Gebhardt, 2021).

In this article, we present a conceptualisation of populism as a heuristic tool that enables us to examine contents, employ a critical perspective on the normative claims made in the name of 'the people' or other unifying signifiers, assess the changes in their connotations, including its constitutive outside, and explore this over time. Instead of a pre-defined 'people,' we draw attention to the process in which the imagined community is constituted, through otherness and chains of equivalence and as a split subject, craving for impossible fullness. This deconstructive but also Lacanian ontology is key to understanding populism in Laclau (Howarth, 2015) and opens space for researchers to explore what the nation, nationhood, nationality or ethnicity have got to do with populism.

The article is structured as follows: First, we bring in the nationalism theorist Brubaker to challenge the homogeneity of (post-)Laclaudian thought. Second, we explore the implications of the nationalism versus populism debate initiated by De Cleen and Stavrakakis and Brubaker. Third, we situate our ontological reading of populism within wider theoretical debates on what lies at its 'core' by arguing for its emptiness. In the fourth part, we propose a heuristic device to capture the ontological dimension. Finally, discussing the ontic case of Serbia, we demonstrate how our reconceptualisation of populism can bring clarity into the research field, specifically relating to the conflation of populism with nationalism.

2 | THE RELEVANCE OF THE LACLAUDIAN TRADITION AND THE ONTIC-ONTOLOGICAL DISTINCTION FOR NATIONALISM STUDIES

In the Laclaudian tradition, the ontic dimension of populism would pertain to the empirically observable, sedimented and investigated articulations of 'the people,' as many scholars have already considered. Populism has been defined as a 'discursive repertoire' or a sedimented range of significations of the 'people' (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, 2020), as a signifier in discourses about populism (De Cleen, Glynos & Mondon, 2018; Dean & Maiguashca, 2020), as a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016), or as a signifier articulated by different political camps (Dean & Maiguashca, 2020; Mondon & Winter, 2020). This tradition includes an emphasis on left-wing populism and its productive component for democracy (Custodi, 2021; Eklundh, 2019, 2020; Katsambekis & Kioupiolis, 2019; Prentoulis, 2021; Stavrakakis et al., 2016) but also on right-wing populist movements and parties (De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon 2021; Glynos & Mondon, 2019; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). Some address performative aspects of populist politics, like 'strong,' mostly male, leadership (Casullo, 2020; Moffitt, 2016; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Vulović, 2022) or even technocratic leaders (Hartikainen, 2021).

To elaborate on the ontological dimension of populism in the spirit of Laclau, we find the most recent works by Rogers Brubaker useful. We radicalise Brubaker's notion that 'the people' designate the broadest category of political organisation, not just a plebs (Brubaker, 2020). Drawing also on Laclau, Brubaker (2017, 2020, 2021) defines populism as a relational and oppositional articulation that constructs 'the people.' This 'productive polysemy of "the people"—denoting at once plebs, demos and nation (as well as other forms and scales of "community")' (Brubaker, 2020, p. 49) points to the limits of understanding populism purely through its ontic dimension, that is, its characteristics, core signifiers (such as 'the people') or ideas.

While Laclau's (2005) 'On populist reason' emphasises the emptiness of populism, making it viable for the study of nationalism, Brubaker's Laclaudian critics De Cleen and Stavrakakis argued that what matters is the vertical opposition between an 'underdog' and a form of 'power.' A formalist logic is present in De Cleen and Stavrakakis, but they primarily emphasise the empirical dimension. In his most recent work, the nationalism theorist Brubaker recognised that populism is 'substantively empty' and 'defined by what it opposes' (Brubaker, 2021, p. 81), putting forward a formalist understanding that the most recent debates on the discursive and performative approaches to populism also stress (Ostiguy, Panizza & Moffitt, 2021). By distinguishing between its empty form and specific contents, populism can be conceptualised as both an ontological category and a discursive repertoire. Nationalism, then, would be a specific content filling this empty form, with a distinct discursive repertoire at its disposal. This perspective recognises the conceptual and practical entanglement between populism and nationalism (e.g., Brubaker, 2020; Heiskanen, 2021; Palonen, 2018).

