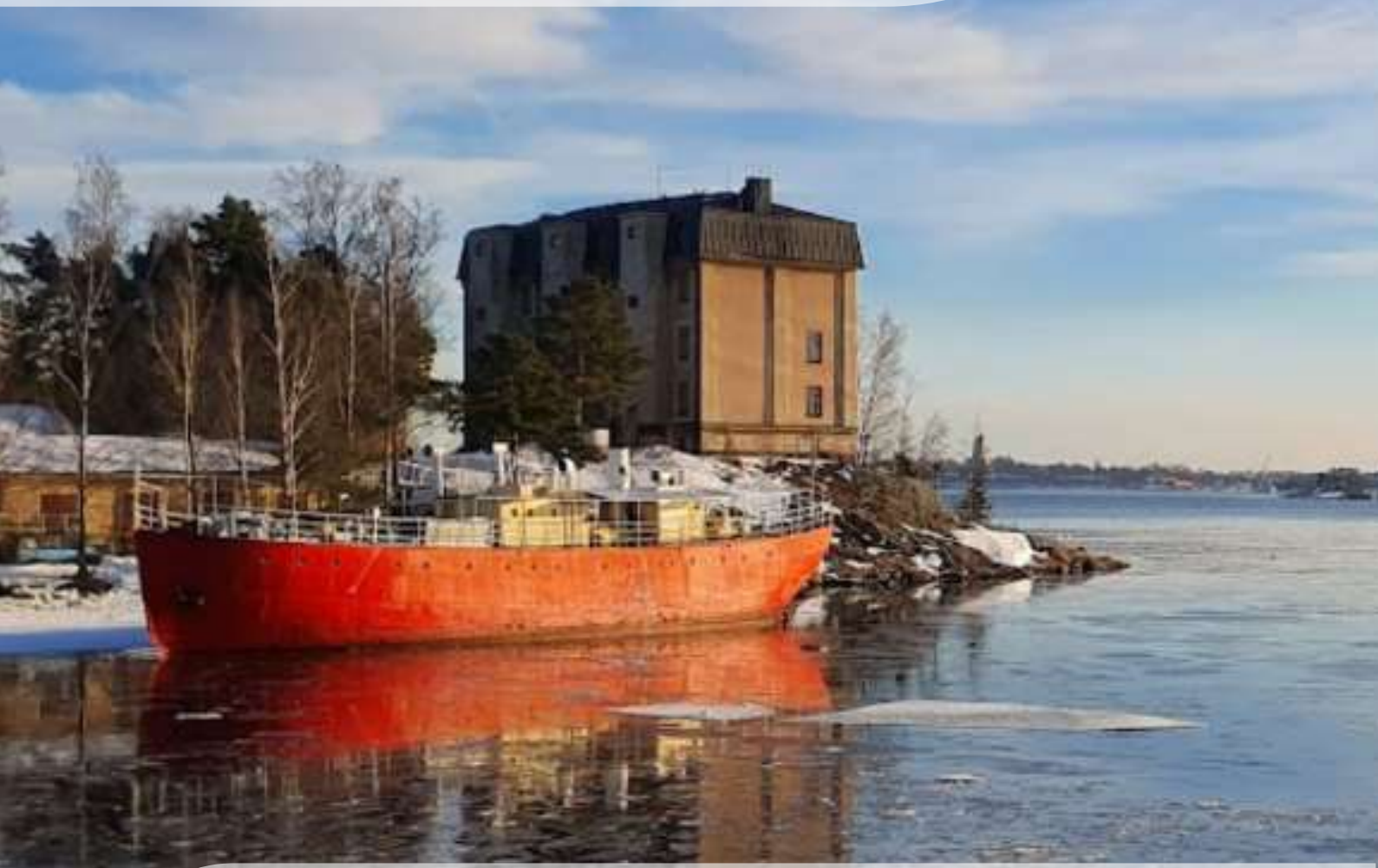
REFLECTIONS ON EMOTIONS, POPULISM AND POLARISATION

HEPP5 Conference Proceedings



Edited by Ilana Hartikainen and Olena Siden

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Editors:
Ilana Hartikainen and Olena Siden
HEPPsinki Research Group University of Helsinki

The Working Papers on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation is an academic series that publishes both double-blind peer-reviewed and non-blind peer-reviewed papers on a bi-annual basis. The publications include the HEPP conference proceedings. The series is run by the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPPsinki), established in 2020 as an umbrella organization and meeting point for a set of interdisciplinary teams collaborating within several externally funded projects since 2017, mainly in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki.

