

POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

POPULISMUS

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION



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METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

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In preparation for the international methodological workshop organized within the framework of POPULISMUS (*Analyzing Populist Discourse: Methods, Tools, Interpretations*, Thessaloniki, 11-13 July 2014), the POPULISMUS research team has drafted an internal technical report designed to chart the research trajectory to be followed in the project, to highlight the main research questions to be explored and to put forward some guiding threads (axial hypotheses, conceptual orientations, etc.). This version purports to offer a starting point for debate in the international workshop, facilitating the exchange of good research practices and generating important feedback for its following stages. Thus, a series of research questions and hypotheses first discussed here and enriched through scientific exchange in the workshop, will function as the springboard for the project's future activities, including research in several countries of Europe and the Americas (Work Package 2), further theoretical elaboration and the analysis of specific case-studies in comparative perspective (Work Package 3), as well as a concluding international conference in 2015 and the launching of a web-based Observatory of populist discourse (Work Package 4).

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INTRODUCTION: ABOUT POPULISMUS

Against the background of traditional populist mobilisations (Agrarian populism in the US, Russian *Narodnichestvo* and traditional Latin American populisms in the 1940s and 1950s), the last decades have signalled a resurgence of populist phenomena, especially in Latin America (Chavismo in Venezuela, Kirchnerismo in Argentina, etc.) and, more recently, the US (were, ironically, both the *Tea Party* movement and Obama as well as the *Occupy* movement have been branded as populist). Needless to say, Europe itself has not been left untouched, since it has witnessed in its core the development of (extreme) right-wing populism in countries like France (Le Pen), Austria (Haider), the Netherlands (Wilders), etc. As evidenced by the results of the 2014 European Parliament elections, this trend is continuously strengthened. At the same time, the European picture is gradually diversified to the extent that populist hybrids, which diverge from the ‘classical’ Extreme Right model emerge in a variety of contexts, notably UKIP in Britain as well as Grillo’s *5 Star Movement* in Italy. Last but not least, within the context of the European crisis, left-wing populism(s) seem to emerge dynamically especially in the South of Europe; thus the ‘Indignants’ in Spain and Greece as well as their party mutations have also been described in both the media and in the academic discussion as populist.

Nevertheless, most available analyses of populist movements and their political discourse often suffer from a certain lack of global awareness, conceptual sophistication and methodological rigour, as they are conditioned by regional, national and continental peculiarities and, in addition, fail to bridge effectively the theory/analysis divide. They, thus, encounter difficulties in accounting for the current and largely unexpected resurgence of populist phenomena throughout the world. To illuminate all these populist phenomena seems to be a pressing priority for contemporary social and political research.

The POPULISMUS project purports to initiate a comparative mapping of such diverse phenomena with a view to articulating a synthetic conception of ‘populism’ able to reorient the empirical analysis of populist and anti-populist discourses in the global environment of the 21st century and to assess its effects on the quality of democracy. In order to achieve these goals, POPULISMUS purports to utilise a series of innovations developed in the areas of political theory and discourse analysis over the last decade. In particular, guided by the innovative analysis of political identifications elaborated by the so-called ‘Essex School’, the project will adopt a discursive methodology to inquire into the mobilisation of symbolic resources and passionate investments for as well as against populism, in a bid to explain both fascination with and abhorrence towards ‘the people’.

It is anticipated that, by cogently negotiating the theory/analysis divide, this framework can generate a comprehensive and rigorous conceptual apparatus able to operate productively on the empirical level of a global comparative research of public discourse. In addition to articulating a theoretically informed account of populism able to map and assess a challenging body of empirical evidence, the POPULISMUS project will evaluate the effects of the emerging discursive cleavage between populist and anti-populist tendencies on the quality of democracy in Europe and beyond, reorienting further research and enabling the formulation of policy recommendations. Given the central location of debates around populism in socio-political research and society at large it is anticipated that benefits on both levels could be far-reaching.

A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE ‘PEOPLE’ AND POPULISM

When one sets out to investigate populism, s/he is immediately confronted with the uses and the role of the signifier ‘the people’ as well as with the ambiguous relationship between the ‘people’ and populism. Throughout history, signifiers like ‘the people’ invariably function as markers of the internal division of every political community between part and whole, between the few and the many, those governing and those governed, those inside and those outside. This division seems to traverse the development of European if not global societies

from Greek and Roman antiquity up until modernity, setting the stage for an often bitter political antagonism. Indeed, in the language games orchestrated around ‘the people’ one encounters the paradox of something – an inherently ambiguous symbolic designation and a type of internally divided political identity – that ‘cannot be included in the whole of which it is a part and [...] cannot belong to the set in which it is always already included. Hence the contradictions and aporias to which it gives rise every time that it is evoked and put into play on the political scene’ (Agamben 1998: 178).

Throughout history, it was this axial ambiguity, the irreducibility of this sliding, that permitted the synecdochic articulation of the popular demands of the abject classes for inclusion within the political community, for the enjoyment of equal rights. In democracy’s modern history, in particular, from the Chartists to the constitution of the welfare state and the New Social Movements, this ambiguity facilitated and, to a certain extent, guaranteed the constant *democratization of democracy* (Stavrakakis 2013:110). To the extent, however, that this articulation could be attempted in a variety of ways – with often antithetical political orientations and implications – it also functioned as a springboard for authoritarian solutions.

At any rate, the Revolutions of the 18th century have allowed ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘representation’ to replace the ‘Divine Right of Kings’. And yet, the implications of this move have also been paradoxical. Indeed the French Revolution constitutes a turning point here: through the elevation of the ‘people’ into the model of democratic political subjectivity it gives birth to two opposing modern traditions. One that recognizes the importance and, sometimes, even idealizes the people and another that stresses the dangers involved in mass mobilizations and, often, demonizes the people. In institutional terms this is translated into different models of modern democracy: encouraging or discouraging popular participation; dealing with the phrase ‘We the people’ as an institutional mandate or as a mere incantation. In the first case this had led to a series of radical democratic and participatory theoretico-political projects. In the second to the emergence of democratic elitism. In its paradigmatic formulation by Schumpeter, this theory of competitive leadership implies that ‘democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms “people” and “rule.” Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them’ (Schumpeter 2003: 284-5). Indeed, this model seems to be closer to what Robert Dahl would later describe as ‘polyarchy’, distinguishing it from Madisonian and ‘populistic democracy’ (Dahl 2006).

How are these developments connected to the global return of populism and the debate around populism (especially in its negative connotations)? Within a framework overdetermined by democratic elitism and the post-democratic mutations of representative government (Crouch 2004), ‘populism’ often becomes the negative index through which political, economic and intellectual elites attempt to identify, stigmatize and contain demands for wider participation, egalitarian justice and the radicalization of democracy. As Jacques Rancière had already highlighted, here populism seems to be the ‘convenient name’ under which the denunciation and discrediting of alternatives legitimizes the claim of economic and political elites to ‘govern without the people’, ‘to govern without politics’ (Rancière 2006: 80). At the same time, some of these alternatives claiming to represent popular demands may prioritize anti-democratic political orientations and thus the designation ‘populist’ is often used to name such political projects.

All in all, a considerable amount of confusion seems to arise from the inherent ambiguity of signifiers like ‘the people’, from the difficulty in distinguishing ‘the people’ and the ‘popular’ from ‘populism’ as well as from the antithetical political orientations performing the representation of popular demands. Should one opt here for a normative standpoint attempting to somehow fix – from a supposedly objective scientific position – the meaning of the signifiers involved and their truth-value, or is it preferable to simply register their essential contestability and, in fact, elevate the exploration of this continuous sliding between ‘popular’ and ‘populist’ and the political accusations often accompanying it into an integral part of our research? Inevitably, we would argue, within a pluralist context, and as we pass from the field of personal opinion and one’s capacity for strong differentiations and convictions, to the field of political discourse, to the symbolic reality of political antagonism,

every articulation of ‘popular’ demands – irrespective of its exact political orientation – is bound to be dismissed from its opponents as ‘populist’. What is ‘popular’ for one, could be ‘populist’ for somebody else, and *vice versa*. In fact, this is precisely the reason why contemporary political theorists/analysts of populism (such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Margaret Canovan) generally avoid ascribing either an exclusively positive or an exclusively negative connotation to populism and, in any case, never oppose the ‘populist’ to the ‘popular’: every call upon or interpellation of ‘the people’ is regarded as populist, to the extent that it separates the ‘people’, the political subject it attempts to construct, from the power bloc, from a hostile establishment.