We contend that DeCleen and Stavrakakis present a particular ontic reading of Laclau, already valorised by Stavrakakis (2006), whereby the signifier of the people as underdog is an ontic characteristic of populism. Recognising the connection between the ontic and the ontological in actual struggles, Stavrakakis (2006, p. 264) doubts the formalism in Laclau:

I consider it preferable to opt for a concept of populism capable of mediating between the ontological/formal level and the ontic level of the signifying reality of concrete political struggles; serving as an interface between theoretical analysis and the reality of political practice. In that sense, reference to the structural location of 'the people' remains crucial as a defining criterion in the analysis of populism, together with the criterion of equivalence.

This takes him closer to ideational and peopleist approaches to populism.

In the anti-essentialist Laclaudian tradition, the structural location of 'the people' is key. 'The people' can be any 'empty signifier', which representing the many in a chain of equivalence constitutes a (temporary) unity often recognised by its name. Vitrally for research on nationalism, we argue that 'the nation' can provide content for populist discourses.

For Laclau (2015a), 'what is in the name' referred to the process in which signifiers can be filled with different signifieds: The choice of the name as the signifier matters, but is not a given. For Mouffe (2018), 'the people' is the crucial name that emerges out of the struggle to become the subject of politics and builds antagonistic frontiers against what it opposes. Her later work can be read as an ontically oriented peopleist version, where just as in Laclau's ontic politics the people prevail as the political subject (Biglieri & Cadahia, 2021, p. 19). While these cases are often ontic, each has a transferrable, ontological and emancipative dimension. Both ontic and ontological dimensions are relevant for analysis, and the two perspectives on Laclaudian populism may co-exist.

Still, differentiating ontic contents and ontological form would contribute to new scholarship on the distinctions between populism and nationalism (Anastasiou, 2020; Bonikowski et al., 2019; Custodi, 2021; Filsinger et al., 2021; Heiskanen, 2021) by offering ways of conceptualising nationalism *through* the workings of populism as a political logic of antagonistic us-building relying on equivalence. This would allow us to study nationalism from a particularly ontic point of view and examine how it entangles with other empirically observable phenomena. As we will show with the case of Serbia, the signifiers in local contexts can be filled with different signifieds.

Our ontological take may be criticised for conflating the far right and populism, as it often appears in the media and academia (Glynos & Mondon, 2019; Mondon & Winter, 2020). The normative progressive aspect in Laclaudian populism assumes that while the ontological dimension may reach beyond populism to fascism (Gürhanlı, 2015; Laclau, 2006), there are ontic populist struggles that are to be supported. For us, normative decisions about populism need to address the ontic manifestations and kinds of 'people' and equations they present. This idea is rooted in the combination of Lacanian and Derridean ontology with the ethics at the core of Laclau's theory (Howarth, 2015). Instead of anti-populist disengagement with progressive populist struggles (Stavrakakis, 2018), we draw attention to the ontic dimensions of the left, right and other iterations of populism. There are no shortcuts: A distinction between a singular, homogeneous nation on the right and heterogeneous people on the left (Stavrakakis et al., 2017) is at odds with the diversity manifested in some of the far-right chains of equivalence and the ambiguity of 'the people' that emerges out of them. In the absence of pre-existing political communities, all mobilising political forces need a measure of populism. Therefore, it is easy to find the populist logic operating within different nationalisms.

3 | STUDYING NATIONALISM AND POPULISM AS ENTANGLED

De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) attempt to disentangle populism from nationalism by claiming that the two are analytically distinct categories. They understand them as different discursive ways of representing and

constructing the people: as nation (nationalism) and as underdog (populism), terming them as the architectonics of populism and nationalism. For them, the socio-political antagonism in nationalism is constructed around an in/out axis, whereby the membership of the nation refers to a shared sense of territory and history. The antagonism in populism is constructed around a down/up axis, whereby the sense of community comes from being frustrated or dissatisfied with the establishment that is in power (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 312). The authors advocate for an empirical study of populism and nationalism, 'through the prism of articulation, looking at the different ways in which populism and nationalism become intimately linked with each other in different empirical cases' (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 302). Focusing on the specific articulations of 'the people', whether as nation or as underdog, points to an ontic understanding of populism, that is, the authors are interested in the empirically observable ways in which these two interact.

