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*Left-wing populism in Ecuador: Preliminary notes on  
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**Introduction**

In the wake of the appearance of new European left-wing parties prone to articulate in their discourse heterogeneous popular demands, setting them against a common enemy, a revitalised debate around the question of populism both as an interpretative category and a political strategy for the Left has emerged (Errejón 2011; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014). The growing seduction exerted within the Left by the prospect of creating a ‘people’ suggests an ever-wider recognition of the primacy of the political, understood as the moment in which new political identifications are forged amid economic and social dislocations that loosen previous investments. Although the current wave of interest is primarily directed at making sense of the ongoing experiences of SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Left had already gone through this path in Latin America only a decade ago.

It is a truism to highlight that the fundamental difference between the kind of left-wing populism emerging today in Europe and that of the recent Latin American progressive experiments is temporality; yet, it is one that bears important political consequences and permits to analyse the possible, but by no means necessary, trajectories of left-wing populism. In other words, populism should not be analysed statically, but as a function of the moment in which it is situated, whether as a political logic deployed from the ranks of the opposition, or from the side of the incumbent.

Progressive forces in Latin America have now been in power for some time and this experience can thus shed light on both the potentialities and the risks inherent in the populist path. The following theoretical exercise will take its empirical bearings from the Citizens’ Revolution in Ecuador. Firstly, a succinct historical detour will frame the context preceding the advent of Rafael Correa’s project into the national scene, and summarise its emergence and policies. Secondly, the hegemonic grip achieved by this project will be accounted for by focussing on the primacy of the political. Thirdly, the most problematic aspects of Correa’s politics will be scrutinised in order to untangle the potential bottlenecks of left-wing populism. These reflections are meant to spark a discussion on the type of populism the Left should stand for: the fourth section will thus attempt to advance some preliminary answers in this sense. A conclusion will then wrap up the main points raised throughout the text.

**Neoliberal and post-neoliberal Ecuador**

Ecuador went through a period of high political instability and economic crises in the 1990s and early 2000s, characterised, among other things, by the toppling of three

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consecutive elected Presidents under the pressure of massive street demonstrations, and the surfacing of multiple demands expressed by the population. Many of them stemmed from the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, which deepened profound contradictions that had their genesis in colonial times. These demands, however, consistently differed as to what they aimed at, while their proponents found it difficult to coalesce in a unique project able to launch an effective, sustained, organised and disciplined assault on the hegemony of the traditional parties, tied to international financial institutions (Mazzolini 2012).

Let us mention some of these demands, often overlapping, but nevertheless analytically distinct: environmental calls against the destruction of the Amazon and Andean ecosystems through extractive activities, indigenous demands aimed at the fostering of rights for ancestral populations, initiatives calling for the cancellation of foreign debt, feminist demands pushing for the official recognition of domestic jobs, advocacy for economic, social and collective rights in the name of equality, anti-imperialist and pro-sovereignty protests against the constant interference of the US in domestic politics, rejection of a corrupt and detached political class, workers' claims against labour outsourcing and flexibility (Mazzolini 2012).

A fairly distinguished heterodox-leaning economics professor in the national scene, Correa was appointed as Finance Minister in 2006 by the then interim President Alfredo Palacio. While in the post, he took a number of redistributive measures that brought about turmoil in the country, after which he was ousted. As a result, he gained much visibility and media coverage, and decided to found a political movement, which united different pre-existing political groups and urban intellectuals, and discursively articulated the demands mentioned above. Initially considered as an underdog, he managed to win the elections and became President in January 2007. He then pushed for the institution of a Constituent Assembly, resulting in the 'Montecristi' Constitution – approved in 2008 – which paved the way out of neoliberalism. Since then, Correa has been re-elected two more times, last time in February 2013 with a sweeping 57% of the vote in the first round.

