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Left Populism

How is left populism a response to the post-political?

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Abstract

The theme of this text is left-wing populism as a response to the post-political condition of today's society. I undertake a critical discussion of the concept of populism as it is regularly understood in media as well as in political theory. By leaning on the theories of Ernesto Laclau, approaching populism as a political logic, it becomes possible to understand the populist moment in terms of the philosophy of language. More specifically, one can understand the increasing frequency of populist movements as a sign that our representation of society has major shortcomings that cannot represent itself within the current political discourse. This shortcoming can be understood as a radical negativity, or a *lack*. Understanding today's post-democratic and post-political challenges in connection with such a radical negativity, makes it possible to understand left-wing populism as a contribution to the return of the political, as Chantal Mouffe has proposed. This return, however, is based not only on support for left-wing populist movements, but on left-wing populism's ability to establish new ways of thinking in politics along the whole of the political spectrum. Left-populism can on the one hand serve as a final breach with the capitalist way of thinking economic growth as the universal guideline for what is to be considered 'rational' politics. On the other hand, it is a revitalization of a democratic vocabulary, the articulation of an anti-capitalist and ecologically oriented identity, and a perception of *the other* as both a legitimate and incompatible adversary.

Sammendrag

Temaet i denne teksten er venstrepopulisme som respons på en post-politiske tilstand i dagens samfunn. Jeg gjennomfører en kritisk diskusjon av begrepet populisme slik det regelmessig forstås i media så vel som i politisk teori. Ved å støtte meg på teoriene til Ernesto Laclau som forstår populisme som en politisk logikk, blir det mulig å forstå det populistiske øyeblikket gjennom et språkfilosofisk grunnlag. Mer spesifikt kan man forstå den økende hyppigheten av populistiske bevegelser som et tegn på at vår representasjon av samfunnet har store mangler som ikke lar seg representere innenfor dagens politiske diskurs. Denne mangelen kan forstås som en radikal negativitet eller mangel. Å forstå dagens postdemokratiske og postpolitiske utfordringer i forbindelse med en slik radikal negativitet, gjør det mulig å forstå venstrepopulisme som et bidrag til en retur av det politiske, slik Chantal Mouffe har foreslått. Denne returen er imidlertid ikke bare basert på politisk oppslutning, men på venstrepopulismens evne til å etablere nye tenkemåter i politikken langs hele det politiske spekteret. Venstrepopulisme kan på den ene siden tjene som et siste oppgjør med den kapitalistiske måten å tenke på, med økonomisk vekst som den universelle retningslinjen for hva som skal betraktes som 'rasjonell' politikk. Samtidig viser dette til en revitalisering av et demokratisk vokabular, artikulasjonen av en antikapitalistisk og økologisk orientert identitet, og en oppfatning av den andre som både en legitim og inkompatibel motpart.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the political discourse appears to be characterized by an increasing number of actors who challenge what is usually understood as rational or common sense, at the same time as they receive alarmingly large support. In the second round of the French presidential election in 2017 the far-right, anti-immigration party National Front, led by Marine le Pen, received a staggering 33.9 % of the votes.[1] The charismatic and controversial figure of Donald J. Trump won the presidential election in the United States in 2016 against all predictions. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán and Fidesz has made major changes in the constitution, which has led the country in a clearly autocratic direction.[2] Likewise in Poland, where the right-wing national-conservative party Law and Justice (PiS) has led the country towards, among other things, stricter abortion laws and strong discrimination against the LGBT-community.[3] These are just some of the many examples of populist movements blowing the lid on what is considered common sense in liberal democracy.

The actors above could well be labeled 'right-wing populist', but populism might just as well come from the left. Bernie Sanders has through his popularity, to a large degree managed to challenge the established program of the Democratic Party in the United States.[4] European parties like Syriza in Greece, or Podemos in Spain are other examples of this form of left populism.[5] The program of the left-populist parties are characterized by an anti-capitalist dimension challenging the commonsensical view that capitalism is a necessary evil in today's politics. In this way establishing a vocabulary where capitalism isn't necessarily the only sensible alternative.[6] Where right-wing populists challenge the political discourse with their conservative and often nativist vocabulary, left-wing populists do so with a rather progressive vocabulary.

Populism shows itself along the entire political spectrum and challenge what one understands as common sense in the political discourse. This is, however, not just about the content and message of their politics, but it is just as much about a breach with political

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[1] See for example Clark & Holder 2017
[2] Müller 2016: 64-65
[3] Mûller 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019; See for example Easton 2021
[4] Mouffe 2018: 81
[5] Mouffe 2018: 20-21
[6] Mouffe 2018: 49; Streeck 2016: 57

manners. One can, for example, see the Norwegian Center Party as an example of the relatively mild populism in Norway. [7] Centre Party-leader Trygve Slagsvold Vedum is perhaps first and foremost characterized by his common tone and charismatic high-pitched laugh. While the program of the Centre Party might be labeled populist in of itself, it seems that it is just as often the behavior and appearance of Vedum alone that is labeled 'populist'.

What we understand as populism is not just about political programs, but it is just as much about the communication and style that articulates the political program. Take for example the British prime minister Boris Johnson. Why is he claiming that he, of all things, likes to make and paint buses out of wooden wine boxes on his free time?[8] Why would a politician purposely ridicule himself like that? If it is to be considered part of a populist style, we might consider it an attempt to distance himself from the established political elite. Populism is about challenging political rationality, both in terms of political content and political etiquette. We might even consider that the hairstyles of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, not saying that it is part of their political strategy, serve as a reminder for the voter that these guys are not like the other politicians. Some voters might find it hard to take them seriously looking like they do, but others might see them as the long-awaited alternative to the typical well-educated and boring politician.

What political scientist Øyvind Østerud describes as today's new bussword, populism, is to a large degree captured by the exampled mentioned above. [9] Still, populism is by no means a new concept, nor is it a new phenomenon. The literature on populism depicts populist movements dating back to the 19th century. For example the Narodniki-movement in Russia, or the People's Party in the United States.[10] Nevertheless, populism seems to catch our attention today because of an increasing frequency in populist actors, something we might understand as a populist moment.[11] Looking at today's political climate as a populist moment, it makes sense turning to Ernesto Laclaus description of what we usually understand as 'populist':

> There is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings which crystallize in some symbols quite independently of the forms of their political articulation, and it is their presence we intuitively perceive when we call a discourse or a mobilization 'populistic'.[12]

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[7] Jupskås in Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 17
[8] See for example Lyons 2019
[9] Østerud 2017
[10] Mudde & kaltwasser 2019: 47, 57
[11] Mouffe 2018: 1
[12] Laclau 2005: 123

Understood in this way, populism might not be as much about content as it is about frustrations with the hegemonic political order. In this thesis I will explore how left-wing populism might function as a response to such a 'reservoir'. It seems that populism, even for scholars, is difficult to grasp as a functional part of the political. It also seems as if populism is increasingly used as a polemic tool to discredit political competitors one would rather be without. Following a line from Laclau, I will argue that these shortcomings in the concept of populism might in of itself show us something important about the necessity of populism.[13]

Research question

The theme of this text is not limited to what populism is, although it is of course an important part of the text. The main theme, on the other hand, is what today's populist moment can show us about expectations of rationality and manners in the political. On the whole, it is particularly interesting to discuss how left-populism challenge such expectations, but it is equally interesting to look at how left-populism envisages an alternative to the established programs on the left. Through such a discussion, it becomes possible to explore ontological dimensions of the political and assess the current political discourse in relation to such dimensions. While *politics* concerns something like the distribution of goods and resources within a political order, *the political* concerns the way in which *the social* is instituted as a political order.[14] The latter is therefore about how individuals operate in the social, and in this way lays the foundations for the political order within which politics can be carried out. In this text I will consider populism in condition to what Chantal Mouffe describes as a post-political condition.[15] This I understand in close connection to the mentioned "reservoir of anti-status-quo feelings".[16] If the post-political condition points at an absence of 'outlets' for the social in the political order, populism points at the social energy looking for the missing outlet.

Chantal Mouffe's latest book from 2018, *Left Populism*, will serve as the starting point for my discussion on left populism.[17] Her concept of populism is derived from what Ernesto Laclau theorized in his book from 2004, *On Populist Reason*.[18] Mouffe has discussed *the political* through several books, for example in *the Democratic Paradox*, *Agonistics* and

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[13] Laclau 2005: 16-17
[14] Laclau 2005: 154
[15] Mouffe 2018: 17
[16] Laclau 2005 123
[17] Chantal Mouffe 2018
[18] Laclau 2005

Return of the Political.[19] These works must of course be seen in the light of her and Laclau's main theory, laid out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategies* in 1985.[20] Looking at populism from the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe I will write my paper around the following problem: *How is left populism a response to the post-political?*

There are two major clarifications to be made in this discussion. First, I need to clarify how to understand populism. Here it will be important to discuss common understandings of populism, both in media and in political theory. Discussing different theoretical approaches to populism might also highlight how Laclau and Mouffe's approaches differ from traditional approaches in political theory. In particular, this concerns the way in which they use philosophy of language to focus on the discursive side populism, while traditional theory focuses mainly on content in populist movement. In Laclau and Mouffe's approach, populism is understood as the discursive expression of something that cannot be represented in the political discourse.[21] A sub-problem is therefore if the shortcomings in the common understandings of populism can be associated with a wider representational problem in the political discourse. Is the inability to understand populism itself a symptom of why populism might be a precondition for representation itself? Furthermore, a second question regards how left populism is a particular response to this representational problem? What is it that left- populism might represent, which established movements is incapable to represent?

The second clarification concerns what is understood by the post-political condition. I understand this in close connection with what I view as a common expectation of a rational and consensus-oriented political behavior in today's political order, to a large degree focused on the avoidance of conflict. These expectations make it difficult to accept the populist expression in of itself, for example because of its typical vagueness and imprecision. The post-political condition, as Mouffe explains it, leads the political discourse to exclude every political alternative that is too confrontational or too radical.[22] This is in turn makes it even harder to postulate political alternatives to a global capitalism that is, conscious or not, at the root of many anti-status-quo feelings in society. This challenge is therefore related to what one might understand as a post-democratic condition where politics is mainly about the technocratic and bureaucratic continuation of an already existing neoliberal political order.[23]

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[19] Referred to in Mouffe 2018
[20] Referred to in Mouffe 2018
[21] Mouffe 2013: 1
[22] Mouffe 2018: 17
[23] Mouffe 2018: 17

Based on these two clarifications, I can address my main question: How is left populism a response to the post-political? The purpose of my thesis is not to empirically defend either the claim of a post-political state or the success of left populism. My purpose is to explain how left populism might contribute to a return of the political, as proposed by Mouffe.[24] What are for example the 'reservoir' that left populism might tap in to, the missing 'outlet' that left populism claims to articulate? In this regard Mouffe sees both the anti-capitalist and the ecological question as important sources for today's reservoir of anti-status quo feelings. Therefore, we might as well ask why for example the anti-capitalist dimension would need a populist articulation, rather than a more traditional marxist articulation. Another sub-problem is how one should measure the success of this sort of strategy. In other words, what is the goal of this strategy? Here I will suggest that left populism is not about the establishment of a new political regime, but rather the establishment of new modes of thinking in the political language.

Methodological considerations

This is a theoretical paper where I will work my way through the discussion through a critical reading of various literature on populism. The discussion will certainly be marked by my adherence to the theory of Ernesto Laclau, where populism is understood as one of several possible political logics. This approach is in turn marked by a fundamental linguistic groundwork, that further leads to the hegemonic and anti-essentialist perspective one can find in Laclau and Mouffe's works. By using this approach, it becomes possible to critically discuss the existing literature on populism, and at the same time discover some of the shortcomings in our political discourse.

The linguistic insight that gives Laclau his vantage point, comes from the Swiss linguist and philosopher Ferdinand Saussure. In short, Saussure shows us that there are no positive references in language, and that meaning always constitutes itself through a play of differences.[25] In other words, one understands what something is, precisely on the basis of everything else that it is not. Meaning is created in a horizon where one sees things as they appear in relation to other things. The horizons where objects appear, might be understood as a *discourse*. The discourse can therefore be explained as the terrain where meaning constitutes itself.[26] Since there are no positive references in language, the discourse will always be

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[24] Mouffe 2018
[25] Saussure i Laclau 2005: 68
[26] Laclau 2005: 68

temporary. Furthermore, what gives meaning necessarily gives meaning withing a given discourse. Some things constitute itself within this horizon of understanding while others might be left outside, impossible to represent.

Laclau takes this insight even further and understands all communication and action in terms of this play of differences. He understands political judgments, political identity, populism, democracy, all on the basis of the ability to express oneself within a discourse.[27] Furthermore, Laclaus understanding of *hegemony* depicts an overarching, universal function in the language.[28] The hegemony subordinate other particularities in this play of difference, so that meaning always constitutes itself within the symbolic framework of the hegemony. A neoliberal hegemony for example makes it possible to constitute meaning only within a neoliberal framework where 'freedom of the market' might be viewed as common sense. Chantal Mouffe argues that today's liberal democracy functions within a neoliberal hegemony where 'economic growth' is the universal sensible motive that all other motives must submit to, following 'common sense'.[29] In the neoliberal hegemony poverty or climate certainly gets our attention, but only as long as it is within the framework of economic growth.

This linguistic groundwork makes it possible to see the political in a different perspective than what is usually done in political theory. The hegemonic approach for example makes it possible to see liberal democracy not as the end of history on the level of ideas, but as part of a hegemonic order established during the 1980s and 1990s.[30] Where political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history, he pointed to the lack of conceivable alternatives, just as the hegemonic approach does.[31] The difference is that Fukuyama's teleological proclamation claims that we have reached the pinnacle of political evolution where there will never be a better alternative than liberal democracy. Where Fukuyama connects the very real *lack* of alternatives to history, Laclau and Mouffe would connect it to the shortcomings of our political language.

The concept of populism as a political logic is also a result of this linguistic groundwork. Understanding that political identities aren't positive references in themselves, Laclau proposes that political identities constitute themselves through various forms of articulation. Populism is one of these possible articulations, following one specific logic.[32]

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[27] Laclau 2005: 69
[28] Laclau 2005: 70
[29] Mouffe 2018
[30] Mouffe 2018
[31] Referred to in Fukuyama 2018
[32] Laclau 2005: 2017

This specific logic is a necessity for representing that which cannot me grasped within the political discourse, what Laclau understands as a radical negativity in language. Populism is not a positive reference to a specific content, but a logic which makes it possible to represent something on the basis of a *lack*.[33] That is precisely why populism seems vague and imprecise, irrational and emotionally driven. These are not shortcomings of populism, but the precondition for the representation of something very real in society.[34]

There is an enormous body of literature on populism, and certain limitations have been necessary for this paper. I have based my conception of populism on Laclaus work in *On Populist Reason.* [35] And the concept of a left populist strategy is to a large degree that which is discussed in Mouffe's latest work *For a Left Populism.*[36] The critical discussions about left populism as a strategy will to a large degree be a result of my own reflections and my critical reading of other works on populism.

With regards to the other works on populism, which are meant to illustrate the shortcomings of our political language, I have made a limited selection. I have largely focused on two recent works that are widely used in discussions of populism. The most used of these two is without a doubt Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's general introductory book to populism, in their Norwegian translation from 2019[37]. Here they present an ideological approach where populism is understood as a thin ideology. The second book I have used is far more controversial in that it clearly condemns populism as something anti-democratic. The latter is Jan-Werner Müller's minimalist definition of populism as anti-elitist and anti-pluralistic, in the 2016 book *What is Populism?* [38]

My paper is a master's thesis withing political science, and there are certain clarifications that are important to do before I get into the text itself. First, this is not an empirical task. I will not defend either left populism, claims about the post-political, or claims about a neoliberal hegemony. The paper is meant as a discussion of the ontological dimensions of the political and how populism relates to these dimensions. As Laclau shows in his theory, the relationship between an ontic or positive content and an ontological reality is somewhat arbitrary. [39] This argument regards a social reality that can express itself in different ways. The complex political theory of Laclau can easily lead into confusing and relativistic

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[33] Laclau 2005: 85
[34] Laclau 2005
[35] Laclau 2005
[36] Mouffe 2018
[37] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019
[38] Müller 38
[39] Laclau 2005: 87

argumentation. This paper, leaning on this theory, will stand in danger of being misunderstood as an argument in favor of the irrational. Before delving into the discussion, I would like to emphasize from the start that this paper is in no way a defense of either the conspiracy theories or false information that seems to torment today's society. The main point of the discussion is rather to shed light on the limitations in language, showing that what we view as rationality is limited to a certain discourse. Representation should thus be understood as something more than just conceptual means or logical and positive deductions within the discourse. The irrational might in itself, in certain conjunctures, be a precondition for representation in itself.

Content

I begin my paper by discussing how understandings and interpretations of populism show us some of the expectations and rationalities withing the discourse of the hegemonic order. This is the groundwork that lets me, in the following chapters, explain left populism as a respons to the post-political. In the this first part I consider the understanding of populism as it appears in the media. Here I look at how there seem to be some implicit views on populism in relation to liberal democracy. The main argument I will make concerns the expectation that political assessments should base themselves on rationality and intellectual foundations, furthermore that a consensus-oriented liberal democracy seems to be the goal in itself. I am not raising a critique of either rationality, liberal democracy or consensus, but simply pointing out that there are certain limitiations for what one can consider "common sense" within a given discourse. I continue to discuss different scholarly approaches to populism, and begin to outline how populism is often portrayed purely descriptively. Through these approaches, it becomes clear that political theory lacks the linguistic-philosophical basis for understanding populism as Laclau and Mouffe can understand it. Especially in the ideological approach, one sees a clear attempt to look for content in a phenomenon that in its core is without content.

In the last three chapters, I take a closer look at the left-populist strategy as a response to the post-political. In the third chapter, I discuss Chantal Mouffe's work on left-wing populism. Here I show how she sees a neoliberal hegemony establishing itself in the 80s and how this contributed to a post-democratic and post-political state that characterizes the current political order. Here it will be especially clear how one can understands political orders as temporary hegemonies rather than historical steps in the ladder of political evolution. In the fourth chapter, I take a closer look at populism as a political logic. Here I will emphasize how

philosophy of language makes it possible to explain the constitution of political identities, which is further the engine of all political action.

