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The Case of the British Labour Party

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Introduction

Populism, it seems, is both everywhere and nowhere. Despite reams of coverage in newspapers and academic journals of the much touted 'rise of populism', very few citizens or politicians self-identify as populist. As Demata *et al.* (2020: 11) point out, 'if being a "populist" is rather rarely chosen by politicians as an acceptable self-description, then the "populist" designation must be the creation of an anti-populist opponent or the analyst herself'. Fortunately, this curious state of affairs has been addressed in a burgeoning body of literature that seeks to analyse anti-populism as a significant discursive formation that shapes contemporary political discourse in a variety of different national contexts. This paper builds on this literature, both empirically and conceptually. Empirically, I aim to demonstrate the importance of anti-populist discourses in shaping the ideological and affective contours of contemporary British politics, despite the lack of scholarly attention to anti-populism in Britain. Conceptually, I draw attention to the role of affect, loss and melancholia in shaping anti-populist politics. Melancholia – that is, an inability or unwillingness to mourn the loss of an ideal – is, I suggest, central to understanding the palpable anger and disorientation that underpin the frequent hostile invocations of 'populism' in mainstream political discourse.

In this paper, I trace these dynamics via an analysis of anti-populist responses to the British Labour Party during and after the leadership of left-winger Jeremy Corbyn. The British Labour Party is an analytically rich case study for the analysis of anti-populism: hostile invocation of 'populism' featured heavily in academic and journalistic responses to Corbyn and Corbynism, even though there is little scholarly consensus as to whether Corbynism was *actually* 'populist' in any meaningful sense (Maiguashca and Dean, 2019). Without denying the many quirks and specificities of the UK/Corbyn context, I suggest that the case of the British Labour Party is nonetheless helpful for shedding light on some of the broader affective, ideological and temporal dynamics of anti-populism.

Against this broad political and intellectual backdrop, the paper pursues three main lines of argument. First, it reviews the wider literature on anti-populism. Via a critical engagement with post-Marxist discourse theory, it argues that anti-populism is best understood as a distinctive kind of political *sensibility*, i.e. a mutually reinforcing combination of discursive, ideological and affective orientations centred around the construction of 'the populist' as a particularly urgent and pressing threat to (liberal) democracy. Central to the anti-populist sensibility is a distinctive account of recent political history, marked by a profound sense of melancholic longing for pre-populist times. Second, the paper argues that anti-populism has been central to dominant constructions of the British Labour Party – and indeed British left politics more generally – in recent years. Put simply, much of the negative reaction from journalists and academics to left-winger Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the party from 2015-2019 was expressed in and through an anti-populist sensibility. This sensibility was articulated in three key ways: first, the framing of populism as simplistic, excessive and

dangerous; second, the invocation of a 'horseshoe theory' that posits an equivalence between left and right populisms, and, third, an affective construction of the populist as mad, irrational or immature, by contrast to the implicitly sensible, rational and adult anti-populist. Finally, I suggest that the prevalence and intensity of anti-populist sensibilities is symptomatic of a pervasive melancholia on the part of much of the professional class of political commentators in the UK. In part, this manifests via a normative commitment to, and melancholic longing for, a Blair-style Third Way politics, but is also expressed in a more diffuse nostalgia for the consensus, optimism and triumphalism marking the era in which Fukuyama (1992) heralded the end of history. Overall, I suggest that the anti-populist mobilisation of the threat of 'the populist' should not be seen as simply normative opposition to populism. Rather, it is a symptom of a profound melancholia on the part of much of the liberal centre-left, for whom the breakdown of the post-Cold war 'post-democratic' consensus has been profoundly unsettling.