- **We are, thus, firmly located within the field of representation in both its meanings: as political representation, a means to influence decision making on behalf of popular claims or demands, as well as symbolic/discursive representation, a process of articulation through which such claims/demands are shaped, staged, invested, accepted or rejected. This is an ambiguity that POPULISMUS will have to take seriously into account.**

The inherent linkage between populism and people as well as our reliance on representation is also depicted in the lay definitions of populism in many dictionaries. For example, *Merriam-Webster dictionary* defines a ‘populist’ as:

1. A member of a political party claiming to represent the common people; especially often capitalized: a member of a United States political party formed in 1891 primarily to represent agrarian interests and to advocate the free coinage of silver and government control of monopolies,
2. A believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people

Indeed, the association is also visible in the first mass movement that willingly claimed for itself the designation ‘Populist’, the American People’s Party of the 1890s. It is important to note that American Agrarian populism emerged against a framework of semantic ambiguity like the one we have already highlighted. In the post-revolutionary context, ‘The People’ functioned initially and predominantly as an empty signifier designating the whole of the community: ‘For Washington, Adams, Madison, Jefferson, and Hancock, “we the people” was more incantation than description; Like speaking of the Almighty Himself, it indicated who the ultimate sovereign was but did not specify who was actually to rule the nation’ (Kazin 1998: 13). But then, it also designated the part: ‘Yet, soon after the Revolution, a quite different meaning of “the people” could be heard [...] In the 1790s Jeffersonian pamphleteers praised those who toiled with “hammer and hand” as the “industrious part of the community” ’ (Kazin 1998: 13). Towards the end of the 19th century, the effects of an aggressive capitalist modernization started affecting large segments of the population: ‘Corporations grew exponentially amid traumatic spasms of global capitalist development. Mark Twain called it the “Gilded Age”. The rich amassed great fortunes, a prosperous section of the middle classes grew more comfortable, and hard times pressed on most everyone else’ (Postel 2007: vii). This was bound to trigger social resistance and political mobilization. And this mobilization expressed itself through the people-populism axis, with populists, the People’s Party, representing the claim, the demand of the people (with a small ‘p’) as the excluded and/or suffering part of the community to be recognized as an equal member of the People (with capital ‘P’) as the whole of the democratic community: ‘How did those on the short end respond to these changes? They organized protest movements the likes of which this country had never seen before. Populism – made up mostly of farmers but also of wage workers and middle class activists – provided one of the most intense challenges to corporate power in American history’ (Postel 2007: vii). At the same time, populist discourse of this period has often been accused of articulating ‘much that was retrograde and delusive, a little that was vicious, and a good deal that was comic’ (Hofstadter 1955: 12).

Moreover, the inescapable symbolic link between ‘the people’ and ‘populism’ can further be established through an elementary study of their main (common) opponent, that is anti-populist discourse. Interestingly enough, and although anti-populist rhetoric allegedly targets ‘populism’, the demonization of populism often ends up encompassing all references to ‘the people’ as well, reducing politics to an administrative, technocratic enterprise, stripped from the elements of popular participation and open democratic deliberation. This is obviously consistent with the Schumpeterian/post-democratic orientation modern democracy has been following and this seems to be what creates social grievances and political demands that, to the extent that they put in question the prevailing model, are in turn denounced as ‘populist’. Thus a populist and an anti-populist camp emerge, with each side doubting the allegiance of its opponent to the democratic ideal, especially in times of crisis. What if, however, instead of one common ideal shared by all, it turns out that the ideals are perhaps two or even more than two? Given the heterogeneous composition of each camp, the latter seems to be the case.

A set of points seem to emerge from this brief historical account:

- **First of all, the inherent link between the people and populism: studying the second always involves examining the ways in which the first becomes articulated and debated, recognized and idealized, opposed and demonized. In other words, our inquiry is bound to be located within the terrain of *representation*.**
- **A second point directly flows from the first. To the extent that representations of the people invariably involve the staging of an opposition, to the extent that they are (1) triggered by social division, by the splitting of every political community into part (the particular) and whole (the universal) and the dialectics of inclusion/exclusion it enacts, and (2) result in the construction of two (political and intellectual) camps, one populist and the other anti-populist, every study of populism proper must also be a study of anti-populism, an inquiry into the symbolic instability and the historical variability of this opposition.**
- **Last but not least, although anti-democratic articulations of popular demands and grievances cannot be *a priori* excluded, this opposition often points to the clash between antagonistic models of democracy. During certain periods this clash subsides and (paradoxical) agonistic articulations emerge instituting a temporary truce (Mouffe 2000), but the antagonism can always re-emerge, especially in times of crisis. The pejorative designation ‘populist’ acquires increased importance within the language games marking such periods of *democracy in crisis*.**
- **POPULISMUS is designed on the basis of carefully addressing these points. It purports to articulate an approach to populism registering the intrinsic signifying link between ‘the people’ and populism, accounting for the irreducible instability representations of the people historically acquire and for the antagonistic language games in which they are inescapably involved. And yet, this challenge is not merely theoretical, conceptual and/or historical. It is predominantly empirical and analytical.**
- **Obviously, our research is not taking place in a vacuum; how has political science dealt with these issues up to now? What happens when we pass from history to theory and political analysis? What are the shortcomings one has to avoid or remedy and the ‘good (analytical) practices’ to be acknowledged and endorsed? POPULISMUS will thus advance a detailed inquiry into the validity**

and limitations of the concept of populism as it is currently used in political analysis and public discourse. The main parameters of this inquiry are put forward below.

B. STATE OF THE ART: LIMITS, IMPASSES, CRITIQUE

1. Analytical limitations

The passage from theory to empirical study complicates things even further, especially given the immense proliferation of populist phenomena in contemporary global politics. To be able to account effectively for such a globally pervasive, multi-layered and ambivalent phenomenon is today's analytical challenge, if not duty, for frontier political research.

- **Responding to this challenge, POPULISMUS seeks to develop an innovative hermeneutics of populism able to document, organize and interpret in a comprehensive and rigorous way this complex and expanding body of empirical material.**
- **This is precisely what existing approaches have largely failed to achieve. The dominant trend in most research conducted on both traditional and contemporary forms of populist movements and populist discourse, visible in monographs and collective volumes alike (see, for example, Germani 1978, Hahn 1983, McMath 1993, Hayward 1996, Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008, Hawkins 2010, Cannon 2010), has been to study populist mobilizations in different parts of the world separately, in relative isolation (Latin America, the US or Europe).**
- **The lack of a sufficiently flexible yet rigorous theoretical and conceptual framework has resulted in the production of isolated case-studies employing diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies and thus forestalling the emergence of a comprehensive mapping and interpretation of populist politics at the global level.**
- **Thus, the resulting fragmentation creates difficulties not only for the analysis of populism in a comparative/global perspective, but also at the conceptual level, to the extent that researchers often tend to elevate their limited, particular geographical focus to a universal criterion, thus leading to idiosyncratic and incompatible conceptualizations of populism.**

a. Example: Pathologies of euro-centrism

Conceptual reductionism

The most significant example of this problem is recent analyses of European populism. Indeed, there is no doubt that in today's Europe, the word 'populism' usually refers to right-wing populism or the populist extreme right (see, for example, Betz 1994, Berezin 2009, Meijers 2011). In addition, in most cases this association assumes a restrictive form. Another indication of the same problem (i.e. euro-centrism) is the association between populism and extremism, where, once more, extremism usually refers to the extreme right in its most virulent forms (Goodwin 2011, Painter 2013).