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Reflections on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation (HEPP5 Conference Proceedings)

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Authors: Chris Burden, Vincenzo Gannuscio, Ilana Hartikainen (ed.), Dom Holdaway, Aboubakar Kouakou, Jan Křovák, Silvia Modena, Fedja Pavlovic, Maria Plucinska, Yosua Praditya, Sierra Salazar, Olena Siden (ed.) Jyot Sikhar Singh, Avdi Smajljaj, Raquel Tarullo, Tommaso Valastro, Olga Vlasova

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FOREWORD: The Social Contract in Politics

This volume of articles from the HEPP5 conference is already the fifth in our Working Paper series. Our conference in 2025 was themed with the Horizon Europe Continuous Construction of the Social Contract (CO3) consortium, which we have been leading along with Demos Helsinki. The conference was an effort where the editors of this issue and Laura Horsmanheimo made important contributions, and they are also to be thanked for both efforts. We received high quality contributions from the conference participants, whose number exceeded those from previous issues. In HEPP5, we gave space to 212 participants from altogether 42 countries and every continent except Australia and Antarctica. It is also the content that matters. A warm thanks to the authors of this for submitting and revising their texts after review for this issue of the HEPP Working Papers! It is published in the lead-up to the HEPP6 conference in May 2026 and will hopefully offer inspiration for the participants of the next conference.

Furthermore, we would like to thank the keynote speakers of the HEPP5 event. The conference opened with a keynote from Allan Dreyer Hansen, my colleague for 25 years. Allan was kind enough to engage with my Laclaudian formula of populism, which was not familiar for all participants, but I hope that the publication of my monograph on Hungary after the event in open access from the Helsinki University Press will make it more accessible. Allan's work on the spectres of populism also connects with the way in which the social democrats in Denmark have adopted anti-migrant discourse but forgotten about the constitutive role politics has for the people, in a Laclaudian sense.

The Eastern and Central European space and even the former Soviet area are important for us as a geographical location, but beyond that, Asel Doolotkeldieva in her keynote was able to capture the way in which the social contract is generated in particular spaces and for particular people in transitional societies. Her work impressed me at the Aleksanteri Conference, a large international conference on the region, and I was happy that we could also recruit her for HEPPsinki.

The last but not least of the keynotes was the great orator Marina Prentoulis, known by many for her pro-EU left-wing argumentation in the UK. Her engagement with the social contract as a concept was an important contribution for the research group. With the background of the social contract of the Brexit debate, it raises an important point – one that is echoed also at the time of writing this foreword here in Budapest.

The theme of the conference, the Social Contract, may appear at odds with our research group theme, but indeed the idea of social contract in explicit and implicit references has become part of the political debate. How does this fit with populism research? Social contracts can also be used as heuristic tools for understanding inclusion and exclusion. It enables asking, for example, the following questions: Who are the "us" assumed to be contracted? What are we contracted on? What is the imagined transaction about? Who gets to ask or answer these questions? Answers may differ from context to context, and they can be a fruitful object of debate – also tangible in contemporary populist discourses.

Emilia Palonen, Leader of the Helsinki Hub on Emotions, Populism and Polarisation

Introduction

by Ilana Hartikainen[1] & Olena Siden[2]

The present volume draws together a fascinating collection of working papers from the HEPP5 conference, held at the University of Helsinki on March 5-7, 2025. As HEPP5 was our biggest and most thematically expansive conference yet, it is no surprise that this issue of the HEPP Working Paper Series is similarly expansive. The conference featured a key focus on the social contract, following the work done in our Continuous Construction of Resilient Social Contracts Through Societal Transformations (CO3) Horizon Europe project. While the papers collected in this volume do not directly deal with social contract theory, they present a wide range of approaches on how to study the societal crises that the CO3 project looks at through the lens of fracturing social contracts.

The papers break down into four categories: theoretical innovations, historical analyses, media approaches, and global case studies. We are proud that the topics addressed here showcase what we see as HEPP's main strengths: our focus on interdisciplinary populism research, especially highlighting the importance of emotions and the media; and our global outlook. The HEPP conferences have been hybrid, with a hybrid panel in HEPP1, fully online HEPP2. HEPP3 in 2022 ushered us out of our pandemic cocoons, and while this requires substantial additional organization on our side, you can witness the payoff of this approach in this very volume. Several of the authors could only participate online, and this option greatly widened the geographical scope of the case studies featured both at the conference and here. As you read through these pages, the authors will take you across four continents, and from an analysis of populism in Italian pop culture to a quantitative look at Czech populism in the media.

The Papers Collected Here

We open the volume with three theoretical explorations of populism, each emerging from a different theoretical tradition and arguing for a reframing of the phenomenon and how we study it. Fedja Pavlovic's contribution builds on the work of Michael Kazin, Margaret Canovan, Pierre Ostiguy, and Benjamin Moffitt to suggest an approach that conceptualizes 'the people' in a populist movement as 'the good underdog', integrating both normative valuation and a consideration of power hierarchies in the populist articulation of a collective identity. He argues that this fills the gap left by the conceptual and empirical issues with the

[1] University of Helsinki

[2] Univeristy of Helsinki

widely accepted ideational and political-strategic approaches, on the one hand, and the Laclaudian discourse theoretical approach, on the other, ultimately adding nuance to the study of populism as a way of discursively articulating collective identities.