In the fifth chapter, I consider how a left-populist strategy envisages a return to politics through a democratic and leftist articulation of the shortcomings in the neoliberal hegemony. In this section, I make it clear how the discursive goal itself can be about more than just political support and the establishment of leftist regimes. Here I will, among other things, discuss how Mouffe connects the anti-capitalist and ecological dimension, as well as how a new view of the citizen can contribute to revitalizing democracy. At the same time, I will take a closer look at how Mouffe claims that a dimension of conflict is necessary to radicalize democracy, and how this dimension might not necessitate a break with the pluralism in today's society. The main argument in this chapter is that left populism contributes to the constitution of a wider subjectivity, which makes it possible to think and speak about the political in new ways.

2. Conceptions of populism

2.1 Populism as irresponsible and cynical

In an editorial piece in the newspaper *Verdens Gang*, we can find a rather typical dismissal of the phenomenon understood as 'populism'. Political editor Hanne Skartveit begins by asking the question of what kind of politician you would entrust the responsibility of your financial future. In the piece she puts the established politicians on one side, as for example Jan Tore Sanner in the Conservative Party in Norway, and the populists on the other side. She points out how populism in recent years, has "ridden powerful nations such as the United States and Britain".[40] And furthermore that even Norwegian politicians are obsessed with vying to get the most likes on social media. The point of Skartveit's piece is that the mass media should not let themselves be too preoccupied by these quick-witted charismatic politicians and their infectious laughter. She argues that the media focus more on what she considers 'good' politicians:

> To a greater extent we should celebrate the perhaps a little grayer, but steady, serious, knowledgeable and hard-working politicians. Whatever the party. Those who have the courage to tell us the unpleasant truths. Simply because they understand it will come one day after tomorrow.[41]

Populism is certainly one of the big buzzwords of the political discourse today. Unfortunately it is not always clear what one means by 'populism'. The term is largely used to describe something problematic, and usually something one would rather be without. Populism functions as a polemic tool capable of discredited opponents on the basis of their (deficient) political programs or even just for their (lack of) political manners. In the piece above, Hanne Skartveit argues that the Norwegian Labour Party has to a certain degree given into easy and popular solution, in other words what she understands as populism. In this case it regards the construction of a railway track in northern Norway. Rather than "putting responsibility aside", she urges the Labour Party to look at their own past leaders for inspiration: Politicians who were neither social fireworks, speech artist or charmers, but rather conscientious, responsible and hard-working.[42] This paints a good picture of how populism is commonly rejected as cynical and irresponsible.

A similar discrediting of the 'irresponsible populism' can be found in a column by veterinarian and leader of the animal rights organization NOAH, Siri Martinsen. Politicians who take advantage of Norwegians' desire to eat meat, prioritizing this demand over urgency

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[40] Skartveit 2020 (Author's translation)
[41] Skartveit 2020 (Author's translation)
[42] Skartveit 2020 (Author's translation)

of the climate crisis deeply affected by the meat industry, are in this column referred to as "sausage populists".[43] Martinsen argues that: "There is every reason to be skeptical of politicians who talk about how you should be allowed to eat your meat sausages in peace."[44] Once again, the argument consist in populism as something cynical and irresponsible.

With these common perceptions in mind, I will begin my discussion by making some critical considerations regarding how one often seems to understand populism in today's political discourse. My point being that rationality and common sense is always limited by the given discourse. I will argue that the inability to understand populism as something more than irresponsible and cynical politics is an example of such limitations in the discourse. Furthermore, I will argue that populism cannot be understood simply by referring to its ontic content, because populism in of itself does not refer to this content. My understanding follows the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, viewing populism as a political logic.[45] In this regard, the characteristic vagueness and imprecision that often lead to the dismissal of populism, can be viewed not as political shortcomings, but a necessity for political representation in certain conjunctures.[46] More specifically, a populism not referring to a positive content is symptomatic of the representation of something that does not have a place in the political discourse, a linguistic barrier that prevents its initial representation. Discrediting this representation is just another way of amplifying the initial problem of representation.

2.2 Populism as an expression at the margins of rationality

Political scientists Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser argues that the election results of populists are strongly linked to their ability to create credible crises-oriented narratives.[47] Following their line, political scientist Anders Ravik Jupskås points out that this may just as well be a result of politically constructed crises, rather than actual crises.[48] This is exemplified by the fact that it is not necessarily the most crisis-struck countries that have the biggest populist movements. Voters in Norway may be just as afraid of the immigrant crisis as the voters in Sweden, even though the challenges are much greater in Sweden. The same goes for

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[43] Martinsen 2020
[44] Martinsen 2020
[45] Laclau 2005, Mouffe 2018
[46] Laclau 2005: 84-85
[47] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 137
[48] Jupskås i Lygre 2020

the climate crisis, voters in Norway may be just as engaged in 'green' movements, even though Norway cannot compare to the countries most affected by the crisis.[49]

Following Laclau's approach to populism, one should not immediately discredit populism for its crisis-orientation, or even for its potential crisis-manufacturing. One should understand this, simply as a sign of something that could not be expressed otherwise. One can certainly be skeptical of politicians nurturing feelings of fear, but in regards of populism it serves a clear function. Laclau shows us how the affective dimension that is influenced by the crisis, makes it possible to embody the linguistic deficiency at the root of the initial representational problem.

Still, this discrediting of populism due to its crisis-orientation seems to be part of the common perception of populism. Take for example member of the Conservative Party in Norway and Parliament representative Heidi Nordby Lunde. In the Norwegian TV Show, *Trumps Verden*, she explains why she is critical of populism. She explains that populists exploit problems that have no solutions. This furthermore points to an understanding of populism as a cynical strategy for mobilizing 'easy' votes, at the same time as it creates a highly polarized society.[50]

An interesting and paradoxical point to be made here regards Nordby Lunde's expression *problems without solutions*. Although probably not intended this way, she points to something that on the one hand is the cause of deep frustrations in society, the very real *problem*. This can be the source of the social energy that populism represents. Simultaneously she points to something that prevents this social energy from representation, the fact that the problem is *without solutions*. Can this not point in the direction of the linguistic deficiency, what Laclau understands as radical negativity? My point is that the discrediting of populism is usually based on a correct picture of what populism looks like, but it is at the same time based on expectations of the political that might not be possible to fulfill once we understand the linguistic foundations for representation. Namely, the expectations that political identities should be based on rationality and intellectual arguments.

We have at this point stumbled upon, what I view as a major source of populism. A lot of the problems that cause the biggest affections with voters are problems lacking a clear and rational solution. Problems regarding immigration, globalization, social inequality, climate, centralization are all complex problems causing major frustrations in society. I would

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[49] Jupskås i Lygre 2020
[50] TV2 2019

argue that these problems would to a certain degree have to be accepted as part of the political if we were limited to a rational framework, because our rational solutions are derived from the common sense that caused these "problems" in the first place. I'll return to this point in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to point out that the marginalizing of problems that cannot be solved within the political order, also serves to the marginalization of individuals affected by these problems. Once again it might be useful to point out Laclau's description of what we understand as populist, as the expression of the reservoir of anti-status quo feelings.[51]

It is at this point worth pointing out the problematic relation between ontic content and ontological function in populism, which I will explain in more detail in chapter 4. This is closely related to the vagueness and imprecision in populism, and certainly populism's tendency to the manufacture of crises. Take for example Donald Trump's affiliation to false information and conspiracy theories. On the one hand, populism seems to have an arbitrary relationship with the reality of the empirical world. On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing that the social energy that is embodied through this arbitrary articulation is something very real indeed.

Most would agree that those inclined to vote for Trump is suffering from severe structural challenges that have long tormented the American society.[52] Nevertheless, the voters are mainly characterized as emotional and irrational, fooled or manipulated by the cynical and polarizing rhetoric of Donald Trump. Such a view is evident in the popular reports of the comedian Jordan Klepper in the Daily Show. Klepper joins the Trump campaign to meet, interview and ridicule the Trump voters, seemingly "checking the pulse" of the Trump camp. The voters seem ignorant, emotional, as politically incorrect as it gets, incapable of formulating a single coherent argument. Even though this is just a comedy piece, it is worth wondering why so many people find it funny. Is it not because there is something real to it? Is this not to a certain degree how one commonly understands the behavior of populist voters?[53]

I am not arguing that Trumps arbitrary relationship to the empirical world isn't problematic in of itself. I am simply making the point that we seem to overestimate our capability of expressing the social real withing the rational framework in our political discourse. Following Laclau's approach it is possible to understand the success of Trump as the shortcomings of other parties, not simply as the cynical manipulation of Trump. What

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[51] Laclau 2005: 123
[52] Fukuyama 2014: 488-505; Muller: 93
[53] The Daily Show 2020

Trump manages to do, is embodying that which will not represent itself by rationality alone. The lack of coherent reason within the Trump camp might, rather than being a result of intellectual poverty, be due to the impossibility of addressing their 'problem' within the rationality of today's discourse. Trump could well be discredited for his values, his vocabulary or his embrace of false information, but the fact that he embodies a social energy is not a fault of his, but a fault of the other parties' incapability in representing the same energy.

Political movements and actors are regularly discredited for being 'populist', usually described in terms of their vagueness, imprecision, irrationality, simplicity, cynicism, and so on. So far, I have understood this in relation to the rational framework within today's political discourse. Following Laclau, my argument is that some things are not possible to express within this framework. The social energy at the root of populism, rather than as something misunderstood or manipulated, be understood as something real for which populism might be the precondition for its representation. [54]

2.3 Populism as a polemic tool

Populist movements have existed for hundreds of years, but a broadly accepted definition has never been established. The wide range and span of populist movements makes it impossible to formulate a definition catching any clear essence capable of separating populism from other political movements. Political scientist Øyvind Østerud emphasizes that the term in on extremity is synonymous with mob rule, while it in another extremity becomes synonymous with democracy. [55] Laclau, initially in his theory, argues that early theories on mass psychology has left a certain expression within political theory of collective identities as something pathological.[56] The paradoxical result is a vaguely defined term which may be used both with its democratic and pathological connotations.

This has led the term to be used as a polemic tool, to a certain degree shown in the already mentioned examples. In short this means that the term may take its meaning depending on the intention of the user. In 2013, Heikki Holmås from the Socialist Left Party in Norway claimed that the Progress Party was a right-wing populist party. Progress Party-politicians such as Siv Jensen and Ketil Solvik-Olsen criticized the statement as a gross

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[54] Laclau 2005: 99
[55] Østerud 2017
[56] Laclau 2005: 29

caricature, while the forthcoming prime minister of the Conservative Party, Erna Solberg, urged Holmås to apologize for his statement.[57] According to Jupskås, the negative associations to the term "right-wing populism" makes it difficult for the Progress Party to accept Holmås' claim. Right-wing populism has to a large degree become synonymous with both extreme anti-immigration attitudes, exclusive nationalism and authoritarianism.[58]

As long as populism is as vaguely defined as it is, it is possible for any populist actor to escape such labels whenever they become an inconvenience and embrace them whenever they serve as a compliment to their program. The leader of the Progress Party at the time, Siv Jensen, did so when she proclaimed that the Progress Party was only populist to the extent that it "listened to the people". In that case she could proudly proclaim that the Progress Party could be understood as 'populist'.[59] The same can be said of Trygve Slagsvold Vedum and his Center Party, criticized for being populist, which they are, because of their simplifying solutions to complex issues.[60] Vedum replied to the accusations in a speech in 2019: "In 2017, we were populist. Populism! Oh my, are you going to start listening to the people? Such populists!"[61]

It is clear that populism used in this polemic way, is devoid of any analytical function whatsoever. Its meaning simply changes depending on its intention, and gives us no better understanding of either movements, actors or regimes. The political scientist Jan-Werner Müller expresses deep concern about this inability to analyze what he sees as today's greatest threat to liberal democracy. He warns us of the conceptual chaos that awaits when one cannot agree on a clear and limited definition of populism:

> (…) how should we draw distinctions between real populists and those who are mainly branded as populist (...)? Are we not facing complete conceptual chaos, as almost anything – left, right, democratic, antidemocratic, liberal, illiberal – can be called populist, and populism can be viewed as both friend and foe of democracy[62]

Viktor Orban and the party Fidesz in Hungary is an example of the kind of populism that Jan-Werner Müller sees as deeply problematic and anti-democratic.[63] Fidesz is characterized by a

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[57] Lode 2016; Jupskås in Mudde & Kaltwasser 2009: 7-8
[58] Jupskås 8

[59] Lode 2016

[60] Prestegård 2019

[61] Skjetne & Ertesvåg 2019
[62] Müller 2016: 10
[63] Müller 2016: 58

Christian-conservative and authoritarian populism, which has given the party enough power to seriously challenge the country's constitution after the 2010 election. Major restrictions on the possibility of political opposition is one of these changes. [64] Nevertheless, historian and former advisor of Orban, Maria Schmidt, portrays the Hungarian populism as something fundamentally democratic. [65] The point being that the vaguely defined populism can in some instances be more confusing than analytical in today's political discourse.

This is a major problem for political theory as we are today seeing what some theorists are calling "a populist moment".[66] Various approaches have been tried to create a broadly accepted definition. These approaches do to a large degree try to derive the definition from the positive content in populist movements and actors. If we are to believe Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of populism, which I argue that we should, we should be hesitant to accept such definitions because populism is at its core without such positive references.[67] In this case we might wonder if the various scholarly attempts at understanding populism are in fact searching in vain for something that isn't there.

2.4 What does populism look like?

Even though there are no broadly accepted definitions of populism, there are certain elements that are broadly accepted as part of populism. The most important element is the populist perception of society as divided between two antagonistic camps: a 'pure' *people* against a 'corrupt' *elite*. [68] The wide-ranging variations of populism is largely due to the way in which the *people* or the *elite* is articulated.

The *people* can, according to Mudde and Kaltwasser, usually be understood in three ways. First, the people can be understood as *power*, as when US President Abraham Lincoln made the famous statement: "A government of the people, for the people, by the people." [69] Populist movements are to a large degree the mobilization of a *we* in protest against something or someone. In that case, populism is about "giving the power back to the people." Secondly, the people can be understood as *ordinary people*. The people here refer to a broader class of individuals, basically with regard to socio-economic status, cultural traditions or

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[64] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 120
[65] Schmidt 2019
[66] Mouffe 2018: 1
[67] Laclau 2005: 84-85
[68] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 27, Müller 2016: 20, Mouffe 2018: 10-11
[69] Citation in Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 32

widespread popular attitudes.[70] One of these popular attitudes may relate to the experience of an elite apparently looking down on you. Jordan Klepper may therefore, rather than "fingering the pulse" of the Trump camp, actually raise the pulse of the 'Trumpian people'.[71] This is because the ridicule of these voters may enforce the feeling of being looked down upon by 'the elite'. The third way of understanding the people is the people as *a nation*, referring to a national community based on either judicial or ethnic criteria. This is not a collective identity based either on power or attitude, but more in the direction of what Benedict Anderson describes as "imagined communities".[72]

Either way, populism's central element is the people. We can for different perceptions of the people in various political articulations. Bjørnar Moxnes, leader of the Red Party in Norway, refers to the people as "a silent majority", clearly viewing the people as *power*.[73] The green movement may on the other hand view the people with regard to ecological-oriented *popular attitudes*. And both the Center Party and the Progress Party may refer to a *people* with regard to national traditions and values.

What is equally clear however, is that these articulations define some sort of *elite*, a *They* in opposition to the *We*. The silent majority is oppressed by someone, the ecological attitudes are directed at someone, the national values necessarily exclude some foreign values. There second important element of populism is therefore the elite. In Latin America, the elite has largely been defined as an economic elite, an oligarchy.[74] In the United States, Donald Trump has focused his fight against the political elite in Washington, as well as the cultural elite in Hollywood. In Europe, it is not uncommon to understand the EU as a form of elite, as is done by Syriza in Greece.[75] In right-wing populism, the enemy is usually defined through a nativist vocabulary preaching anti-immigration policies. Even the perception of political correctness may serve as a front dividing the "ordinary people" from the "cultural elite". In short, the enemy can be anyone, as long as it resonates with voters' perception of being oppressed or overlooked in some way or another.

The collective identity in populism leads us the concept of the popular will. When the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the will of the people in the 18th century, it was about all the social needs of the individuals in society being transformed into

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[70] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 33
[71] The Daily Show 2020
[72] Anderson 1991
[73] Moxnes 2020
[74] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 52
[75] Mouffe 2018: 20-21

an overriding will of the people. This refers to a force in the community, not just the total sum of individual assessments.[76] The transformation of individuals into a collective force, relates to the complexities of collective identities. For example, in regard to how the instituted power of the collective identity seem unrestricted by both time and space. I would argue that this topic is usually not explained very well in political theory. The French philosopher Vincent Descombes on the other hand, has made an extensive discussion of the concept of collective identities, showing how this power depends on the 'imaginary', rather than the empirical and logical.[77] Laclau and Mouffe have a similar view when they include the affective dimension into their theory.[78] I will delve into these arguments later on in the paper. At this point, it is enough to emphasize that the central elements of populism are often left unexplained elsewhere in political theory. This may also explain why Laclau and Mouffe can arrive at what I view as a better understanding of populism than the rest of political theory.

In an article in the newspaper *Dagbladet* for example, one can find a relatively typical critique of populism directed at Center Party leader Trygve Slagsvold Vedum. Here we can read that Vedum apparently has thrown himself on the trend of "talking-contemptuous-about-the-elite" and about "political correctness". The critique consists in Vedum, in populist fashion, never make a clear explanation of whom he is talking about. The author understands this as a suppression technique.[79] In short, this critique relies on the typical misconception that collective identities should, or even could, be empirically explained. This is a shortcoming of the typical understanding of collective identities. And I would argue that this is due to a linguistic-philosophical deficit that Laclau and Mouffe are able to overcome.