In his critique, Brubaker argued that populism and nationalism are 'analytically distinct but not analytically independent' (Brubaker, 2020, p. 45). He claims that populist discourses create a two-dimensional space of both inequality (on the down/up axis) and difference (on the in/out axis). In his model, these horizontal and vertical appeals to the people are 'constitutively intertwined such that "the elite" is represented as both on top and outside'. Thus, he argues against 'conceptual purification' (Brubaker, 2020, p. 46) and for an architectonics of populism and nationalism as interacting practical categories, which makes his account closer to the ontic dimension. However, previously, he conceived of nationalism or 'nationness' as a 'contingent event' (Brubaker, 1996, p. 7), not through the prism of self-evident and pre-existing collectives that can articulate their relationship to territory or history *post factum*. Nationalisms are formed in the very act of naming, similar to Laclau's (2005) elaboration of the unity of a collective as the retroactive effect of naming. Brubaker (1996, p. 19) claims that nationness should be understood 'as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture.'

Even though Brubaker only refers to nations, he emphasises articulation and naming as constitutive of building communities, which attributes to this act an ontological dimension. Connecting Laclau's de-essentialising of populism to Brubaker's attempt to do the same for nationalism, we offer a conception of community-making through the lens of ontology, mainly following Laclau's ontological-constitutive understanding of the people. With our ontological take, we hope to radicalise Brubaker's argument that nationalism tends to be 'subsumed' under populism. Brubaker (2017, p. 359, emphasis added; see also Brubaker, 2020, p. 49) claims that "'the people" is a deeply ambiguous notion, with at least three core meanings. It can refer to the common or ordinary people, the people as *plebs*; to the sovereign people, the people as *demos*; and to the culturally or ethnically distinct people, the people as *nation* or *ethnos*.'

We do not understand populism as a discourse, as we would nationalism, peopleism, racism or socialism, but as a logic of antagonistic community-making constitutive of any '-isms' (discourses such as the above), as long as they rely on extending chains of equivalence between demands into a broader constituency. While we embrace Brubaker's attempt to stretch the concept of the people, he does not seem to de-essentialise it fully, as he does with nationness. In his most recent work on populism and the pandemic, Brubaker (2021, p. 81) argues that

populism—unlike socialism or liberalism or conservatism—is not a substantive political ideology. It is substantively empty. Populism is relational and oppositional, defined by what it opposes. What it opposes is formally always the same—it is always anti-elite, always anti-establishment—but substantively variable, depending on how the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'the establishment' is constructed.

A degree of essentialisation is present in Brubaker's account: He defines what populism opposes as 'always the same' not in terms of form, as he claims, but in terms of content. If populism always opposes the elite or the establishment, these are specific *contents* it opposes, meaning that populism is not substantively empty, as he claims.

4 | ONTOLOGY AND TEMPORALITY IN POPULISM AND NATIONALISM

To understand contemporary political struggles, current scholarship needs to acknowledge the ontological dimension of populism as more than a discourse or specific articulation of the people, or a historically sedimented discursive repertoire. Referring to the ontological dimension, we aim to 'strip away' any specific content that might fill populism and focus on the form itself (Palonen, 2020). The 'us' can then be filled with a specific content—like 'nation' in nationalism, or 'people' as underdog and/or outsider in peopleism—and opposed to a 'them' that can be filled with 'immigrants' or 'sexual minorities' in right-wing nationalist discourses, or 'elite' or 'establishment' in vertical peopleist and leftist discourses. However, the *form* of populism always remains the same. It represents the ontological dimension of this logic of us-building/community-making necessary for politics. Laclau precisely pointed to a renewed understanding of politics (Biglieri & Cadahia, 2021).

The ontological dimension of populism as necessary for politics has been criticised by anti-formalist scholars such as Arditì (2010) and Beasley-Murray (2010), in whose view Laclau took the notions of populism both as hegemony and as politics too far. Salter (2016) has specifically addressed this debate by elaborating on populism as a logic of equivalence that momentarily builds unity around an empty signifier of 'the people,' while hegemony can be articulated both through the logic of equivalence and difference. Hence, populism would rather be a counter-hegemonic force that responds to the hegemonic constellations of political life and attempts to disrupt them. For us, populism (understood ontologically) is not simply politics, because politics consists of both sedimented and politicising practices, something that even Laclau underemphasises at times due to his focus on antagonism (Laclau, 2015a, pp. 162–163). As an antagonistic logic of political us-building, populism is a disruptive force that can counter any hegemonic order by bringing together disparate demands, and a principle of us-building that is simply necessary if we are to engage in political meaning-making. At the other end of this spectrum lies *agonistic* politics, which differs from antagonistic us-building in the way it articulates the frontier: not as total exclusion, but as recognition of differences (Carpentier, 2018; Mouffe, 2005). Failing to emphasise the ontological dimension of populism as a logic, researchers may conflate it with 'populism' on the ontic level, that is, peopleism. The radical democratic ethos of populism theory makes it difficult to see how the logic of populism may operate in different contexts, which we aim to correct in this article.