Tommaso Valastro starts from the ideational approach, but, similarly, uses his contribution to argue that our understanding of populism would be improved by incorporating a third dimension into the traditional two-dimensional model that considers populism as anti-pluralist and democratic (albeit majoritarian): namely, communitarianism. He proposes that pro-democratic actors might incorporate communitarian forms of civic nationalism to address the anti-pluralist, majoritarian character of many populist movements. Jyot Sikhar Singh moves to the Laclaudian, discourse theoretical approach, in order to discuss epistemic populism, where 'the people' are discursively constructed as the bearers of true knowledge, in opposition to the elite and the institutional knowledge structures linked to them. Through a case study of Donald Trump's first term as president and a few examples from Viktor Orbán's Hungary, he argues that epistemic plurality might provide a safeguard against the anti-democratic character of such knowledge-based populisms.

The final theoretical piece takes us away from the usual suspects and into the world of Italian television. Here, Dom Holdaway draws on Herkman's notion of cultural populism to argue for the existence of a so-called populist narrative, which might contribute to cultures of populism outside of the world of entertainment. As you read Holdaway's Italian examples, similar examples from your own TV and movie consumption will certainly come to mind.

As the volume's historical case study, Sierra Salazar offers a theoretically ambitious reassessment of the Ukrainian Sixtiers Movement through Ronald Inglehart's Silent Revolution framework and World Values Survey categories. Drawing on archival materials, memoirs, samvydav, interviews, and KGB files, the article argues that so-called "traditional" values – national pride, family, and cultural heritage – functioned as forms of self-expression and resistance under Soviet secular totalitarianism. By critically interrogating modernization theory's coding of values, the study challenges linear assumptions about value change and highlights the specificity of the Soviet Ukrainian case.

Several contributions approach populism and crisis through the lens of media studies. Chris Burden develops a conceptually innovative framework for analyzing digital populism, showing how platform infrastructures and algorithmic logics shape populist performance, visibility, and affective mobilization. Jan Křovák takes a quantitative approach to media coverage of populist politicians over three parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, and this impressive dataset reveals two main findings, namely the candidates attract more media attention while holding office, and that the media rarely actually use the term 'populist' in referring to these political actors, despite their broad recognition in political science research as populist. Similarly situated within media research, Raquel Tarullo examines the emotional dynamics of news use among migrants, demonstrating how nostalgia, anger, and hope sustain transnational engagement and constitute a form of affective citizenship. Olga Vlasova also engages media as a site of governance, analyzing how the Kremlin used propaganda, reassurance, and informational control to manage anxiety and depoliticize society during the September 2022 mobilisation.

The volume's global case studies further expand its geographical and thematic reach. Avdi Smajljaj takes readers to Kosovo, analyzing the electoral success of the Vetëvendosje party and their subsequent failure to deliver on campaign promises through an emotional les, tracking voter anger and anxiety. Yosua Praditya delivers a fascinating analysis of the 212 Rally in Indonesia as a case where religious and nationalist groups that would normally find themselves in opposition to each other were able to unite when faced with a shared Other. Maria Plucinska investigates how moralization and emotional framing intensify polarization in contemporary Poland. Aboubakar Kouakou examines speeches by the junta leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso to show how anti-colonial rhetoric constructs a polarized "us versus them" dynamic and legitimizes geopolitical realignment. Finally, Silvia Modena and Vincenzo Gannuscio provide a comparative Western European study demonstrating how gendered identity and emotional appeals function as central tools in populist boundary-making across linguistic and national contexts.

Conclusion

Across diverse contexts and approaches, the contributions gathered in this volume demonstrate the analytical depth and geographical reach of contemporary populism research, while also speaking – often implicitly, yet powerfully – to the question of the social contract that framed HEPP5 and the broader CO3 project. Across theoretical innovation, historical reassessment, media analysis, and global case studies, the papers illuminate how political actors construct "the people," mobilize emotions, and redefine the boundaries of belonging and legitimacy. In doing so, they shed light on the processes through which social contracts are contested, strained, and, at times, reimagined.

Although few contributions engage social contract theory directly, many address its core components: expectations of representation, mutual obligations between rulers and ruled, access to knowledge and truth, and the emotional foundations of political trust. By bringing together cases from four continents and combining qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical approaches, this volume also highlights the comparative and interdisciplinary promise of HEPP's work. It shows that the resilience or fragility of social contracts cannot be understood without attending to emotions, narratives, media ecologies, and historically specific value configurations. We hope that this collection will serve as both a snapshot of the intellectual energy of HEPP5 and a stepping stone for further research on how democratic societies confront contestation, polarization, and transformation. In times when social contracts appear increasingly under pressure, sustained dialogue across disciplines and regions is not only academically fruitful but politically necessary.