At this point I would like to emphasize another challenge with populism understood through concepts of the people, the elite and the will of the people. How does this differ from ordinary politics? Are there any politicians out there today who would deny a claim that they represent the people? I would imagine that most politicians would embrace the idea of themselves as spokesperson for the people or the popular will of the people. These elements alone could not distinguish established parties like the Labor Party or the Conservative Party from populist parties such as the Socialist Left Party or the Progress Party. This is where Müller points out that populism is about more than just the mobilization of the "people". It is also about seeing themselves as the only legitimate representation of the people:

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[76] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 38,39
[77] Descombes 2016: 196
[78] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018
[79] Wåge 2020

> Populism is not just any mobilization strategyt hat appeals to 'the people'; it employs a very specific kind of language. Populist do not just criticize elites; they also claim that they and only they represent the true people.[80]

This leads Müller into the typical critique of collective identities mentioned above. Müller points out the problem with the perception of the people as a homogenous entity, a perception that would go against the very core of the pluralist society:

> But most *would* concede that representation is temporary and fallible, that contrary opinions are legitimate, that society cannot be represented without remainder, and that it is impossible for one party or politicians permanently to represent an authentic people apart from democratic procedures and forms. Which means that they implicitly accept a basic claim that was clearly articulated by Habermas: 'the people' appear only in the plural.[81]

I would argue, following Laclau's concept of equivalential chains and differential logics, that it is not necessarily true that populist movements perceive themselves as a homogenous anti-pluralist entity. Furthermore, it is not the case that collective identities, such as 'the people' can only appear in the plural. This is a logical and empirical assumption that can be met by the argument that collective identities rely on 'the imaginary'.[82] This does, however, not mean that collective identities do not refer to something real. Descombes argues that rather than referring to a plural assembly of individuals, a collective identity refers to a complex, moral and fictional person.[83] It is not a pluralization of multiple selves, but the expansion of self.[84] This resonates to a large degree with what Laclau would argue in his approach to populism.

Still, Müller has a point with regard to populism as the understanding of a given people as the only legitimate representation of the whole of society. Laclau points out that identities can be articulated in various ways, and populism is one way of articulating this people.[85] Collective identities in themselves aren't necessarily populist, but the articulation of an oppressed people, a *plebs*, simultaneously claiming to be the whole people, a *populus,* could be understood as following the populist logic. This is clear, for example, in this statement of Donald Trump: "The only important thing is the unification of the people - because the other people do not mean anything".[86] This is equally clear in the fact that Viktor Orbán considered it unnecessary to participate in debates ahead of the Hungarian presidential

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[80] Muller 2016:40
[81] Muller 2016: 40
[82] Descombes 2016: 186
[83] Descombes 2016: 150
[84] Descombes 2016: 198
[85] Laclau 2005: 117
[86] Citation in Müller 2016: 22

elections in 2010 and 2014. His claim was that everyone could see what had to happen, and that as the only true representation of the people it was unnecessary to spend energy on discussion: He simply knew what had to happen, and the people knew he knew.[87]

Although the antipluralist criterion captures some populist movements as a clear distinction to ordinary politics, the criterion is too narrow. Populist actors such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders in the United States, Syriza and Podemos in Europe, as well as much of the mild populism in Norway, would fall outside such a criterion. This is something Müller acknowledges in his theory, but he claims it is necessary to ensure a functioning analytical concept.[88] In an attempt to give a clear definition of populism, I would argue that Müller to a certain degree throws the baby out with the bathwater. He resigns to explaining mainly the autocratic dimensions one sometimes finds in populist regimes.

Rather than the anti-pluralist criterion, we should see the difference between populism and established politics with regards to an always present dimension of conflict in populism. This concerns the dividing frontier making the people and the elite incompatible.[89] Following this line of argumentation it is possible to distinguish populists like Bernie Sanders from established politicians like Joe Biden. Both have long careers in American politics, but the former is populist while the latter is not. The radical content of Sanders' program cannot be part of the definition of populism, if understood in terms of a radical negativity. Nevertheless, the radical content contributes to the creation of an antagonistic frontier that makes possible the constitution of a *we* and a *they*.

Joe Biden may identify Donald Trump as a sort of enemy, but his vocabulary has a conciliatory and inclusive message that avoids the antagonistic frontier. Biden emphasizes that *everyone* has a place in his political order. Even Trump's voters are not understood as the others, but as a part of Biden's people. This is clear in his inaugural speech:

> To all those who supported our campaign I am humbled by the faith you have placed in us. To all those who did not support us, let me say this: Hear me out as we move forward. Take a measure of me and my heart. And if you still disagree, so be it. That's democracy. That's America. The right to dissent peaceably, within the guardrails of our Republic, is perhaps our nation's greatest strength. Yet hear me clearly: Disagreement must no lead to disunion. And I pledge this to you: I will be a President for all Americans. I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as for those who did.[90]

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[87] Müller 2016: 26
[88] Müller 2016
[89] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Slagstad 2019
[90] Biden 2021

Bernie Sanders, on the other hand, has a vocabulary that nurtures this antagonistic front between the people and the elite. This frontier is not just about disagreement, in that case it wouldn't be all that different from the articulation in established politics. The frontier divides to counterparts that are equally incompatible.[91] Sanders portrays the great challenges in American society, the same challenges addressed by established politicians, but he takes a stand in relation to the political order that makes him incompatible with established politics operating within this order. For Bernie Sanders, this position is linked to what he understands as democratic socialism.[92] The people he mobilizes would in that case be incompatible with a political order that is not based on the values of this "democratic socialism".

A similar example could be made comparing both the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party, both understood as populist, with the established Labor Party. The former parties look at solutions outside today's political order due to the inherent capitalism within the order. The latter would, on the other hand, look for solutions within the mentioned order. Both the populist and established versions fight for a more even distribution of resources in society, but they differ in their opposition to the political order.[93] The antagonistic frontier separates the people from what is accepted as common sense within the political order, namely the political discourse, and makes them incompatible with those who derive their solutions from that common sense.[94] Similarly the Progress Party and Center Party is incompatible with the established politicians with regards to other issues. For example globalization, immigration, climate change. The Center Party is especially concerned about the issue of centralization, and Jupskås makes a valid point when I explained their populist transformation as the changing attitudes from "city and countryside, hand in hand" to "city against countryside".[95]

We might at this point separate two major challenges that make it difficult to understand populism. One of the challenges concerns certain expectations that populism seems incapable to meet. Populism operates at the margins of our rationality and is often dismissed for lacking any intellectual or empirical basis. This is certainly evident in the populist perceptions of *people* is considered a misunderstanding of the self-evident truth that identities are always plural.

The second challenge, which I will turn to in the following section, concerns the radical negativity Laclau and Mouffe sees at the root of populism. Namely, the challenge

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[91] Slagstad 2019: 30-36
[92] See for example Golshan 2019
[93] See for example Cosson-Eide and Myklebust 2018
[94] Laclau 2005: 16-17; Mouffe 2018: 21-22
[95] Jupskås in Lygre 2020

consist in political theory attempts at understanding populism as derived from its positive content. Besides the articulation of an antagonistic frontier between a people and an elite, there does not seem to be much more 'populist' content to find. The content can vary everywhere from socialist to nationalist ideologies, to every other conceivable ideology, as long as the antagonistic articulation is present. This articulation can become more or less effective depending on a number of characteristic elements one often sees in populism, but none of these elements has shown itself as a prerequisite for the populism. Scholarly approaches have searched in vain for such prerequisites but ends up time after time with a definition that is either too narrow or too broad. This search for content may be one of the reasons for the common dismissal of populism as something deficient, something best described as vague and imprecise, irresponsible, cynical, authoritarian, and so on. The need to define populism on the basis of content is based on a basic assumption that language rests on positive references, and that meaning is derived from such references.

2.5 Approaching populism

The need to understand populism could be argued self-evident just by looking at today's populist moment. Müller describes the need in these terms:

> Populism is something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril. Becoming aware of its character can help us see the distinctive features – and, to some degree, also the shortcomings – of the democracies we actually live in.[96]

Through a good theory of populism, one can better understand the democracy one lives in. This argument would to a certain degree resonate with most of the approaches to populism, even Laclau and Mouffe's approach.

     As mentioned, the content of populism can vary across both time and space. One way of solving this is by defining populism in minimalist terms, as is the case in Müller's theory. Unfortunately, this leads to the exclusion of several populist movements. Müller's theory really only explains populist regimes, and more or less restricted to the populisms on the right or those with autocratic inclinations. He puts forward two criteria for calling something populist, the anti-elitist and the anti-pluralist criterion.[97] In this section I will rather focus on other approaches to populism, as well as the characteristics that characterize these approaches.

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[96] Muller 2016: 11
[97] Muller 2016: 2-3

I will in turn point out some of the challenges with these approaches, and in this way show why the approach of Laclau is better suited to explore populism.

Populism in Latin America has often been explained through the socio-economic approach represented by Jeffrey Sachs, among others. Here, populism is often understood in terms of irresponsible economic policies.[98] This is also closely linked to the phenomenon of clientelism, which Müller in fact sees as an important part of populism.[99] The socio-economic approach tends to emphasize as important parts of populism, the unrestrained use of money, rising amount of debt, as well as the subsequent inflation to come. Unrealistic promises to the people are therefore often discredited as "populist". This is seen, for example, in the description of the Progress Party policy as "petroleum populism".[100] This approach is ill-suited to depict the wide and varied populism. It is far from all populist movements that are first and foremost characterized by the irresponsible monetary policy, or vice-versa not all economically irresponsible parties that are populist. In addition, such a definition would nurture the polemical use one wishes to avoid in an analytical term since no politician would ever recognize that one is pursuing irresponsible monetary policy.

Other approaches often emphasize the vernacular element of populism.[101] By acting like ordinary people or just by standing out from typical politicians, the populist politician can express his or her opposition to the established elite while claiming to be one of the people. Such behavior is evident in both Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, as well as in Vedum in Norway. Nevertheless, this vernacular behavior does not separate populism from ordinary politics. The vast majority of politicians would strive as to be understood as one of the people. In an interview in the home of the typical, establishment Labor-politician Jonas Gahr Støre, a bottle of Jägermeister had 'carelessly' been placed on the kitchen counter.[102] One can easily understand this as part of his attempt to reduce his elitist impression. The point being that this folk-style is not enough to extract the populism in of itself.

Another similar characteristic that is often emphasized is that populist movements are led by a charismatic leader. The charisma of the former reality-start Donald Trump would in that case explain his populism. Max Weber argue that charismatic leadership is about the unique and exemplary abilities of the leader, a personal gift of grace. Weber moreover pointed out that charismatic leadership would flourish in times of crisis, something that resonates with

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[98] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 23,25
[99] Muller 44
[100] Jupskås in Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 11
[101] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 26
[102] See for example Lundgard 2020

the crisis-oriented populism.[103] At times of crisis, voters are inclined to look for someone to lead them, someone who can give them a sense of belonging and some sort of hope. Charisma would therefore contribute to explain the comedian Beppe Grillo's support in the crisis-ridden Italy, through the Five Star Movement.[104]

Mudde and Kaltwasser argues that the charismatic leadership in populism, in a Weberian sense, is about a specific bond between the leader and the followers. Take for example the increasingly popular way for a leader to address their constituents through social media. By using Twitter, Donald Trump can speak directly to his constituents bypassing what he and the constituents perceive as a corrupt and left-oriented mass media.[105] Still, these are merely characteristics of populism not in of itself enough to extract the populism we are currently looking for.

Approaching populism as a specific political style, as is the case in Benjamin Moffit's conception of populism, may incorporate several of the mentioned characteristics.[106] In this approach one emphasizes the performative aspect of populism, which is certainly an important part in the theories of Laclau and Mouffe as well. The populist style would refer to an embrace of the media, either social or traditional, as a performative stage for the appeal to the people against the elite, marking distance to political manners while nurturing the narrative of crises. While this definition would be wide enough to capture the full scope of populism, it is still not clear how this would differ from ordinary politics which at its core is full of performative elements. By emphasizing the performative dimension as something especially populist while not clearly separating it from ordinary politics, we might at the same time reduce populism to a polemic term describing 'manipulative' and 'cynical' politic. I would argue that it is the populist logic that enables Vedum to attract voters with his performative features, such as his high-pitched and infectious laughter. The former approach would on the other hand suggest that it is his laughter, among other features, that makes him populist in the first place.

Mudde and Kaltwasser is also able to describe populism in all its variations by using an ideational approach. In that case we might view populism as a "thin ideology", that is an ideology with no fixed content for itself. Rather, it derives its content from various "thicker" ideologies such as socialism, nationalism, fascism and so on.[107] This would explain the

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[103] Mudde & kaltwasser 2019: 92
[104] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 136
[105] Müller 2016: 35
[106] Østerud 2017
[107] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 28

existence of various populisms across time and place, as well as populism's ability to adapt to different cultures and different political contexts. [108] Furthermore, they avoid the misconception of populism as the manipulation of the masses, which I argued as a possibility when approaching populism as style. The big advantage with this approach is its account of both supply and demand.[109] Namely, that voters of populism have certain populist attitudes on their own, not just created by the populist politicians.

Still, the ideational approach cannot fully escape the challenge of describing populism without deriving the theory from its positive references, which Laclau and Mouffe would argue as absent. Mudde and Kaltwasser are able to deliver an outstanding descriptive theory of populism, even pointing to why populist voters may have populist attitudes. Still, they cannot explain why populism would be a precondition for the representation of these voters. They are not able to explain why populism needs to be vague and imprecise, or a "thin ideology". Populism could very well be understood in terms of a thin ideology, but without explaining the radical negativity at the root of this representational problem we are left with the impression that populism is something intellectually deficient.

I would argue that this problem is the result of Mudde and Kaltwasser searching in vain for a populism on the basis of its positive content. They acknowledge a fleeting nature of the content in populism but argues that we can solve this problem by categorizing populism in subcategories:

> The main fluidity lies in the fact that populism inevitably employs concepts from other ideologies, which are not only more complex and stable, but also enable the formation of «subtypes» of populism. In other words, although populism as such can be relevant in specific moments, number of concepts closely aligned to the morphology of the populist ideology are in the long run at least as important for the endurance of populist actors. Hence, populism seldom exists in pure form. Rather, it appears in combination with, and manages to survive hanks to, other concepts.[110]

I am not arguing that Mudde and Kaltwasser misunderstand populism, but that they do not provide a sufficient explanation. More specifically, the descriptive explanation is comprehensive and good, but explains little about populism as a precondition for representation in some conjunctures.

The approaches mentioned are to a large degree complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. The advantage of viewing populism as a political logic, as Laclau does, is that all of the descriptive features mentioned begin to make sense as a functional prerequisite

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[108] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019: 65,66
[109] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019
[110] Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017: 7

for representation, and as a consequence of the radical negativity at the core of populism.[111] In that case populism is about the constitution of a collective identity on the basis of something that is perceived as absent in society. Since it does not refer to anything positive, it necessarily needs to be vague and imprecise. This is explained through concepts of social demands and equivalential chains.[112] I will discuss this theory more in detail further on in the paper, but for now it is enough to point out that Laclau makes it possible to understand the lack of content as a deficiency in the political discourse, rather than an intellectual deficiency in populism.

A final point to be made about the different approaches to populism, concerns the potential moralization of populism in its relation to democracy. A rather extreme stand could be found in Müller, depicting his minimalist populism as fundamentally anti-democratic.[113] Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that the conventional view of populism is that it poses a real danger to democracy. They refer to Pierre Rosanvallon as the most famous spokesman, perceiving populism as "a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy".[114] They refer to Laclau as a counterpart to Rosanvallon, viewing populism as the radicalization of democracy.[115] Mudde and Kaltwasser argues that populism can function both as a threat and a corrective against liberal democracy:

> In essence, populism is not against democracy; rather it is at odds with *liberal* democracy. It is a set of ideas that defends extreme majoritarianism and supports a form of illiberal democracy. Populism strongly champions popular sovereignty and majority rule but opposes minority rights and pluralism. [116]

In that case populism could mean the potential for the tyranny of the majority, the overriding of civil rights, polarization and instability. But it could just as well mean the representation of issues and attitudes dominant in the lives of people in society, and especially the mobilization and representation of marginalized groups in society.[117] It is certainly in this latter fashion that Laclau and Mouffe argues for populism as a response to a political order where the nature of global capitalism seems to marginalize larger and larger parts of the society.[118] With this in mind I will in the following chapters discuss how a discursive left-populist strategy might serve as a response to the conditions of today's political order. The first point of this

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[111] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2013: 1
[112] Laclau 2005
[113] Müller 2016
[114] Citation in Mudde og Kaltwasser 2017: 79
[115] Mudde og kaltwasser 2017: 79
[116] Mudde og Kaltwasser 2017: 95
[117] Mudde og Kaltwasser 2019: 113
[118] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018

discussion regards the establishment of this political order and the development of its current condition.

3 A neoliberal hegemony in crisis

3.1 The end of history and the last man

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published the article "The End of History".[119] A few years later he published a book *The End of History and the Last Man*, exploring his initial thesis more in depth.[120] Fukuyama's thesis, although fundamentally different from the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, is worth mentioning because it gives some background to the condition Mouffe sees left populism as a response to. Fukuyama argued in a teleological historical perspective that liberal democracy, with its inherent market economy, served as the peak of political evolution. Not saying that liberal democracy was the necessary outcome of historical development, but simply arguing that it was the best one could possibly hope for.[121] Even though he viewed it as the only conceivable goal, Fukuyama has emphasized that liberal democratic orders are difficult to establish and maintain, and that liberal democracies might also decay into authoritarian regimes.[122]

I would argue that Fukuyama's thesis makes sense within a teleological view of history. The ideological campaigns of the 20th century resulted in the elimination of fascism after the Second World War, and the elimination of communism after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. What other conceivable alternative are left outside the market-driven liberal democracy?

Furthermore, Fukuyama emphasizes how the lack of ideological alternatives has major consequences for the individual in the 'post-historical' world. Here he refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of *the last man*. This concept refers to individuals with nothing to fight for, lacking any higher goals or ideals. The individual is left to live its modern life in an endless pursuit of consumer satisfaction, never having anything real to strive for or to sacrifice itself for.[123] I view this description as to a certain degree complementary to Laclau's description of the ever-present reservoir of anti-status-quo feelings in society.