- **We are, of course, entitled – indeed obliged – to deal with this phenomenon, especially given its pan-European manifestations (with the 2014 European Parliament elections being the most recent and dramatic one), about which many social scientists have contributed illuminating accounts and theorizations.**

- **The question is how exactly to conceptually and politically deal with this problem; in particular, is the category of ‘populism’ the most suitable way?**
- **If, that is to say, what we are currently facing is the pan-European rise of a nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionist and, very often, violent extreme right, is the concept of ‘populism’ the proper analytical instrument through which the problem should be perceived, categorized and debated?**
- **What are the implications (direct and indirect) of such a naming and the analytical risks involved in such a restriction, which is both conceptual (reducing populism to the extreme-right) and geographical (examining the European situation in isolation from its global populist context)?**

Indeed, lacking a rigorous yet flexible theoretical/conceptual grounding, most European analyses of the extreme right seem to suffer from a euro-centrism that reduces the conceptual spectrum covered by the category ‘populism’ in its historical trajectory and global use to a very particular European experience – extreme right-wing xenophobic movements and parties – and then essentializes the resulting association, over-extending the application of this contingent European meaning and elevating it into a universal and trans-historical criterion. Indeed, falling victims of the aforementioned over-extension, we often use the category ‘populism’ to describe political forces, actors and discourses in which the role of ‘the people’ is only secondary or peripheral and where, in many cases, the reference is simply opportunistic (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014: 136).

- **What becomes evident is the need for a conceptual and methodological framework able to avoid the risk of such a short-sighted euro-centrism.**
- **Such a framework should be capable of breaking the near-exclusive association between populism and the extreme right and registering, on a first level, the existence of both right-wing and left-wing variants of populist claims, demands, movements and parties.**
- **On a second level, however, this framework should also be able to provide adequate criteria to distinguish populism from ideologies, discourses and movements that include references to the people in political projects that are predominantly nationalist, racist, authoritarian, etc.**
- **POPULISMUS aims at articulating such a research framework.**

Geographical isolationism

Apart from these correctives, a rigorous analysis of populism determined to overcome ‘the poverty of euro-centrism’ should also move beyond the fetish of the European case-study and embrace a truly comparative methodology. To provide an example of this ‘geographical’ pathology we could refer to a much-celebrated and far from uninteresting collective volume edited by Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008). It is revealing that this book uses a title with global and total aspirations – that is to say, *Twenty-first Century Populism* – in order to refer to a very limited series of case-studies of European populism(s) and their relation to Western European democracy. The paradox becomes even more profound given the fact that, in their introduction, the editors do acknowledge that ‘the equivalence of populism with the Right can be misleading’, adding that ‘if they are not necessarily of the Right, then populists obviously cannot always be classified as “extreme” or “radical” Right either’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008: 3). Indeed, Albertazzi and McDonnell

conclude that ‘this insistence on making “populist” and “extreme right” synonymous or lumping all populists under the “radical Right populist” banner for ease of comparison (for example, Norris, 2005) is detrimental to our understanding both of specific mislabeled parties (the Lega Nord and the Lega dei Ticinesi to name but two) and populism itself’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 4). And yet, although the editors avoid the conceptual reduction of populism to the (European) extreme right and highlight the need for comparison, their book stands out as limiting the scope for comparison within Europe alone.

- **What is missing here?**
- **Obviously, given the predominance of Left-wing and thus very un-European populism(s) in Latin America, a comparison between Latin America and Europe should take priority, but is clearly not the only comparison possible; the US also stands out as a potential subject due to its long historical ‘populist’ legacy as well as the antithetical formulations of populism marking it, something that has been taken into account in the preparation of the research visits envisaged within the framework of the POPULISMUS project.**
- **This is an orientation we have already, if not hesitantly, started to see in the relevant bibliography (see, for example, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s *Populism in Europe and the Americas* (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012a) which includes chapters on Belgium, Austria, Canada, Venezuela, etc., as well as *Contemporary Populism*, a recently published volume (Gherghina, Miscoiu & Soares 2013) which encompasses studies of Latin America, Africa, Australia as well as various parts of Europe, including Scandinavia and Russia) and also what the POPULISMUS project is designed to attempt.**
- **It is time to take seriously into account the complexity and historical/political variability of populism(s) as well as its inclusionary potential, a potential most visibly present in contemporary Latin American experience.**
- **How can political science register this potential in a relatively impartial and non-partisan way? Here Mudde and Kaltwasser’s central distinction between *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* populisms (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013) acquires much relevance and may provide a valuable tool for the analytical framework necessary for the POPULISMUS project. Provided, of course, that this distinction is disengaged from an essentialist, anti-historical tendency that *a priori* attaches each type of populism to a different continent.**
- **If this is the case, it is an urgent priority to critically assess the new landscape and study left-wing, inclusionary populisms in a comparative and cross-regional perspective in order to fill this significant gap in the relevant bibliography, marked by the equation of populism with the European extreme-right and an exclusivist, if not xenophobic, worldview. It is not, perhaps, a coincidence that a relevant cluster within the ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research) General Conference 2014 is entitled, ‘Populism in World Politics: Conceptual and Comparative Approaches in Global, Regional and Cross-Regional Perspectives’.**
- **Following this direction, Work Package 2 of POPULISMUS will involve a series of research activities pertaining to areas of interest around the world: Argentina and Venezuela in Latin America, the US (in particular hotspots associated with ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and Tea Party movements), and Europe (including hotspots associated with right-wing populism as well as with the ‘Indignant’**

movements in Spain and Greece).

- **In Work Packages 3 and 4 this material will undergo consistent waves of analysis, based on three case-studies: (a) Contemporary left-wing populism in Latin America, (b) Extreme right-wing populism in Europe, and (c) The populist/anti-populist cleavage in times of crisis. On top of documenting and analyzing in detail the extreme variety of populist discourses which circulate internationally, the proposed case-studies will reveal potential flaws in our analytical model and indicate necessary revisions. Here, substantial gains are envisaged both in terms of analytical/theoretical development and methodological efficiency.**
- **The material collected will also be crucial in producing an electronically accessible index of populist phenomena and of the discursive uses of ‘the people’ in political discourse around the globe, in the form of an open access web-based Observatory (Work Package 4).**

b. The comparative dimension: Conceptual implications

This general orientation is not, however, capable of resolving the crucial methodological question of the ‘how?’ Here, POPULISMUS purports to facilitate a truly *meaningful comparison* between diverse populist phenomena (as well as between distinct anti-populist reactions) and thus stands to benefit from research conducted within the area of comparative politics without that involving an all-out embrace of comparativist methodology.

The main concern here is the same one in which we have been insisting all along this report, the conceptual status of ‘populism’. As Rose has cogently put it, ‘concepts are necessary as common points of reference for grouping phenomena that are differentiated geographically and often linguistically’; indeed, ‘in order to connect empirical materials horizontally across national boundaries, they must also be connected vertically; that is, capable of being related to concepts that are sufficiently abstract to travel across national boundaries’ (Rose 1991: 447). ‘Populism’ is supposed to be one of these concepts. And yet, from a comparative analysis standpoint, the elaboration of this concept has been, to say the least, unsatisfactory.

In a very recent study, Stijn Van Kessel persuasively argues that ‘besides the unsystematic use of populism, or the absence of a clear definition, the lack of uniformity in the application of the term is an important reason as to why the concept of populism resembles what Giovanni Sartori calls a cat-dog. The term is used to describe political actors that in fact cannot be placed in a single category’ (Van Kessel 2014: 100). For Sartori (1991), a cat-dog is an animal that, although does not exist in reality, comes to life in scientific discourse: ‘biologists might make the mistake of lumping together cats and dogs in one category because the animals show particular similarities’. According to Van Kessel, in the relevant bibliography, populism often appears similar to a cat-dog: ‘the term is used to describe political phenomena and actors that actually do not belong in the same category’ (Van Kessel 2014: 103).