Policy-wise, Correa's executive has consistently delivered in terms of poverty alleviation (CEPAL 2014, SENPLADES 2013: 113-114) and reduction of inequalities (SENPLADES, 2013: 114-115), especially thanks to extended welfare provision in the areas of education and health-care, and also promoted the construction of major infrastructure works in the country (with special emphasis on connectivity and electrical power production). A heterodox economic policy involving anti-cyclical macro-management has also been adopted, including the set-up of a debt-audit commission that finally resulted in a huge relief of its burden (SENPLADES 2013: 15, 53-58, 428). However, his economics has lately been characterised by a mitigation of his early rhetoric: a clear example of this is the recently signed trade agreement with the EU, which resembles in many aspects those signed by Colombia and Peru (Isch 2014). In sum, economic policy has been about fostering consumption and economic growth, accompanied by sound social policies, the deepening of extractive activities and market regulation (Stefanoni 2014). In terms of foreign policy, this has been characterised by a defiant stance towards the US and the fostering of Latin and South-American integration processes. Nevertheless, Correa has not always been as progressive on gender issues, by explicitly vetoing abortion even in cases of rape and promoting a sexual education programme based on abstinence (Guidi 2015).

## The primacy of the Political

As already hinted, the political and economic situation in Ecuador made the 2006 conjuncture ripe for a change: in fact, it is in those moments called by Gramsci 'organic crises', in which dominant narratives exhaust their potential, that new political projects can enter the hegemonic field and challenge power-holders. It was thus thanks to Rafael Correa's political gamble that all the above-mentioned demands became equivalentially enchainned, such that their contiguity became an analogy (Laclau 2005: 109). In other words, originally dispersed demands gained homogeneity and unity by merging into a single discourse such that one necessarily implied the other. The popularity of Correa's project then rested on the simplification of the political space, consisting in the discursive creation of two antagonistic camps: on one side 'the people', that is the bearers of the articulated democratic demands, and on the other the 'elites', that is bankers, the traditional political class, the export-oriented business sector and mainstream press. Correa devised particularly persuasive ways to define the two camps: for instance, 'the people' was initially defined in terms of those with 'clean hands, lucid minds and brave hearts', whereas the elites were depicted through derisive or pejorative nicknames, such 'bigwigs' for the upper classes and 'partitocracy' for the fading political parties. It is possible to see here at play the importance of naming: as the unity of the people is not grounded on an undisputable infrastructure, but rather constitutes the product of a rhetorical operation, naming is performative and provides a moment of unity to the popular subject and its adversary (Laclau 2005: 118). In addition, it is to be noted that the unity of the former did not simply consist of the amalgamation of organised sectors and already politicised individuals: by diversifying its rhetoric – at once including sophisticated tropes addressed at a cultivated audience, and more 'plebeian' ones, spiced by popular utterances and gestures, and thus capable of interpellating ordinary people traditionally alien to politics –, the project of the Citizens' Revolution went beyond the problem of 'preaching to the converted', and thereby created a distinctively new and unique political identification that to some extent modified the very elements that were incorporated.

This neatly leads us to consider another feature of the populist discourse of Correa. We need to ask ourselves: what kept together all the demands? What was the nodal point, that is to say the partiality elevated to universality that by 'emptying' itself managed to allude to a variety of elements uniting them into a concrete project? There have been some signifiers that enjoyed a degree of privilege over others, such as 'development', intended in terms of modernisation of the country, and 'equality'. However, the empty signifier that has so far been capable of keeping together the popular camp can be most convincingly identified with the name of the leader, that is the very figure of Rafael Correa (see Laclau 2005b: 40).