Anti-Populism: Theories and Definitions

As is well known, recent years have seen a vast proliferation of academic studies of populism. Most of these tend be aligned with one of two main traditions of populism research: the ideational approach associated with Cas Mudde, and the discursive approach associated with Ernesto Laclau. The former has been the more influential within political science, defining populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' that sees society as antagonistically split between a morally virtuous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). Anti-populism, however, remains rather marginal to most research carried out by those aligned with the ideational approach,[1] reflecting a more general marginalisation of anti-populism within the field of 'populism studies'. As Benjamin Moffitt (2018: 5) puts it, this may simply reflect the fact that anti-populism is 'the default position for the academy, and as a result, its "naturalness" makes it somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study'.[2]

Fortunately, however, anti-populism has been pursued in a more sustained way by a number of scholars in the Laclau-inspired tradition.[3] Consequently, it is worth unpacking in some detail the contributions of this tradition to the theory and analysis of anti-populism. Laclau is famous in part for having articulated a conception of populism as a formal logic, i.e. a particular way of constructing politics, in contrast to more mainstream approaches which emphasise the substantive content of populist actors, ideas or policies. More specifically, populism, says Laclau (2005), entails the drawing of an antagonistic frontier between, on one side, a 'chain of equivalence' uniting a series of unmet demands from below, and, on the other, the established order, the 'elite', the 'system', or similar designation.

While Laclau himself has said rather little about anti-populism per se, an implicit account of anti-populism can be discerned in his texts. Populism, he suggests,

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[1] One exception to this is Bale *et al.*'s (2011) analysis of understandings of populism in the UK print media. While offering valuable empirical data which corroborates the hypothesis that 'populism' tends to be used pejoratively, it stops short of enquiring into the broader ideological context and consequences of its widespread pejorative usage.

[2] See Katsambekis (2022) for a compelling defense of the view that there is a normative anti-populist bias embedded within the 'ideational' approach.

[3] For further treatments of anti-populism which do not explicitly align with either the discursive or ideational approach, see Ostiguy (2009) and Moffitt (2018).

arises through the extension of an anti-system logic of equivalence. This logic of equivalence is counterposed to what Laclau calls the logic of difference, in which specific, isolated (i.e. 'different'), political demands are absorbed into the institutional logic of the hegemonic order (Laclau, 2005). As such, anti-populism, for Laclau, implicitly arises when the logic of difference predominates 'so that different social demands remain isolated, relating only vertically to the institutional system' (Miró, 2019: 119). Consequently, for Laclau, populism and anti-populism are deeply intertwined, indeed co-constitutive: there is no populism without anti-populism, and *vice versa*.

What is more, several scholars working in the Laclau-inspired tradition have made this claim explicit. As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis have argued, 'for every populist actor asserting its presence, there are other anti-populist actors antagonising it' (2019: 39). Methodologically, they suggest shifting focus away from analysing populism per se, towards mapping different iterations of the populism/anti-populism frontier, 'focussing on their mutual constitution and reproduction' (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018: 6). From this perspective, largely in keeping with Laclau, anti-populism has no necessary discursive or ideological content, but instead marks the various attempts to neutralise, domesticate and stave off the challenge to the hegemonic order posed by populist politics.

In a series of rich analyses of the populism/anti-populism frontier in post-crisis Greece, Giorgos Katsambekis, Yannis Stavrakakis and colleagues have fleshed out in some detail the broad contours of anti-populist discourse. Katsambekis (2014), for instance, has contextualised anti-populism in Greece within a broader transition from democracy to post-democracy, the latter understood as a 'hollowing out of democratic institutions' (2014: 144) in which technocracy, administration and consensus displace the dissensus and conflictuality proper to (democratic) politics. Amidst the post-democratic condition, the anti-populist denigration of populism helps shore up a democracy without a demos, in which any and all expressions of popular sovereignty are cast, variously, as unwelcome, illegitimate or dangerous (Katsambekis, 2014, 2016).

The specific discourses marshalled to construct the 'populist threat' vary considerably across contexts and can – as Georgi Medarov (2015) notes concerning post-socialist Bulgaria – be articulated to a wide variety of often contradictory discursive formations. That said, there are a number of well-established tropes underpinning anti-populist discourse. As Katsambekis (2016) usefully observes in relation to the Greek context, there are three especially common anti-populist framings of populism. First, populism is often cast as dangerously antagonistic, relying on a Manichean view of society as split between two broad camps. Second, populism is accused of unleashing passionate – as opposed to rational, moderate – politics. Finally, anti-populist discourse casts populism as irrational and moralistic. In addition, Yannis Stavrakakis highlights the frequent use of medical metaphors that cast populism as akin to a disease, be it of the mind (i.e. populists are 'mad' or 'irrational'), body (i.e. a 'virus' in need of an antidote) or the soul (whereby populists are seen as immoral or evil) (Stavrakakis, 2014, 2018; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018). What is more, they suggest viewing anti-populism as a symptom of political crisis, in which the established order is called into question, unleashing a 'complex choreography between populism and anti-populism' (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018: 7). A slightly different spin on the same argument is offered by Joan Miró in a discussion of anti-populism in Spain, who suggests