In fact, two of the sub-categories of cat-dogs highlighted by Sartori, are particularly relevant here and can help us conclude our critical account of relevant analytical arguments:

(1) *Parochialism*. Many euro-centric studies reducing populism to the European extreme Right would probably belong here to the extent that they ‘purely and simply ignore the categories established by general theories and/or by comparative frameworks of analysis, and thereby unceasingly invent, on the spur of the moment, an ad hoc, self-tailored terminology’ (Sartori 1991: 247).

(2) *Conceptual stretching*. Here, ‘comparative futility and fallacies simply and generally result from definitional sloppiness’ (Sartori 1991: 249), leading to concepts that, as they are attached to practically anything (and populism often functions in such a way) become stretched to the point of meaninglessness and lose all heuristic validity.

- **In order to avoid these risks and to articulate a rigorous yet flexible comparative analysis of populist phenomena, POPULISMUS will adopt Van Kessel’s call for the elaboration of a ‘minimal definition of populism’ (Van Kessel 2014: 100).**
- **Our hypothesis is that this task will be greatly assisted by the identification of relatively formal criteria able to categorize the way representations of the people are discursively organized; in fact, it should not go unnoticed that in Van Kessel’s work the core unit of analysis entrusted with such a function is ‘populist discourse’.**

2. Theoretical impasses

Our analysis up to now has highlighted a series of difficulties in employing a slippery and unstable concept such as ‘populism’, difficulties that emerge simultaneously at the levels of symbolic and historical variability, antagonistic representation and comparative application. As we have seen, in order to effectively deal with such problems it is important to define ‘populism’ in a rigorous yet flexible way, using criteria able to capture the ‘bounded variability’ peculiar to this phenomenon:

- **Which could these criteria be? And how can they be identified? These are questions only a true *theory of populism* can answer.**
- **And how have theories of populism answered them up to now? Generally speaking, one can discern two distinct traditions in the part of the relevant literature that has escaped a narrow analytical focus and engaged with concept formation: a substantive/normative and a formal/structural orientation.**

a. Substantive/normative orientations

Some brave attempts to articulate a wide-ranging ‘theoretical’ approach with ‘global’ pretensions have largely operated by way of producing a checklist of institutional, ideological and organizational ‘symptoms’ that supposedly define a populist movement or discourse, creating at the same time various typologies of populism(s) (Wiles 1969; Canovan 1981, 1982; Mouzelis 1985, 1989; Taguieff 1997; Taggart 2000). These symptoms include hostility towards institutions, anti-elitism, an unmediated emphasis on the role of the leader, etc. No matter how useful such classifications can be, they have been unable to integrate the ideal-types formulated on the way into a comprehensive framework with global reach, a framework that would be sensitive both to the historically specific experience of different countries and areas as well as to the universal forces that determine identification processes and identity formation. In other words, they have historically failed to produce operational definitions of populism, to illuminate what is unique to populism as a type of interpellation and an object of collective identification, and to clarify the relation between populism and democracy.

Once more, the lack of an operational negotiation of the theory/analysis divide and the difficulty of arriving at a commonly acceptable and sufficiently flexible definition of populism have led to rather poor results. It comes as no surprise that almost all publications on populism, books and articles alike, share a rather pessimistic conclusion, stressing the essential contestability of the concept as well as the stark differences between existing approaches to populism. As Margaret Canovan points out, although the term is frequently used, it remains exceptionally vague ‘and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena’ (Canovan 1981: 3). In fact, she even goes on to admit that it can be ‘doubted whether it could be said to mean anything at all’ (Canovan 1981: 5; see also Canovan, 1982: 544). And this is not a conclusion confined to the 1980s; it is still the dominant view as an Open University textbook on the concept of populism reveals: ‘Populism is a difficult,

slippery concept' (Taggart 2000: 2). Thirty years after Canovan, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser introduce their edited volume on *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, by pointing that during that period 'the number of scholars of populism has increased manifold and we are probably even further from a definitional consensus within the scholarly community'. Can we identify, after all, 'a central core present in all the manifestations of populism?' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b: 4; also see Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014: 122).

- **Locating such a common core is, undoubtedly, the holly grail of all theories of populism. The question is where exactly is this to be located: In the content, the positively defined characteristics of populist movements, practices and ideologies? Or in the way such ideological, organizational and other contents and characteristics are formally structured and meaningfully organized? One of the premises of POPULISMUS is that the first option can be of very limited use and thus a formal orientation needs to be adopted. On what grounds can we substantiate this research decision?**

Example: Paul Taggart and the populist 'heartland'

Paul Taggart's take on the issue – in the only introductory textbook on populism available (Taggart 2000) – reflects various problems and impasses of the aforementioned type present in the relevant literature and is worth examining briefly.

Now, where should one place her/his focus when researching populism? For Taggart, the answer is clear – revealing what stands at the core of his theorization –, and relates to what he calls the populist 'heartland': 'The heartland provides us with a tool for making sense of the populist invocation of "the people". The populist claim to speak in the name of this constituency is not empty. It has a certain set of meanings for populists.' Thus, Taggart suggests that 'in each case of populism, it is useful to conceive of a heartland. This becomes a device through which we can detect what it is in "the people" that populists celebrate and therefore the source of the populist commitment to "the people" ' (Taggart 2000: 98). The populist 'heartland' is defined as the 'construction of the good life derived retrospectively from a romanticized conception of life as it has been lived' (Taggart 2000: 78); it is 'the location of the people', understood as 'virtuous and unified' (Taggart 2000: 95).

At first, Taggart's definition may sound as flexible enough, even as allowing us 'to see the commonality across different manifestations of populism, while at the same time allowing each instance of populism to construct its own version of the heartland' (Taggart 2000: 98). And yet, the territorial metaphor is not entirely coincidental here. And it will not remain as a purely structural (empty) axis: it involves an 'obsession' with frontiers and exclusion delimiting a territory that is supposed to incarnate the most pure part of national identity, which also explains why 'internationalism and cosmopolitanism are anathema to populists' (Taggart 2000: 95). Indeed, Taggart will end up defining populism as a qualified form of nationalism, one that focuses on the nation as an *organic community* (Taggart 2000: 96).

As a result, Taggart's axiomatic assumptions on the nature of populism ultimately impose on the term a set of restrictions that render his conception particularly narrow and unfitting for empirical analysis or comparative research. In his effort to define populism in the most detailed way, he has fallen victim to what Margaret Canovan has already been describing in the early 1980s: offering a conception that is rather 'clear but too narrow' (Canovan 1982: 546). Or, as Laclau has put it, Taggart has entered 'into a game in which any attribution of a social or ideological content to populism is immediately confronted with an avalanche of exceptions' (Laclau 2005b: 44). Last but not least, due to the restrictive association between populism and romantic nationalism on which it relies, Taggart's theorization suffers from the same fallacies the euro-centric case-studies we have reviewed suffer. Such approaches purport to normatively fix the signified of the signifiers 'people' or

‘populism’, usually reducing populism to nationalism, and thus fail to introduce a sufficiently formal definition with true operational promise. This is why other mainstream approaches have reluctantly embraced a turn to formalism.

b. The reluctant turn to a formal/structural approach

Kirk Hawkins: From rational choice theory to discourse

Let’s see what happens when we turn our gaze to analysts operating within more mainstream research paradigms, like Kirk Hawkins, who operates within the paradigm of rational choice theory. Kirk Hawkins is mostly known for his seminal study of Hugo Chavez’s populism; a study that is considered highly original and innovative, and which utilizes both qualitative and quantitative tools of analysis, in an effort to ‘measure’ populism. Hawkins’s approach does, of course, partly rely on the contents of populist ‘fundamental beliefs’, but, on the other hand, by slowly focusing on the discursive dimension, he does take certain important steps towards a more formal account: ‘All of these ideas are expressed in a characteristic language identifiable not through a particular lexicon, but through such diffuse elements as tone, metaphor, and theme’ (Hawkins 2010: 5).

Approaches like the one that Hawkins advocates are placed within what we could call the ‘new mainstream’ in the field of populism studies. It is here that we also find the definition of populism advocated by Cas Mudde and his collaborators. This is an intellectual position previously occupied by Margaret Canovan. What is of much interest is that this new mainstream visibly incarnates a turn towards a more formal/structural orientation in researching populism. Very often this is directly related to the adoption of a conceptual vocabulary borrowed from discourse studies and occasionally includes direct references to the work of the Essex School of discourse analysis.