Following Laclau's work, Anastasiou (2020) has highlighted the temporality of populism as a logic and claimed that it has the potential to disrupt hegemonic formations. However, Anastasiou (2019) also states that populism can take a variety of forms whereas we claim that it takes only one with multiple ontic variations. We agree that populism has a distinctly temporal function. The form of populism we introduce below becomes recognisable in specific moments (Palonen, 2018). The unity of any collective is not self-evident, but a momentary, constitutive articulation in which that what is named is constituted in the very act of naming. Therefore, *populism is not about the content, but about the form*.

Anastasiou (2020) places populism in the order of time and nationalism in the order of spatiality. This coincides with our understanding of populism as processual, as a logic of articulation, while nationalism (like peopleism) would be an ontic, articulated or sedimented discourse or repertoire that we could empirically analyse—a content that fills the form. Anastasiou (2019, 2020) speaks of 'nationalist populism', which he characterises as 'narratives, affects and life modalities that are associated with symbolic sedimentations of "the nation"' whereby a 'national (ist) experiential milieu' emerges (Anastasiou, 2020, p. 218). Importantly, for Anastasiou, the analytical task should not consist of identifying 'nationalist populism', but in recognising how populism operates as a temporal (ontological) phenomenon. In our view, *populist nationalism* (or populist racism, socialism, etc.) would be a better conceptual phrasing for the same phenomenon, because the antagonistic *form* is constitutive to us-building, however diversely it might be articulated on the ontic level of human language and practice. Hence, we recognise populism not only as an ontological concept but also as an ontic 'signifier' (De Cleen et al., 2018; De Cleen & Stavarakis, 2017; Dean & Maiguashca, 2020), at the core of peopleism. Calls for unity are not just about producing signifiers of 'the people' but have wider implications for group-making in politics.

5 | WHAT LIES AT THE 'CORE' OF POPULISM?

The current literature on populism does not harness the potential of Laclau's formalist approach for an ontological understanding of populism. This has led to many debates on what 'truly' makes up populism, such as the recent one between De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) and Brubaker (2020) outlined above. Some works seem to debate the ontological dimension (the form) and others debate the ontic dimension (the contents), even if slightly entangled.

Crucial for our understanding of how the empty core of populism is filled with various contents is the theory of performativity (Butler, 1988, 1993), which highlights the constitutive role of language and practice through embodiment. The performative aspect of populism has been recognised as a certain political style that can be observed empirically (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) but, unlike this strand of research, we understand performativity as an ontological category. A performative approach allows us to think of 'the people' or 'us' not as a pre-existing entity, but as constituted in the very act of naming (Laclau, 2005; Palonen, 2018). This means that the 'us' can be understood as an empty category, something in the range of an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005). The performative approach to building an 'us' enables us to look into which specific contents (or signifiers) are produced in the process of articulation, in embodying and temporally *filling* this emptiness. An empty signifier overflows with meaning, but crucially, the 'signifier is only empty of necessity' (Palonen, 2020, p. 60); it needs to be constantly filled with contents. The 'overflowing signifier' is able to accommodate a range of different meanings, all invested by the same political camp (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2021). Ontologically, we emphasise the emptiness of 'us,' while addressing the 'overflowingness' as an ontic examination of populism. Hereby, we explore which specific contents fill this emptiness of 'us' or 'the people' and make it overflow with meaning.

For us, populism is always ontic in its manifestations and ontological in form. Echoing the ontic understanding, De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 2020) define populism as a historically sedimented range of discursive and material significations that anchor 'the people' in contrast to 'the elite' in a vertical discourse. Yet, as Brubaker has rightfully pointed out, 'the people' is a broad category that can encompass a nation, a larger or smaller political community, or a demos, so it cannot act as a stable reference point (Brubaker, 2017, 2020). This underscores the ontological understanding of populism as an affective-antagonistic logic of us-building based on equivalence. This us-building is not solely about representation and performance because, as we have seen, language—naming—has material and constitutive effects (Butler, 1993; Laclau, 2005).