that anti-populism is not – as implied in Laclau – to be equated with the institutional absorption of demands into the existing order. Rather, anti-populism marks the *failure* of political elites to carry out such a task: it is, says Miró (2019: 123), a political logic marked by 'the radical disavowal of the legitimacy of the worldviews of counterhegemonic actors' in the face of an inability on the part of the ruling classes to integrate, co-opt and neutralise popular demands.

A further strand of Laclau-inspired scholarship on populism and anti-populism has also emerged in recent years, one which focuses less on the populism/anti-populism frontier per se, and more on the effects and consequences of discourses *about* populism (Stavrakakis, 2017; De Cleen *et al.*, 2018; De Cleen and Glynos, 2021; Brown and Mondon, 2021). These authors argue that populism should be seen not just as a concept or an actually existing form of politics, but as a *signifier* that plays a crucial role in shaping the wider ideological, discursive and affective contours of contemporary political life. A final strand of scholarship on anti-populism, much of it inspired by Laclau, is more normative in orientation, offering an explicit political defence of left-wing populism, and a critique of anti-populism's elitist and anti-democratic tendencies (see, for example, Mouffe, 2018; Howse, 2019).

There is, therefore, a rich body of work produced by scholars working within the Laclau-inspired tradition which draws attention to the importance of anti-populism. However, there is scope for considerably more research on anti-populism. In some respects, this is simply a question of quantity. That is to say, with the exception of a relatively small body of empirical research which covers, for example, Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2019; Nikisianis *et al.*, 2019), Greece and Argentina (Markou, 2021), Spain (Miró, 2019), Bulgaria (Medarov, 2015), British newspapers (Demata *et al.*, 2020; Brown and Mondon, 2021) and discourses about education (Sant and Brown, 2021), 'the political and ideological significance of anti-populist political rhetoric has yet to receive the kind of systematic treatment that the study of populist rhetoric has', as De Cleen *et al.* (2018: 656) put it.

But the problem is not simply that anti-populism has been empirically under-studied. There are still problems concerning its conceptual status. Thus, while this paper builds on the insights of the Laclau-inspired tradition – and particularly the work of Stavrakakis and Katsambekis – there are three specific problems with the way anti-populism has been thematised within the Laclauian schema. One is the issue of formalism and 'conceptual inflation', to use Benjamin Arditi's phrase (2004: 140). The problem goes like this: for Laclau, populism and anti-populism correspond to the logics of equivalence and difference respectively. What is more, the logics of equivalence and difference are ontological categories that undergird the constitution of the political *as such* (Laclau, 2005: 163). Thus, populism and anti-populism are not simply two types of politics among others, but are fundamental to Laclau's entire political ontology. Yet, framed in these terms, anti-populism, much like populism itself, ceases to yield much in the way of conceptual specificity or analytic purchase, given that *all* attempts at neutralising or defusing a counter-hegemonic challenge are, *by definition*, anti-populist. This reflects a longstanding worry about Laclau's approach to populism, namely that it suffers from a 'hyperformalism' that deploys an increasingly 'thin and generic' (Jäger and Borriello, 2020: 751) conception of populism that stands aloof from concrete instances of (anti-)populist politics.

The second problem relates to the framing of anti-populism in the context of a mutually-constituting choreography with populism. Such a view implicitly casts anti-

populism as primarily situated in an antagonistic and dialectical relationship with populism. By contrast, I would argue, perhaps counter-intuitively, that anti-populism can function *even in the absence of 'actually existing' populism*. In certain circumstances, populism – and especially the figure of 'the populist' – should be seen as itself a product of anti-populist discourse, rather than the latter being simply a post-hoc response to a pre-existing array of populist actors. Put differently: anti-populism is not simply *reactive*. To some extent, anti-populist discourse constructs and constitutes the very idea of 'the populist' to which it is ostensibly a reaction. Indeed, such a view is implied in Glynos and Mondon's (2016), and Brown and Mondon's (2021) analyses of populist hype, which cast the 'rise of populism' narrative as self-generating and self-reinforcing. In so doing, they imply that the much-vaunted 'populist threat' must be seen as discursively and affectively produced, rather than a pre-existing entity whose features and characteristics are self-evident. This is manifest in, for example, the tendency to exaggerate the electoral success of some parties designated as populist, or the tendency to use the designation 'populist' when other descriptors may be just as appropriate, if not more so (Brown and Mondon, 2021; Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017).