The Good Underdog: On Populism's Construction of 'the People'

by Fedja Pavlovic[3]

Abstract

How does populism envisage 'the people'? Does it depict them as morally pure and homogeneous entity, or primarily as the underdog in a struggle against entrenched power? This paper critically reviews two prominent theoretical positions in contemporary populism studies, which address this question – the 'homogeneity and morality theses' prominent in ideational and political-strategic approaches, and the 'people-as-underdog thesis' developed within the Laclauian discursive tradition. Arguing that both perspectives have significant conceptual and empirical limitations, I propose a third, synthesising perspective derived from the writings of Kazin, Canovan, Ostiguy, and Moffitt. According to this 'good underdog thesis', two distinct but interrelated criteria are at play in populism's construction of 'the people': normative valuation (ethical, aesthetic, ideological) and power (hierarchies of status and cultural capital). I conclude by outlining key theoretical questions raised by this dual-logic approach, which could guide future research into populism's discursive articulation of collective identities.

Keywords: Populism, The People, Homogeneity, Morality, Subalternity

Introduction

Populism, as the name suggests, centres on 'the people'. The promise to empower 'the people' – the idea that politics has escaped the people's control, and that the people should reclaim their rightful hold on power, taking charge of their lives and deciding their own future – is widely recognised as the central message spread by a diverse assortment of populist political actors throughout the world (Canovan 2002). It is well-established that left-wing and right-wing populist discourses tend to employ different criteria in determining what Laclau (2005a) would call the people's ontic content – that the former emphasise socio-economic status, and the later cultural and ethno-national attributes. But what of 'the people' as an ontological category of populism *per se*? Are there any features inherent to the populist conception of 'the people', and if so, what are they?

One striking feature of populism's 'people' is the vagueness of its intention. This vagueness is evident in

[3] University of Montenegro

the tendency of populists to use diverse and shifting descriptions when referring to the popular subject – "the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the burdened taxpayers, the 'common man', the moral majority, and so on" (Arditi 2003, 22). 'The people', as a category of populist discourse, appears to be an infinitely malleable entity: "an idea that is as ductile or flexible as populism needs it to be" (Taggart 2000, 92).

This inherent conceptual flexibility has inspired a rich body of literature dealing with the question of how populism conceives the popular subject. From that body of literature two prominent theoretical camps can be readily discerned.[4] According to one perspective, populism envisages 'the people' as a morally pure and homogeneous entity (the 'homogeneity and morality thesis'); in the other perspective, populism conceptualises 'the people' primarily as the underdog engaged in a struggle against entrenched power (the 'people-as-underdog thesis').

This conceptual intervention seeks to introduce and articulate a third, synthetising perspective implicit within the scholarship on populism. According to this view, populism constructs 'the people' *both* as the underdog *and* as a normatively valorised entity. I call this the 'good underdog thesis'. I begin by sketching the two familiar perspectives, highlighting some of their respective limitations. I then proceed to stake out the proposed third perspective – the good underdog thesis – and conclude by considering the broader theoretical implications arising from this dual logic in populism's construction of 'the people'.

The Homogeneity and Morality Thesis

Scholars working within the ideational and the political-strategic approaches to populism tend to claim that populism depicts 'the people' as a homogeneous and a morally pure entity – a position some have termed the 'homogeneity and morality theses' (Katsambekis 2022). From this standpoint, populism depicts 'the people' as a single, organic and indivisible whole, "with each individual member of 'the people' sharing exactly the same key interests and values" (Mudde 2021, 579). Moral purity, in this view, constitutes the very essence of the populist notion of 'the people' (Mudde 2017, 51). Correspondingly, populism is said to depict 'the elite' as an equally homogeneous entity, whose defining feature is moral corruption (Galston 2018, 12).

These two interrelated claims find their clearest expression in Cas Mudde's classic definition of populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (2004, 543). Another prominent articulation of the homogeneity and morality theses is offered by Jan-Werner Müller, who defines populism as "a way of

[4] My own understanding of this debate is indebted to a recent survey of the most influential conceptual approaches in the contemporary field of populism studies (Kim 2022).

perceiving the political world that sets a *morally pure and fully unified* – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior" (2016, 22, italics mine). The 'homogeneity and morality theses' are also found in Paul Taggart's account of populism's conception of 'the heartland', as an imaginary place in which populists believe that a virtuous and homogeneous population resides (2000).[5]

Populism, in this per, operates with a distinctly Manichean conception of politics as the site of a cosmic struggle between "a knowing good and a knowing evil" (Hawkins 2019, 60). Within this Manichean framework, 'the people' and 'the elite' are not merely positioned as groups with irreconcilable values and interests. Rather, they become embodiments of the two sides of a cosmic duality: good versus evil. Seen through these hyper-moralised Manichean lens, political struggles transmute into ethical confrontations, and politics becomes "a fight between good and evil, spirit and matter, honesty and dishonesty, sincerity and insincerity, morality and immorality" (de la Torre 2000, 67). Populism's affinity with a Manichean moral framework is similarly acknowledged by proponents of the political-strategic approach to populism, who regard the deliberate effort to turn political conflicts into "an epic struggle between the forces of good and evil" as an essential component of the populist political strategy (Weyland 2019, 324).

