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## ***Populism Without Nationalism, or, Learning from the Enemy***

### **Abstract:**

Critically revisiting the trend of associating populism with nationalism, I show how a populist logic may also be traced to the politics of neoliberal radicals. I demonstrate how a post-foundational approach can be used to untangle “populist” from “nationalist” discourses and see how other radical contenders to mainstream politics have used the very same populist logic. My analysis is informed by scholars suggesting that the central theme in populist discourse is the construction and signification of an antagonistic divide between “the people” and “the elite”. My case in point is that of Swedish neoliberals who moved swiftly from the margin to the mainstream, precisely by positioning themselves as an anti-establishment alternative to the powers that was. Their populist appeal furthermore explains part of their success and contributes to a better understanding of how social-democratic hegemony was toppled in Sweden. The learning point is that if we become too bent on associating populism only with nationalists and right-wing extremists, we risk missing the mark in terms of understanding how populism works and how populist discourse is used to gain political leverage. We stand to learn much more by broadening our analytical scope to include the role that populism has played in other successful political movements such as neoliberalism, socialism, and so forth. The empirical analysis presented here is one example of how such research can enrich current endeavours in the study of populism.

### **Introduction**

When I was studying neoliberal discussions around political change as they played out in Sweden during the late 1980s, I was taken by surprise to discover broad similarities between the neoliberal analysis of the Swedish labour movement and Chantal Mouffe’s more recent analysis of Thatcherism and nationalist populism. The successful strategies that Mouffe ascribe to these political movements turn out to be strikingly similar to those ascribed by neoliberal intellectuals<sup>1</sup> to the, likewise successful, Swedish labour movement in the post-war period. Learning from the enemy, as the title suggests, should be understood in a dual sense: how researchers as well as political actors left and right today can learn from neoliberalism and how neoliberals learned from the labour movement.

This paper has two aims which are mirrored in the structure. First, I aim to show how the Swedish neoliberal movement and its discourse was organised according to a populist logic. My theoretical framework builds on post-foundationalist theories on populism, political rhetoric, and discourse. I embark from Ernesto Laclau’s concept of populism (Laclau 2005a), which has become a major theme in the discourse theoretical literature during the past decade. Because

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<sup>1</sup> For the full theorisation of the concept of “intellectuals” from a performative perspective see Sunnercrantz 2017.

populism is a contested, broad, and abstract concept – interwoven with hegemonic practices and empty signifiers – I try to demonstrate how “the people” can be articulated as part of a political struggle and demands in contingent structures of meaning. Second, and following, I clarify the non-nationalist character of the neoliberal populist discourse and explore how populist articulation does not equate to nationalism, anti-immigration, or xenophobia and thus contribute to the untangling of “populist” from “nationalist” discourses (as suggested by De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Palonen 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). The Swedish neoliberal discourse illustrates how it is possible to found a populist logic on “people” or “human beings” rather than “the people”.

## **A post-foundational approach to populism**

In this analysis I treat populism as a performative process in which a universal political subject like “people” is positioned against an “elite”. I take inspiration from a post-foundational perspective that follows political theorist Ernesto Laclau’s theories on populism, hegemony, discourse, and contingent, rhetorical foundations of society (Laclau 2005a, 2014; Marchart 2008; Palonen 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Now, the literature on populism has all but exploded over the past few years, and fruitful theoretical discussions continue. In this paper I lean on theories developed by Laclau (2005a, 2005b), Chantal Mouffe (2018a), Cas Mudde (2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), Ruth Wodak (2017), Emilia Palonen (Palonen 2018), Yannis Stavrakakis and others (2017), to conceptualise populism as a political and discursive logic, or a logic of articulation. Populist discourses recreate the social as a division between these two opposing camps. Populist articulations create an image of the speaker as a saviour of the people speaking on behalf of the people against its enemy – in contrast to untrustworthy politicians. To argue that politics should be the expression of the will of the people and to formulate one’s politics as that collective will, where my party represents the people against the elite, is part of the same logic. From a post-foundational standpoint it is possible to see that the universal category or identity of the signifier “the people” can be substituted by any form of universal and inclusive “us”/“we” that can take up the representation of the historical/political subject and integrate heterogeneous identities and demands in a broader chain of equivalences. (De Cleen 2016; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Laclau 2014; Mouffe 2018a; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Palonen 2018; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Wodak 2015, 2017). Furthermore, populist rhetoric uses metaphors that structure the social around a vertical, down/up axis referring to power and hierarchical positioning; i.e. the underdog vs. overdog (Dyrberg 2003). As Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) explain:

Populist rhetoric often refers to these down/up identities with the words “the people” and “the elite”, but also uses a range of other labels. What is crucial is that populists claim to speak for “the ordinary people”, “the little man”, “the common man”, “the man in the street” as a down-group, an underdog, and reject “the establishment”, “the political caste”, “the ruling class” as an up-group for not representing “the people” and for endangering its interests. This down/up structure is one of the elements that differentiates populism from other discourses that also revolve around the signifier “the people” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 311).

Consequently, it is possible to discern populist practices among other actors than the xenophobic right-wing. In previous analyses, rhetoric has proved a crucial part in the constitution of political discourses, the construction of ideologies, the performances of intellectual functions, and more (Finlayson 2007, 2012; Laclau 2014; Sunnercrantz 2017; Wodak 2015). Rhetoric can also be an integral part of a post-foundational analysis of populism, which is the approach that I take in this paper.