Only a work of such political articulation of the above-mentioned demands could manage to create a new 'us', that is a new 'people'; without this process no political result of this sort would have been possible. All this is quite at odds with the notion of the 'multitude', a term embraced by thinkers of a different radical strand, that theorise self-management, the autonomy of demands and the disengagement from the State (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, 2009). In their framework, hegemony is purposefully avoided, as merely mimicking the patterns of domination and exploitation characteristic of neoliberalism (Day 2005: 83, 88-89; Beasley-Murray

2010: xvi). However, the Ecuadorian lesson teaches us that multitudes do not spontaneously emerge and converge to present a serious threat to power and existing political configurations. There is no immanent, spontaneous, teleological getting together of heterogeneous elements that supplant capitalism at a subterranean level (Laclau 2001: 6-7). In this sense, political communities are never a gift of nature, but the outcome of political construction that pulls together diverse aims, even those that may appear at first to be conflicting with each other (Kioupkiolis 2014: 153). If we think of politics in terms of a horizontal and a vertical axis, whereby the first represents the flourishing of demands, their multiplication, the 'multitudinous moment', and the vertical in turn symbolises the aggregation of such demands in a political project that confronts power, the case of Ecuador, and of Latin America more generally, demonstrates that any stride towards the undoing of neoliberalism has only come through a work of political articulation that combines verticality and horizontality.

### **The bottlenecks of left-wing populism**

All that does not mean that the popular camp is bereft of any contradictions. The equivalential inscription gives solidity to the demands at the expense of their autonomy, with distinct objectives potentially clashing with each other in practical terms within the overall context of the unified project (Laclau 2005: 129). As a result of this tension, each element that is incorporated into the chain of equivalence is open to be disputed and re-appropriated by different projects that attribute a different signified to its signifier (Laclau 2005: 131). The first dilemma that emerged in the Citizens' Revolution consisted thus in the open clash between redistributive and environmentalist impulses. In a nutshell, to make redistribution concrete in the short-term and make the entitlements of new rights effective, the generation of wealth was needed. Still tied to a primary-exporting model, Ecuador cannot afford to generate such wealth without furthering the extraction of natural resources, which entails by necessity a pressure on the environment. This is because economic diversification is not possible in the short run, as it needs time and investments. What Laclau calls the 'particularist logic' cannot accept this tension and here a war of position irrupts between the populist attempt to maintain the equivalential inscription of the environmental demand and the logic of difference that strives for its autonomy. However, it can be broadly argued that this type of tension – which resulted in the distancing of some of the environmentalist constituencies from the government – has not constituted a serious threat to the populist political practice of Correa.

Nevertheless, new problematic aspects have surfaced in recent times. As stated above, the Citizens' Revolution has displayed for some time a positive dialectic between horizontality and verticality. Recently, though, the project of Correa has been increasingly doing without the horizontal axis, as he distanced himself and his government from organised social sectors, giving birth to a qualitatively different experience. The waning of the horizontal axis throws light on a certain paradox. Populism finds legitimisation in the lack of an infrastructural ground that impedes society from being transparent or reconciled with itself. The discursive creation of two camps and the articulation of heterogeneous signifiers around such a division imposes itself as a task – and, in fact, as the only option for hegemonic success – for the Left precisely because there is no essence guiding people's consciousness through a predetermined, teleological course (Laclau and Mouffe

1985: 109). The notion of ‘the people’ to which all Latin American national-popular governments have made constant references is thus linked to the proactive assembling of diverse claims for change, providing them with a nodal point necessary for acquiring political effectiveness; but this is a precarious construction, for it can be de-instituted or contested with the same rapidity with which it was originally constituted (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 142). This very ontological terrain that permitted the construction of ‘the people’ often tends to be neglected: once again, we get back into essentialist waters, as the discourse that permitted to conquer a hegemonic position in the early days of the populist project is deemed to represent an everlasting fullness. This entirely disregards the fact that the society that Correa’s government contributed to transform over the last few years now faces new situations and challenges, which could be aptly addressed only through creative and innovative discursive practices. In other words, in order for the Citizens’ Revolution to maintain its – always precarious and unstable – hegemony, receptivity towards new floating signifiers and common senses developing in society would be necessary. Such a capacity, however, is stifled by an exaggerated cult of personality towards the leader – earlier cashed out through the lenses of the nodal point –, who has increasingly ceased to be an accurate interpreter of the moods of society and seems to despotically impose his positions on the party.