This line of interpretation, with its underlying 'homogeneity and morality theses', has been challenged on at least two grounds.

First, several authors contend that the moral framing of the us/them distinction – the logic of 'we are good / they are bad', which simplifies the field of political antagonism by idealising one own camp and vilifying the enemy camp – is by no means a peculiarity of populism, but, rather, a feature inherent to all forms of partisan aggregation, and indeed to all passionate attachments and all identification, including political identification (Urbinati 2019; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018). In fact, it is precisely this impulse for moralisation – the tendency to 'play out the political in the *moral register'*, turning the struggle between 'right and left' into a struggle between 'right and wrong' and effectively collapsing political issues into moral ones – that scholars like Mouffe identify as characteristic of the post-political *Zeitgeist* and of the ostensibly non-adversarial 'Third Way' politics of Europe's (neo)liberal mainstream in the aftermath of the Cold War (2005, 5). The same could be said of the ideological contraposition between the 'honest' many and the 'corrupt' few, reflected in the popular denigration of the ruling elite as out-of-touch, corrupt and unrepresentative. That trope, according to Urbinati, is a central theme of the republican tradition, and can be traced back to the patrician-plebeian cleavage in the Roman Republic (2019, 38). Overall, the argument is that the postulation of morality/moralisation as a defining criterion for populism obscures the specificity and distinctiveness of the phenomenon in question (Katsambekis 2022, 60).

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[5] The 'homogeneity and morality theses' do not always appear in tandem. For instance, in their influential contribution to the ideational approach to populism, Abts and Rummens (2007) endorse the 'homogeneity thesis' while rejecting the criteria of moral purity/righteousness and corruption in favor of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction. Populism, in this reading, is as a thin-centred ideology which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body (2007, 409).

Second, the 'homogeneity and morality theses' have been criticised on empirical grounds for giving an inaccurate account of how populist actors in Latin America and various left-wing populists in the West, tend to speak of 'the people'. Ostiguy, for instance, argues that in the discourse of Latin American populists 'the people' are characterised as deserving, suffering, neglected and oppressed – but never as morally pure and virtuous. The world of the plebs, he explains, is "the world of petty thieves, of street smarts, *lazzaroni*, *patoteros*, *arrabeleros*" (Ostiguy 2017, 130). According to Ostiguy, populist moral indignation in these contexts pertains to the idea that 'the people' have been betrayed by the elite ("hurt, damaged, ignored, "unrepresented"), and not that their purity does not reign supreme (Ibid). Furthermore, the notion of a homogeneous 'people' is questionable in the context of left-wing populism. Pointing to SYRIZA's record of protecting immigrant, refugee and LGBTQ rights while in office, to Podemos' discursive representation of the Spanish people as plurinational and culturally heterogeneous, and to the emphasis on the diversity of the American people found in the discourse of Bernie Sanders during his 2016 presidential campaign, Katsambekis argues that, in each of these prominent cases of left-wing populism, we encounter an explicitly inclusive, heterogeneous and plural notion of 'the people' (2022, 60).

The People-as-underdog Thesis

A second perspective, prominent among scholars influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau and associated with the 'post-foundational discursive approach' (Kim 2022), identifies power rather than morality as the key criterion according to which populism constructs 'the people'. In this perspective, populist discourses, insofar as they are populist, construe 'the people' not as a morally pure or righteous entity but as the *underdog*, and the populist distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' is interpreted as being about "power, hierarchy, recognition and socioeconomic or sociocultural position", rather than about good and evil (Moffitt 2020, 35).

In Laclau's strictly formal conception of populism, no particular ontic content – whether political, ideological or socio-economic – is necessarily inscribed into 'the people' (2005b, 44). In this sense, within the Laclauian framework, it is difficult to claim that populism endows the popular subject with any fixed property. However, insofar as 'the people' of populism is described as emerging through a dynamic that presupposes a stark asymmetry of power relations, at least one identifying feature can be discerned: 'the people' figures as the *underdog*.