With a critical stance to the trend of associating populism with nationalism, I draw on empirical examples of how neoliberal political discourses can exhibit populist characteristics. In my PhD thesis (Sunnercrantz 2017) I used a performative approach inspired by rhetorical political analysis (Finlayson 2007) and discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) to analyse meaning-making practices in the public medialised Swedish privatisation debate, covering the crisis years of 1988-1993<sup>2</sup>. In this historical period of crisis and dislocation new political positions emerged to contest the social democratic hegemonic formation. Subsequently, I have expanded my empirical material beyond the topic of privatisation in public debate and into the strategic dimensions of neoliberalism in Sweden in late 1980s and early 1990s.

Populism, in my perspective, is not about the content of political demands, nor is it equivalent to popular demands. “Privatisation” was not a popular demand in Sweden when neoliberal radicals demanded it; on the contrary, the public attitude was negative towards privatisation of public enterprises (Nilsson 1997; Svallfors and Tyllström 2018). There was a clear divide between the neoliberal hegemonisation of media on one side and public opinion on the other. Mainstream debate pages scarcely represented the general public’s attitudes (which might add to an anti-establishment sentiment among readers). In contrast, policies represented the perspective that dominated the mainstream medialised debate (Sunnercrantz 2017).

In the past few years, increased effort has been made to specify what characterises populism in empirical situations and local cases (Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Palonen 2018; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017, to name but a few). In research on Scandinavian populism much attention has been brought to voter turnout, opinion polls, media exposure by numbers or how far-right parties are treated by editors in mainstream newspapers – yet such research neglects to draw parallels to the great success of *neoliberal populism* in Sweden, perhaps because “populist” is still equated with “nationalist” in much research (Hellström 2016; Hellström and Lodenius 2016; Immerzeel and Pickup 2015; Rydgren 2006). Going against the surging trend to label radical right-wing politics populist, I argue that in order to fully comprehend the socio-political landscape today we cannot afford to exclude extra-parliamentary and non-authoritarian actors from the analysis. Moreover, the successful political movements from yesteryear may have unacknowledged influence on the politics of today. It is easy to be dazzled by extraordinary circumstances and charismatic political spokespersons and accept the current hegemonic formation as natural – and to forget that neoliberalism’s road to success was paved with populist logics (cf. Fryklund 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> The main empirical sources for the thesis, some of which are used here as well, consisted of print and broadcast mass media, including opinion and culture sections in national and regional daily newspapers; two more politicised journals; and one radio programme for debate on culture, ideas, and social matters, broadcast on national public service radio.

## Neoliberal Hegemonisation of Public Discourse in Sweden, at a Glance

In a previous discourse theoretical analysis of meaning making in the Swedish privatisation debate, I have challenged earlier analyses of the Swedish political discourse and argued that by the end of the 1990's crisis, neoliberalism did indeed hegemonise the public medialised discourse – since neoliberal ideology was reiterated as common sense across divergent political fora, and the neoliberal definition of private property was uncontested – any alternative seemed unimaginable (cf. Boréus 1997; Sunnercrantz 2017). Despite radical visions of a Night-watchman state (and beyond) and unlawful political actions, Swedish neoliberals were able to present a broad and united front for neoliberalisation in the late 1980s. The neoliberal rhetoric was broad and inclusive: it presented the neoliberal movement as a vast coalition of anti-etatist groups including think tanks, private universities, business, parliamentary party members and affiliate organisations, cultural expressions, and intellectuals. This was partly achieved by hijacking known authors, musicians, and film makers (regardless of their political intentions) and reiterating their works from a neoliberal frame of interpretation (see for example Norberg 1997), i.e. by articulating various groups and demands in an equivalential chain represented under the unifying symbol of “neoliberalism” (Sunnercrantz 2017).

In contrast, social-democratic spokespersons aimed their contributions to the debate at an internal audience (in the party and in parliament), even if published publicly. The struggle, presented in these contributions to the privatisation debate, was centred around internal battles (Sunnercrantz 2017). The right-wing faction at the top of the Social Democratic party (“Kanslihusögern”) scrambled to defend their position by launching “third way” politics in the 1980s (Feldt 1985, 1991). They incorporated some of the right-wing critique and proceeded to articulate neoliberal demands and economic arguments, in an attempt to expand its social basis. The ideological enmity between the “chancellery office right” within the Social Democratic Party and the more socialist trade unions was flaunted publicly in the process regarding the wage-earner funds<sup>3</sup> (Feldt 1991; Hort 2014a). Business and right-wing actors interpreted the proposal for wage-earner funds as a break from the post-war consensus between labour and capital. The Swedish Employers Association consequently gathered their forces for ideological warfare (Blyth 2002; Harvey 2005). Right-wing forces in and outside of parliament put aside their differences and focused on the common enemy: social democracy. With an inclusive political rhetoric, the neoliberal right represented what was best for all: private ownership. Neoliberal arguments described private ownership as beneficial, not just to each private individual but to society, and the economy in general. Internally, this was drawn up as a class politics for the bourgeoisie; but it was to be publicly proclaimed as a politics for all (see Segerstedt 1988a). The neoliberal project was formulated as an extension of democratic principles of liberty and equality, in the form of privatisation.