According to Fukuyama, the big challenge of the post-historical society would be to address the so-called "problem of Thymos".[124] In Plato's conception of the threefold soul, *thymos* is the part that demands recognition for the dignity of the individual.[125] Thymos

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[119] Referred to in Fukuyama 2018
[120] Referred to in Fukuyama 2018
[121] Fukuyama 2018
[122] Fukuyama 2014
[123] Fukuyama 2018: xiii
[124] Fukuyama 2018: xiii
[125] Fukuyama 2018: 15-17

moreover consists in two parts. On the one hand, *isothymia* requires recognition as an equal individual. On the other hand, *megalothymia* requires recognition as something superior.[126] The idea of democracy would to a large degree promise equal recognition of every individual, but this promise is usually impossible to fulfill in real life: "Isothymia will therefore continue to drive demands for equal recognition which are unlikely to ever be completely fulfilled." [127]

There is also the question of whether liberal democracy in of itself can provide outlets for *megalothymia*. Fukuyama suggests that the market economy could possibly provide such outlets.[128] Nevertheless, it will always be a threat in liberal democracy that megalothymia and isothymia merge. Namely that an individual who wants recognition as something superior mobilizes individuals on the basis of their unfulfilled demand for recognition as equal members of society. [129] This could very well serve as a framework for understanding the populist upsurge in recent decades. See for example the slogan of the populist movement under Hugo Chavez in Venezuela: "Chavez is the people!" [130] This illustrates one leader as the reincarnation of a *people* of equal individuals. Could this not be understood in terms of both isothymia and megalothymia?

Fukuyama argues that much of what is explained in terms of economic motivation should rather be explained in terms of the demand for dignity.[131] The post-historical challenge concerns that it is unclear in what terms one should demand their recognition. The exploration of this challenge is the main purpose of his new book *Identity*.[132] According to Fukuyama, much of the reason why nationalism and religious fundamentalism are still important features of the modern society is that it in these terms individuals seek recognition for their dignity. [133] The populist moment could be understood in the same framework, merely the result of individuals demanding recognition for their dignity in a post-historical society. Fukuyama furthermore argues that democracy should strive for something like the universal recognition of the dignity of all people, and in that way avoid that this need for recognition in terms of nation, religion, ethnicity, gender, among others. [134]

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[126] Fukuyama 2018: 22-23
[127] Fukuyama 2018: xiii
[128] Fukuyama 2018: xiv
[129] Fukuyama 2018: xv
[130] Müller 2016: 34
[131] Fukuyama 2018: xv
[132] Fukuyama 2018
[133] Fukuyama 2018: xiii
[134] Fukuyama 2018: xvi

Even though several of the themes in this theory would resonate with challenges addressed in Mouffe's theory, there would be one fundamental disagreement between the two. While Fukuyama see's the market-driven liberal democracy as the peak of political evolution, Mouffe sees it as the consolidated but temporary hegemonic order of the day.[135] The anti-capitalist dimension in Mouffe's argument, which I will come back to, would for example be inapplicable in Fukuyama's way of thinking**.**

Both Fukuyama and Mouffe emphasize identity as a driving force in the political. Nevertheless, Fukuyama derives his argument from within the liberal democratic and individualistic framework, arguing for example for the articulation of universalistic individualities.[136] Mouffe on the other hand, argues for the articulation of collective identities through equivalential chains resonating with the affective inclinations of the individual.[137] Populism is in that case a way of articulating such identities in a seemingly "post-historical" society.

Fukuyama's thesis is worth mentioning here, because it shows an alternative way of understanding today's populist moment. Müller expresses his support for Fukuyama's theory at the beginning of his elaboration of populism as a degraded form of democracy.[138] The critique of a left-populist strategy does of course not necessarily entail turning a blind eye to the structural challenges in today's society. Müller in facts acknowledges the potential need for a neoliberal criticism, but he is skeptical of the articulation of this critique in terms of the "people-talk" and "oligarchy-talk" one finds in populism.[139] If one needs a political alternative to EU's austerity policy, why not focus on mobilizing majorities? Why is it necessary for the populistic articulation of the people as a singularity? Why not just establish a new *social contract* with broad support in the population? [140]

Moving forward I will show how Mouffe, in my view, explains the populist moment in better terms than Fukuyama does through his "problem of thymos". The important question to be addressed in the following section is why this so-called 'people-talk' in populism is necessary to address the structural changes at the root of the populist moment. What seems clear from the arguments of Fukuyama and Müller is an expectation that individuals can or should strive to form their identity mainly on the basis of rationality. Fukuyama suggests that

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[135] Fukuyama 2018: xii-xiii; Mouffe 2018
[136] Fukuyama: xvi
[137] Mouffe 2018
[138] Müller 2016: 6
[139] Müller2016: 98-99
[140] Müller 2016: 98-99

we articulate more rational and universal identities.[141] Müller suggest the establishment of a new social contract. Such articulations would rest on an intellectual foundation for the establishment of 'common sense'. Following Laclau and Mouffe, and their emphasis on linguistics, it is possible to argue that no objects cannot be represented on the basis of such an intellectual foundation alone. Namely that ideas can only become 'common sense' when backed up by the affective dimension.[142] Restricting ourselves to 'rationality' in the political discourse, might just as well limit our possibility of expressing some of the structural challenges in society. The first step towards such an understanding would be to abstain from the view that liberal democracy, as the culmination and perfection of the intellectuality emerging from the Enlightenment, is the pinnacle of political evolution.[143]

3.2 Hegemony

The hegemonic approach permeates several of Mouffe's books and can at its core be traced back to the work she and Laclau did in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which she refers to in her following books. [144] This is where the concept of radical negativity, which I have briefly touched upon several times, is developed as a fundamental ontological dimension in politics.[145] The radical negativity concerns the impossibility of totalizing objects in language, following the linguistic differential theory of Saussure.[146] More specifically, it concerns how an object is dependent on the relation to something else, as well as it needs to totalize itself as an object of its own. The object needs to be something complete in of its own, even though this is impossible. Applying this linguistic understanding to every symbolic action, Laclau and Mouffe can argue that this is the reason why a society would never be complete, all-encompassing, harmonious or fulfilled. Society will always be tormented by an indecision, meaning that every order would be of a temporary nature.[147] This is the foundation for the hegemonic approach of Chantal Mouffe.

Hegemony is about the establishment of a stable symbolic framework, functioning as a total horizon of meaning.[148] Hegemony can refer to a political order where a certain political discourse is perceived as all-encompassing. Hegemonic practices could thus be

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[141] See for example Fukuyama 2018: 166
[142] Mouffe 2018: 75-76
[143] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018
[144] Referred to in Mouffe 2018; 2013
[145] Mouffe 2013: 1
[146] Laclau 2005: 68
[147] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018
[148] Mouffe 2013: 1

understood as a set of practices that nurture this perceived totality. Some things make sense within a given hegemony but might not make sense in other hegemonies. Every hegemony therefore consists in certain possibilities, while other possibilities are excluded.[149] In contradiction to Fukuyama, Mouffe understands the liberal democratic order as a hegemonic order established and consolidated through the 1980s and 1990s.[150] This hegemony makes possible the political representation and political identity in terms of a certain reason, or 'common sense'. She explains the temporary nature of hegemonic orders like this:

> According to this approach, every order is the temporary and a precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always be otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. Any order is always the expression of a particular configuration of power relations. What is at a given moment accepted as the 'natural ' order, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices. It is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that is exterior to the practices that brought it into being. Every order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices that attempt to disarticulate it in an effort to install another form of hegemony.[151]

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing the importance of the *others* as what makes the constitution of an object possible.[152] This is an important element in Laclau and Mouffe's theories on populism, and it does to a large degree explain why populism cannot be without this antagonistic frontier. Furthermore, Mouffe argues that this dimension of conflict between a *we* and a *they* is an indispensable part of the political in of itself. In this regard, she draws important insights from the work of the German philosopher Carl Schmitt. He argued that, in the political, there would always be a potential for an existential struggle between *friend* and *enemy*.[153] The point being that this may in certain instances be the precondition for the perception of a *we* altogether. Mouffe nuances this concept quite a bit arguing that, although conflict is a necessary dimension of the political, it would not necessitate an existential struggle. Instead of playing itself out as a conflict between two parts having to eliminate one another for their own survival, it could rather play itself out as an incompatibleness between to *adversaries* regarding each other as legitimate counterparts. This is what she means by an *agonistic frontier*, as an alternative to Schmitt's *antagonistic frontier*.[154]

I will return to the left populist strategy and its agonistic dimension further on in the paper. Before that I will have to direct my attention to the conditions Mouffe argues as the

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[149] Mouffe 2013: 1
[150] Mouffe 2018
[151] Mouffe 2013: 1
[152] Mouffe 2018: 91-92
[153] Mouffe 2018: 90-93; Slagstad 2019: 46-54
[154] Mouffe 2018: 90-93; Slagstad 2019: 46-54

underpinnings of the populist moment of the day. This will give us an expression of what conditions in society the left populist strategy is meant as a response to.

3.3 Thatcherism and neoliberalism

Mouffe refers first and foremost to the British context of the 1980s and 90s to understand how today's neoliberal hegemony established and consolidated itself. There are two arguments in particular that are important here. First and foremost, she shows how neoliberalism lays the foundations for what is perceived as 'common sense' in the political discourse of the recent decades. In other words, how economic growth acts as the measure of what is good or bad policy. And secondly, she argues that the British context also shows that the establishment of a new hegemony does not necessarily require a decisive break with all existing institutions. The latter is, in other words, a critique of revolutionary programs within Marxism or anti-institutional programs such as in the horizontal movement of Occupy Wall Street. Mouffe's left populism, on the other hand, is about a hegemonic transformation through discursive practices, through both existing political institutions and by affective expressions through cultural and artistic arenas.[155] The latter dimension of affect is central for the constitution of new broad subjectivities through equivalential chains. The affective dimension is more or less what gives this chain the 'force' that makes it something beyond the positive references it refers to, a political identity.[156]

The transformation she depicts in the British context is also transferable to a number of other Western countries because the political structure was relatively similar in many countries. In short, this is about the hegemonic order around a Keynesian welfare model being replaced by a hegemonic order around a neoliberal market model.[157] In Britain, the former was about a persistent consensus around the Keynesian mixed economy between Tory and Labor in the decades after World War II. Mouffe mainly cites two developments that led to a change of power in 1979.[158] On the one hand, the stagnation of the economy in the 70s, something that seriously questioned Keynesianism as a basis for economic order. On the other hand, a number of social movements - connected with, among others, feminism, racism, ecology, anti-autocracy, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. - had emerged in the 60s with an expanding demand for democratic participation and for the expansion of social rights. This

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[155] Mouffe 2018: 76-77
[156] Laclau 2005: 118-120
[157] Streeck 2016: 21-24
[158] Mouffe 2018: 25-29

provoked reactions from conservatives that democracy had simply gone too far. Mouffe refers here to the conservative political scientist Samuel Huntington who claimed that these movements created a 'democratic surge' that seriously undermines democratic governance.[159]

The result of this development was that the conservative and neoliberal Margaret Thatcher came to power with a clear populist articulation in 1979, where she remained in power until 1990. Mouffe claims that Thatcher was populist because her goal was to break the post-war consensus that, according to the conservatives, was at the core of the economic stagnation and deterioration of society.[160] A frontier was therefore drawn against the 'people' on one hand, and the 'establishment' on the other, i.e., the *elite* who supported the post-war consensus. The people was understood as a pure, hard-working and productive people, oppressed by the 'bureaucratic elite, trade unions and tax evaders'.[161] As mentioned above, this dimension of conflict is essential for an articulation to be considered populist.

Thatcher's politics centered on the individualistic philosophy of, among others, Friedrich Hayek. For Hayek, liberalism was first and foremost about reducing the power of the state to its absolute minimal.[162] The outcome of this philosophy is, according to Mouffe, that democracy functions first and foremost as a tool to ensure individual freedom. In essence, the ideal of equality is subordinated to individual rights linked to, for example, property and the market.[163]

Thatcher's populist rhetoric created much polarization and resentment. When she had to resign in 1990, however, a new common sense had established itself in the political discourse.[164] This point is clear from Labor's move towards 'the third way', which Mouffe claims is a major reason for the left's inability to formulate alternatives to the capitalist market economy. She understands this as the left's ideological transition from social democracy to social liberalism. Labor's innovation was based on Anthony Giddens' theories that the distinction between right and left was superfluous in modern politics.[165] More specifically, the conflict dimension between *us* and *them* was seen as somewhat backward and outdated. Labor's progressive commitment was therefore not to see capitalism as an enemy that should be eliminated, but as something any social-democratic party could embrace and use as its own. This attitude was then adopted by social-democratic and socialist parties in several

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[159] Huntington in Mouffe 2018: 27
[160] Mouffe 2018: 29
[161] Mouffe 2018: 29
[162] Mouffe 2018: 31
[163] Mouffe 2018: 18
[164] Mouffe 2018: 32
[165] Mouffe 2018: 33

European countries. Through the third way, political assessments to the right and left could meet to a consensus in a 'radical center'.[166]

The practical outcome of this was that Labor, under Tony Blair, came to power in 1997 without confronting the neoliberal sense at all.[167] Mouffe refers to the sociologist Stuart Hall who finds that several of the elements from the Thatcheric discourse survived into the discourse of the new Labor party:

> the 'taxpayer' (hard-working man, over-taxed to fund the welfare 'scrounger') and the 'customer' (fortunate housewife, 'free' to exercise limited choice in the marketplace, for whom the 'choice agenda' and personalized delivery were specifically designed). No-one ever thinks either could also be a citizen who need or relies on public services.[168]

The political left thus lost the ability to formulate ideological alternatives to economic liberalism. Mouffe maintains that the progressive idea of trying to avoid antagonistic conflicts is in of itself a productive idea. The problem is that social-democratic parties embraced this idea as if it was possible to avoid the dimension of conflict in the political altogether.[169] On the one hand, it became impossible for the left to formulate any legitimate alternative to the hegemonic neoliberal order: Either one had to accept market liberalism, or one had to accept a communism that to a large extent had lost all legitimacy after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Mouffe argues that there is something in between this false dilemma.[170] On the other hand, the consensus orientation has simultaneously created the commonsensical attitude that everyone who confronts the consensus must be disqualified as 'extreme' or 'populist'.[171]

This is a big political problem because voters feeling left out, overlooked or invisible within the political order, lacks 'legitimate' representation. What they need is representation capable of challenging the political order that makes the voter invisible. In the consensus-oriented order of today, this representation cannot be anything but radical. The discursive turn towards a neoliberal hegemony in the 1980s and 90s made an anti-capitalist representation virtually impossible. This explains Mouffe's idea that right-wing populist voters are right-wing mainly because this is the only available vocabulary for the representation of their 'invisibleness'. This representation corresponds to their sense of an

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[166] Mouffe: 33
[167] Mouffe 2018: 32
[168] Stuart Hall in Mouffe: 32
[169] Mouffe 2018: 33
[170] Mouffe 2018: 45-46
[171] Mouffe 2018: 17

uncomplete and broken society, but unfortunately it is often made up of an authoritarian and xenophobic vocabulary.

One of the main points in both Laclau and Mouffe is that identity cannot be understood in the essential way that it is usually understood on the left. In such an understanding one assumes that there is an *a priori* essence underlying any identity.[172] The consequence is that parties on the left usually tries to mobilize voters on the basis of how they *should* identify themselves, rather than how they actually experience themselves.[173] I don't think I am very controversial when claiming that there is a common perception by leftist people that working class voters on the right have just 'misunderstood' their own social reality and their own political needs: 'How can they, as working people, not see that they should embrace higher taxes and more distribution?'

In fact, it is also worth pointing out Fukuyama's argument that voters' demands have been given the "wrong address" in the 21st century. He refers in particular to how nationalism and religion have become the basis for the mobilization of the 'invisible' in American society. One would think that that class-based policies on the left would be better suited to mobilize these voters on the basis of the structural economic challenges that characterize their lives, but this is not the case. [174] The reason, according to Fukuyama, is that financial challenges does also concerns the individual's understanding of his own identity and dignity: "To be poor is to be invisible to your fellow human beings, and the indignity of invisibility is often worse than the lack of resources".[175] Structural economic challenges might therefore just as well be about identity as anything else. Furthermore, he argues that some of the problems here are the particular identity groups that has usually been the focus of the political left: "Rather than building solidarity around large collectivities such as the working class or the economically exploited, it has focused on ever smaller groups being marginalized in specific ways ».[176]

Fukuyama's theory is insightful when he points to the fact that politics to a large degree is about searching dignity for one's identity. This is mainly what he tries to explain through the concept of thymos.[177] Furthermore, he understands identity as an individual's perception of the self. [178] However, his explanation of how identity comes into being is not as deficient as that of Mouffe and Laclau. They, on the other hand, explain how identities comes

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[172] Mouffe 2018; Laclau 2005: 73
[173] Mouffe 2018: 2
[174] Fukuyama 2018: 80-90
[175] Fukuyama: 80
[176] Fukuyama: 90
[177] Fukuyama xiii
[178] Fukuyama 2018: 25-40

into being through discursive articulations. They would certainly support Fukuyama's argument that the Right does not address the challenges that actually underlie voters' frustrations, but they simultaneously emphasize that political identity comes into being based on the available vocabulary the voter has to articulate his or her demands.[179]

The problem with mobilization on the Right is not that the individual is confused about his own identity, as Fukuyama seems to imply when he calls it the "wrong address". The problem, however, is that the only sufficient vocabulary to articulate the frustrations comes from the right. This is because of the essentialist approaches of the Left, if we are to believe Mouffe. What the Left seems to misunderstand, according to Mouffe, is that these voters need the expression of an identity based on a radical negativity.[180] It is not possible to constitute this identity by referring only to positive references connected to different social categories. The radical negativity refers to something that is not possible to express in the discourse.[181] Mouffe argues that in the neoliberal hegemony, the 'common sense' prevents the expression of anti-capitalist struggles. The structural challenges in capitalism can therefore only be understood through reference to a radical negativity. Within 'common sense' it is not possible to address the frustrations in society, but through a populist articulation Mouffe argues that one can establish a new 'reason'.[182]

3.4 The post-democratic and post-political challenge

The important reason that the 'losers of economic liberalism' doesn't vote for socialist parties is, according to Mouffe, that the voters lack good alternatives that represent and respond to the great economic and structural challenges in society. Furthermore, this points towards two comprehensive criticisms of the current political order. The first critique concerns the post-democratic condition of society, while the second critique concerns the post-political condition. In this section, I will take a closer look at these criticisms, and through these conditions explain what Mouffe means by the neoliberal hegemony in crisis.