Thus, Hawkins is quick to draw the readers’ attention to the significance of discourse-oriented approaches to populism, and especially those that are working within the constructivist paradigm, like Ernesto Laclau. In his words:

Ironically, for better guidance we must turn to the constructivists and discourse theorists [...] including especially those who study populist discourse [...]. Their work here is much more advanced and provides most of the descriptive material we need to create a better definition and measurement of populism (Hawkins 2010: 10).

Such an open call, however, is largely an exception. In recent work typical of the ‘mainstream’, the discursive influence towards an increasingly formal approach is also present but the relevance of Laclau’s work, although acknowledged, is rather *disavowed*.

Old and new ‘mainstream’

Indeed, passing now to the recent theoretical and analytical output of Canovan and Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, which are among the most prominent and often utilized in empirical research, one immediately encounters a significant paradox marking both projects, with all their differences and the thirty years standing between them. Ironically, both Canovan and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser will express their admiration for Laclau’s theory of populism only to subsequently dismiss it for one or the other (rather marginal) reason. Nevertheless, in both cases, Laclau’s insights are eventually vindicated, albeit in a rather indirect way (see, for a detailed analysis Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014).

Very briefly, in Canovan’s case, Laclau’s approach is initially credited as ‘the most ambitious attempt’ to construct a consistent and flexible enough theory of populism ‘able to take in the wide variety of phenomena given the name’ (Canovan 1982: 549). This is due to its particular elaboration of operational criteria: for Laclau, ‘the defining characteristic of

populism in all its varieties is that it mobilizes the antagonism of “the people” against the established order’ (Canovan 1982: 549). And yet, Canovan will eventually disavow Laclau’s contribution, only, however, to return to the issue a few years later to advance herself what she calls a ‘structural’ approach, with the word ‘structural’ being homologous to Laclau’s ‘discursive’ as distinct from ideological, organizational, etc.:

Clarification can, I believe, be achieved if we shift our attention from the ideology and policy content of populist movements and concentrate instead on structural considerations. Populism in modern democracies is best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society. [...] They involve some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people (Canovan 1999: 3).

Moving to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s recent work, from a quick overview of available approaches they also conclude that ‘Laclau’s theory is interesting’ to the extent that it treats populism as a political logic ‘characterized by the confrontation of the existing hegemony by means of a discursive construction capable of dividing the social into two camps, “the power bloc” versus “the people” ’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b: 6). Once more, however, disavowal takes the upper hand and Laclau’s contribution is eventually dismissed in favor of a *minimal* definition of populism which, however, is marked by an unmistakable Laclau-esque flavor: populism is defined as a ‘*thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people*’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b: 8).

Last but not least, the turn towards a reluctant and/or unacknowledged formal approach, increasingly registering the need to openly embrace a discursive methodological framework, is also present in the work of a well-known historian with no theoretical pretensions. Thus, one of the most important contemporary scholars of American populism, Michael Kazin, is also pointing towards a similar direction. Admittedly, Kazin is not very much interested in methodological debates. No wonder that his book deals with method only in a 2-page long appendix entitled ‘A Note on Method’. In this appendix, however, his intuition is made clear: populism needs to be studied as an ‘*ideal type of language*’ (Kazin 1995: 292), as a form of *persuasion*.

C. DISCOURSE THEORY, POLITICAL ANALYSIS AND POPULIST DISCOURSE

1. The Essex School

As we have seen, Laclau’s formal criteria emerge as the underlying yet too often disavowed kernel of a minimal definition of populism. In what follows, we will go back to provide a brief presentation of these criteria in Laclau’s early work on populism as well as follow their development in his late work. And yet, in order to grasp the innovation involved in their development it is necessary to provide some background knowledge on the profile and the contribution of the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis in general (Townshend 2003, 2004).

The Essex School belongs to a bundle of theoretical and analytical approaches that have highlighted the importance of ‘discourse’ within socio-political research (Torfing 1999, Glynnos, Howarth, Norval & Speed 2009, Angermüller 2013). Initiated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, discourse theory combines a theoretically sophisticated grasping of the processes through which social meaning is articulated with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points (such as ‘the people’) and their differentiation from other discourses in a bid to hegemonize the public sphere and to influence decision-making. Here, however, the

term ‘discourse’ does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 3-4) through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers. Thus, discourse is located beyond the linguistic/extra-linguistic distinction and acquires a performative function.

In its diachronic development, discourse theory has managed to refine a series of analytical and methodological tools permitting it to grasp the constitutive representational aspect of identity formation, thus registering the ‘linguistic’ and ‘constructionist’ turn in the social sciences, as well as the way the hegemonic appeal of such discursive articulations depends on processes of emotional investment, thus taking on board the so-called ‘affective’ turn. All that has been the result of a sustained commitment to interdisciplinarity, enlisting a multitude of disciplinary and theoretical resources (from semiotics and deconstruction to post-analytical philosophy and psychoanalysis) in the service of a diversified (Gramscian) theory of hegemony.

- **It is important to note that the last period has also signalled a significant increase in the empirical applications of this supposedly over-theoretical framework (Laclau 1994; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000; Howarth & Torfing 2005; also see Glynos & Howarth 2007). This proliferation seems to address an oft-quoted criticism according to which, ‘Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, however, is short on specific methodological guidelines and illustrative examples’ (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002: 8). Studies of populism have been central in this development and POPULISMUS is designed as a further step in this trajectory.**

a. Discourse analysis and the Essex School

In the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe, *discourse analysis* refers to the scientific practice of capturing, mapping, and accounting for the mechanisms that, within an always unstable and antagonistic environment, attempt to partially fix the identity of subjects and objects through discursive articulation. The units, the building blocks, utilized in these articulatory practices can be of various types and constitute the ‘data’ collected and analyzed. These include but are not limited to: ‘speeches, reports, manifestos, historical events, interviews, policies, ideas, even organisations and institutions’ (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 4) The collection and analysis of such data, the mapping and interpretation of the ways in which they form articulations and produce distinct discourses, prioritizing particular meanings and excluding others, can enlist a variety of linguistic and literary techniques (drawing on the Saussurean and Barthesian traditions) as well as other qualitative methodologies.

In the last few years, it has also been proposed that corpus driven lexicometric procedures (such as frequency analysis, analysis of specificities, and the analysis of co-occurrences) and the analysis of narrative patterns (contextualizing the findings of lexicometric approaches based on closed corpora) can also greatly assist in this endeavor; thus, in his thoughtful analysis of francophonía, Georg Glasze has argued that a triangulation of these two linguistic methods ‘is appropriate to reveal temporary fixations’ and provide the Essex School with a more rigorous methodology (Glasze 2007: 663-4).

- **POPULISMUS purports to advance further this cross-fertilization between the Essex School, corpus-based approaches as well as other orientations within this field, something that is anticipated to enhance our conceptual apparatus, our research tools as well as help us develop web-based procedures related to the development of a complex interactive Observatory (Work Package 4).**
- **On the one hand, of interest at this intermediate stage will be (a) the incorporation of methods and conceptual tools from other traditions of discourse**

analysis such as **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** and **Discursive Psychology** (for example, of the category of discursive or ‘interpretative repertoires’ from **Discursive Psychology**; see, in this respect, **Wetherell & Potter 1988, 1992; Phillips & Jorgensen 2002**) as well as from the analysis of social movements (for example, of ‘frame analysis’; see **Della Porta & Diani 2006, Caiani & Della Porta 2011**).