Neoliberal populist strategies succeeded in obscuring more materially oriented conflicts by playing up the moral aspects of the struggle around private versus public ownership and constructing an inimical relation between the individual

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<sup>3</sup> The WEFs were drawn up in the 1970s, implemented in 1983, and disbanded when a right-wing government took office in 1991

and the state. In order to push the boundaries for what they considered to be 'politically impossible' (Segerstedt 1988a) neoliberals scrutinised the historic 'privilege to define problems' (Westholm 1988: 26) and developed strategies to redefine the public's conception of reality. Inspired by the Swedish labour movement, these strategies were pursued through a mobilisation effort to take control of the political agenda by posing what appeared outwardly as a united front. The strategies can be summarised as follows:

- The link between welfare state and democracy was severed by arguing that the public sector was illegitimately financed through funds forced from the hands of hard-working individual tax-payers (cf. Gergils 1993c; Hayek 1960; Holmberg 1990; Nordin 1988);
- Privatisation was redescribed as a moral question of right and wrong; taxation is theft in the sense that to shift the individuals' money into state property must be morally wrong – i.e. "ownership" is always individual;
- Historic legitimisation was sought through posing individual ownership as an original natural state of things, while counterposing state and public ownership as modern perversions, thus laying the ground for the claim that individual liberty is dependent on the right to private ownership.

Neither social democrats nor leftist intellectuals seriously challenged these claims. As the question of privatisation was reformulated as a question of right and wrong rather than left and right, a neoliberal worldview was implemented as the common sense. In Sweden, neoliberals used moralism to condemn public/common ownership – the system, rather than the opponent, was stigmatised in moralistic terms (Sunnercrantz 2017)<sup>4</sup>. By framing e.g. privatisation as a moral question of right and wrong, neoliberal rhetoric constructed a moralistic (rather than materialist) terrain in which to debate the issue of privatisation – but not in order to define any sort of "pure" moral people as in Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2017) analysis<sup>5</sup>.

Wodak (2015) shows how right-wing populism is a product of the erosion of trust in politics. A loss of trust in existing political systems and a following search for alternatives is a recurring pattern following crises, since the post-war era. Similarly, the discourse theoretical Essex-school stress the role of dislocations of discourse and the myths, rolled out by intellectuals, that stabilise dislocations (Howarth 2013; Laclau 1990). In the Swedish case, neoliberal political projects exploited a general erosion of trust in the Social Democratic reign. Discontent with state control and monopolies in many areas (from production and sales of alcohol to child care) grew among actors left and right. But, prior to 1990, there was no apparent crisis. Granted, as the fiscal crisis escalated, so did the ideological shift to the right in public debate (but there are more factors at stake here, including the dominating daily news paper's choice to scrap its section for cultural debate). As the Swedish housing

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<sup>4</sup> Hence, contrary to previous discussions around 'the displacement of politics by morality' – this was used by neoliberals not as an anti-populist strategy, but as part of a process to construct a chain of equivalence between the morally right, privatisation, the individual, people, and so on, on the one hand, and the morally wrong elite on the other. (Mouffe 2013: 181; Stavrakakis et al. 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Still, I am not convinced that moralism should be a decisive factor in definitions of populism. (cf. Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2017)

bubble deflated in 1991 through 1992, and a severe credit crunch commenced, the government scrambled to bail out banks and nationalise the worst debts - a strategy later adopted on a much larger scale during the North Atlantic fiscal crisis of 2008 (Krugman 2008; *The Economist* 2009). In the process of defining the cause and solution to the crisis, the welfare state came under harsh scrutiny. Right-wing intellectuals had long been working on a ready conclusion, and debaters (politicians, experts, various spokespersons, and organisations, et cetera) swiftly agreed that the public sector was too large, too costly, too centralised, and too undemocratic. The reinvigoration of populist logics through neoliberal articulations co-created and utilised the sense of crisis, all the while presenting a ready solution: marketisation. In that sense it was a matter of a construction, rather than a mere erosion, of distrust in politics (Blyth 2002; Hort 2014a, 2014b; Sunnercrantz 2017).

I am not alone to suggest that contemporary populism perpetuates aspects of neoliberal ideology, or that neoliberalism can be populist. The sense of resentment and anti-political attitudes seem integral to neoliberalism as well as to the xenophobic radical right. It has equally been pointed out that contemporary right-wing populist movements target established positions with representative monopoly (journalists, scholars, political parties) rather than production monopolies, which coincides with neoliberal rhetoric (cf. Davies 2016, 2018; Wodak 2015). Hans-Georg Betz (1994) analysed neoliberal populism at the time and recognised that voter disenchantment escalated in Sweden in the period from 1973 to 1991. While Betz identified the populist aspects of the short-lived right-wing “New Democracy” party, he failed to recognise the populist practices of the extra-parliamentary neoliberal movement.<sup>6</sup> And so, despite the scrutiny aimed at populism on the one hand and neoliberalism on the other, convergences between the two have largely been overlooked. Yet, neoliberal populism offered ‘alternative influencing tools other than mere voting’ - to borrow a phrase from Emilia Palonen (2018) - through extra-parliamentary organisations, business associations, think tanks and more.