I would like to start by making explicit that Mouffe is not talking about capitalist *regimes* when she talks about these conditions. Rather, she refers to a neoliberal hegemony in crisis. I view her 'neoliberal hegemony' as a way of thinking and understanding the political world which has been viewed more or less as 'common sense', but that is not as 'common'

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[179] Mouffe 2018: 24
[180] Mouffe 2018: 1
[181] Mouffe 2013: 1
[182] Mouffe 2018

today as it used to be. This way of thinking contains, among other things, an unavoidable focus on economic growth underpinning all political assessments.[183] No matter what political challenge one sees in today's society, it must be understood in relation to the ever-important goal of economic growth. In short, we can say that the crisis of the neoliberal hegemony concerns the decreasing legitimacy of this commonsensical goal.[184]

According to Mouffe, the populist moment seen in today's society is linked to the fact that this common sense no longer corresponds to the social demands that characterize most of the individuals in society. Large groups of society have greater affective connections to other demands, and therefore "growth" fails to mobilize the 'people'. Populism often emerges as a result of successive crises, and Mouffe emphasizes successive economic crises as the basis for this populist moment.[185] Similarly, Wolfgang Streeck has pointed out that the economic crisis of 2008 is just one in a long series of crises that have plagued the legitimacy of a capitalist order since the mid-1970s.[186] He claims that the dissolution of capitalism is well under way, and that society is now in a kind of interregnum. He describes the trend this way.

> Low growth, grotesque inequality and mountains of debt; the neutralization of post-war capitalism's progress engine, democracy, and its replacement with oligarchic neo-feudalism; the clearing away by 'globalization' of social barriers against the commodification of labour, land and money; and systemic disorders such as infectious corruption in the competitive struggle for ever bigger rewards for individual success, with the attendant culture of demoralization, and rapidly spreading international anarchy – all these together have profoundly destabilized the post-war capitalist way of social life, without a hint as to how stability might ever be restored.[187]

This largely overlaps with what Mouffe understands as an 'oligarchization' of Western European society. Here she points to, among other things, deregulation and privatization, de-industrialization and technological change, relocation, increasing economic inequality, and austerity policies.[188] It is on this basis that she argues that the left-populist strategy must necessarily have an anti-capitalist dimension, even if the articulation does not necessarily have to be expressed as 'anti-capitalist'.[189]

It is thus clear that Mouffe argues that the common sense that has characterized the political discourse for decades – where economic liberalism equals 'good' and economic

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[183] Mouffe 2018; 2020
[184] Mouffe 2018
[185] Mudde og Kaltwasser 2019: 137; Mouffe 2018: 18-19
[186] Streeck 2016: 47
[187] Streeck 2016: 35
[188] Mouffe 2018: 18
[189] Mouffe 2018: 49

growth functions as a universal guideline for political assessments – no longer resonates with the large parts of the democratic electorate. [190] This equals a hegemonic crisis. Furthermore, she emphasizes how the political discourse in the neoliberal hegemony reduces freedom to freedom in the market or freedom for the individual as a consumer. She claims that «what now rules is an individualistic liberal vision that celebrates consumer society and the freedom that the market offer". [191] In order to address the current problems of for example social inequality or ecological sustainability one must first address the post-democratic and post-political challenges limiting the voters' ability to express such demands.

The term post-democracy was first used by political scientist Colin Crouch to describe the enormous imbalance in modern democracy between corporate interests and the interests of the rest of the population. [192] On the other hand, the philosopher Jacques Rancière uses the term to describe a democracy that is first and foremost about the conceptual legitimation of practices in a democracy that is no longer about the *demos*, but about mechanisms within the state. [193] Mouffe, on the other hand, understands today's post-democracy as a condition in liberal democracy where the liberal tradition has become dominant, while the democratic tradition has become superfluous. She explains:

> To be sure, 'democracy' is still spoken of, but it has been reduced to its liberal component and it only signifies the presence of free elections and the defence of human rights. What has become increasingly central is economic liberalism with its defence of the free market and many aspects of political liberalism have been relegated to second place, if not simply eliminated. [194]

For Mouffe, post-democracy is thus about the electorate being 'caught' in an economic liberalism with several challenges that cannot be addressed. The starting point for this understanding is the historical articulation of two traditions that underlie liberal democracy: liberalism and democracy. [195] The former emphasizes the rule of law, the separation of power and individual rights. The latter emphasizes equality and popular sovereignty. The historical articulation of these two traditions as *one* liberal-democratic tradition refers to the historical context of the first modern democracies at the end of the 18th century. At this point as a united articulation that broke with the established absolutism. [196]

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[190] Mouffe 2018
[191] Mouffe 2018: 18
[192] Crouch i Mouffe 2018: 13
[193] Rancière i Mouffe 2018: 13
[194] Mouffe 2018: 16
[195] Mouffe 2018: 14
[196] Mouffe 2018: 14

Müller are among those who would be skeptical of such an argument, because he more or less sees the liberal-democratic tradition as *one* tradition. He argues that: «The image according to which liberal democracy involves a balance where we can choose to have a little bit more liberalism or a little bit more democracy is fundamentally misleading».[197] He nevertheless acknowledges that Mouffe has a point in her arguments about challenges in democracy but emphasizes that her conclusions are overexaggerated. Müller refers to the political scientist David Ost's analysis of PiS's election victory in Poland in 2015, and cites Ost as follows: "The problem ... is not that people are not committed to democracy. Yes, plenty of people today are not committed to democracy but they are not committed to it because they feel that democracy, packed in neoliberal wrapping, is not committed to them".[198]

Müller is, on the whole, critical of how the term "liberalism" is used in its European sense, as a term referring to an unrestrained capitalist economy. This is to a large degree how Mouffe understands the term, since she seemingly believes that the neoliberal hegemony actually consists in a to a certain degree unhinged capitalist economy. The big problem, as Müller sees it, is that Mouffe's theory can in this way legitimize anti-pluralist and anti-liberal populists like Orbán in Hungary. Müller claims that Orbán's program is both about opposition to unrestrained capitalism, as well as the restriction of individual rights among minorities in society, such as for gays. Opposition to *liberalism* might, according to Müller, legitimize Orbán's illiberalism.[199] With Mouffe pointing towards an economic liberalism, while Orbán's opposition is just as much against a political liberalism. It should be clear that Mouffe is in no way legitimizing Orbán's regime through her argumentation. Müller is of course, and rightly so, afraid that populism might threaten the pluralist society. The problem is that he argues for democracy and pluralism as if there were no limits to a democratic society, as if no one necessarily will be left out. The insight of Mouffe and Laclau is that such a totalization of a harmonious society is impossible. Even plural representation must have its boundaries.[200]

Both Müller and Fukuyama have views on democracy that certainly points out the post-democratic challenge Mouffe talks about, where liberalism is understood as the only legitimately 'good' order.[201] Not saying that one should always force the implementation of

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[197] Müller 2016: 11
[198] Ost i Müller 2016: 60
[199] Müller 2016: 53-54
[200] Hansen 2020
[201] Müller 2016: 5-6; Fukuyama 2018: xii-xiv

liberal democracies, since not everyone are ready to achieve it, but simply saying that liberal democracy would always be the highest fulfilment of a political society. In that case, economic liberalism (as long as the liberalism entails and is dominated by its economic meaning) cannot be held accountable for the challenges it creates. Mouffe would strongly disagree and sees this line of argumentation as a part of the *temporary* neoliberal hegemony.

Let's return to the concept of post-democracy. The idea of a de-democratizing capitalism can be found in Streeck as well. Among other things, one might see supranational financial organizations, such as the European Central Bank, and how these always trump national democracy.[202] One can see this in how the politics of the Greece left-wing and populist party Syriza was made impossible by the response from EU, to a large degree because of their (economic) illiberalist program against EU's austerity policies.[203] This clearly shows the limits of democracy in the post-democratic condition.

The strength of Laclau and Mouffe's approach is that it is possible to understand some elements as 'outside' the rationality, as something that the hegemony has left behind. It is exactly this insight that leads Mouffe to an understanding of the post-democracy as a condition where the losers of economic liberalism are left behind with no 'legitimate' representation. We can see this in the dismissal of radical alternatives as too 'populist' or 'extreme' to be taken seriously.[204] A usual critique of populism concern their simple and unrealistic solution to complex problems. The struggles of capitalism are usually perceived as such problems. It is therefore wort mentioning Streeck's argument that capitalism is in fact a problem than cannot have any solutions, but has to collapse by itself:

> As long as we imagine the end of capitalism being decreed, Leninist-style, by some government or central committee, we cannot but consider capitalism eternal. (...) Matters are different if, instead of imagining it being replaced by collective decision with some providentially designed new order, we allow for capitalism to collapse by itself.[205]

That is not to say that the feeling of being left behind should not be addressed, but simply that this representation should not be dependent on the rational and intellectual solutions to the problems of capitalism. This is also the goal of the left populist strategy, striving to establish a new common sense where capitalism is not considered eternal and self-evident. As long as the necessity of capitalism is considered self-evident, democracy will continue to function as a bureaucratic and technocratic continuation of status quo.

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[202] Streck 2016: 55
[203] Mouffe 2018: 20
[204] Mouffe 2018: 17
[205] Streeck 2016: 57

At this point it is clear that Mouffe's hegemonic approach makes her critical of Fukuyama's teleological view of history. What is equally clear is that the post-democratic condition is not due to a lack of willpower as much as to linguistic barriers one always finds in language. These insights are all based on the fundamental linguistic groundwork in both Laclau and Mouffe's theories. From this groundwork, they also argue for the necessity of the *other* in every act of signification. In that case Mouffe refers to the German philosopher Carl Schmitt. He pointed out that there is a fundamental incompatibility between the liberal and the democratic tradition.[206] The domination of the liberal 'grammar' over the democratic 'grammar', may to a certain degree explain why the dimension of conflict is no longer understood as a vital part of the political, which furthermore explains Mouffe's argument about the post-political. By turning to Schmitt, Mouffe explains how democracy prevents liberalism on the one hand, and that liberalism prevents democracy on the other hand. Mainly due to the incompatibility between freedom and equality:

> Schmitt is certainly right in pointing out the existence of a conflict between the liberal 'grammar,' which postulates universality and the reference to 'humanity', and the 'grammar' of democratic equality, which requires the construction of a people and a frontier between a 'we' and a 'they'.[207]

The view that these traditions are interdependent, as we for example can see in Müller, creates the perception that a radical critique of economic liberalism must be understood as too 'extreme'. This is also the challenge with a 'third way', since politics is then to a certain degree reduced to the preservation and continuation of the status quo. Following both Schmitt and Mouffe, we can view this as a blurring of the antagonistic front between friend and enemy.[208] This is of course related to the post-democratic condition, but this challenge is of an even deeper ontological character. The problem is that without a certain dimension of conflict, one is not capable of constructing either a *they* or the corresponding *we*.[209] One can of course do without the dimension of a *they* as long as one already feels represented within the order.[210] But as I have argued so far, the populist moment is due to the fact that a larger and larger part of the electorate feels 'invisible' or 'left behind'. Therefore, the antagonistic frontier is a precondition for representation for a large part of the electorate. According to

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[206] Slagstad 2019: 30-36; Mouffe 2018: 14-15
[207] Schmitt in Mouffe 2018: 15
[208] Mouffe 2018
[209] Mouffe 2018
[210] Laclau 2005: 81

Laclau and Mouffe, the representation of radical negativity is dependent on a populistic articulation of a *we* against a *they*.[211]

The approach to populism as political logic makes it possible to take a closer look at the political ontology itself. It is through this approach, with its linguistic-philosophical basis, that one can understand the significance of the antagonistic frontier. If one understands post-democracy as a state where representative democracy fails to capture the great frustrations in society, populism is a logic that makes this representation possible. One of the core elements in this logic is the emphasis on the *other*, because it is this *other* that makes the *we* possible. Furthermore, Mouffe argues that this populist articulation should involve an anti-capitalist dimension, because capitalism and the neoliberal hegemony is at the root of the post-democratic and post-political challenge.[212] For Mouffe, populism is a necessary step towards the return of the political. With this in mind, I will now move on to a discussion of populism as a political logic.

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[211] Laclau 2005: 81; Mouffe 2013: 1
[212] Mouffe 2018

4 Populism as a political logic

In this part I will discuss the approach of Laclau, viewing populism as a political logic. I have argued that political theory lacks a proper linguistic-philosophical groundwork for thinking the political. I will therefore explain how populism can be understood on the basis of such a groundwork. This should make it clear why political theory are plagued by certain shortcomings in their understanding of populism. The big problem is that one usually expects that political assessments or objectivity as such can be based on an intellectual basis or a rational framework. Furthermore, that one can always deduce objectivity by referring to its positive references. Laclau can show us that such references might not always be available.

I will first return to one of the core concepts of populism, the people. Here I will go into more detail on how the French philosopher Vincent Descombes explains the concept of collective identities. This will serve as a critique of the more or less implicit view that collective identities can be seen as merely irrational or misleading. The point is that political theory tends to take the concept of 'identity' as something that exists a priori, and as a positive reference to something empirical. In the second part, I will show how Laclau breaks with political theory by seeing social demands as the minimal unit for analyzing identity. In the second part I will show how, in populism, several different social demands can be articulated as a singularity through a chain of equivalence, following a certain discursive logic. In the final part I will show how this articulation of political identity can be understood as something more than just a cynical manipulation of language, but rather the actual representation of something 'real within the symbolic'.[213]

4.1 Instituting the 'people' through the imaginary

One of the major objections to populism is that the construction of a people in of itself is the construction of a fictitious thought without any empirical reference. That this fictitious idea should serve as a guideline for political assessments would seem irrational in today's empirical-oriented political discourse. This does to a certain degree explain why populism seems problematic and difficult to either accept or explain in today's political theory.

A first point to be made is that there is no individual apart from the social individual. I would argue that a rather common view is that there is an individual prior to the social individual. In that case it is wort point to the insight of the philosopher Charles Taylor

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[213] Laclau 2005: 118

conserning the "disembedded individual".[214] In short, Taylor explains that in traditional societies, man was connected to various communities, i.e., "embedded" in social bands. In modern society, the individual sees these bands as voluntarily. In other words, the modern individual has stepped out of the social and become "disembedded". The interesting idea of Taylor is that the individual's natural state is still in the social, but in modern society it has become possible to see oneself as an independent individual. The disembedded individual is thus not the starting point for the identity. It is possible to view oneself as independent, but in viewing ourselves as someone who can 'break free from our social ties', we have to have certain ties to break free from. The social individual is therefore prior to the independent individual, even in modern society.[215]

In a mentioned above, the individualism of Friedrich Hayek has had a great impact on today's discourse. This philosophy has a view on the individual fundamentally different than what we can find in Taylor, or in Descombes for that matter.[216] Mouffe points, for example, to today's understanding of the citizen as the individual consumer in the consumer society. She herself claims that one should rather understand the citizen as a participating individual in the political sphere.[217] It is reasonable to believe that some of the basic assumptions in today's discourse, challenged by the populist logic, are tied to this individualistic philosophy. In order to challenge these basic assumptions from a theoretical perspective, it is therefore necessary to take a critical look at the individual's role in the social. More specifically, how an individual can perceive himself or herself within the social. It is this feeling of being oneself that one refers to when one talks about identity. A deeper examination of this concept helps to show that populism cannot be discredited on the basis of their fictitious and non-empirical construction of the 'people'.

In its elementary use, identity refers to something identical. The psychologist Erik Erikson, on the other hand, introduced the term in its modern, identitarian sense when he examined what he calls the identity crisis among American veterans in the middle of the 20th century.[218] Erikson claimed that the psychosocial identity was about how the individual understood himself as something with continuity and sameness. On the one hand, this is about how the individual responds to the question: Who am I? And on the other hand, how does the individual perceives that the environment understands the individual, responding to the

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[214] Taylor in Descombes 2016: 105-107
[215] Taylor in Descombes 2016: 114
[216] Mouffe 2018: 31; Descombes 2016
[217] Mouffe 2018: 65-66
[218] Erikson in Descombes 2016: 16

question: Who is it? The combination of these questions gives rise to a third question: Who am I? The third question then understood in a psychosocial sense where identity is both subjective and objective at the same time. [219]

Today's use of the concept is derived from Erikson's psychosocial understanding. Descombes argues that our theoretical assumptions about the concept still to a large degree is tied to identity in its elementary sense. Making us look for the identical reference, asking the question of what it is that remains the same in a Self with continuity and sameness. Since line of argument leads to a sophistical refutation, Descombes argues that we divorce ourselves from the elementary use.[220] Rather, he suggests that identity be understood as the result of an individual's subjective *expression* of his own identity. [221] In other words, one can say that identity is created through the social interaction in which the individual is involved. This fits in well with Laclau and Mouffe's claims that identity is created through discursive practices or, in other words, the expression of social demands. [222]

Identity says something about how the individual sees himself in the social, and this in turn lays the foundation for how an individual will understand his or hers needs or values in the political sphere. This is evident not least in populism where the feeling of belonging to a people seems to drive every political assessment the individual makes. Any expectation that politics should be driven by intellectual, rational or transparent reasoning is challenged once one understands that identity is created in a tension between the affective dimension and the discursive 'expression'. [223] The concept of collective identities, on the other hand, helps to show that the real world does not represent itself first and foremost through intellectual foundations or positive references to an empirical world. That a part of the population understands itself as a *plebs*, and at the same time claims to be a whole *populus* is intuitively an irrational claim. [224] How can a part claim to be the whole? Such an invocation can be found in Müller. In the first quote he states that the 'people' is an illusion, in the second quote he contrasts the the populist notion and Rousseau's general will.