In this article, we argue that a perspective emphasising 'the people' *cannot* be the ontological dimension of populism but should be understood as an ontic dimension: peopleism. In contrast, populism seen through the lens of ontology is *not* peopleism because any appeal to 'the people' as a discourse or a historically sedimented discursive repertoire, to borrow DeCleen and Stavrakakis's terms, would present an essentialist definition of populism as a political logic. Hence, references to 'the people' represent the content that fills the form of populism as a logic. Building a community, an 'us' in a broad sense, does not propose an essentialist understanding of community because identification (group or otherwise) is a *relational* endeavour, layered through chains of equivalences, and ontologically necessitates the articulation of a frontier towards what it excludes.

6 | ONTOLOGY AT ITS PUREST: POPULISM AS A FORM

Laclau (2005) theorises populism as a logic of us-building through the extension of chains of equivalence and through the simultaneous articulation of an antagonistic political frontier. Understood in the discourse-theoretical notion of the relational ontology of meaning (e.g., Marttila, 2015) that emphasises the relational constitution of identity (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), populism as a logic builds a community, an 'us' around establishing an antagonistic frontier (against an Other that it excludes) by extending chains of equivalence. The dynamics of performing an 'us' are heightened by affects, which inevitably involves exclusion outside antagonistic political frontiers, also heightened by affects

(Palonen, 2020, 2021). Laclau's key concept of populism, which we understand ontologically, can be captured in the formula previously introduced by Palonen (2020) and Palonen and Sunnercrantz (2021):

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us}^{\text{Affect1}} + \text{Frontier}^{\text{Affect2}}$$

The poststructuralist formula manifests the linguistic and psychoanalytical roots of the theory. The '+' in the formula would not signify a mere addition, but co-presence. The number of elements is fixed to signify the two co-constitutive parts that can be logically understood as expanding and shrinking in proportion. The affects are not another addition, but always tied to either 'frontier' or 'us'. When us-building dominates the discourse, the frontier can be less emphasised, and when the frontier is underscored, 'us' can remain ambiguous. The chain of equivalence—adding on more groups or demands—would operate within the components of the formula. To clarify this, we expand this formula with chains of equivalence as follows:

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us (Demand} \equiv \text{Demand} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects1}} + \text{Antagonistic Frontier (Other} \equiv \text{Other} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects2}}$$

In this expanded format, useful for ontic analysis, the demands on the 'us' side are equated under the same heading and constituted through the process of othering that takes place when ideals, ideologies or 'Others' are opposed and signified in the frontier. Similarly, affects are a compound of several affective loads or emotions appealed to. Though the ontological dimension can never truly be grasped but always occurs through meaning-making (however formalist it might be), we have reworked the formula to capture the highest degree of abstraction possible. Only such a radical conceptualisation could capture the ontological dimension we have outlined so far, and would allow us to differentiate concepts other than 'the people' and 'the elite' (a nominalist version of the formula would be *Populism = People vs. Elite*). In the Laclaudian formula, 'us' (the imagined subject of politics), the antagonistic frontier (what is opposed), and the affects (that heighten the appeal and identification; see below on affective investment), can be extended to contain several demands and grievances, symbols and significations. Laclau's notion of populism relying on the logic of equivalence offers a way of stressing the position of equality through a shared contestation (Laclau, 2005). This enables the constitution of a collective not necessarily through the signifier 'the people', but through a shared heading as a temporary articulation of an 'us.'

Populism involves a division of society into two antagonistic camps, which presupposes 'the presence of some privileged signifiers which condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp (the "regime", the "oligarchy", the "dominant groups", and so on, for the enemy; the "people", the "nation", the "silent majority", and so on, for the oppressed underdog [...])' Laclau (2005: 87). What needs to be distinguished, however, is 'the ontological role of discursively constructing social division' and 'the ontic content' (Laclau, 2005, p. 87), which can have many iterations depending on the context. Populist us-building thus results in a simplification of the political space, while the differences between and uniqueness of the demands would be recognised through the logic of difference (Laclau, 2005). This logic of equivalence extends to the 'antagonistic frontier' in the formula. To this end, if the 'us/community' is empty of necessity, then so is the 'enemy' that is opposed behind the antagonistic frontier.