### **Learning from the enemy: similarities between postfoundational analyses of populism and neoliberal analyses of the labour movement**

The neoliberal struggle to define privatisation was aimed ‘not just at affecting the economic system but people’s conception of reality as well’ (Westholm 1988: 41). Plans and strategies drawn up by neoliberals in the late 1980s were strikingly populist. Swedish business and right-wing scholars purposefully gathered their forces to discuss theoretical and practical possibilities for a counter-hegemonic offensive. These actors welcomed globalisation not just for the sake of market relations, but also for the promise of diminishing power of national organisations (e.g. trade unions) that they saw in it. This presented new possibilities for political alternatives to the social democratic reign, or so neoliberal argumentation suggested (Segerstedt 1988b). The similarities between neoliberal strategies and contemporary analyses of populism took me by surprise, as I analysed discussions around political practises in

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<sup>6</sup> New Democracy was formed in early ’91 and by the election in September 6,7 % of voters had rallied to their cause (Betz 1994). Still, since Hayek and other neoliberal thinkers disapproves of majority rule and these types of parliamentary democratic state systems, it seems sensible to pay attention to neoliberal politics outside of parliamentary politics.

neoliberal think-tank outputs, seminars, and various fora for debate<sup>7</sup>. While theorists, such as Chantal Mouffe (2018a), analyse Thatcherism and the growing nationalist populism across Europe today, Swedish neoliberals of the 1980s analysed the labour movement that had dominated the political post-war landscape in Sweden (see especially Westholm 1988; Zetterberg 1988). By examining the political strategies, rhetoric, organisation, coalition building, and various intellectual practices involved in the successful social-democratic project, neoliberal intellectuals reached many of the same conclusions that analyses of populist politics reach today. I will touch upon some of these commonalities in this section.

In a rhetorical situation, the representation of the historical, political subject can be taken up by another universal and inclusive “us” than “the people”. In analyses of the labour movement’s successful strategies, neoliberal intellectuals identified the need to articulate an “us” and the necessity of that “us” being a broad universal category that anyone can identify with. In the neoliberal populist rhetoric (and gradually in the public discourse) the signifier “people” was articulated in a chain of equivalences to “the individual”, “human beings”, “the common man”, and of course, “neoliberals” – who took up the representation of the people’s position against the state. “People” is thus constructed in a liberal discourse largely without exclusivist elements of nationalism<sup>8</sup>. The neoliberal rhetoric that positioned “people” against “the state” built on a successful unification of disparate groups under the same demand.

These neoliberals also saw the benefits of creating a division between the universal “us” or “people” and an elite (in social democratic rhetoric it was “the people” against “the capitalists” and establishments). In the public political debate, neoliberal arguments constructed a political frontier between the individual and the social democratic welfare state; disarticulating unifying links between the left, social democracy, the people, the working class, women (and so on) in the process. The demand for privatisation connected demands for freedom and democracy, thus prompting even leftist intellectuals to, at least partially, support neoliberal arguments. At the same time, leftist critique also targeted the Social Democratic party - for abandoning the people, workers, women, and students, in favour of power. For instance, a spokesperson for the Social Democratic party and youth organisation

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<sup>7</sup> This includes output from *Timbro*, which was and is the most significant neoliberal think tank in Sweden. I have not studied international think tanks as such, but articles, essays, et cetera that originate from international think tanks and were republished in Swedish media sources are included in the analysis. *Ratio* (publishing house from 1978-1988, later turned research institute), was a part of *Timbro* at the time, and have published not just books and research reports but collections of essays from their own seminars. These seminars, as well as other meetings and conferences were often reported in the neoliberal journal for political and philosophical debate, *Nyliberalen*. *Nyliberalen* started publishing in earnest in 1989 and received attention from mainstream press and leftist journals alike. It was openly attached to the organisation *Frihetsfronten*, “The Freedom Front”. The staff, members, and regular contributors to outputs from *Nyliberalen*, *Timbro* and *Ratio* were attached to various organisations including the Mont Pèlerin Society, business organisations, publishing houses, as well as right wing youth, student, and party organisations.

<sup>8</sup> Articulations that connect “nation” and “people”, as in “the Swedish people”, usually emphasise the particular aspect of this subject in contrast to more transcendental subjects such as “humans”, or “liberals”. I.e. neoliberals lamented over the Swedish people’s unwillingness to accept neoliberal ideals – positioning the national people in an inimical relation to the neoliberal “we”; or in efforts to ridicule authorities in their attempts impose ‘socio-fascist’ ideals on the “they” of the Swedish people (cf. Nordin 1993).



argued that the ‘strong’ society and its public systems had ‘gone too far’ (Thorwaldsson 1993), and argued for civil society solutions and individual empowerment instead. In place of the old social democratic hegemony, neoliberals sought a new hegemonic order based on popular consent and voluntary agreements. The left and social democrats met the new neoliberal mobilisation with passivity. By incorporating some of the neoliberal critique, the Social Democrats hoped to quench the upheaval and at the same time save as much as possible of the welfare state system and their own hegemonic project. Instead of taking up a conflicting stance to neoliberalism, social democratic concessions to privatisation demands reinforced the anti-etatist argument (Sunnercrantz 2017).

By analysing the labour movement, neoliberals realised the importance of constructing a united front and that ‘political success is often tantamount to building successful coalitions’ (Westholm 1988: 25). Pluralism in strategies and identities under the common demand for privatisation was the road to the neoliberal ‘revolution’ (Larsson 1988). In internal neoliberal fora, vivid ideological debates took place, but outwards they (neoliberal organisations, networks, think tanks, writers, etc.) took aim at the same enemy. The neoliberal project gained support from many sectors partly because it was articulated as a broad coalition of actors by neoliberals who realised the benefits of such a presentation; but also, because leftist intellectuals adopted this worldview.