In fact, the personalisation of the experience has also translated into a re-emergence of hierarchies and top-down processes. With this, a fictitious separation of powers, a forced application of the law, the replacement of deliberation and genuine political mobilisation by marketing and, even more worryingly, the emergence of authoritarian tendencies have progressively made their appearance. In particular, representatives of the Citizens’ Revolution have increasingly become a closed elite club to which one can gain access only if complete allegiance to the leader is demonstrated. Moreover, the prominence of the leader impedes the processing of decisions even within the popular camp: the leader is already conceived as the embodiment of the popular will and the need for deliberation is more or less suppressed. This is paralleled by a specific place for the populist followers. In this case, ‘[t]he people emerge as the source of legitimacy for the populist movement without the necessity of political action’ (Westlind 1996: 104). This need not to be so, as a populist discourse can well accommodate an intense level of political activism, encompassing not simply voting, but also rallies, mass meetings, and, even more crucially, instances of direct democracy. And yet, in the case of the Citizens’ Revolution, the role attributed to the followers has been increasingly passive, highlighting the verticality of the decision-making process.

A few concrete examples will suffice to substantiate these remarks more clearly. Following a disappointing result at the last local elections in March 2014, various members of *Alianza País* (Correa’s political organisation), fearful of future electoral prospects without the explicit presence of the President, proposed to amend the Constitution in order to allow Correa a further re-election. Contrarily to what he had claimed until then, Correa opened the door to that possibility: ‘I think it is my duty to review the sincere decision I made not to go for re-election because I have a responsibility to ensure that this process is irreversible’ (El Telégrafo 2014). This and similar statements betray an attempt to ‘freeze’ meaning, a lure which continuously resurfaces in his discourse. Moreover, despite minor constitutional amendments achieved in 2011 by Correa via a referendum – when his movement did not control a parliamentary majority –, a change of such magnitude is now being

decided exclusively in the National Assembly, now favourable to Correa by roughly two-thirds. However, opinion polls suggest that the vast majority of the population would prefer the matter to be established through broader popular consultation (Cedatos 2015) and widespread scepticism exists as to whether indefinite re-election is a good option for the country or not (El Telégrafo 2014b).

Even more tellingly, Correa has displayed a growing intolerance towards dissent, both internal and external. As for the first, during the parliamentary discussion on the reform of the Penal Code, a few MPs of *Alianza País* proposed the decriminalisation of abortion in case of rape. This move prompted a strong reaction from Correa, who harshly criticised the move and asked those MPs to be sanctioned for supposedly breaking party discipline, as the issue had not been internally discussed. The involved MPs were temporarily suspended from the movement and the proposal was suppressed, amid the threat of Correa: 'If these acts of betrayal and disloyalty go on, I will tender my resignation' (BBC, 2013). Much more eloquent have been some of the recent reactions against opponents, with specific crusades launched against an anonymous internet profile that published sarcastic political 'memes' (who then, as his identity was revealed, claimed to have received threats and decided to stop his activity) and a critical cartoonist, who has been sanctioned a number of times as a result of Correa's pressures to the 'Superintendency of Information and Communication', a nominally independent state institution (in actual fact, all the branches of the state are led by people close to Correa, and in some case even by persons who worked for him in the past).

In other words, Correa has pursued a politics of literalism that makes no room for irreverence and sarcasm, revealing a paranoid attitude towards any critique against authority. In this sense, he has also turned his 4 hours-long Saturday broadcasts, intended to keep the citizenry informed about his weekly activities, into a way to put on the defensive anyone who dares to disagree with him (Sosa 2012: 177). Similarly, the government has ever more relied on a massive use of political advertising at the expense of internal debate and the consolidation of a functioning political movement (Sosa 2012: 180, Ramírez 2010: 191).