What is othered does not necessarily need to be a group or a people, but oppositions can be created towards hegemonic systems or discourses, such as capitalism (Dyer-Witthford, 2020) or neoliberalism (Mouffe, 2018), which may be 'named' or exemplified in political struggles to be more tangible. Therefore, we employ the term 'antagonistic frontier' instead of the 'enemy', as the logic of equivalence suggests that the chains of signifiers can be extended to include new meanings. For Norval (1997, pp. 65–67), 'paratactical frontiers' divide the political space into two clear-cut camps. As such, it makes little sense to ontologically define populism as an opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite', because in Laclau's (2005, p. 86) words, 'the identity of the enemy also depends [...] on a process of political construction.'

Building a political community necessarily involves an affective component (Laclau, 2005), as explained by Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras (2006) and Stavrakakis (2007) following a Lacanian understanding of the 'split subject' or 'subject as lack', which discourse theorists have embraced in the study of populism and nationalism (e.g.,

De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Eklundh, 2020). While acknowledging that passions play a crucial role in all forms of politics (Mouffe, 2018), the analytical task is to flesh out the similarities and differences in 'affective economies' (Ahmed, 2004; Gebhardt, 2021) that operate in and between different movements and parties (communities) and the Others they oppose.

As Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008, p. 261) argue, '[s]ubjectivity in Lacan's work [...] is linked not only to lack but also our attempts to eliminate this lack that, however, does not stop re-emerging.' The full closure of identity is posited as impossible and any identificatory act will aim to re-capture the lost enjoyment (*jouissance*) that emerged from the split. Identification is thus fuelled by desire to cover or mend this lack, which is why we can characterise the subject as desiring. What sustains desire is fantasy, a specific narrative that holds a promise of how to mend the lack. However, in psychoanalysis,

realizing one's fantasy is impossible because the subject (as a subject of desire) survives only insofar as its desire remains unsatisfied. But the obstacle, which often comes in the form of a prohibition or a threatening Other, transforms this impossibility into a 'mere difficulty,' thus creating the impression that its realization is at least potentially possible (Glynos, 2008, p. 283).

In short, the 'threatening Other' is constitutive of our subjectivity, which is always relational. For instance, fantasy often constructs the Other as someone who has stolen our enjoyment from us—'theft of enjoyment' is typical of racist discourses (see Žižek, 1993). By doing so, fantasy 'preserves our faith in the existence and the possibility of recapturing our lost enjoyment, a faith enhanced by the partial enjoyment we get from our experience but projects its full realization onto the future, when we will manage to get it back from the Other who has stolen it from us' (Stavrakakis & Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 152). Hence, affective investment in a fantasy that constructs an 'us' as a cohesive group depends equally on the notion of 'shunning' the Other who might jeopardise this fantasy. This is how an 'us' is affectively built on an ontological level.

The 'affects' in our formula refer to the affectively loaded or emotionally invested signifiers or broader affective narratives, such as fantasies (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). As Mouffe (2014, p. 157) claims, 'we should see those discursive inscriptions as providing the affections that will bring about the affects which would spur desire and lead to specific action', which leads us to recognise 'that affects and desire play a crucial role in the constitution of subjectivity' and that 'they are the moving forces of political action'.

Our formula enables empirical analysis to reconstruct what specific affects, feelings and affective narratives fill the affective component of populism. These can be hate or fear (of the immigrant, a minority) in nationalist discourses, or it can be love for or pride in a nation that sustains the larger community. At the ontic level, 'negative' emotions, such as shame or anger, can equally constitute the 'us' as 'positive' emotions like pride or love. Salmela and Capelos (2021) elaborate on *ressentiment* as an emotional mechanism producing negative emotions (shame, humiliation, anger and jealousy) that constitute the in-group. This strand of scholarship from sociology of emotions could be compatible with the formula and can help us elaborate on the contents (specific affects) that fill the form. Thus, we have revised the formula to include *affects* in the plural.

Presenting the formula as a heuristic device underscores that nothing substantive lies at the core of populism. However, populism has plenty of ontic manifestations. The empty core of populism maintains its democratic flair past existing contents (Palonen, 2021). As a logic, populism offers a temporary signification for a political subjectivity detached from prior substance. Ontically, a certain substance is often associated in a particular ontic moment, such as 'the nation' or a minority seeking representation. Theoretically, however, populist politics not merely re-presents the subject but constitutes it (Laclau, 2005, pp. 100–101; Laclau, 2006). Laclau's claim that the name is the ground of the thing can be interpreted in this way. The formula enables us to address the ontological and ontic dimensions of populism as a political logic.