Neoliberal intellectuals were well aware of the partisan nature of politics, as well as the need to cover up the particular and emphasise the universal sides of political demands. In analysing the workers’ movement these neoliberals learned the importance of a hegemonic struggle and the construction of an “enemy”. Speaking from an enunciated position of “we” humans, a seminar essay on the bourgeoisie’s submissiveness and future possibilities starts by analysing the social-democratic movement and arguing that:

it needed an enemy. Social democracy needed the capitalists, especially a few of them. Major capitalists dangled like carrots in front of the social-democratic election train and pulled it forward. *Here social democracy acquired a double standard: They wanted to preserve the capitalists in order to have an enemy.* At the same time, they had to fight the enemy (Westholm 1988: 30).

And so, the neoliberal right realised that they too had to create an enemy to fight. This enemy was not an economic elite but the protectors of the social democratic welfare state: politicians, intellectuals, union bosses, journalists, and oppressive state bureaucrats, i.e. the “establishment”. In many ways, these strategies resembled the strategies that Margaret Thatcher employed, as Mouffe shows (Mouffe 2018a: 29).

The lack of a political enemy was one of the main political challenges that neoliberal thinkers identified. Right-wing politicians ‘did not want an enemy [...] The bourgeoisie worldview did not contain as much politics and confrontation as the social democratic. Here, there was consensus instead of class struggle’ (Westholm 1988: 30). These neoliberals understood and acted on the knowledge that antagonisms are always present in a society – and that you can construct politics based on them:

There are always antagonisms in a society. Between buyer and seller, between employer and employed etc. If you want, you can construct

conditions for a civil war from these; but to do that you need bring them up on a sufficiently central level. But antagonisms can also be resolved through voluntary agreements [...] (Westholm 1988: 40).

The labour movement had built a successful political project on the antagonism between workers and employers, according to the neoliberal analysis. The neoliberal solution was to cover up this conflict with reference to voluntary agreements between labour-market parties. The real conflict, as neoliberal arguments portrayed it, lay between the common man and the oppressive system: the welfare state. Critique against public sector systems was phrased in terms of the state's obligation to respect human rights and freedoms (i.e. private ownership). And so, neoliberal arguments drew a line between human beings and the cold, evil, unjust welfare state that favoured only a few elite actors and ruined it for the masses; as well as the political and cultural establishment that defended this system. Interestingly, the left largely agreed to this description of the political landscape: the notion of the state apparatus as an enemy was reiterated; and politicians, media and cultural sections were described as an inaccessible/unapproachable establishment and ruling elite (see Greider 1992, 1993; Norlin 1992; Tännsjö 1988).

Radical neoliberals drove a hard battle against collectivism and all things public/common –striving to articulate collectivism in a chain of equivalences to nazism and communism (see Norberg 1993a), i.e. known “evils”. Moreover, neoliberals outside and *within* the Social-Democratic party exploited growing resistances to the collectivist, bureaucratic, and detached implementation of the welfare system (Mouffe 2018a). It was impossible for the Social Democrats to beat the right wing at their own game, however. Leftists found themselves ‘in the paradoxical situation of having to defend various welfare institutions that [they] criticised earlier for not being radical enough’, to borrow from Mouffe’s analysis of the contemporary left (Mouffe 2018a: 36. Again, the similarities between neoliberal populist movements in Sweden and the UK are striking). In the early 90s, arguments enunciated from leftist positions defended bureaucracy as the ‘most efficient and just’ (Carlén 1993) form of administration. Arguments enunciated from right, left and centre joined in the “revolution” of individual empowerment and freedom from the intrusive bureaucratic state, and this attitude quickly came to dominate the medialised public discourse (as seen in leftist contributions by Antman 1992; Greider and Lappalainen 1992; Lappalainen 1992). This situation resembles the Thatcherite discourse in the UK (Hall 1988; Mouffe 2018a), except that there was no *one* person or party behind the populist neoliberal practices in Sweden. And the suggestions Mouffe presents to reinvigorate the social democratic project have been tested by the Swedish neoliberal discourse coalition. Neoliberal intellectuals learned from the past and set out to transform the identity and strategy of right-wing politics.

Extra-parliamentarily, radical neoliberals who created their own alternative journal (“the Neoliberal”), treated the social democratic sphere as the establishment and criticised the conservative party for its blatant connections to the elite and upper classes. Discussions on political strategies and practices in fora such as these were aimed at a liberal audience that were to be persuaded of the means, rather than the cause for political change. Neoliberal ideologists acted internally by developing strategies and ideologies, and externally by mediating ideology to a broader audience. Just as the workers’ movement, right-wing think tanks wished to present its politics as a movement with history on its side, by representing the future

rather than the past and the obsolete. The liberal vision was to be described as modern – a natural step in the development of history and society. Internal discussions focused on outward rhetoric and orientational metaphors: ‘avoid slogans like “rollbacks”’ (Westholm 1988: 39). This rhymes well with the overall attempt to re-construct the political space from one based on a left/right orientation to a new order based on “up-down” (the state vs. people) and “front-back” (progress vs. regress) (Dyrberg 2003). Swedish neoliberals, in this sense, extracted themselves from the left-right spectrum, preferring a position in the bottom of the up-down and to the forth of the front-back spectrum; a peoples’ underdog, neither left or right, representing progress and the future.