The very notion of *demand*, central to Laclau's theory of populism and taken by him as the minimal unit of analysis, contains within itself what Nietzsche would call 'the pathos of distance' (1887/2007), namely the chasm between a place of power and a place removed from power, between the act of asking for something and the ostensible capacity to make that thing happen. A demand, by definition, "has to be addressed to an instance different from that within which the demand was originally formulated" (Laclau 2005b, 35-36). Its very emergence, we are told, presupposes some kind of exclusion or

deprivation – what Laclau calls 'deficient being' (2005a, 117). Unsatisfied demands, which bring to the fore the chasm between pleading and enacting, enter into an equivalential chain precisely by virtue of their one shared negative trait: the fact that they remain unsatisfied. And as in Laclau's theory the aggregation of demands is what constitutes the identity of a social group, the chasm between power and powerlessness – the "essential asymmetry between the community as a whole (the populus) and the underdog (the plebs)" (2005a, 200) – can be seen as inscribed into the identity of the popular subject generated by a populist chain of equivalence, i.e. 'the people' of populism. That is why, for Laclau, populism involves the division of the social field into two camps – an antagonised seat of power (e.g. the 'regime', the 'oligarchy', 'the establishment') and the oppressed underdog (e.g. 'the people', 'the nation', 'the silent majority') (2005a, 84).

This idea, which might be termed 'the people-as-underdog thesis', is evident in Stavrakakis' formulation of the two basic components of populist discourse – (a) *people-centrism* and (b) *anti-elitism* – where *anti-elitism* is defined as "a dichotomic representation of the socio-political field between *Us* (the marginalized, the underdog, "the people") and *Them* (the establishment, the 1%, the elite)" (2017, 528). It is also found in the joint work of De Cleen and Stavrakakis, who define populism as "a dichotomic discourse in which "the people" are juxtaposed to "the elite" along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which "the people" is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to "the elite" conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group" (2017, 310). They specify that the axis of 'down/up antagonism' pertains to power, status and hierarchical position. According to De Cleen, the reliance on down/up antagonism in discursively constructing of 'the people' is precisely what differentiates populism from other discourses that also invoke 'the people' as a central signifier but construct 'the people' in a different manner – whether the-people-as-demos in the case of democratic discourses, or the-people-as-nation in nationalistic discourses (2017, 456). What is crucial, in this view, is that populists take the side of a powerless down-group ("the ordinary people," "the little man," "the common man," "the man in the street") against a powerful up-group ("the establishment," "the political caste," "the ruling class") that is rejected for not representing 'the people' and for endangering its interests (Ibid; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 311).

Laclau's theory of populism has faced notable criticism for its tendency to treat populism as synonymous with the political as such (Arditi 2004; Stavrakakis 2004). While 'the people-as-underdog thesis', as developed by De Cleen and Stavrakakis, seeks to circumvent this line of criticism, it nonetheless remains vulnerable to it. Stavrakakis argues that, if populist discourse is understood to mean any equivalential discourse articulated around 'the people' as a nodal point – and if any signifier can potentially step into that role by becoming the empty signifier of the equivalential chain – then there can be no clear conceptual distinction between a populist discourse and any other equivalential discourse (Stavrakakis 2004, 97). Consequently, he argues for specifying the structural location of populism's 'people' within a vertical down/up axis of power, status and cultural capital. This allows the 'populist' label to be reserved only for those equivalential discourses that have as their nodal point 'the people' conceived as the underdog (Ibid.; Stavrakakis 2017). But does this specification truly succeed in mitigating the risk of conceptual stretching?

The rhetorical adoption of a subaltern stance – framing a political conflict as the fight between David and Goliath in which one's own side is David – is among the oldest tactics in politics, and a ubiquitous feature of contemporary political discourse. As an identity position, subalternity takes varied forms: the counter-hegemonic disruptor, the oppressed victim or persecuted minority, the relatively underprivileged or dispossessed class, and so on. In all cases, a claim to subalternity is a privileged means of discursively constructing political identity. That is not merely because persuading one's audience that 'our side' is facing an uphill battle is a potent tactic of political mobilisation (as it gives potential supporters the feeling that *their* support is crucial to success of the whole enterprise), but also because it leverages a widespread normative sympathy for the underdog.

In this sense, the previously outlined critique of the 'morality thesis' may well be applied to the 'people-as-underdog thesis'. If the logic of 'we are good / they are bad' is, as Urbinati suggests, "the motor of all forms of partisan aggregation" (2019, 38), could the same not be said of the logic of 'we are David / they are Goliath'? While the 'David v. Goliath' frame may not be quite as ubiquitous as the logic of 'we are good / they are bad', it is still far too common in contemporary politics to serve as a sole differential criterion of populism. Calling all equivalential discourses articulated from an assumed position of subalternity populist leaves us with too few instances of non-populist equivalential discourse. Hence, the problem of conceptual stretching persists.

A Third Perspective: 'The People' as the Good Underdog

In addition to the two outlined perspectives on populism's depiction of 'the people', it is possible to discern a third approach to the question at hand – one that has yet to be explicitly formulated, and to which I shall try to give rigorous form in this remainder of this discussion. In that approach, which runs through a number of influential theorisations of populism, populism is described in a way that suggests there is not one, but two distinct criteria involved in its construction of 'the people'. These two criteria are (a) *normative valuation* and (b) *power*.