7 | THE ONTIC DIMENSION: NATIONALISM AND POPULISM IN SERBIA

Finally, we focus on the case of Serbia, because nationalism has been the usual lens of political research in this region. The roots lie in the disintegration of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, with many wars exacerbating existing ethnic and nationalist sentiments. Although research on Serbian politics has focused on nationalism, marked by a legacy of Slobodan Milošević's pro-Serb politics of ethnic antagonism against Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians and others (see Bieber, 2002, 2010; Brubaker, 1995; Čolović, 2017; Malešević, 2012; Ramet, 2005), in recent years, a surge in studies has been dealing with populism in Serbia (Berend, 2020; Grdešić, 2019; Stojarová & Vykoupilová, 2008; Vranić, 2019). For instance, Stojanović (2017) points at the hype around populism as nothing new for Serbia, which has always had an abundance of populist leaders. One can conclude two things from this short overview.

First, studies of nationalism and populism in Serbia tend to be conflated because researchers have recognised what Brubaker has characterised as the polysemy of 'the people,' simultaneously denoting a plebs, a demos and a nation. This might be due to the meaning of *narod* in Serbian, which can denote the people and the nation at the same time if one speaks of the *srpski narod* (Serbian nation/people). Hence, the meanings of populism and nationalism tend to be conflated in studies of this Balkan country's politics. Second, research has implicitly recognised that the antagonistic form of us-building, which has previously been examined through the lens of nationalism, can also be applied to 'populism' by switching the signifier 'the nation' for the signifier 'the people' in the Serbian context.

This points to the wider applicability of our proposed two-dimensional lens: If populism is to be understood ontologically, as a principle or a logic of us-building relying on equivalence through articulating an antagonistic frontier heightened by affects, then its ontic 'effects' can be observed in a variety of cases. In each case, we would examine the specific content that fills the form and look at how political discourses are anchored or re-articulated around specific signifiers and through a multitude of discursive relations. For instance, a look at the ontic dimension of populism in Serbia since the 1990s would refer to the strongly established nationalist discourses prevalent in this country. It would also refer to the legacy of 'strong' and 'male' leadership that perpetuates antagonistic frontiers to constitute a political collective either around the signifier of the 'nation' or 'the leader' as the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić have done in recent years (Castaldo, 2020; Dragojlov, 2018; Vulović, 2022). Depending on the context, our reworked populism formula could be filled with these contents for contemporary Serbia:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Populist Nationalism} &= \text{The Nation (Serbs} \equiv \text{Orthodoxy} \dots)^{\text{love,pride}} \\ &+ \text{Ethnic Difference (Albanians} \equiv \text{Croats} \equiv \text{Islam} \equiv \text{Catholicism} \dots)^{\text{disdain,fear}} \\ \text{Narodism} &= \text{The Leader (Vučić} \equiv \text{SNS} \dots)^{\text{loyalty,support}} + \text{Opposition (Rivals} \equiv \text{NGOs} \dots)^{\text{disloyalty,suspicion}} \end{aligned}$$

The performative-constituting function of this form is crucial: 'The nation' or 'the leader' are not essential categories, but temporal ontic manifestations of the antagonistic political logic we call populism. The antagonistic frontiers articulated here as 'ethnic difference' and 'opposition' point to a possible extension of the chains of equivalence to incorporate multiple and specific ethnic differences (the Albanian or Croatian Other, and even religious affiliation such as Islam or Catholicism) or multiple and specific opposing Others within the *narod* (domestic political rivals, NGOs, certain leaders of the Orthodox Church, etc.). As such, pertinent to the formula are not only groups (Others) but also characteristics brought together in a chain of equivalence, such as religious identification, to define the 'us' or the Other.

Furthermore, research and ontic articulations of political community have shifted in Serbia in recent years: From 'nation' to 'leadership', specifically 'Vučić' as an empty signifier that is able to unify diverse voices against an array of antagonistic others that are even positioned within the nation, such as the political opposition, the 'pro-Western' NGO sector, or the 'anti-Serbian' Orthodox Church (Vulović, 2022). There is increased attention of scholars to the Serbian leadership and how it impedes democratic reform and fosters illiberal policies and an authoritarian style of governance (Bieber, 2020; Castaldo, 2020; Dragojlov, 2018; Kapidžić, 2020).