The need of a vision, ideology, and ideologists was something else the neoliberals identified in the worker’s movement. The vision of the minimal state took the place of the welfare state. Demands for lower taxes were reformulated in terms that made it clear that ‘one person can get better without anyone else getting worse’ (Westholm 1988: 39) – i.e. forced taxation is unjust, as argued in early semi-internal discussions. Through later years, in a more outwardly engaging neoliberal journal, the tax system and public sector was presented as responsible for stealing the salaries – the profits of the bodily labour – of hard-working individuals. The Swedish state or “Sweden” is described as an oppressor; the dominated are the ‘we’, ‘human beings’, ‘individuals’, ‘everyone’ – the underdog position from where neoliberal arguments are uttered, often in combination with an emotionally engaging rhetoric (see for instance Holmberg 1990; Norberg 1993b; Varveus 1990a). The self-positioning of many neoliberal speakers as marginalised and oppressed further served to construct a political frontier along new spatial divides of in-out/centre-periphery (cf. De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Dyrberg 2003), where neoliberals sided with peripheries seen to be oppressed by Social Democratic centralism.

This way, neoliberal arguments created an opposition between the interests of the individual (all individuals) and the interests of the social democratic welfare state.<sup>9</sup> In short, the neoliberal vision was portrayed as better for all; socialist redistribution of resources was, accordingly, a partisan politics merely for the working class; the welfare state system, though, benefited the middle and upper classes (see Borg 1992; Norberg 1993c). The public sector was turned into the scapegoat that caused the fiscal crisis and described in both mainstream and alternative fora, most often through metaphors, as a burden, and a sick, consuming, ineffective, and too expensive system. This can be read in parallel to Wodak’s claim that populist rhetoric creates scapegoats as part of a ‘politics as fear’ (Wodak 2015). In this case, the scapegoat that was filled with most of the contemporary woes (from conservatives and social democrats alike) and constructed as a threat to “us” and “our society” or “our economy” was not a group of people but a societal function/sector.

The neoliberal rhetoric made use of established concepts and values by appealing to what the public already recognised as right or wrong: “regulations”, “centralisation”, “absolute power”, “monopoly”, “bureaucracy”, and so on. To argue against regulations and centralisation of power was easy, since these notions already

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<sup>9</sup> Again, similar Mouffe’s conclusion that the Thatcherite discourse ‘[b]y opposing the interests of some categories of workers to those of the feminists and the immigrants, presented as being responsible for stealing their jobs, [Margaret Thatcher] managed to win to her side important sectors of the working class’. (Mouffe 2018a: 30)

carried negative connotations. Such concepts had been used by the left in the 1960s and critical leftists were quick to sign on for the same demands twenty years later. The labour movement had been expansive throughout the main part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Confidence in the future, demands for justice, natural holders of power, angry, hopeful, morally assured – that was the (old) labour movement in the eyes of the bourgeoisie (Westholm 1988). They saw how their own ideas were outdated, in the eyes of the public. ‘Nobody wants to be unjust or undemocratic’, ‘the righteous Davis beats the evil giant Goliath’ (Westholm 1988: 33), was the neoliberal conclusion. The bourgeoisie and business had been positioned as the enemy in the social democratic discourse. The remnants of the bourgeoisie were in disarray, it suffered from fear, nostalgia, and had adapted to the *politicised* times, according to the same analysis. Political parties on the right were unable to move their positions forward but saw the Social Democrats as a source of inspiration. In recent years, the tables have turned, and this picture stands in stark contrast to the one Mouffe (2018) presents. Today, the problem facing the left is quite contrary – that we need politicised times again, seems to be Mouffe’s conclusion.

### **Populism without the people: “hate the state – not the immigrants”<sup>10</sup>**

Again, the populist logic can be understood as a performative process in which a universalising political subject like “people” is positioned against an “elite”. A speaker always speaks from somewhere, a place or position of enunciation. In persuasive argumentation, an utterance is also aimed to appeal to a particular audience. In order to engage the reader and rally them to a certain political cause, a speaker can attempt to appeal to the audience. To speak on behalf of the “people” is to take up a universal enunciate position (“we the people”) in contrast to the relatively particular position of a particular group or party. But this broad and universal political subject does not have to be a people – it can be another broad and inclusive category that all and any can identify with. The neoliberal rhetoric positioned universal categories such as *humans, the individual, you and I* or *we* in opposition to an elite. That elite was constructed as a composition of various positions of power: the state, the Social Democratic party, politicians, and/or the establishment – which were, in the end, only different faces of the same enemy. The establishment is recurrently constructed in terms of the mainstream media, the culture pages (even by leftist cultural journals) and, on occasion, as the “hash left”, in neoliberal fora<sup>11</sup>.