I propose 'normative valuation' as a term with a somewhat broader connotation than 'morality'. Notions such as 'moral purity', 'moral virtue' and 'moral righteousness' carry a specific inflection, evoking an ascetic religious imaginary and a rather determinate framework of moral valuation. They leave out a variety of modes of normative appraisal, in which the ethical is closely intertwined with the aesthetic and the ideological. Affirmations of the authenticity, vitality and warmth of the 'common people'; clichés about the fundamentally benevolent nature of flawed characters, who in spite of their transgressions embody a certain spirit, which is appreciated and beloved; the intimation that, underneath the knavish facade, those 'petty thieves, street smarts, *lazzaroni*, *patoteros*, *arrabeleros*' of Latin American populism (Ostiguy 2017, 130) carry something essentially valuable and worth defending – those are all expressions of normative appraisal that do not fit, and in fact deliberately eschew, the language of moral purity, virtue and righteousness. For that reason, 'normative valuation' presents itself as a more inclusive, hence more appropriate term. As regards 'power', I interpret it in line with Stavrakakis and De Cleen, so as

to refer not only to the ability to determine political outcomes, but also to notions such as status and cultural capital.

With that in mind, to posit *normative valuation* and *power* as the two criteria at play in populism's construction of the popular subject is to identify them as two mutually irreducible logics, two distinct axes of the us/them antagonism, with which populist discourses operate in demarcating the formal boundaries of 'the people' as an ontological category. In other words, when populists juxtapose 'the people' to an 'elite', they mobilise both of these symbolic frameworks: good-versus-evil (or right-versus-wrong) and underdog-versus-power.

This idea, I suggest, is not new. Let us consider Michael Kazin's description of the "images of conflict between the powerful and the powerless", which make up what he calls "the language of populism" in American politics:

> The haughty financier wraps chains of debt around small farmers who grow food and fibers for the nation. The stout industrialist – top hat on his fleshy head and diamond stickpin gleaming from his silk tie – dashes with the working man dressed in overalls or secondhand suit, his jaw firm and his muscles taut. The federal bureaucrat, overeducated and amoral, scoffs at the God-fearing nuclear family in its modest home, a crucifix on the wall and a flagpole in the yard (1998, 1).

As Kazin's illustrations clearly convey, in the 'language of populism' representatives of power tend to be normatively denigrated (as callous, arrogant, complacent and cynical), whereas the powerless are normatively valorised (as the nurturing, humble, self-sacrificing and devout salt-of-the-earth). The two relations – good-versus-evil and underdog-versus-power – are posited as overlapping in the populist imaginary.

The same idea is found in Canovan's conception of populism as "an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (1999, 3). Populism, as Canovan makes clear, is not just any kind of anti-establishment politics that mobilises against 'the system' – its differentiating quality is that it challenges "not only the established power-holders, *but also their values*" (Ibid, emphasis mine). Canovan further argues that populist values are always articulated in opposition to whatever values the establishment is seen to promote in a given context. Hence, for instance, if a political elite happens to endorse a set of liberal values, such as individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, permissiveness and belief in progress, populists will react by developing an illiberal worldview, and so on (4). We therefore have in Canovan's theory of populism the criteria of normative valuation and of power – of right-versus-wrong and of underdog-versus-power – recognised as two distinct yet interrelated dimensions of populism's us/them antagonism.

The role of normative valuation and power in populism's discursive articulation of political identities can also be identified in Ostiguy's account of the high-low axis in politics, along which he defines populism as "the flaunting of the 'low'" (2017, 107). The high-low axis, according to Ostiguy, pertains to distinct "ways of being and acting in politics" (111), with its 'high' and 'low' poles representing contrasting "ways of relating to people" across life's various dimensions. Its socio-cultural dimension, the high-low axis is primarily associated with levels of cultural capital, distinguishing the "proper/refined" from the

"coarser/folksier" (116) through manners of speaking, gesticulations and demeanours, vocabulary choices and accent, body language, ways of dressing and other such markers of a person's cultural milieu (112-114). In its political-cultural dimension, it is about preferred forms of political leadership and modes of decision-making, with "formal, impersonal, legalistic, institutionally mediated models of authority" associated with the high pole, and a preference for personalistic leadership associated with the low (118). Ideologically, it aligns 'the low' with nativism and 'the high' with an affinity towards cosmopolitanism, while in the political domain the high-low axis is said inform judgements that are simultaneously aesthetic and ethical, involving "different criteria for judging what is likeable and morally acceptable in a candidate" (113).