### **Which left-wing populism? Some preliminary answers**

Ernesto Laclau has initially advanced the category of populism as a descriptive one, postulating its importance insofar as it throws light on the ontological terrain in which politics takes place. Populism is indeed to be understood as an ideal pole of a continuum. The opposite ideal pole is 'institutionalism' (Laclau 2012: 38), i.e. the differential satisfaction of demands in administrative fashion, such that the possibility for them to coalesce in a single identity is neutralised (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145, 151) and the rules underpinning a contested practice are never questioned. A political practice is then never entirely populist or institutionalist, but typically combines both dimensions, shedding light on the dialectic compromise between equivalence and difference (Laclau 2005b: 46). However, it would be a mistake to see Laclau's project as simply restricted to an ontological problem, for it clearly carries normative entailments insofar as the task of the Left is concerned. In the dialogue with Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler, he starts to undo the contrast he upheld earlier between the normative and the descriptive (Butler et al. 2000: 294). Other less visible academic interventions (see Laclau 2006) and Laclau's well-known strenuous defence of the left-wing populist experiences that have emerged in Latin

America over the last fifteen years, with particular emphasis on his native Argentina, reinforce his engagement with the normative, even though the connection with the descriptive is scarcely explored.

The recognition that the descriptive has normative impingements has come with the introduction of another divide, this time between the ethical and the normative/descriptive – in line with the Heideggerian distinction between the ontological and the ontic (Laclau 2000: 81). This implies that the ethical is considered as something constitutive of all societies, and not exclusively inherent to democratic ones. Simon Critchley has articulated a particularly powerful critique of such a stance by highlighting not just the untenability, but also the scarce usefulness of the concept of the ethical if it were to simply highlight the impossibility of fullness, of a final ‘suture’ (Critchley 2004: 119-121). On the contrary, if the ethical is considered as a distinguishing feature of democratic politics, it becomes coterminous with the normative, as one description of the ethical is recommended over another (Critchley 2004: 121). While the former connotation banally signals that dislocations sooner or later always bring about the crumbling of any identification in the name of the impossibility of an ultimate fixation of meaning, the latter produces significant political repercussions, as it implies particular attentiveness to the ways in which a political practice may undermine the ethical commitment to pluralism, or to put in the language of Lefort, the emptiness at the place of power. Under this logic, it becomes patent that any normative position must foreground the ethical: ‘it means that our normative stances are always relative to the ultimate contingency of social relations and practices. [...] the norms and ideals that we project [...] are intrinsically contingent, contestable and revisable. Contingency necessarily penetrates the realm of the normative, which in turn indicates the need to develop a suitable ethos’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 198).

As social scientists that critically observe and to an extent attempt to influence the world in which we live, it becomes difficult to advocate populism without adding some further qualifications to that advocacy. In this sense, it is arguable that in the passage from the descriptive to the normative, the notion of populism has not yet undergone the necessary theoretical work to articulate it with radical democracy – the normative facet of Laclau’s political discourse theory. One of the primary commitments of radical democracy is indeed an ethical commitment: the notion of truth is rejected, and pluralism is fully embraced (Mouffe 1993). This precaution enables different representations, different meanings of the social to continuously emerge and be propagated, and indicates a particular way through which to relate to the political Other. ‘The aim of democratic politics thus is to construct a “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an “adversary”, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question’ (Mouffe 2000: 101-102). This is the core of the ‘agonistic pluralist’ model endorsed by Chantal Mouffe, and which should be more comprehensively incorporated into any advocacy of populism.

Let us push forward this reasoning a little further. Rafael Correa, along with other progressive populist leaders, has laid claim to transforming society while abiding by a liberal-democratic institutional framework. Mouffe conceptualises liberal-democracy as a contingent articulation between the two principles sustaining the notion: the liberal element, on one side, and the egalitarian-democratic one, on