> The term *illusion* is justified here. For the whole people can never be grasped and represented – not least because it never remains the same, not even for minute. Citizens die, new citizens are born. Yet it is always tempting to claim that one can actually know the people as such.[225]

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[219] Erikson in Descombes 2016: 69
[220] Descombes 2016: 37, 42
[221] Descombes 2016: 132
[222] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018
[223] Laclau 2005: 118-120
[224] Laclau 2005: 81
[225] Müller 2016: 28

> (...) major difference between populist representation of the people and Rousseau's general will. The formation of the latter requires actual participation by citizens; the populist, on the other hand, can divine the proper will of the people on the basis of what it means, for instance, to be a «real American.» More *Volksgeist*, if you like, than *volonté générale* – a conception of democracy in which «substance,» «spirit,» or, put more straightforwardly, «true identity» decides, and not the larger number. What might initially have looked like a claim by populists to represent the will turns out to be a claim to represent something like a symbolic substance.[226]

It is worth mentioning Descombes' distinction between two main critiques of collective identities.[227] The first critique concerns the authenticity of the people, for example due to a lack of common history or culture. The second critique concerns the ontological possibilities for collective identities altogether. It is the second critique one can find in Müller's invocations, and this is the critique Descombes focuses his discussion on. Furthermore, he explains how in order to respond to this type of criticism, one must have a philosophical approach rather than what I have described more or less as an empirical approach deriving reality from positive references.[228]

The most instant problem of collective identities, in my view, is what Müller addresses in the first quote, pointing out that the people die, and people are born, showing that the people never remain 'the same'. How can a collective identity then be perceived as something with continuity and sameness through generations? It is important to emphasize from the start that we are not here talking about a collective identity as the gathering of multiple individuals but rather, the expansion of an individual's "I".[229] Descombes therefore suggests that we understand the collective identity as a complex and moral person.[230]

Furthermore, there is a force in collective identities giving legitimacy to certain traditions and symbols both in the past, present and future. To understand this persistent element, it is worth distinguishing between a constitutive and institutive power.[231] The constituted power of the people refers to something expressed and articulated as basis for legitimacy. We can for example claim that the Norwegian 'people' is constituted through the Norwegian constitution from 1814. The instituting power on the other hand, refers to the force that leads certain Norwegian individuals to come together to write this constitution, and furthermore for future individuals to accept this constitution as legitimate. The constitutive power does not only regard the *demos* in the present but are expected to have legitimacy

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[226] Muller 2016: 29
[227] Descombes 2016: 138
[228] Descombes 2016: 140
[229] Benveniste i Descombes 2016: 198
[230] Descombes 2016: 154
[231] Descombes 2016: 191-193

through time. It is the institutive power that makes this temporal dimension possible. Therefore, the constitutive power is preconditioned on a prior institutive power.[232]

In the quote above, Müller discusses Rousseau's general will as if this were a reference to all individuals in its empirical sense, "the larger number", without referring to an underlying substance or spirit of some sort.[233] I find this hard to accept, following Descombes discussion of Rousseau. Descombes on the other hand, emphasizes Rousseau's discussion of the four laws.[234] The first laws are a reference to the constitutive power, more or less in a juridical sense. The forth law is a reference to the institutive power, referring to moral standards, habits, norms – "the spirit of its constitution". This is certainly not a reference to something empirical, but a force that gives legitimacy to the other laws. Following Desombes, I would argue that we can understand this spirit as the social practices making the collective Self into a collective Self.[235] It is *there* prior to its constitutive expression.

Another important objection found in Müller, regards the impossibility of a part being the whole. Müller is right to emphasize that the whole people can never be represented without remainder. In fact, a good linguistic foundation makes it possible why the representation of a people presupposes a remaining and excluded *they*. I will return to this. This is a typical critique of collective identities, and Descombes even mention a similar critique of Rousseau, raised by Voltaire. Voltaire objection regards Rousseau's claim that a part is the whole. Voltaire then points out that if an individual in the republic is trampled on, this would mean that the rest of the individuals in the republic feels the pain as well. Similarly, if someone steps on your foot, you should suddenly feel pain in your shoulder.[236]

The problem is that those raising this critique are basing it on identity in a literal sense, understood as something identical. This, furthermore, leads to the search for an empirical 'sameness' that can explain the identity. Descombes and Laclau shows us that representation is based on more than conceptual means alone. Descombes argues that one must accept an imaginative dimension as a legitimate part of representation.[237] This resonates with Laclau's view that we should understand language as figurative, rather than literal.[238] In this case, rhetoric, vagueness, imprecision, imagination might all be understood as ontological dimensions of our language, rather than misconceptions of 'the real'.

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[232] Descombes 2016: 191
[233] Müller 2016: 29
[234] Rousseau in Descombes 2016: 178-179
[235] Descombes 2016: 180
[236] Voltaire in Descombes 2016: 181
[237] Descombes 2016: 196-197
[238] Laclau 2005: 71

Descombes explains that this dimension of the imaginary, as a precondition for collective identities, refers to "an instituting imaginary and not an unreal imaginary".[239] Descombes accepts that imaginative collective identity is in fact "devoid of natural reality to be taken as a model for the faithful representation of the groups historical unity».[240] Still, Descombes denies that this identity is "devoid of any reality of any kind"[241], and explains: "If it is possible to bring together an assembly of citizens in order to organize a collective deliberation on the policy to be implemented, then there must already be a social life, the social life of an already-instituted society".[242] To a certain degree, this can be understood as a 'real within the symbolic', as Laclau puts it.[243]

The fundamental insight here is that language should not be understand as something literal or positive. To truly understand how identity can be such a driving force in the political, one must understand how identity comes into being. This is what distinguishes Mouffe and Laclau from much of traditional political theory, since they emphasize how identity constitutes itself through discursive practices.[244] Identity is not understood as a reference to *a priori* and positive social categories, but through the articulation of what Laclau has termed *social demands*.[245] In certain instances, this articulation may even presuppose the vagueness and imprecision that is often used to disqualify populism.[246] Populism can in this way be understood as a precondition for the representation of demands that cannot otherwise be expressed in the political discourse, because they have no positive reference. This linguistic understanding of a figurative language is what I will turn to next.

4.2 The play of differences

Ernesto Laclau lays out three basic assumptions for his theory in *On Populist Reason*: *Discourse*, *hegemony and empty signifiers*, as well as *rhetoric*. It is clear that these assumptions about language permeate his whole theoretical framework. The purpose of this part is to go through basics of the theoretical framework of Laclau, and to arrive at an understanding of what he means by 'political logics' as the discursive articulation and constitution of identities.

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[239] Descombes 2016: 196-197
[240] Descombes 2016: 197
[241] Descombes 2016: 197
[242] Descombes 2016: 194
[243] Laclau 2005: 118
[244] Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018
[245] Laclau 2005: 73
[246] Laclau 2005: 99

An important starting point is Laclau's understanding of *discourse* as the primary terrain for the constitution of any objectivity.[247] Laclau builds his insights on the theories of Ferdinand Saussure. Laclau thus emphasizes that meaning, or objectivity, are made out of differences rather than any positivity or essence. The signification of an element is first and foremost possible by referring to the composition of which the element is a part, in other words its differential relationship to other elements. For Laclau, there is nothing "beyond the play of differences".[248] He is therefore not concerned only with the linguistic articulations as was the case with Saussure. Laclau uses this differential framework to understand all symbolic actions bearing meaning, understood as discursive practices.[249]

The valuable insight in this 'game of differences' is that for an object to constitute itself, it must be presented as a whole composition, understood as a totality. At the same time, the object is dependent on limits making it possible to differentiate itself from something other.[250] Take for example the reference to a certain mountain. To identify the mountain as an object, one must also be able to see the surroundings around the mountain. It is these surroundings that makes clear he contours of the mountain itself. The mountain *and* the surroundings must therefore be part of every representation of the mountain, and its composition is in that case what we can perceive as the totality. But since we are at the same time talking about the representation of the mountain, it is the mountain that has to totalize itself as what this representation of the whole is all about. Therefore, Laclau points out, the object has to exclude the differential elements from the whole in order to represent itself.[251] In other words, the surroundings necessary for the representation of the mountain, has to be excluded from the representation of the mountain in order for the mountain to be constituted as an object.

The paradox is that the object therefore must be both a part and a whole at the same time. Laclau understands this as a tension in any objectivity because the 'totality' is both necessary and impossible. The result is always a failed totality, what Laclau describes as "the place of an irretrievable fullness".[252] This necessary impossibility underlines the former point that representation cannot be limited to the positive language, since it is wider than conceptual grasping".[253]

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[247] Laclau 2005: 68
[248] Laclau 2005: 69
[249] Laclau 2005: 68-69; Mouffe 2018
[250] Laclau 2005: 69-70
[251] Laclau 2005: 69-70
[252] Laclau 2005: 70
[253] Laclau 2005: 70

I have already made clear how Mouffe's theory is permeated by the concept of *hegemony*.[254] This concept is equally important for Laclau but is primarily used to explain how objects constitute themselves as the embodiment of the mentioned "irretrievable fullness".[255] It is therefore worth mentioning that we are here talking about hegemony in a more linguistic and technical way, than what was the case in the previous chapter.

Laclau argues that the hegemonic process always underlies the constitution of political identities. The great challenge at hand is to explore how it is at all possible that identity without any positive substance, can constitute itself as a whole through the play of differences. Laclau argues that this is possible through the populist logic, where a particular demand serves as a universal sign in an equivalential chain of different demands. In this case, Laclau explains:

> (...) there is the possibility that one difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In that way, its body is split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer. This operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called *hegemony*. And, given that this embodied totality or universality is, as we have seen, an impossible object, the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness. With this it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground.[256]

This hegemonic process depends on what Laclau calls *empty signifiers*.[257] This concerns how a signifier, referring to a particular content, incorporates in itself the representation of a universal content which other particular signs can subordinate themselves to. For this to be possible, the initial signifier has to give up some of its particularity, and in that sense become 'empty'. It is worth emphasizing here, that this is not the same as an abstract signifier. The former refers to something that is lacking, a negativity, while the latter would refer to some common positive features.[258] Take, for example, ecological sustainability as an example of a potentially empty sign. In an abstract sense, sustainability could refer to all initiatives related to ecological sustainability: Electrification, taxes on CO_2 emissions, reduced use of plastic, etc. For the sign to be empty, however, it must point to the radical negativity, something preventing sustainability. In that sense, ecological sustainability would refer to various requirements that do not have representation, more specifically requirements that are not met. In the long run, the above investments may still be part of the articulation, but it must

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[254] Mouffe 2018
[255] Laclau 2005: 70
[256] Laclau 2005: 70-71
[257] Laclau 2005: 71
[258] Laclau 2005: 97

necessarily be articulated as a shortcoming. In general, the emptiness in the sign shows why representation of the radical negativity cannot be understood through a logical deduction of the positive references in language.

This emptiness makes it possible to understand how objectivity and meaning, and thus rationality, doesn't presuppose any intellectual foundations. The 'emptiness' is a precondition for the representation of the radical negativity, because it cannot possibly refer to something positive or empirical.[259] The valuable insight is that this is a precondition, not a misconception or a shortcoming of the representation. The radical negativity makes itself clear through the affective dimension, which is what gives force to any representation of the individual. The affective dimension is therefore always an underlying part of the hegemonic process.[260] Since the hegemonic process regards the representation of radical negativity through empty signifiers, any objectivity will be a reference to a horizon, not a ground.[261] This does to a large degree explain Mouffe's hegemonic approach, claiming that every political order is of a temporary nature.[262]

One last important element in Laclau's theoretical framework is the role of *rhetoric* in language. Populism is often criticized for its rhetorical features. Laclau on the other hand, argues that rhetoric is in of itself an ontological part of any language, because language is figurative, rather than literal. He builds on Cicero's argument that language has gone through a primitive phase where there were more objects than references available to describe these things. Laclau sees a similar inability to refer to objects but claims that it is part of the ontological nature of language, rather than an empirical lack in a primitive phase.[263] From this he argues that certain elements are impossible to make literal references to, what is understood as *catachresis*. In certain cases, one is dependent on the figurative use of the literal elements in language. He points to the expression "the leg of a chair" as catachrestical,[264] and argues that it is the same with the populist "people".[265] The only way to understand populism, is therefore to accept that language is figurative rather than literal, positive or empirical.

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[259] Laclau 2005
[260] Laclau 2005: 71
[261] Laclau 2005: 70-71
[262] Mouffe 2013; 2018
[263] Laclau 2005: 71
[264] Laclau 2005: 71
[265] Laclau 2005: 72

4.3 Social demands and equivalential chains

I have already mentioned the anti-essentialism in Mouffe and Laclau. The main point is that identity cannot be understood as a reference to a *a priori* substance, which is the case when identity is used as the minimal unit of analysis. Populism cannot be understood as a mobilizing strategy for certain pre-existing social categories, because the *people* that populism mobilizes is constituted through the populist articulation. The point of this section is to show the minimal analysis of Laclau's theories, and in that way understand how populism can be understood as one of several possible logics in the political.[266]

The central category put forward by Laclau as a minimal unit for analysis is the category of "social demands".[267] Populism can be understood as a way in which the unity of a group can constitute itself.[268] It is in other words tied to how the individual expands his "I" and how the group becomes a "moral person".[269] The minimal unit should therefore be tied to the subjective experience of psychosocial identity. The category of social demands does this by referring to needs and desires of the individual in the political something than can be articulated and directed towards those in power.[270] A demand ceases to be a demand if it is met by those in power, but as long as this does not happen the demand can take two forms. Firstly, the demand can persist as a simple and isolated demand, something Laclau calls a 'democratic' demand, without any normative connotations in the term 'democratic'. Secondly, the requirement can develop an equivalent relation to other unfulfilled demands, what Laclau understands as a 'popular' demand.[271] The latter is however, contingent on an articulation of this chain, capable of constituting a "broader subjectivity" on the basis of radical negativity.[272] This refers again to the mentioned hegemonic process, where an empty signifier performs the embodiment of the irretrievable fullness.

It is through this category of social demands that Laclau explains populism as a political logic constituting the unity of a group. In general, it is worth emphasizing that Laclau understands social logics as a system of rules that draws the horizon for how one can make sense of anything in the social. Political logics are about how such a 'horizon' is instituted as a political order.[273] Laclau furthermore outlines three important preconditions for populism.

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[266] Laclau 2005: 73
[267] Laclau 2005: 72,73
[268] Laclau 2005: 73
[269] Descombes 2016
[270] Laclau 2005: 73
[271] Laclau 2005: 74
[272] Laclau 2005: 74
[273] Laclau 2005: 117

First, an internal frontier established between the citizens directing the demands, and those in power receiving the demand. In other words, a separation between the people and the elite. Secondly, an equivalent chain making it possible to articulate several different demands, each with its own particular content, subordinated the whole. Thirdly, the reaching of a higher point by the equivalential chain, making it possible to crystallize itself as one singular people.[274] Populism can thus constitute a people that is more than the particular parts and contents it is initially referring to.

It is clear that each demand must be split between its own particular content and the subordination to a universal signifier. Laclau argues that all social and discursive identity must be constituted in the tension between a differential and an equivalent logic.[275] The first logic concerns the place of a particular content within a differential composition. The other logic concerns the subordination of the particular content to the universal signifier capturing the radical negativity as a singularity. The former can focus on the inclusion of different particular contents, while the latter necessarily has to exclude something in order for the equivalential link to be possible. Different political logics consist in different relations between these two fundamental logics.[276] Social reality is therefore always instituted in a political order through the tension between the differential and equivalential.

One can, for example, think of the political welfare model in the post-war years as a hegemony dominated by the differential logic. The social movements of the 1960s demonstrated an ever-expanding order aimed at making room for more and more particular demands.[277] There is never any *other*, and therefore it can never be a *people*. The conservative and neoliberal movement in the 80s laying the foundations for the neoliberal hegemony proved to be dominated by an equivalential logic establishing a *we* with a corresponding *they*.[278] Thus, embodying the radical negativity building up through the former decade.[279]

These two examples can moreover point towards the two specific logics Laclau mention in his theory.[280] The former example follows the institutional logic with representation seemingly without boundaries, with room for *every particular demand in society*. Laclau explains that the differential in of itself incorporates the representation of the

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[274] Laclau 2005: 74
[275] Laclau 2005
[276] Laclau 2005: 78-80
[277] Laclau 2005: 78
[278] Laclau 2005: 78
[279] Mouffe 2018: 27-29
[280] Laclau 2005: 81

whole; all requirements are united in an equivalent relation based on the fact that the particular requirements are equal. The latter of the examples above follows the populist logic. This refers to a logic where a 'totalization of the social' happens on the basis of the front between *we* and *them*. More specifically, one then understands society as something whole, only through the exclusion of the other. Where institutional logic is based on a seemingly universal equality for all particular demands, populist logic is based on a the seemingly universal opposition to something *other,* something preventing particular demands from being fulfilled. In the latter case, someone has to be excluded. In both logics the tension between the differential and the equivalent are present, but the former is dominated by the differential logic, while the latter is dominated by the equivalent logic.

It is worth reminding the reader of one of Müllers core objections to populism, criticizing it's claim of representing a plebs and a populus.[281] Laclau shows the need for such a representation by explaining that the tension between particularity and universality is due to the pursuit of such an impossible and necessary totality. The need to embody an unattainable wholeness shows a need to understand a people as a populus, while the exclusion of some *other* that prevents the fulfillment of the social demand points to an understanding of the people as a plebs. Laclau therefore agrees with Müller that populism concerns the representation of a *plebs* claiming to be the only legitimate populus.[282] I would argue that there is a fundamental difference between the two since Laclau seems to understand this as a precondition for the representation of a radical negativity, while Müller views it as a mere illusion.

This paper concerns the arguments in favor of a left populist strategy. In that case it is obviously necessary to ask why one wouldn't rather respond to the hegemonic crisis by articulating identity along the institutional logic explained above. Wouldn't this avoid all the dangers populism in certain cases pose to pluralism? Müller would likely support such an argument, based on the already mentioned arguments in his theory.[283] The problem with Müller however, is that he seems blind to the fact that any order must have its limits, even pluralism.[284] The institutional logic can for example not represent a radical negativity maintained on the premise that some demands are not met in society. In fact, Laclau emphasizes that no society will ever be complete and harmonious, something will always fall

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[281] Müller 2016: 23
[282] Laclau 2005: 81
[283] Muller 2016
[284] Hansen 2020

outside the positive framework from which the institutional logic bases its representation. This explains that there could in some instances be a need for populism. The institutional logic is suitable for an expanding hegemony, while the populist logic is suitable for the challenging or replacing of an existing hegemony. [285]

As a though experiment we might discuss the recent campaigns against sexual harassment, not least through the #metoo-campaigns. This is the struggle of those facing a culture in society where sexual harassment has long seemed an integral part of the daily lives in society. Several democratic and specific demands aiming at equality between the genders and the right to a safe workplace are represented as a demand on equal terms with other demands in society, within the hegemonic framework. It refers to a rupture with a given culture, but this rupture can be referred to within the existing discourse. This kind of representation would refer to the institutional logic.