- **On the other hand, regarding the technical task of sorting and organizing data, the job of indexing and retrieving could be facilitated by the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), but other forms of computer-assisted text analysis methodology may be of use in this field (Alexa 1997, Brier & Hopp 2011).**

b. Conceptual apparatus: Discourse, articulation, nodal points, empty signifiers

All the central concepts introduced by Laclau and Mouffe – such as articulation, elements, moments and nodal points – are elaborated at a formal level permitting their flexible utilization in the analysis of concrete cases and allowing a rigorous comparative usage. Articulation is the signifying practice through which discourses are produced; in other words discourse is ‘the structured totality resulting from [an] articulatory practice’. What is articulated in such practices is conceived in terms of signifying units – elements – that preexisted the articulation in question, but acquire new meanings through this articulation. Thus articulation refers to ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’. As soon as these signifying elements become parts of a new articulatory chain they are designated as ‘moments’ of the new discourse produced. Thus, moments are the ‘differential positions’ that ‘appear articulated within a discourse’, whereas elements are those differences that are ‘not discursively articulated’ because of the ‘floating’ character they acquire in periods of social crisis and dislocation or because they appear articulated in other – more or less – antagonistic discourses (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105). In this sense, articulation refers to the signifying mechanism through which elements are incessantly transformed to moments of distinct discourses in an attempt to (partially) fix their meaning and crystalize identities.

If, however, such partial fixations cannot rely on some sort of direct correspondence to a real foundation, how is even such partial fixity generated? What structures discursive articulation? It is the category of the nodal point that incarnates this function, within this framework. The structuring function of the nodal point explains how meaning achieves a (partial) fixation without which social and political discourse would surely disintegrate into psychotic rumbling and no political institution would be possible (Stavrakakis 2007).

Thus, to refer to a concrete empirical example, Green ideology (political ecology) can be seen to comprise an articulation of differential positions, of distinct ideological moments with no a priori ecological meaning (direct democracy, grassroots focus, decentralization, non-violence, post-patriarchal principles, etc.). What retroactively transforms this aggregate of largely pre-existing ideals into a coherent ideological chain, what stops their ideological sliding, limits re-signification, and (partially) fixes their meaning, transforming them from elements to moments, is the intervention of the nodal point ‘Green’, of ‘Nature’ as a discursive principle of discursive articulation. Following this intervention – and the ideological process of re-naming it initiates – direct democracy becomes ‘Green democracy’, the subordination of women is linked to the exploitation and destruction of nature, and so on (Stavrakakis 1997; also see Stavrakakis 2011: 70).

In his work in the 1990s, Laclau has further developed the logic of discursive structuration by associating the function of the ‘nodal point’ with the category of the ‘empty signifier’. Thus, the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point. In other words, emptiness is now revealed as an essential quality of the nodal point, as an important condition of possibility for its hegemonic success, and the promise of the tendential filling of such emptiness as the means of this

operation (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000: 8-9).

c. Discursive logics: Equivalence & difference

Drawing on the linguistic work of the founder of modern (structuralist) linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure and especially on the distinction he introduces between the *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* poles of language, as well as on the Jakobsonian concepts of metaphor and metonymy, Laclau and Mouffe have elaborated the logics of *equivalence* and *difference* as two distinct logics through which the representation of social space is formed:

We, thus, see that the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity. Taking a comparative example from linguistics, we could say that the logic of difference tends to expand the syntagmatic pole of language, the number of positions that can enter in to a relation of combination and hence of continuity with one another; while the logic of equivalence expands the paradigmatic pole - that is, the elements that can be substituted for one another - thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 130).

In social life both these logics continuously overlap. Diverse social actors, identities or demands obviously occupy 'differential positions within the discourses that constitute the social fabric. In that sense they are all, strictly speaking, particularities'. If such demands can be addressed within the existing power structure, then they cannot escape their own particularity and end up reproducing hierarchical relations of domination implicit all along in the practice of articulating a demand towards an authority. When, however, these identities feel the limits imposed in their development by a power structure frustrating their demands (especially in times of crisis destabilizing the reproduction of an existing economic, social and political order), social antagonisms can emerge creating internal frontiers within a social fabric previously represented in terms of continuity. Thus a new representation emerges splitting the social field: 'Vis-a-vis oppressive forces, for instance, a set of particularities establish relations of equivalence between themselves' (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: xiii).

2. The discursive analysis of populism

Interestingly enough, populism has been, already from the 1970s, one of the main analytical *foci* of Laclau's discourse analysis (Laclau, 1977, 1980), to which he has recently devoted a monograph and a companion text (Laclau 2005a, 2005b – also see his relevant debate with Žižek: Laclau 2006; Žižek, 2006a, 2006b); it has also been a central priority in debates within the Essex School at large (Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis, 2003, 2004; Arditì, 2007; Biglieri & Perello 2007; Brading 2013; Groppo 2013). Let us briefly present the main methodological directions in the analysis of populism developed within this field, identify problematic areas and chart some ways in which POPULISMUS is planning to capitalise on the advances and remedy the shortcomings in order to facilitate a rigorous comparative analysis of populist phenomena in the 21st century.

a. Minimal criteria: Equivalential structure and the location of 'the people'

As it has already been indirectly mentioned, approaches to populism elaborated within a discursive framework or influenced by it, have indeed contributed a series of operational criteria promising to resolve the aforementioned analytical limitations undermining many existing approaches. In particular, they highlight the importance of ascertaining whether a given discursive practice under examination is: (1) Articulated around the nodal point 'the people' or other (non-populist or anti-populist) nodal points, and, (2) To what extent the representation of society it offers is predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two

main blocs along equivalential lines: the establishment, the power block versus the underdog, ‘the people’ (in opposition to dominant political discourses asserting the continuity of the social fabric and prioritizing non-antagonistic technocratic solutions). This formal emphasis is visible already in Laclau’s work in the 1970s (Laclau 1977, 1980) but is further enhanced in his more recent work (Laclau 2005a, 2005b). Thus Laclau’s recent work on populism can be seen as a further step in strengthening his structural/formal approach to populism. Here, it becomes clear that a discursive analysis of populism moves beyond the assessment of empirical contents – ideological, organizational, etc. – and focuses on form: ‘we could say that a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are’ (Laclau 2005b: 33). This entails a move of the whole scope of analysis from ideologies and movements not only to discourse but to *discursive practices* constructing ‘the people’ by employing an equivalential articulatory logic.

It becomes clear that what Laclau is now proposing is a *strictly formal* approach as he explicitly puts it:

the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation – the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independently of the actual contents that are articulated. [...] Most of the attempts at defining populism have tried to locate what is specific to it in a particular ontic content and, as a result, they have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an ‘intuition’ which cannot be translated into any conceptual content (Laclau 2005b: 44).

- **This heightened formalism is clearly analytically enabling to the extent that it substantially helps in the construction of a concept of ‘populism’, which is both rigorous and flexible and thus able to guide empirical analysis at a comparative level.**
- **In particular, it helps to address two important problems highlighted in our analysis so far:**
 - **(1) ‘In the first place, we have a way of addressing the recurrent problem of dealing with the ubiquity of populism – the fact that it can emerge from different points of the socio-economic structure’ (Laclau 2005b: 44); (2) ‘Secondly, we can grasp better, in this way, something which is essential for the understanding of the contemporary political scene: the circulation of the signifiers of radical protest between movements of entirely opposite political signs’ (Laclau 2005b: 45).**
- **Building on this challenging theorisation of political identifications elaborated by the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis, POPULISMUS seeks to resolve the tensions found in existing approaches in an original and persuasive way.**
- **By placing emphasis on the formal aspect of discursive articulations, this novel interdisciplinary approach promises to bridge a crippling theory/analysis divide, allow the formulation of a truly operational definition of populism and facilitate a challenging inquiry into the mobilization of symbolic resources and passionate investments for as well as against ‘the people’ at a global level.**

b. Analytical implications

Through the utilization of such formal criteria, the discursive orientation offers the possibility of developing rigorous typologies of populist movements, identities and discourses. Thus, the articulatory nature of populist discourses and the flexibility of populist ideological articulations, both underlined by discourse theorists, can illuminate the paradox of antinomic formulations of populist ideology, from socialist-populist hybrids to be found in contemporary Latin America to the newfound contemporary grassroots populist movements in Egypt, the European periphery (Greece, Spain and Beppe Grillo's Italy) and the US (OWS), to the paradoxical elitist populism characteristic of extreme right-wing movements in Europe (Lievesley & Ludlam, 2009: 17; Panizza, 2009: 178; Mouffe 2000; De Vos, 2002) and up to so-called 'media populism' (Mazzoleni, Stuart & Horsfield 2003, Eco 2007, Simons 2011).