the other (Mouffe 2000: 2-3). The contemporary unbalance in favour of the first, especially in its individualist and rationalist version, has not only caused a massive rise of worldwide inequalities with disastrous consequences on human welfare, but also, on a different level, the concealment of the political, i.e. of the ineradicable dimension of antagonism inherent to all society (Mouffe 1993: 2). Mouffe has thus long advocated a rebalancing between the two elements, trying to articulate a vision in which the needed deepening of the democratic control can go along with the defence of liberal-democratic institutions, especially insofar as pluralism is concerned (Mouffe 1993: 103). In this attempt, however, Mouffe is blunt in recognising the role played by liberalism in sustaining the pluralistic thrust of democracy: 'It is only by virtue of its articulation with political liberalism that the logic of popular sovereignty can avoid descending into tyranny' (Mouffe 1993: 105). Mouffe's discussion offers thus a promising bedrock on which to anchor a left-wing populism: while the renegotiation of the terms in the unstable marriage between liberalism and democracy necessarily implies an enhancement of the latter at the expense of the former, this impulse should not undo the marriage, but rather radicalise its emancipatory potential.

A further angle from which to look at the question is that of the fantasmatic logic underpinning the discourse of the Citizens' Revolution. By engaging with Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau has postulated that the empty signifier plays the role of the *objet petit a*, that is, it achieves the hegemonic representation of a whole by promising a mythical fullness (Laclau 2005: 115). By going beyond signification pure and simple, the object is then invested with a libidinal force that is indispensable to generate a sustainable identification (Stavrakakis 2007: 282). However, a sustainable identification does not have to go against the ethical and disregard the fundamental lack underlying any symbolic representation – the Lacanian 'lack in the symbolic Other'. As formulated by Stavrakakis:

the type of investment has still to be decided. Emptiness and lack can indeed acquire a positive/institutional expression and can be enjoyed. Instead of functioning as a support for fantasy [...], the partial drive can become the leading force towards a reorientation of enjoyment faithful to the positive/negative dialectics. Only thus shall we be able to really enjoy our partial enjoyment, without subordinating it to the cataclysmic desire of fantasy (Stavrakakis 2007: 282).

An unmediated fantasy can in fact be problematic for a radical democratic project. The mode of investment to be promoted should rather be critical of ideological over-investments, whereby the ideological 'consist[s] of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture' (Laclau 1991: 27). Rather, the mode of investment should be associated with openness and with 'an alternative ethos which signals a commitment to recognizing and exploring the possibilities of the new in contingent encounters' (Glynos 2008: 291). It is my contention that such an attitude, which by necessity implies an ironic ethos that maintains a prudent distance between one's own normative commitment and actions, is difficult to achieve when the prominence of the leader is unduly protracted. While charisma may be a necessary ingredient of the affective dimension of any project that seeks to dislodge previous political identifications and pull together diverse democratic demands, the perpetuation of such a dependence

falls into a cult of the personality that blinds followers, impedes them from a detached and honest look at reality and gives rise to a despotic type of leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The Ecuadorian Citizens' Revolution represents a paradigmatic experience, which can demonstrate the efficacy of the populist option to unhinge neoliberalism, while also exposing some risks inherent to the phenomenon of populism. As for the first, the Ecuadorian populist project of Correa has been pursuing hegemony as a struggle to reconfigure existing configurations of forces and to substitute them with a new power.

However, this project, having been in place for 8 years, can shed light on how the temporal dimension may impact upon populism, with special emphasis on the transition from opposition to incumbency. A degree of institutionalisation has in fact distanced the project from the antagonisms that once constituted the wherewithal of its very inception, and some authoritarian tendencies have also made their appearance.

Populism may entail some non-necessary, but likely-to-emerge organisational features that have normative impingements upon democracy that contradict the ethical thrust that a leftist political project should carry. We should thus advocate truly democratic organisational features for a left-wing populist discourse. Even though the role of the leader is often indispensable to politically articulate heterogeneous demands and unblock the inertias, the passage from the leader to the idea is a step that cannot be postponed. Following Freud: 'This abstraction, again, might be more or less completely embodied in the figure of what we might call a secondary leader, and interesting varieties would arise from the relation between the idea and the leader' (Freud 1921: 100).

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**POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**  
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## POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismiss the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.



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