On the other hand, one could see this as part of a political correctness preventing individuals from expressing themselves as they always have done, because of a problem that these individuals may not have anything to do with. In a discourse where #metoo is deemed as common sense, any male critique of the campaigns may be disqualified as male chauvinism. The demands of these so-called chauvinists would then be impossible to express within the discourse. Furthermore, these demands could easily subordinate themselves in a chain of equivalence under a universal struggle against political correctness. Her one might be accompanied by for example climate skepticism, which is also "unthinkable" within the political discourse. Just as well, one might feel disconnected from the political sphere because of technological advancements causing jobs to disappear, or globalism seemingly causing cultures to disappear. If the signifier is 'empty' enough, then these struggles might just as well fall under the representation of the same radical negativity as that of the chauvinists.

To understand that populist logic can be a precondition for representation, one must understand what Laclau describes as a "broken space". Laclau argues that this radical negativity is a consequence of a broken space. This refers to a feeling that something is missing in society, which populist tries to respond to: «a gap which has emerged in the harmonious continuity of the social, a fullness of the community that is missing. (...) the construction of the 'people' will be the attempt to give a name to that absent fullness».[286] Society will never be complete, but the more social demands that are not met within the

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[285] Laclau 2005: 81
[286] Laclau 2005: 85

existing order, the clearer this break will be. The expression of this break is what I have understood as radical negativity in the explorations above.

One can understand the hegemonic order as a symbolic framework that makes it possible to understand the social through an institution in the political. Understanding the hegemonic order as the framework for understanding the social as instituted in the political, the feeling of a lack functions as a challenge on this framework's ability to understand the social. This could eventually lead to the hegemony disintegrating, as has been proposed by Mouffe.[287] This is not just about a hegemony not being able to represent the radical negativity, but also that the tension between the equivalential and differential logics ensures that no order can ever be permanent.[288]

Let do another though experiment, inspired by the conjunctures in Norway. We can think the resistance and frustration with increasing tolls on roads, and with the building of wind turbines as two social demands with the ever-existing potential of entering equivalential chains. Both demands refer to a broken space where the individuals feels that they are deprived of something, be that freedom, nature, capital or whatever. We can furthermore say that the voters might find it hard to object to such policies due to the climate-orientation of today's discourse. What these demands have in common is first and foremost the feeling of deprivation, of a lack in society. The opposition towards an 'elite' in the capitol makes it possible for them to understand themselves in terms of a popular demand, articulated as a people against an oppressive elite. Entering into this equivalential link will at the same time entitle the particular content to be subordinated the universal function of the bearing symbol. After the people has been crystallized from this articulation, the particular contents of the toll or turbine resistance might no be as apparent.

This points us towards another important insight of Laclau, namely the relationship between ontic content and ontological function in populist logic. When the equivalential logic is dominant, which is the case when representing a radical negativity, the ontic content becomes secondary due to the importance of the universal function in the empty signifier. The ontological function of creating a 'total' order is more important than the ontic content filling this order. The point being that the most important need is to create an order that can represent the individual in question. [289] Laclau points out that if society is perceived as unjust, the

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[287] Mouffe 2018
[288] Laclau 2005: 89
[289] Laclau 2005: 87-88

primary task is about making the society just. Whether it is socialism or fascism that creates a just society is secondary.[290]

In this part I have shown how Laclau understands political identities such as 'the people' on the basis of social demands. The articulation of these demands takes place in the tension between two logics, the differential and the equivalential. Populism is a logic dominated by the equivalential logic, and this needs to be the case because it is only through an equivalential chain of demands that radical negativity can be expressed, and the constitution of a people becomes possible. Since this concerns the embodiment of an impossible fullness, it is clear that populism cannot be derived from the ontic content in its articulation. What is usually understood as weaknesses or misconceptions in populism, is by Laclau understood as something "inscribed in the very nature of the political".[291]

4.4 The Real within the Symbolic

In light of the criticisms of populism, it is important to emphasize that Laclau is not talking about a homogenous entity. He explains the chain of equivalence on the basis of social demands in an heterogenous terrain where each demand has its own particularity, even though it is subordinated the universal sign.[292] Furthermore, we are still talking about a collective identity, which I have argued that we can understand as the expansion of "I" or a complex moral person. This means that 'the people' that Laclau are talking about should be understood as a heterogenous singularity. In fact, there would be no people claiming to be the whole populus if the chain of equivalence did not include several differentiated demands affecting broad groups in society. Furthermore, the emphasis on singularity makes it possible to understand why the leader often become the bearing symbol, or even the reincarnation, of the people. Because individuality is the extreme form of singularity.[293]

The point is that this singular identity refers to something real in society, even though the 'impossibility' of this representation makes it necessary to include a seemingly 'mythical' dimension. For Descombes, this would be his reference to the 'imaginary'.[294] Laclau would on the other hand explain this as the embodiment of a lack. Laclau explains that this requires a radical investment from the voter, which is where the affective dimension

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[290] Laclau 2005: 96-97
[291] Laclau 2005: 99
[292] Laclau 2005: 98-99
[293] Laclau 2005: 100
[294] Descombes 2016: 196-197

comes into the picture.[295] The point being that the mythical dimension does not mean that anything goes and that anyone can make any kind of people through a cynical articulation. The radical investment means, on the other hand, that the people are based on real affections in the voters, thus representing something 'real' that could not be represented otherwise. Furthermore, Laclau argues that it is not enough for the demands merely to have a vague solidarity to one another. The equivalential chain must reach a higher point for it to constitute a people. Namely a point where the equivalential chain becomes the ground itself, rather than the consequence of different demands. The equivalent chain is initially a result of different social demands, but from this point on becomes the starting point for the social demands themselves. [296]

Laclau argues that: "the popular symbol or identity, being a surface of inscription, does not passively express what is inscribed in it, but actually constitutes what is expressed through the very process of expression." [297] This leads Laclau to discuss the relationship between Name and Thing. [298] Traditionally, there are two approaches in particular that characterize this field. The classical approach, represented by John Stuart Mill or Bertrand Russell, argues that the Name refers to the Thing on the basis of the common features making the Thing what it is. The anti-descriptive approach, represented by for example Saul Kripke, sees the Name as a reference to x-factor remaining the same even if the features of the Thing changes. In the latter, the Thing is divorced from its positive references. It is therefore clear that Laclau's theory is linked to the anti-descriptive approach.

Laclau points out that it still remains the question of what it is that remains the same. [299] This reminds us of the elementary use of identity that Descombes criticized. Laclau refers to Slavoj Zizek's arguments, viewing the x-factor as the retroactive effect of naming. [300] Descombes has a similar argument, claiming that identity revolves around a semantic reversal.[301] The point of Zizek is that the Thing does not have a reference in the language, and is thus to be understood only as a void. Laclau therefore argues that the discursive expression of Naming creates the reference making it possible to objectify this void, thus creating the symbolic framework from which the real can express itself within.[302] In the case of identity,

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[295] Laclau 2005: 110
[296] Laclau 2005: 93
[297] Laclau 2005: 99
[298] Laclau 2005: 101-102
[299] Laclau 2005: 103
[300] Zizek in Laclau 2005: 103
[301] Descombes 2016: 199
[302] Laclau 2005: 103-104

he concludes that «the identity and unity of the object result from the very operation of naming».[303]

This is to a certain degree where Laclau's linguistic groundwork meets up with his psychoanalytic inspirations, mainly from Jacques Lacan. Laclau understands this retroactive process of Naming as the embodiment of a lack, or what Lacan calls *objet petit a*.[304] The important point is that this lack can be understood as an object in of itself, and through a radical investment it becomes possible to fill this lack with a particular content. This in turn, raises the perceived lack into "the dignity of the Thing".[305] This is possible through the radical investment, fueled by the affective dimension. In that case, Laclau talks about this embodiment of a mythical fullness as "the rallying point of passionate attachments".[306] Furthermore, making explicit that this is not about the replacement of anything real with someting like a 'second-best' reality. The passionate attachments are the real thing, even if it is dependent on the hegemonic process and the emptiness of the signifier. According to Laclau, there is nothing «Real before the symbolic», only «the Real within the symbolic».[307] In order to understand populism, one must first acknowledge that the reservoir of frustrations in society refers to a radical negativity where the ontic content is secondary to the ontological function of representation.

By understanding populism as a political logic, I am relying on a linguistic philosophical groundwork that makes it possible to challenge much of the traditional ways of thinking the political. I have made clear how one can understand identities as something that needs to be expressed, thus lacking any a priori essence. Furthermore, I have shown how this can be done in several ways, but never beyond the play of differences. The most important insight is however that collective identities cannot be understood mainly through deduction from the positive references they are seemingly referring to. This is because representation is wider than conceptual grasping, and that collective identities are not a reference to the empirical composition of individuals in society. You cannot count a people. Another consequence of this is that we must accept an imaginary dimension where the ontic content is simply there to fill a void. The ontic content embodies something more than the content itself. This process is

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[303] Laclau 2005: 104
[304] Laclau 2005: 116
[305] Laclau 2005: 116
[306] Laclau 2005: 116
[307] Laclau 2005: 118

nevertheless dependent on the passionate attachments of individuals expressing this identity. The content serves as the symbolic framework from which the Real can constitute itself within.

With a proper understanding of what is meant by populist logics, I will now be able to return to the initial question of how left populism is a response to the post-political. The next chapter will therefore appear as the meeting point of the two previous chapters, explaining the populist logic as a response to the neoliberal hegemony in crisis.

5. Left populism: The return of the political?

In this last chapter I will explain how Mouffe proposes a left populist strategy and discuss how this could be seen as a return of the political. It is worth emphasizing that this strategy is not about challenging a political regime or establishing a new political regime. It is about challenging a certain hegemony and the establishment of a new hegemony with a new political discourse.[308] There are three elements of the left populist strategy in particular that I would like to explore in relation to my problem. The first element concerns what demands Mouffe sees as necessary in the articulation of the 'people'. Why is it that this articulation must have an anti-capitalist dimension when Laclau explains that the ontic content is secondary? The second element concerns how we can possibly reintroduce the dimension of conflict without risking the big wars that characterized the first half of the 20th century. Finally, the third element concerns how a populism can revitalize democracy and avoid the authoritarian elements that one often sees in right-wing populism.

5.1 The struggles of the plebs

Following Laclau and Mouffe, it is possible to understand the rise of right-wing populist movements with authoritarian and xenophobic tendencies as a sign that these movements articulate a radical negativity that is otherwise neglected. Since identity is without *a priori* substance, one might just as easily imagine the articulation of the same radical negativity on the left, without the autocratic or xenophobic vocabulary. This is what Mouffe argues with her strategy. This confronts the rather intuitive idea that the "irrational" right-wing populism is due to the voters' intellectual shortcomings. According to Laclau and Mouffe's approach we are able to argue, in theory, that the right-wing voters can be swayed to the left if a proper vocabulary is offered. This vocabulary could then be built around an egalitarian project, rather than an ethno-nationalist one.[309] For example, Mouffe refers to the British election in 2017 where voters from the right-wing populist United Kingdom Independence Party switched to a left-wing populist Labor Party under Jeremy Corbyn. The same goes for the elections in France the same year, where voters moved from the right-wing populist National Front led by Marine le Pen, to the left-wing populist La France Insoumise under Jean-Luc Mélenchon.[310]

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[308] Mouffe 2018: 80
[309] Mouffe 2018: 24
[310] Mouffe 2018: 23

This would support Laclau's claim that the ontic content is secondary, while the ontological function of representing the radical negativity is primary.[311]

Nevertheless, Mouffe argues that the left populist strategy must have an anti-capitalist dimension.[312] To understand this, it is important to remember that Mouffe understands today's populist moment as a result of the neoliberal hegemony in crisis. At the core of this hegemony is a set of political and economic practices focused on the free market, which in turn is at the root of several demands that goes unfulfilled in the populist moment.[313] Financial crisis, such as the one in Europe in 2008, are great examples of this, causing strict austerity policies to deeply affect large groups of society. These crises question the legitimacy of the capitalist reasoning, underlying the neoliberal hegemony. I would argue that Mouffe is not seeing this dimension as a precondition for the representation of today's radical negativity, but rather the best way for populism to capture the real struggles of the 'plebs'. This would also explain the fundamental difference between left populism and Marxism, since the latter would likely see the anti-capitalist struggle as the privileged struggle in the fight against oppression. In that case, Marxists could criticize left populists for obscuring the actual oppression through their 'mythical' articulation. Mouffe on the other hand, argues:

> The process of radicalizing democracy necessarily includes an anti-capitalist dimension as many of the forms of subordination that will need to be challenged are the consequences of capitalist relations of production. However, there is no reason to assume that the working class has an *a priori* privileged role in the anti-capitalist struggle. Indeed, there are no *a priori* privileged places in the anti-capitalist struggle. (...) there will be a variety of anti-capitalist struggles. In some cases they might not even be perceived as being 'anti-capitalist' by people involved in them and many will be conducted in the name of equality and conceived as struggles for democracy.[314]

It is worth noting that the anti-capitalist dimension does not necessarily have to be a pronounced 'anti-capitalism'. In general, for example, some of the new environmental parties can be seen as anti-capitalist, despite the fact that they do not necessarily regard themselves as anti-capitalist.[315] The ecological question has a similar inevitable role to play in Mouffe's proposal for a populist articulation in today's society, because it regards one of the most important sources of 'frustration' within the neoliberal hegemony.[316]

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[311] Laclau 2015: 87
[312] Mouffe 2018
[313] Mouffe 2018: 12
[314] Mouffe 2018: 49
[315] Mouffe 2018: 49
[316] Mouffe 2020

These frustrations are evident in the growing number of radical leftist movements from around 2011, for example Aganakismenoi in Greece, Indignados in Spain, Occupy movements in both the USA and Europe, and Nuit Debout in France.[317] These movements articulated the 'Real' within a symbolic framework made up of a leftist vocabulary.

A challenge in some of these movements, however, concerned the refusal of involvement with existing political institutions. Mouffe connects this reluctance to get involved with existing institutions to the approaches of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*. Their theory is that the major transformations in society during the last decades of the 20th century – for example globalization and development of post-fordist capitalism – calls for a complete break with 'modernity'. *Empire* is a term they use to refer to a new decentralized and global order, and *multitude* refers to the new collective worker in post-modern society.[318] Mouffe's point is that their theory argues for the complete 'exodus' from the existing order. Mouffe is critical of the term multitude, and opposes it to her and Laclau's concept of the people:

> (...)a singular multiplicity. It is an active self-organizing agent that can never achieve the status of a juridical personage and can never converge in a general will. It is anti-state and anti-popular. (...) that the democracy of the Multitude cannot be conceived anymore in terms of a sovereign authority that is representative of the People, and that new forms of democracy which are non-representative are needed.[319]

With regards to the mentioned movements, Mouffe is critical to this exodus-approach because the interaction with political institutions is crucial in the hegemonic transformation:

> Although such protest movements have certainly played a role in the transformation of political consciousness, it is only when they have been followed by structured political movements ready to engage with the political institutions, that significant results have been achieved».[320]

The structurization of these movements can be seen for example, in Greece and Spain, where political parties such as Syriza and Podemos managed to channel the forces from the popular protests into party politics.[321]One can also see how the leftist Occupy-movements in the US disintegrated, while the right-wing Tea-Party movement manifested itself in the Republican Party.[322]

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[317] Mouffe 2018: 19
[318] Mouffe 2018: 65-67
[319] Mouffe 2018: 70
[320] Mouffe 2018: 19,20
[321] Mouffe 2018: 2018
[322] Mouffe 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2019

Mouffe understands the hegemonic transformation as a two-sided process of both dis-articulation of the old and re-articulation of the new. This articulation process is dependent on the establishment of a broad subjectivity, manifesting itself as a new 'common sense'. This is, furthermore, presupposes the frontier between *we* and *they*, something that is missed by the exodus-theorists' reference to the multitude.[323]

5.2 The necessity of conflict – Agonism

In essence, left-wing populism is about a confrontation with the economic aspect of liberal democracy, not the principle of political liberalism or democracy.[324] Mouffe emphasizes that there is not necessary break with liberal-democratic institutions in of itself. In fact, the Thatcherite transformation confirms that populism drive a hegemonic transformation without such vital breaks. Liberal democracy is not the problem, the neoliberal hegemony is:

> The process of recovering and radicalizing democratic institutions will no doubt include moments of rupture and a confrontation with the dominant economic interests, but it does not require relinquishing the liberal-democratic principles of legitimacy.[325]

Populism is therefore not about breaking with the institutions themselves, but breaking with the dominant ways of thinking, for example the post-political way of seeking consensus to avoid conflict. Mouffe emphasizes: «The main problem with existing representative institutions is that they do not allow for the agonistic confrontation between different projects of society which is the very condition of a vibrant democracy".[326] Conflict would for example be a necessity if one is to oppose the perception of economic liberalism as common sense.

It is worth going back to the anti-pluralist criterion mentioned by Müller. He argues that populism necessarily is anti-pluralist because it claims that a part can be the only legitimate whole.[327] Pluralism regards the perception of society as being divided into many different social groups, each with its own views and interests. The plurality is furthermore, considered a strength.[328] The weakness of Müller is on the other hand, that he doesn't realize that even pluralist societies must have its limits.[329] The philosopher Carl Schmitt argued that

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[323] Mouffe 2018: 70
[324] Mouffe 2018: 45
[325] Mouffe 2018: 45
[326] Mouffe 2018: 56
[327] Müller 2016
[328] Mudde og kaltwasser 2019: 29
[329] Hansen 2020

society is always permeated by the potential for a conflict between friend and enemy.[330] At some point or another interests and needs in society may be perceived as an existential challenge by other interests and needs. Compromise would in itself be a threat to one's own existence. Schmitt argues that in this case, *we* would perceive the *enemy* as someone who had to be eliminated. [331] It is in this case worth reminding ourselves of how this played out in Europe in the first half of the 20th century, namely with the attempted extermination of the Jews.

Mouffe accepts this ever-present potential for conflict and emphasizes through her theories that the *other* is a precondition for signification as such. She nevertheless differs from Schmitt since she argues that this dimension of conflict can play itself out as something other than an antagonistic and existential fight. She argues that the conflict can play itself out as an agonism, meaning a front between two irreconcilable adversaries that nevertheless accepts each other as legitimate, rather than something to be eliminated. [332] This may also explain why Mouffe's left populism differs from right-wing populism, and why this populist strategy could fall outside Müllers anti-pluralist criterion.