- **Through its research in a variety of contexts (Latin America, the US and Europe; Work Package 2), POPULISMUS purports to test this hypothesis, anticipating research gains at the analytical level but also seeking feedback for a further elaboration of this theoretical framework.**
- **At this preparatory stage, the discursive framework has allowed us to formulate a series of further hypotheses that, if corroborated, will have significant effects on the socio-political research of populism.**

Example: Nationalism, the extreme right and populism

In a previous section, we have tried to show how a substantial part of contemporary European approaches to populism seems to suffer from a crippling euro-centrism, with the word 'populism' assuming a restrictive association with the extreme right, a development conditioned by the European political experience but also 'contaminating' theoretical work as well; hence Taggart's essential link between populism and a strong conception of the 'heartland'.

- **How can the adoption of a discursive framework help us here?**
- **Is it really able to provide adequate formal criteria to distinguish populism from ideologies, discourses and movements that include references to the people in political projects that are predominantly nationalist, racist, etc.?**
- **How can it guide such differential identification?**

Obviously, the stress of the Essex School on discursive articulation predisposes us to first inquire on the structural location of populist signifiers within a particular discourse: for example, where is reference to 'the people' located within, say, an extreme right-wing discourse: does it function as the nodal point, as a central empty signifier? Or is it rather located at the periphery of the discursive structure under examination, relegated to a mere moment in a wider discursive articulation? If, that is to say, the aim of European right-wing populism is to defend and reassert *nation* and *race*, then maybe these discourses should be categorized under the 'nationalist' and 'racist' rubric where references to 'the people' can only be peripheral and/or secondary.

- **In this sense, a discursive approach points to the challenging hypothesis that, to the extent that they rely on a representation of the socio-political field divided between a national inside (linked to the nation as heartland) and outside (linked to an enemy nation or to groups not belonging to the ethnic community, such as**

immigrants), exclusionary discourses usually associated with the extreme right should not be labelled and treated as populist. This hypothesis will be properly formulated and researched within the scope of the POPULISMUS project.

- **What is also thus posited as an important research question is the relationship between the ‘people’ and other signifiers with which it competes at the level of political struggles and to which it can establish relations of articulation and/or antagonism: class, multitude, etc.**

Crisis, populism and Laclau’s dislocation

As far as the genealogy of populism is concerned, meaning the conditions of possibility for the articulation of populist discourses with hegemonic pretensions, the association with a pre-existing crisis has been much debated within the relevant literature. Within the framework of POPULISMUS, this association will be researched with reference to Laclau’s conceptualization of dislocation as the negative twin of his central concept of discursive articulation. Indeed, from a discursive point of view, the emergence of new discourses and new identities is always related to the dislocation or crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders. It is a certain failure of previous identifications that forces subjects to seek refuge in a new discursive attachment and investment. Thus, dislocations are not solely negative episodes. They also have a productive dimension. ‘If’, as Laclau puts it, ‘on the one hand they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted’ (Laclau 1990: 39).

- **In POPULISMUS we purport to articulate a rigorous conceptualization of ‘crisis’ drawing on Laclau’s work on the category of dislocation in order to then put to the test both approaches that consider ‘crisis’ as a necessary precondition of populism and those that consider it a mere possibility or even irrelevant.**
- **We will first try to show that discourse theory already masters the necessary tools to account for a conjuncture as ambiguous and vague as the one termed by the notion of ‘crisis’ in a way that permits for both theoretical consistency and analytical clarity, as well as for a reflexive account of the ineradicably inter-subjective character of every crisis.**

Cleavage theory and the populist/anti-populist divide

After its initial formulation back in the mid-1960s, cleavage theory has been among the standard tools of political science and political sociology (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). Moving beyond the restrictive formalism of typical accounts of cleavages, more recent accounts rightly emphasise ‘much more strongly the active participation of the political actors, above all the political parties, in the process by which cleavages are formed and structured’ (Hloušek 2010: 4). Indeed, ‘[p]arties, or political elites, respectively [...] can, subject to external limitations [...], affect the structuring of the political space and articulate the cleavages through their activities and preferences’ (Hloušek 2010: 4). In this context, an updated and enhanced conception of cleavage provides the ground for a creative synergy between ‘cleavage theory’ and discourse analysis.

- **As we purport to show, *it is in discourse that cleavages are (partially) constructed, represented and enacted.* What is more, creating cleavages and oppositions is not just a crucial characteristic of populist discourse, with which we are mainly preoccupied here, but rather of political discourse in general.**

- **In this context, POPULISMUS purports to analyze and evaluate the opposition between populist and anti-populist discourses placing priority to a set of related research questions:**
- **Does it constitute a ‘full cleavage’, a ‘partial cleavage’, or is it a mere ‘difference/divide’ (see Deegan-Krause 2004; Berglund and Ekman 2010: 93)? What kinds of demographic, social/class, historical or other contradictions does it reflect and/or overdetermine? What is, in other words, its ‘material’ aspect? What has the field of populism studies to offer to cleavage theory and *vice versa*?**

c. The limits of formalism?

We have recounted up to now a series of arguments substantiating the grounds on which POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodology, some of the conceptual and analytical gains expected and the hypotheses formulated. However, the Essex School approach is also marked by a certain ambiguity as far as some of its implications are concerned and POPULISMUS will deal with them in a straightforward way.

The danger of ‘degreeism’

This becomes evident when Laclau registers what follows from his analysis of populism in his late work: ‘To ask oneself if a movement is or is not populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: to what extent is a movement populist? As we know, this question is identical to this other one: to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse?’ (Laclau 2005b: 45). Thus populism becomes identical with politics *tout court*. Here, however, in his determination to articulate a strictly formal approach to populism, Laclau puts in danger the operability and usefulness of the concept in political analysis. In particular, doesn’t the idea that all discourses are populist to some degree, ignore the previous emphasis Laclau had placed on the *architectonics* of discursive articulation? On the basis of that earlier work one would be able to determine whether a particular discourse exhibiting an equivalential profile is populist or not on the basis of the location of ‘the people’; thus a discourse in which the people constitutes a mere moment, articulated in the periphery of, say, a nationalist, discursive ensemble, would not qualify as, strictly speaking, populist. Now, it seems to become a ‘less populist one’.

Interestingly enough, this is a problem well known to comparative analysis and relates to what Giovanni Sartori calls *degreeism*, the third source of his cat-dog fallacy (Sartori 1991: 247): ‘the abuse (uncritical use) of the maxim that differences in kind are best conceived as differences of degree, and that dichotomous treatments are invariably best replaced by continuous ones’ (Sartori 1991: 248). As Van Kessel has pointed out this is a problem visible in many analyses of populism (Van Kessel 2014: 105). Last but not least, if the added value of a formal approach to populism is that it avoids the twin dangers mentioned earlier – that is to say, ending up in a self-defeating exercise whose two alternative results have been either to choose a criterion which is immediately invalidated by a series of exceptions, or to appeal to an ‘intuition’ which is unable to be translated into any conceptual criterion (Laclau 2005b: 44) – can this be compatible with designating all political discourses as populist and thus losing all ability to differentiate between types of political discourses?

- **In other words, the risk here is to lose the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete (comparative) political analysis.**
- **For all these reasons, POPULISMUS opts for a formal/structural conceptualization of populism aware of the limits of formalism (degreeism and conceptual over-extension) and thus capable of mediating between the**

ontological level and the ontic level of the signifying reality of concrete political struggles; serving as an interface between theoretical analysis and the reality of political practices.