In the few instances when “the Swedish people” is articulated in the neoliberal discourse it is done in ambiguous terms. It is not appealed to, but rather analysed or discussed. “The Swedish people” is treated as a problematic, wavering entity – it is largely a social democratic construction and the public opinion mirrored the social democratic hegemony of the time. Furthermore, to speak of “the people” connotes on nationality. To speak on behalf of, for or about the “Swedish people”

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<sup>10</sup> (Varveus 1990b)

<sup>11</sup> This last epithet is slightly paradoxical since the libertarians behind such statements fought for legalisations of narcotics. For further reference see ‘Skandal! Docklands’, *Skandal! Kulturbråken som skakade Sverige* (Kultur, 2014); Sveriges Television AB, Stockholm, Sweden, ‘Moralpanik, Ravekommissionen och razzior’, *svt.se*, 2014.).

can be problematic as you risk positioning the legitimate “Swedish” against the immigrant other. Neoliberals could not settle for the common signifier of a national people. Because the Swedish neoliberal movement was explicitly anti-nationalist, their argumentation was partly centred around “people”, and partly (or more) centred around ‘the individual’ and ‘ordinary human beings’<sup>12</sup>. Articulating and appealing to “people” in general rather than “the people” serves the neoliberal ideology and movement’s internationalist ambitions. They saw no need to recreate the divisions that support the nation-state (as they saw no need for a nation-state). While nationalism is always exclusive to those not included in the nation, the neoliberal discourse included previously excluded groups and identities in the universal “people”, “common people”, “individual”, “you”, “I”, “all”, “everyone”, “fellow human beings”, “ordinary humans”, or “the human being” (often exemplified as a ‘she’<sup>13</sup>) ‘the people’ is only one of the many potential inclusive categories of subjects, or subject positions that populist logics can use/articulate.

By analysing the labour movement, neoliberal intellectuals recognised the importance of taking up the representation of “will of the people” - regardless of the public’s opinion (Westholm 1988). That is to say, they saw the “people-will” as a political construction and used it as such. The will of the people, but not of the majority, was what Swedish neoliberals claimed to represent. In the neoliberal belief system majority rule is an obstacle, if not a form of power ‘which inevitably leads to oppression of minorities’ (Rydenfelt 1993: 13). Majority rule forces the minority (i.e. up to 49.9%) into subjugation, according to their argumentation (Gergils 1990, 1993a; cf. Hayek 1960; Holmberg 1990; Jaensson 1993; Norberg 1993a). Demands for privatisation follow this logic as it consequentially must be better for all – each and every one – if each individual is allowed to decide for herself and be the ruler of her own life.

Under the demand for increased privatisation and an opposition of all things state-related, neoliberal intellectuals were able to connect various anti-etatist positions and demands, including everything from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to the Norwegian nationalist far-right party *Fremskritt* as fellow enemies of state powers (Bejke 1989; Gergils 1993a; Varveus 1989). Paradoxically, one neoliberal journal would proudly present its ties to nationalist forces across borders, while at the same time including debate articles and interviewees arguing for increased immigration. Continually, throughout the neoliberal discourse coalition, unwavering internationalist ambitions and anti-nationalist attitudes were articulated. The welfare state system was described as the main obstacle for increased immigration, in the neoliberal discourse. An editorial in the main daily newspaper illustrates this line of reasoning, in October 1993:

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<sup>12</sup> (see Gergils 1990: 4) ‘What is so important and wonderful though is that all ordinary human beings love the film [Dead Poets Society]. That is evidence of that collectivism and the ideologies that build on it are incompatible with the human being. We are individuals, we are individualists, and collectivism is something that has nothing to do with the human being as a creature’.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance (Gergils 1993c) This example from the neoliberal journal *Nyliberalen* stands in stark contrast to the leftist cultural journal *TLM*: the human being is in the neoliberal discourse usually a “she” while in the leftist discourse “the people”, “worker”, “citizen”, “intellectual” and so on, is most often a “he”. In Swedish, words like “human”, “worker”, “citizen” and so on are gender neutral in themselves and gendered by statements that follow (e.g. “the product of *her* labour”).

With that background [immigrant] I am critical towards Swedish immigration and refugee politics. I am ashamed of its obsession with ideas which make the elements of tragedy unnecessarily numerous and long. We force immigrants into our most rigid/inflexible and clumsy system, namely the old housing politics of the people's home which leads them to long accommodation installations and the old social democratic labour market politics which leads them to long term exclusion from the labour market. We shatter their natural helping networks by allotting places of residence – to later seek to bring them into the state-sponsored immigrant associations of the people's-movement Sweden. [...] It is our system that is faulty, not our foreign-born fellow human beings (Zetterberg 1993)<sup>14</sup>.

The author uses his personal experience of immigration (from Sweden to the USA) to position himself in closer proximity to the 'fellow human beings' that have immigrated to Sweden. Granted, there is still a 'we' that is separate from 'the immigrants' who are forced in to 'our' system. But is this a national "we"? Despite being obviously critical towards the current system, the author still describes it as 'ours'; not "theirs", "the opposition's" or "the state's". This might be because of his official position as ideologist for the conservative party – which was in office at the time (1991-1994). While partly accepting representation for the political system, he argues for changes in the assimilation process. Representing the "we" of the current political order, he pushes the blame on to the Social Democrat's former policies and redefines "immigrants" as part of a broader category of 'fellow human beings'. "The people" is used to emphasise how assimilated immigrants feel as 'a part of the Swedish people' (Zetterberg 1993: 2). On the other hand, the social-democratic 'people's home'-policies (*folkhemmet*) and 'the people's-movement Sweden' are positioned as negative constructions associated with a long tradition of the labour movement's trade unions, political organisations, *bildung* sections, and cooperatives – usually connected to the state at some level. Arguments against the 'people's-movement Sweden' frame it as a threat to capital. Neoliberal writers approached this tradition of organising Swedish society as a hegemonic formation or historical bloc (cf. Howarth 2010: 313; Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 136) which they tried to break up and replace with a distinction between state and civil society (Antman 1993; Bengtsson 2006; SOU 2007:66 2007; Vetenskapsrådet 2003).