I would like to make clear the difference between Schmitt's antagonism and Mouffe's agonism, by making a simplified comparison between the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the Trump movement. In the BLM movement, the systematic repression of black Americans, the privilege of white Americans, and police brutality, are examples of particular content creating a front between the oppressed *we* and the corrupt *they*. Here one can imagine perceiving the privileged white elite as an incompatible they, but not an illegitimate they. The 'white elite' can continue to exist in the same society as the oppressed without being a threat to the latter, it is mainly the structures that needs to change. This would refer to an agonistic frontier between adversaries.

On the other hand, we can view the most extreme parts of the Trump-movement in the months after the election in 2020. This movement perceived the election as 'stolen'. Acknowledging the legitimacy of their counterpart would according to them be a threat to their own existence as an American people. This explains the storming of Congress in January 2021, where the plebs were willing to die in order to prevent the election from going through.

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[330] Mouffe 2018; Slagstad 2019: 46-54
[331] Mouffe 2018; Slagstad 2019: 46-54
[332] Mouffe 2018: 91-92

This is not just about being oppressed but perceiving the oppressors as an existential threat to be eliminated. This could indeed be viewed as both an anti-plural and antagonistic frontier.

It is clear that the populist logic representing the radical negativity can articulate itself following different vocabularies. A central dimension of this articulation of a *we* is the perception of the corresponding *they*. This is why Mouffe argues that the political institutions should make possible the articulation of agonistic adversaries through the political institutions, as a vital part of the political.[333] The exclusion or disqualification of incompatible alternatives would on the other hand increase the likelihood that the unavoidable dimension of conflict plays itself out as the existential antagonism described by Schmitt.

Another important point is that the vocabulary available for the articulation of a people could be focused on increasing the likelihood of egalitarian and democratic 'peoples', rather than autocratic, exclusive and xenophobic 'peoples'. This is what I will turn to next, discussing how Mouffe proposes 'democracy' as the universal signifier of the people.

5.3 Re-signifying democracy

If left populism is to be understood as a strategy for the return of the political, it is worth reminding ourselves of the challenges Mouffe describes in the neoliberal hegemony in crisis, tied to the post-political condition of society. Left populism is meant to challenge a hegemonic order where political liberalism and democratic values are subordinated to that of economic liberalism. The broad subjectivity established through a populist articulation must therefore strive to establish a new common sense where political liberalism and democratic values are superior to that of economic liberalism. For the articulation to be possible the chain of equivalence must have an empty sign capable of reaching the affective dimension of the individual, making the chain 'the rallying point of passionate attachments'. In that case, it is worth pointing out that 'socialism' would have too many negative connotations in certain contexts and would therefore not be able to establish this broad subjectivity. 'The nation' has been a popular sign in several right-wing movements but has the disadvantage of leading to the exclusion of certain croups on the basis of cultural or ethnic features.

Since we are talking about *subjective* collective identities, it makes sense that Mouffe initially focuses on the term *citizen*. She proposes a revitalization of this concept in order to

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[333] Mouffe 2018: 56

make the individual understand the radical negativity in terms of a democratic deprivation. Mouffe argues that in the core of the new people there must be a perception of citizens demanding equality and popular sovereignty.[334] In the liberal tradition, on the other hand, citizen would first and foremost refer to individual rights, regardless of the individuals participation in the social. Moreover, in the neoliberal hegemony, citizen is often reduced to that of the 'consumer'.[335] This is evident in the talk of 'users' when talking about the development of public services.

In the democratic tradition, on the other hand, the concept of citizen is linked to the active participation in political society, emphasizing the role of freedom and equality *for all*. Here with even greater emphasis on freedom and equality for all. Mouffe suggest that we revitalize the concept in this way, more specifically towards the republican vision of citizen as *plebeian*. She explains this as a 'grammar of conduct':

> (...)a conception of citizenship as a 'grammar of conduct' governed by the ethicopolitical principles of the liberal democratic *politeia:* liberty and equality for all. Providing the common identification of persons involved in diverse democratic struggles.[336]

If the individual sees him or herself as a democratic citizen, it becomes possible to see the unfulfilled demands as equivalent within a representative democracy that is not deficient. The hegemonic transformation can then be built around freedom and equality, rather than the economic rebuilding of the nation. The latter would be more likely when the individual sees him or herself first and foremost as a consumer.

Mouffe argues that the left populist strategy entails both the anti-capitalist dimension and the ecological question. She nevertheless emphasizes that one first and foremost have to rehabilitate democracy, in order to radicalize it.[337] It therefore makes sense to argue that we should understand the citizen as the active participator in the political sphere. Equally important is her proposal of seeing 'democracy' as the empty signifier capable of subordinating other demands in an equivalential chain.[338] The democratic signifier is evident in in several left-wing movements. Take for example the call for 'Democracy Now' in the Aganakismenoi movement and the Indignados movement in Greece and Spain.[339]

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[334] Mouffe 2018: 66
[335] Mouffe 2018: 65
[336] Mouffe 2018: 65-66
[337] Mouffe 2018
[338] Mouffe 2018: 51
[339] Mouffe 2018

I have already explained Mouffe's argument that the ecological question should be part of this populist articulation. She praises the program of the American representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez's, calling for a 'new green deal'. The ecological question serves as an important signifier, but the program includes several important proposals. On example is the universal guarantee by the state of paid employment in the green economy.[340] Mouffe sees this proposal as "crucial for securing the adhesion of the popular sector whose jobs are going to be affected".[341] The same can be said about Jeremy Corbyn and Labor's "the Green Industrial Revolution". Here too, social and economic justice is understood as an integral part of environmental justice: "It promoted measures for a rapid decarbonisation of the economy, jointly with investment in sustainable, well paid and unionized jobs".[342]

In these 'new green deals' one can clearly see the potential for conflict, since it becomes fundamentally incompatible with the capitalist and consumerist way of thinking economic growth as *the* purpose of politics. If one at the same time sees such struggles in light of 'democracy' – namely 'freedom and equality' for all – one might be able to formulate an agonistic frontier breaking with the status quo without having to perceive the *other* as 'existential threats to be eliminated'. Democracy, anti-capitalism and the ecological question becomes important elements in the left populist strategy of Mouffe's. These elements makes it possible to represent a *real* frustration with bureaucracy and technocracy within the inescapable global capitalism. Equally important is it that the symbolic framework, from which the real is constituted within, consists in a vocabulary that increases the possibilities for an agonistic articulation of a people with democratic values.

5.4 Populism as opportunity

Throughout this paper, by leaning on the works of Laclau and Mouffe, I have argued how left populism makes possible the representation of a radical negativity in today's society. In this last chapter I have focused on how such a strategy can revitalize the democratic tradition, as well as to reintroduce the dimension of conflict in the political. The populist moment can therefore be viewed as an opportunity, making it possible to articulate a new common sense able to address the big structural challenges in today's society.

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[340] Mouffe 2020
[341] Mouffe 2020
[342] Mouffe 2020

I would for example argue that Mouffe's strategy serves as a possible solution to Wolfgang Streecks claim that the only way to explore the end of capitalism it by not setting up an alternative system for the replacement of capitalism.[343] Mouffe's radical left populist strategy is not about setting up a new regime or system for the replacement of capitalism, it is about challenging the way in which we think the political while letting capitalism collapse on its own. Therefore, left populism cannot be judged merely on the basis of how such a strategy mobilizes voters or how such a strategy might at some point establish new leftist regimes. Mouffe's goal isn't concrete policies, but the establishment of a new common sense.

Jan-Werner Müller argues that the 'people-talk' of left populism actually aren't better suited for the mobilizing of the frustrations of the electorate. He is skeptical of left populism as a response to right populism, partly because left populism isn't effective enough. [344] I will not go into this empirical discussion, but I think it is worth mentioning that left populism can be successful even if it doesn't lead to political power. The left populist parties would naturally be interested in gaining political power, but Mouffe's proposal concern a discursive articulation that in of itself has power beyond the political processes.[345]

Mouffe plays on three important insights in relation to a psychoanalytic understanding of identity, showing how the affective dimension affects the individual's political assessments. First, she points to Freud's critique of "the unified character of the subject":

> Freud shows that, far from being organized around the transparancy of an ego, personality is structured on a number of levels that lie outside of the consciousness and rationality of the agents. He therefore obliges us to abandon one of the key tenets of rationalist philosophy – the category of the subject as a rational, transparant entity able to confer a homogeneous meaning on the totality of her conduct – and to accept that 'individuals' are mere referential identities, resulting from the articulation between localized subject positions. The claim of psychoanalysis that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification is at the centre of the anti-essentialist approach that stipulates that the history of the subject is the history of her identifications and that there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter.[346]

Furthermore, she refers to Spinoza who argues that 'the conatus' function as the driving force in an individual. An individual in affect will be driven by the conatus towards needs or demands. [347] According to Mouffe, identities and their corresponding rationality are the result of both articulation and affect. [348] The point being that ideas can have impact only when backed up by affect. The third insight is taken from Wittgenstein, who claims that social agents form their beliefs or desires, acquiring their subjectivity first and foremost by

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[343] Streeck 2016
[344] Müller 2016
[345] Mouffe 2018: 80
[346] Mouffe 2018: 72
[347] Mouffe 2018: 74
[348] Mouffe 2018: 74

articulating themselves in so-called 'language games', or what Mouffe and Laclau understand as 'discursive practices'.[349]

Democracy thus, can be understood as an idea based on how individuals experience themselves as part of the social and the political, rather than based on rational and intellectual thoughts alone. In that case, I would argue that the dismissal of populism as intellectual misconceptions says more about our expectations of the political than of populism itself. Mouffe argues that democracy in no way presupposes any intellectual legitimization: "Allegiance to democratic values is a question of identification. It is created not through rational argumentation but through an ensemble of language games that construct democratic forms of individuality".[350]

With regard to the goal or purpose of left populist parties one might then point out that, while left-populist party obviously seek political power, the simultaneously create new forms of individuality through their articulation. Furthermore, I would argue that this does not affect only the voters who vote for left populist parties, but the whole political discourse. One might in that case view the radical articulations of the Green Party or the Socialist Left Party in Norway as the creation of individualities concentrated on the urgency of the climate issue or the skepticism of the oppressive capitalism. In creating these new individualities, I would argue that these parties contribute to the shifting tendencies in today's discourse, to a certain degree changing the 'reasoning' along the whole of the political spectrum. If the articulation can establish a new reasoning through the establishment of new forms of individuality, not limited to the populist voters alone, one could also argue that populism can be somewhat successful even if it never gets beyond the role of the opposition.

ThLet us say that the MDGs and the Socialist People's Party create individualities around the climate issue and a general skepticism of capitalist forces, and that this has basically been what I understand as a "new way of thinking". On the other hand, the other party must also take a stand on the radical negativity that is embodied through the articulation of the MDGs and the Socialist People's Party. In this way, the whole political spectrum will be affected by new ways of speaking. In this way, one can say that these parties move "reason" in the political discourse, not only among their own voters. In other words, one can have enormous power in an opposition role if the goal is to establish new discursive hegemony. Policies are always the result of the political discourse, and Mouffe's strategy is first and foremost about influencing the discourse.

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[349] Mouffe 2018: 75
[350] Mouffe 2018: 75

The political parties are nevertheless important, since they provide the most direct channel for providing the voters with a vocabulary and a possible articulation. Nevertheless, she emphasizes the cultural and artistic arenas as crucial ways of reaching the affective dimensions of the people.[351] Criticism of society through cultural practices, whether related to capitalism, climate or other issues, makes it possible to erase "the common affects that sustain the neoliberal hegemony".[352] This confirms that Mouffe understands left populism as something more than just political mobilization and establishment of leftist regimes.

The populist moment shows that there is a large reservoir of frustrations in society. These frustrations are best understood as the result of a radical negativity. This could be understood as a linguistic barrier in the political discourse and a perception that the society is 'lacking' something. This radical negativity is a symptom of a hegemony in crisis, with a common sense that is not able to address the challenges affecting the individuals in society. The expression of this radical negativity can seem irrational and the crisis itself can offer major upheavals and a polarized climate. At the same time, this flare-up of populism can be understood as a great opportunity. Through a political articulation that corresponds to the voters' affective dimension, it becomes possible to fuel new ways of thinking, establishing a reasoning that corresponds to a 'Real' in society.

Populism is in this case a response to several of the challenges that Mouffe identifies in the neoliberal hegemony, both concerning the post-democratic and post-political conditions of society. The challenge consists in establishing a new broad subjectivity with a corresponding reasoning making it possible to think the political as something less oppressive and more in touch with the 'real' in society. With its emphasis on crucial political dimensions such as affect and conflict, it becomes possible to think populism as a return of the political.

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[351] Mouffe 2018: 76-77
[352] Mouffe 2018: 77

3. Conclusion

I entered into this paper with the aim of examining how left populism might function as a response to the post-political condition of today's society. Initially, I referred to Laclau's claim that populism is an expression of the reservoir of anti-status quo feelings that exists in society at any given time. In the second chapter I argued that populism is often understood on the basis of a vague and imprecise content, something that quickly leads to a perception of populism as something intellectually deficient. These common perceptions are evident in media, but also to a certain degree in scholarly approaches to populism, although not as superficial. Müller understand populism as anti-democratic on the basis of the anti-pluralist criterion, but Müller's condemnation of populism is also connected to a more general skepticism towards collective identities altogether. I find in Mudde and Kaltwasser's approach a far less critical, and by all means richer from a descriptive point of view, approach to populism. Their ideational approach is nevertheless clearly oriented towards the content of the populist movements, something which makes it difficult to accept the vague and imprecise nature of populism as anything other than a result of intellectual poverty.

The flora of different approaches to populism are, however, to a large degree capable of capturing the same phenomenon. Populism consist in a perception of society as divided between a pure and legitimate *people*, and a corrupt *elite*. Moreover, there exists certain characteristics that are, if not a precondition for populism, at least typical for populism: the charismatic leaders, direct ties between the people and the leader, easy and popular solutions, the breach with political etiquette, and so on. The important insight that lead me to view populism first and foremost as a political logic, is that the linguistic-philosophical basis for the theory allows me to understand the functionality of these characteristics, and thus avoid any simple reduction of populism as something deficient or cynical. Populism can, rather, be understood as a precondition for representation itself.

The last chapters focused more directly on the initial problem of how left populism serve as a response to the post-political. In the third chapter I explained the reason for and challenge with the post-political condition. The first point to be made concerned how Mouffe's view differed from the teleological vision of Francis Fukuyama. Where Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history at the end of the 1980s, Mouffe argued that the 1980s established the neoliberal hegemony. Moreover, she argues that this neoliberal hegemony is nothing more than a temporary order. The populist moment can thus be view as a symptom of this neoliberal hegemony in crisis

When Margaret Thatcher, through her right-wing populism, broke with the Keynesian consensus, she simultaneously established a new, neoliberal way of thinking about politics. She did this through an articulation that created political identities as opposition to precisely this consensus. The social democratic turn towards a 'third way' in the 1990s shows how the new neoliberal way of thinking had consolidated itself in the political language. Capitalism was no longer an alternative to be confronted or eliminated, but it was more and more viewed as a part of the political in itself. According to Mouffe, the hallmark of this hegemony is the commonsensical view that 'economic growth' is the inalienable measure of what is good or bad politics.

Understanding today's populist moment as a sign of the neoliberal hegemony about to disintegrate, points to the fact that today's political order is incapable of meeting the many needs of society. In Laclau's terminology, one can imagine that this results in an increasing reservoir of anti-status quo feelings. In the third chapter, I point out two challenges in particular. The post-democratic challenge concerns the reduction of today's democracy to the bureaucratic and technocratic continuation of the established neoliberal hegemony. More specifically, this is about the notion that all society's needs must be met within the framework of 'economic growth'. The post-political challenge, on the other hand, refers to absence of 'outlets' for the mentioned reservoir of anti-status-quo feelings. The consensus-oriented discourse excludes radical alternatives as something 'extreme' or 'populist', trying to erase the dimension of conflict from the political altogether.

In chapter 4 I explained populism as a political logic, following the approach of Laclau. I argued that populism could be understood as a precondition for the representation of a radical negativity, or the *lack* which always exist to certain degree in a society. Certain demands in the political are impossible to represent within the hegemonic discourse, and these demands makes it possible to constitute a political identity based on this equivalent feeling of a *lack*. The 'impossibility' of the representation of radical negativity furthermore shows us that representation within the political rests on far more than just conceptual means and logical deduction. The 'impossibility' in the representation, the 'imaginary' in a people, or the 'mythical' in populism does not refer to anything empirical, but it still refers to a 'Real'. In fact, Laclau shows us that it is a 'Real' that constitutes itself within the symbolic.

The post-political challenge, closely associated with the post-democratic challenge serve as a reminder of that which is not possible to represent within the hegemonic order. Take for example the exclusion of any anti-capitalist program or any radical ecological program as too 'extreme' or 'populist'. In the last chapter, I considered how left populism might be

understood as a representation of the increasing reservoir of anti-status-quo feelings resulting from the post-political condition of today's society. Since much of this radical negativity seems to be linked to both capitalism and climate, Mouffe proposes to base the strategy on social demands linked to precisely an anti-capitalist dimension and to the ecological dimension. In order to avoid total and antagonistic frontiers, it is important to articulate a people viewing the *others* as a legitimate but incompatible adversary rather than as enemies to be eliminated. But the incompatibility between the *we* and *they* is a unavoidable part of the representation of the radical negativity. It all comes down to what kind of vocabulary that is available for the embodiment of the social energy in the populist moment. In this regard, Mouffe proposes to revitalize the concept of the *democratic or plebeian citizen*, so as to construct a people on the basis of democratic values such as equality and sovereignty, rather than a people of consumers.

The final point to be made in this paper concerned the purpose of the left populist strategy as a response to the post-political condition. This crucial point is linked to an affective dimension that is often left in the dark by traditional political theory. The affective dimension is here understood as that which gives the discursive articulation the force necessary to establish a new 'common sense'. The discursive strategy laid out by Chantal Mouffe is therefore not just about articulating political programs capable of establishing leftist regimes. The strategy is not just about effective ways of mobilizing individuals in society. Rather, I understand this strategy to be first and foremost about establishing new ways of thinking the political. This is possible through discursive practices performed initially in the left populist movements, but it concerns the establishment of a new common sense along the whole of the political spectrum. What is important for populism is therefore not so much the imprecise or vague content, but how the populist articulation on the one hand establishes new ways of thinking and on the other hand breaks with older ways of thinking.

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