A final problem is that there are several important features of anti-populism which, while hinted at in the work referred to above, have yet to be systematically analysed. While several authors have argued that anti-populism is a profoundly affective politics (see Stavrakakis, 2018; Eklundh, 2020), there is, I suggest, an important intertwining of the temporal and affective elements of anti-populism that requires further exploration. In a recent short essay by Andy Knott (2020), he distinguishes between populism, non-populism and anti-populism. Non-populism, he argues, designates the forms of established consensus-based politics that predominate during periods of relative political calm. However, non-populism is always pregnant with the possibility of morphing into an explicitly *anti*-populist reaction when faced with the emergence of populist formations that seek to challenge the status quo. Implicit in Knott's account is the sense that anti-populism relies on an affectively charged distinction between a crisis-ridden, 'populist' present and a pre-crisis, pre-populist recent past, such that the latter becomes an object of loss or nostalgic longing. These mutually constitutive temporal and affective aspects of anti-populism are, I argue, crucial, and are central to the analysis that follows.

Overall, therefore, my aim is to furnish a conception of anti-populism which remains grounded in the Laclauian tradition, but which jettisons Laclau's ontologisation of (anti-)populism, and casts the latter as a *sui generis* phenomenon rather than simply the negative or the inverse of populism. My argument here aligns somewhat with recent work by Mazzolini (2020) and Borriello and Jäger (2020) who seek to reframe and rework Laclau's legacy whilst remaining faithful to his core insight that politics consists largely of the construction and contestation of (hegemonic) discursive formations. This approach – which Borriello and Jäger (2020) dub 'post-Laclauian' – is characterised by, first, an insistence on the centrality of 'hegemony' to Laclau's project, the latter of which became displaced somewhat by the preoccupation with populism in his later work (Mazzoloni, 2020); and second, a lowering of the dose of formalism in Laclau's work to render it more amenable to context-specific analysis of the quirks of particular conjunctural formations (Boriello and Jäger, 2020).[4]

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[4] Indeed, this latter move means that the approach adopted here sits somewhere between Laclauian post-Marxism, and conjunctural analysis in the tradition of Stuart Hall: while both traditions emerged from the Gramscian tradition, the latter has arguably fared better than the former when it comes to

Against this broad theoretical backdrop, anti-populism can, I suggest, be usefully characterised as a *sensibility*, that is to say, a distinctive way of talking, thinking, acting and feeling about politics or, put slightly differently, an amalgamation of a distinctive set of discourses and affective orientations. My use of the term 'sensibility' in this context is borrowed from feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill's influential account of post-feminism as a sensibility (Gill, 2007). For Gill, post-feminism was a palpable yet rather inchoate set of discourses about, and orientations towards, feminism that prevailed across a range of media, cultural and political spaces during the 1990s and 2000s. Anti-populism, I suggest, is structurally similar. It is arguably rather thin and elusive: as Moffitt (2018: 2) correctly observes, it is 'not a clear ideological disposition or mode of governance'. But it circulates widely across different domains, and is distinctive enough to be identified with a degree of precision. At its core, I argue, anti-populism is a *political sensibility characterised by a preoccupation with the figure of 'the populist' as a novel, distinctive and urgent – perhaps existential – threat to the health and viability of liberal democracy, and by the belief that this threat must be urgently neutralised*. What this means is that anti-populism is not only opposition to populist politics. Rather, it designates a way of thinking about politics in which the signifier 'populism' becomes an object of intense negatively-charged affective investment. Furthermore, anti-populism's excessive focus on populism can lead to the scale and threat of 'actually-existing' populist politics becoming exaggerated or over-hyped, due to 'populism' become a site of exaggerated, at times obsessive, attention and scrutiny (see Glynos and Mondon, 2016; Brown and Mondon, 2021). Finally, as the following sections make clear, anti-populist sensibilities are – in the UK context at least – marked by a melancholic attachment to 'Third way'-style consensus politics, and a sense of loss, disorientation and besiegement in the face its recent decline.[5]