Neoliberal arguments were often enunciated from the point of the underdog - regardless of the speaker/writer's professional role or resources. Radical neoliberals presented themselves as righteous rebels oppressed by the authorities and establishment. By taking up the position of anti-establishment, neoliberals could present a fresh alternative in contrast to engrained political figures (left and right). While the neoliberal right constructed a discourse around the "people", or other inclusive signifiers like "we", "human beings", or "individuals", leftist arguments were articulated from much more particular positions of workers, women, students, and organisational spokespersons (Sunnercrantz 2017). In this sense, the neoliberal

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<sup>14</sup> Zetterberg is cited later the same year in the Neoliberal journal (see Gergils 1993b). In the latter article, Zetterberg is presented as 'Former professor in sociology, head of Sifo ["the Swedish Institute for Opinion Surveys"]', and editor in chief of *Svenska Dagbladet* [the second largest daily newspaper]. Today most known as [the conservative party] *Moderaterna's* foremost ideologist, and chair of their future group' (Gergils 1993b: 24).

discourse used a populist logic without excluding groups or identities based on nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

## Conclusion

By following scholars who clearly ‘distinguish “populist” from “nationalist” (xenophobic, racist, etc.) discourses’ (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 2) I have shown how an antagonism between “people” and an “establishment” was central to the neoliberal discourse. I have argued that, from a post-foundational standpoint, it is possible to study how the universal category or identity of the signifier “the people” can be substituted with any form of universal and inclusive “us”/“we” that can take up the representation of the historical/political subject and integrate heterogeneous identities and demands in a broader chain of equivalences. In this case, the nodal point at the centre of the neoliberal discourse is *not* literally “the people” but other broad and inclusive forms of “us” such as “individuals” or “human beings”. Swedish neoliberals fought to implement a representation of society where the social field was divided between two opposing camps: the people (the underdog, the individual, the “common man”, the oppressed masses, “you”, “I”, “we”, and so on), on the one side, and the elite (the establishment, power, the state, social democracy, and so on) on the other. Through an articulation of chains of equivalence, different identities and demands were united in their opposition to a common enemy: the social-democratic welfare state (Sunnercrantz 2017).

With a post-foundationalist perspective in mind, the commonalities between contemporary nationalist, xenophobic right-wing populism and yesterday’s neoliberal populism can be narrowed down to performative rhetoric: positioning oneself as the underdog, the outsider, or the alternative to the entrenched political establishment that constitutes the “elite” in neoliberal discourses. There are many parallels between now and then. There are, and were, changes in the media landscape, the same rhetorical strategies, but the content may be different (though not necessarily new). In Sweden, new right-wing parties demanding stricter immigrant regulation saw the light of day (New Democracy then, the Sweden Democrats today). Neoliberalism became hegemonic, antagonisms were covered up as the myth of the market stabilised the dislocation associated with the 1990s crisis. The neoliberal project was well thought through and designed by scholars. Moreover, the Swedish neoliberal project was a consciously populist one – at least in terms of the political strategies that business forces and neoliberal intellectuals set their plan to. They did not, however, as the left has recently started to, publicly announce or call for a “populist” political agenda<sup>15</sup>. Many of the political strategies outlined by neoliberals in the late 1980’s Sweden are repeated by Mouffe in “For a Left Populism” (2018). The neoliberal intellectuals of the time didn’t call these practices populist – they called them political, or perhaps, socialist.

The creation of scapegoats often goes hand in hand with populist politics, and it can be difficult to control which identities become entwined in the processes; whether it be immigrants, political dissidents, or single mothers on benefit (as in the old Thatcherite discourse) - or politicians, as in the neoliberal rhetoric. I would

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<sup>15</sup> As exemplified in the UK by Mouffe (2018b, 2018a), and in Sweden by leftist intellectuals (Greider and Linderborg 2018) and think-tank representatives (Suhonen and Gerin 2018)

argue against the recent call for a leftist populism, partly for this reason. Secondly, as this demand has wound its way through the post-foundational thought collective and out into the world, it may be misinterpreted as a call for the left to take up the popular demands of “regular people” instead of assuming the representation of the people to promote leftist demands<sup>16</sup>. Hence, the left today might do well to learn from the past. The Swedish neoliberals were clever and successful. The most significant threat to the Swedish social democratic welfare state in the past 30 years (and more) has not been the xenophobic radical right parties – it has been neoliberal ideology and the new neoliberal hegemony that toppled social democracy. Then again, we might want to reflect on where the radical, xenophobic right (in our outside of parliament) get their inspiration. Neoliberal intellectuals analysed the old labour movement’s political strategies, but the neoliberal ‘small steps revolution’ might now server as a role-model for populist projects today.

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<sup>16</sup> A thin line treaded by Göran Greider and Åsa Linderborg in (Greider and Linderborg 2018)



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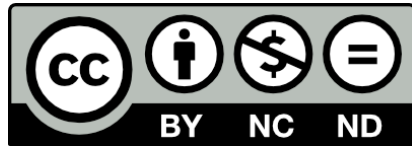
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# **POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY** **POPULISMUS**



[www.populismus.gr](http://www.populismus.gr)

## POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project involved a 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 endorses 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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