Our short example demonstrates the pitfalls of relying only on the ontic dimension of populism, by examining how 'the people' as a signifier is articulated, and proceeding to examine the discursive modalities associated with this term, as Stavrakakis (2006) suggests. Serbia is only one political context where the signifiers for the 'people' and the 'nation' coincide. We seek to highlight these overlaps and introduce a clearer analytical distinction between the ontological and ontic dimension of community-making. Populism, thus, becomes an overarching logic of antagonistic us-building based on equivalence, which 'subsumes' nationalism. Examining how the same logic operates in different ontic contexts unveils how a community is formed: not *ex nihilo*, but constitutively, through articulating chains of equivalence between demands, symbols and grievances.

The aim of using the formula in the Serbian context is to help the researcher simplify complex antagonistic relations in society and recognise when a political community becomes affectively invested in an empty signifier, as we have seen with the leader Aleksandar Vučić. Researchers have labelled him and his party SNS as populist, centre-right (Spasojević, 2019; Vranić, 2019), right-wing, pro-EU (Dragojlov, 2018) and moderate (Castaldo, 2020). The formula helps us recognise why that is: Vučić and his party employ an antagonistic way of community-making, which at times is anchored by signifiers of the 'people', the 'nation' or 'progressives'. It also reveals how antagonistic frontiers are movable and how the 'enemy' can be extended to mean a variety of things, with profound implications for democratic politics in Serbia, shrinking the space for agonistic politics. Although a regime might present itself as moderate or pro-EU, the formula's heuristics in the ontic context tell us otherwise. Similar developments can be traced in Hungary (Palonen, 2018).

Finally, affects that constitute articulations of 'us' and the Other require analysis to understand the political potency of these articulations. An affective analysis of nationalist and peopleist politics could revolve around love for the community, or pride in being a member of one, while the Other is formed by disgust, distrust, envy, hate or suspicion. The proposed formula needs to be applied to a range of case studies, in order to elaborate on the multitude of contents that can fill populism as an empty form in a variety of contexts.

8 | CONCLUSION

Starting from the debate between scholars of nationalism and populism, this article offered a dialogical basis for clarifying whether strands of populism research focus on the ontic-performed or the ontological-performative dimension of populism. We defined populism as a logic that has a specific form but is entirely empty of content, as a principle of 'us' or community-making based on the logic of equivalence that articulates an antagonistic political frontier heightened by affects. This formula is widely applicable to contexts with diverse contents filling the empty form. These could include nationalist discourses making a community around affiliation to the nation by excluding outsiders, immigrants, and religious, sexual, or other minorities, or by seeking to represent the underdog. We suggest addressing these as ontic dimensions of populism. We have argued that just as nationalism is seen as formed around the concept of the nation, forming a community around the signifier of 'the people' should be referred to as *peopleism*. This makes it possible to recognise the populist logic in nationalism.

We propose that much of the confusion about what populism 'truly' is can be resolved by focusing on two dimensions of populism: the ontological form of affective-antagonistic community-making, and the ontic diversity of discursive or material contents that fill the form. The affective component can explain the force, vector or success of community-making in some cases (like nationalism) and why it is fleeting in others (like communism or peopleism).

This article also attempted to correct some misconceptions that have arisen from interpretations of Laclau's work. In contrast to our colleagues focusing on the ontic dimension, we focused on the ontological dimension of populism that Laclau (2005) so eloquently put forward. We stressed that populism does not equate with politics, but is a particular political logic. We have emphasised that 'us', antagonistic frontiers, chains of equivalence and affects have particular roles in forming populism and developed a heuristic formula for single-case and comparative analysis.

Through the case examination of Serbia, we have attempted to add analytical rigour to the post-foundational approach to populism. This approach enables researchers to engage with existing populisms in the plural, but retain

the understanding of populism as a processual logic, even in cases that are not traditionally seen as populist. Our theoretical insights and heuristic formula may be useful in investigating populism, peopleism and nationalism, particularly in articulations that are ethno-nationalist, racist, banally nationalist and xenophobic, which may be found in several places, entangled with anti-elitism and calls for democracy.

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