- **In that sense, reference to the structural location of ‘the people’ remains crucial as a defining criterion in the analysis of populism, together with the criterion of equivalence.**

Affect, emotion and discourse

Within sociology and the social sciences at large, much of the twentieth century signaled an exclusive emphasis on the cognitive, rational and, at best, linguistic aspects of social interaction. This emphasis took place at the expense of emotional, affective and passionate aspects. The situation started to change from the late 1970s onwards, with the establishment and the gradual development of the now thriving ‘sociology of emotions’ (Williams 2001: 1, Barbalet 2001, Kemper 1990, Clarke, Hoggett & Thompson 2006). This new stress on emotion was bound to question the emphasis placed by the Essex School on discourse, language, representation and hegemony, pointing to their assumed inability to take into account the importance of affect (Lash 2007, Beasley-Murray 2010).

Yet, this ‘affective’ criticism has failed to take notice of developments within the terrain of discourse theory, which have been engaging seriously with the problematic of emotion and affectivity (see, in this respect, Stavrakakis 2014a). For example, already from 2003 and through a dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2003; Laclau 2003, 2004), Laclau will admit himself that the theme of affect had hitherto been incorporated into discourse theory in a ‘rather sketchy and inchoate way’ (Laclau 2003: 278), also accepting that it should definitely be seen not as an external threat that falsifies a discursive theory of hegemony (what Lash and Beasley-Murray seem to believe), but as an internal challenge for further theoretical refinement and analytical development (Laclau 2004; Stavrakakis 2007, ch. 2).

If this has been, very briefly, the situation with Laclau’s work, Mouffe’s case is even more crucial and revealing to the extent that she has been highlighting the dimension of affectivity and passion all along, at least since the early 1990s. Indeed, just a few years after the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe insists on ‘the predominant role of passions as moving forces of human conduct’ (Mouffe 1993: 140). The critique of the erasure, of the repression of affectivity and the passions in liberal democratic thought (especially Rawls) re-emerges in *The Democratic Paradox*, published in 2000 (Mouffe 2000: 30). In Mouffe’s subsequent works, first in *On the Political* and more recently in *Agonistics*, not only will the focus on the role of affect and the passions remain central (Mouffe 2005a: 6, 24; 2013: 6, 8, 9), but it will also be grounded on a thorough engagement with the psychoanalytic analysis of identification processes (for a detailed analysis see Stavrakakis 2014b).

Taking into account affectivity especially with relation to the politics of populism has enabled Laclau to start addressing a series of important shortcomings in his early account of the phenomenon. Indeed, analyses of empirical cases (for example, Mouffe 2005b, De Vos 2002, Stavrakakis 2003, 2004) have concluded that what very often differentiates sharply a populist from a technocratic, neutral, if not ‘dry’ institutional discourse is its affective, passionate nature. In a similar vein, Nicolas Demertzis has published an important text from a ‘political sociology of emotions’ perspective, focusing on the role of *ressentiment* in populism. He then goes on to analyze populism as a ‘political phenomenon charged with *ressentiment*’ (Demertzis 2006: 112) and to ‘isolate and interpret the role of *ressentiment* in clearing the ground for the emergence of populism in post-authoritarian Greece’ (Demertzis 2006: 120).

Not surprisingly then, the dimension of affective investment acquires a central place within Laclau’s late analysis of populism through the dialectics of radical investment he elaborates in this work. When, he asserts, ‘an entity becomes the object of an investment – as

in being in love, or in hatred – the investment belongs necessarily to the order of affect’ (Laclau 2005a: 110) and, thus, if, in order to effect the symbolic unification of a group in a formation such as ‘the people’ (Laclau 2005a: 110), such investment is necessary, then affect becomes a nuclear element of a discursive analysis of populism. Here, the function of the name of the leader emerges as one possible (partial) object of radical investment (Laclau 2005a: 192) and, in fact, a rather privileged one (Laclau 2005a: 100).

- **How is emotion and affectivity to be thoroughly articulated with a discursive logic? And how is this articulation to guide the empirical political analysis of populist phenomena?**
- **This is a thoroughly urgent question to the extent that ‘in political analysis, we do not find philosophy’s nuanced understanding of the role of emotions in understanding and evaluation; nor do we find sociology’s mediation of unconscious affects and social contexts. Instead the academic study of politics is for the most part firmly attached to narrowly rationalist models of explanation and justification which split off head and mind from heart and body’ (Clarke, Hoggett & Thompson 2006: 8).**
- **How can one evaluate Laclau’s orientation in articulating the two up to now and what new theoretical resources (from psychoanalysis and beyond) can assist this process?**
- **What will be the results of this articulation in terms of establishing the status of the affective dimension in populist identification?**
- **What will be the place of *ressentiment* here and what other emotions are relevant?**
- **Last but not least, what role does this orientation ascribe to the leader as a physical person and, most importantly, to her/his name? Here, additional help can be provided by the Lacanian theorization of the Name-of-the-Father as well as by innovative explanations of charisma such as the one put forward by James Scott in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Scott 1990: 221).**

Verticality/horizontality & multitude/people

As we have seen, the Essex School approach relies on an ontology built on the negation of immediacy and the concomitant value attributed to (hegemonic) representation. It was thus bound to attract criticism from approaches focusing on the relation between verticality and horizontality in political action and highlighting the importance of autonomous political initiatives that a theory of hegemony through vertical representation cannot capture (Day 2005).

- **At any rate, the relationship between horizontality and verticality as distinct but interdependent modes of political action in contentious movements and parties as well as the way different types of political subjectivity attached to these modes (such the ‘multitude’ or ‘the people’) compete in expressing such movements has been a crucial area of research for the POPULISMUS research team (see, for example, Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis 2014) and is considered of prime importance within our research design.**
- **Are such interpellations mutually exclusive? Can they enter into articulatory relationships?**

- **Our hypothesis is that they do enter into relations of mutual engagement producing a political choreography of great importance for the analysis of populism (Stavrakakis 2014a, 2014b).**

d. Implications for democracy

By advancing a flexible yet rigorous conception of populism POPULISMUS also aims at illuminating a further major point of contention in the ongoing debate: the troubling relation between populism and democracy. As we have seen, the particular ways through which some populist movements articulate their claims to represent ‘the people’ – relying on charismatic leaders, energized by *ressentiment*, virtually bypassing the institutional framework of representative democracy and/or often containing an illiberal, anti-rights and even nationalist potential (Taggart 2000) – have portrayed populism as a threat to democratic institutions. And yet such a conclusion fails to do justice to the immense variety of populist articulations and does not take into account its inclusionary variants; it may even erroneously apply the term to movements and discourses that are outright nationalist, fascist and racist. Last but not least, it is also premised on a hypostatization of modern democracy, which fails to register its paradoxical formulation on the basis of articulating two distinct political traditions, the liberal and the democratic tradition (Mouffe 2000). Indeed, by representing excluded groups, by putting forward an egalitarian agenda, other types of populism – the populist canon, if our hypothesis is correct, combining the formal populist core with the legacy of the (radical) democratic tradition – can also be seen as an integral part of democratic politics, as a source for the renewal of democratic institutions (Canovan 1999, Laclau 2005b).

- **POPULISMUS will thus focus on the crucial question put forward by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser: should populism be considered as a *threat* or as a *corrective* to democracy? (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b) Or maybe as both? And under which conditions?**
- **To the extent that this particular phrasing of the debate tends to imply that ‘democracy’ refers to only one particular institutional arrangement on which consensus exists, clearly a very simplified picture of a much more complex historical dialectic, POPULISMUS will also explore the possibility that what is at stake here is the antagonism between different conceptions of democracy (participatory vs. elitist).**
- **But even if one stays within the framework of a liberal democratic model, what does the dynamic ‘return’ of ‘the people’ reveal with regards to the state of democratic institutions in the 21st century? If popular sovereignty and representation have been the victims of the post-democratic, technocratic transformation of liberal democracies in an age of advanced globalization (Crouch 2004), is populism symptomatic of the need for a new type of democratization? And since the European construction is increasingly suffering from such a post-democratic *malaise* (Habermas 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Beck 2011) can a ‘return to the people’ play any role in reversing this trend, as some political theorists have recently argued? (Balibar 2010). What are the risks involved here and how can they be addressed by contemporary political theory and analysis?**

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

POPULISMUS