Given the polysemic nature of the 'high' and 'low' in Ostiguy's account, to flaunt the 'low' as populism does involves at least two things. For one, it is an act of pure transgression, a finger in the eye of those decent, proper and refined representatives of the 'high' pole and their hegemonic norms of acceptability – in short, a revolt against an existing structure of power. For another, it is an act of positive affirmation. According to Ostiguy, the 'low' that populists flaunt and in whose name they speak is, in the populist narrative, "linked to the most profound, "truest," authentic, and most deserving part of the homeland. The "Other" [...] is thereby in reality not an "Other," but rather, the "truest" (too often forgotten) Self of the nation, of "the people" (111). Populist discourse thus represents this '*unpresentable Other*' as embodying some repressed truth or reality – a truth swept under the rug by official discourses and policies, but boldly brought to the fore by populist discourse. 'The low' in this sense is the locus of that which is not only oppressed by power, but also valuable in itself – which is perhaps why it is oppressed in the first place. For Ostiguy, then, the high-low axis encompasses both relations of power and relations of normative valuation, positing 'the low' that populism flaunts as both the subaltern and the true/authentic.

Moffitt's account of 'bad manners' as a core element of the populist style echoes this idea (2016). By 'bad manners' Moffitt means the seeming disregard for 'appropriate' ways of acting in the political realm, and the deliberate flouting of these norms that populists leverage with the aim of 'performing ordinariness' and differentiating themselves from the other politicians (66). 'Bad manners' point to a variety of associated cultural (if context-specific) markers – for instance, in the case of Sarah Palin in the U.S, these include "directness, playfulness, a certain disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready resort to anecdote as 'evidence', and a studied ignorance of that which does not interest her or which does not go to 'the heart of the matter'" (53). In a more general sense, 'bad manners' involve "acting or presenting oneself in more 'colourful' ways than we usually expect from politicians or representatives" (68).

The symbolic function of 'bad manners' in Moffitt's account of the populist style can be understood in the same way as the flaunting of the 'low'. The ostentatious display of 'bad manners' is a transgressive act, usurping the entrenched structures of power from a position of subalternity by rejecting the hegemonic norms, mores, and 'good manners' associated with that power structure and its ruling elite. In that sense, it represents a challenge to the hegemonic order, a challenge to power, by way of symbolically asserting the identity of the-people-as-the-subaltern. At the same time, the flaunting of 'bad manners' offer populists a way to denigrate the values of the 'high' pole, ostensibly expressed by the elite's 'good manners' as hollow, worthless and false, while affirming as authentic, true and normatively superior the values that the

'bad manners' supposedly express in a raw and unfiltered way – i.e. the values of 'the people'. Thus construed, 'bad manners' are not really *bad*, as much as unfairly disparaged by a false hierarchy of values. In Moffitt's account, then, populist utilisation of 'bad manners' involves *both* a rejection of one set of values, associated with 'the high', *and* the normative valorisation of values associated with 'the low' (53).

Taken together, the works of Kazin, Canovan, Ostiguy and Moffitt exemplify a substantial strand of scholarship in which criteria corresponding both to normative valuation and to power are recognised as playing a role in the way populism constructs 'the people'. As a distinct perspective, it synthetises elements of the 'homogeneity and morality thesis' and of the 'people-as-the-underdog thesis'. On this view, populism conceptualises 'the people' as an entity that is *normatively valorised* (though not necessarily morally pristine) as well as *powerless* (in comparison to a seat of power) – in short, as *the good underdog*. This perspective complements ideational theorists' 'homogeneity and morality thesis' by paying heed to the power asymmetry underpinning the 'people v. elite' divide, and it adds to the Laclauian 'people-as-underdog thesis' by highlighting the normative valorisation implicit in subalternity, as regards 'the people.

Conclusion

In order to integrate these various implicit insights into a coherent and defensible theoretical position, several crucial questions must be addressed. By way of conclusion, I shall outline three tasks, which could be of particular interest in this regard.

The first task concerns clarifying the precise relationship between the criteria of normative valuation and power in populism's construction of 'the people'. Specifically, is one criterion contingent upon another? Does populism normatively valorise 'the people' because they are oppressed – an innocent victim exploited by a malevolent 'elite'? Or, alternatively, does populism regard the people's subjugation as a direct consequence of their moral goodness, exploited by an elite that takes cynical advantage of their earnestness and decency? Or perhaps populism views the people's normative valour and their subaltern position as two independent and merely coincidental attributes?

A second task would involve examining how the interplay between normative valuation and power in the construction of 'the people' differs across various populist discourses. In particular, is there a meaningful distinction between right-wing and left-wing populisms in this respect? Do left- and right-wing populisms envisage the relation between normative valuation and power, as pertains to 'the people' and 'the elite', in fundamentally distinct ways?

Finally, a third task would involve exploring the possibility of alternative configurations of normative valuation and power in populist discourse. Is populism capable of conceptualising a political entity that is simultaneously normatively valorised and powerful? If so, would such an entity represent 'the empowered people', embodying the ultimate fulfilment of populism's redemptive promise, or rather a 'counter-elite'

represented by populist leadership? Conversely, can populism envision entities that are simultaneously normatively denigrated and powerless? Might the non-native 'Other' depicted in contemporary right-wing populism represent precisely this combination?

These questions open promising avenues for further exploration.

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