Defined in this way, anti-populism can be found in policy reports and research by a broad range of think-tanks and third-sector research institutes (such as Counterpoint and the Tony Blair-backed Institute for Global Change), the 'quality' press (such as *The Guardian* and *The Economist*), academic publications (see, for example, Abts and Rummens, 2007; Urbinati, 2019), popular academic books (see, for example, Weale, 2018; Galston, 2018), the discourses of high profile politicians such as Hilary Clinton, Justin Trudeau and Emmanuel Macron, and even in popular culture, including popular television and political comedy. Indeed, anti-populism, so defined, is a widespread and familiar feature of the current political and cultural landscape.

Anti-Populism in Action: The Case of the British Labour Party

Having set out the scholarly context and sought to navigate our way through the conceptual terrain, let us now begin to turn our attention to some of the ways in which anti-populism is manifest in practice. The British Labour Party provides a particularly rich case study through which to examine the shape and consequences of anti-populist sensibilities. The British Labour Party – traditionally a predominantly centre-left social democratic party for much of its history – took a surprise left turn in 2015 when it elected veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn to its leadership. Despite

analysing the specificity of particular historical conjunctures, particularly given the drift towards refinement of formal conceptual categories in Laclau's later work. For a helpful analysis of points of convergence and divergence between these two traditions, see Colpani, 2021.

[5] These dynamics are neatly captured in the title of William Davies' recent book *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain* (Davies, 2020).

widespread predictions that Corbyn's leadership would be brief and unsuccessful, his position as leader was consolidated by winning a further leadership contest in 2016 against 'soft left' rival Owen Smith, and then substantially increasing Labour's vote share at the 2017 General Election. The post-2017 optimism proved to be short-lived, however, and Corbyn resigned following the party's disastrous performance at the 2019 General Election, and was replaced by Keir Starmer, whose politics are much closer to the centre-left politics that has been dominant in the party in recent decades. Despite Corbyn's fairly short tenure, it is hard to exaggerate just how remarkable and unexpected his ascendancy was: prior to 2015, it was widely assumed that the New Labour years had consigned the (hitherto small and isolated) Labour left to the dustbin of history.

The surprising and dramatic nature of Corbyn's leadership prompted a broad range of responses from academics, journalists and commentators, the majority tending towards incredulity and hostility, not just in the right-wing press but also in much centre-left media (Allen, 2020). Crucially, much of this hostility took an explicitly anti-populist form: many commentators framed their opposition to Corbynism on the grounds of the latter's alleged 'populism'.[6] To some extent, these concerns have been replicated in academic settings, where there has been considerable debate as to whether, or to what extent, the Corbyn project was 'populist'. While a number of political scientists have designated Corbynism in passing as populist (Dorey, 2017; Hindmoor, 2018), more sustained interrogations have suggested Corbynism is either not populist at all (Maiguashca and Dean, 2019), or that any 'populism' in the Corbyn project is secondary to its status as a *left* politics (March, 2017). Consequently, Corbynism, and reactions to Corbynism, present us with a particularly vivid example of the capacity for anti-populist discourses and sensibilities to shape the ideological contours of a particular conjuncture, even in the absence of 'actually-existing' populism. The paper also considers anti-populist responses to Keir Starmer's leadership victory, as these have often cast Starmer as signifying a return to 'normal', bringing an end to the 'populist deviation' of the Corbyn years. To capture these processes, the following section traces a range of media narratives about Corbynism and its relationship with populism during the period 2015-20. Most of the material is drawn from established and reputable centre-liberal or centre-left media outlets, such as *The Guardian, New Statesman, Huffington Post, Financial Times, Prospect* and *The Economist*. However, I also drew on material from more tabloid sources such as the *Evening Standard* and *Daily Mirror*, and less prominent media outlets such as (academic comment site) *The Conversation* and (right-wing/libertarian site) *Unherd*.

The analysis revealed three dominant narratives concerning Corbynism and populism. The first was a construction of populism/Corbynism as *dangerous, excessive and simplistic*. In this context, the 'Corbynism as populism' narrative cast the former as harbouring an authoritarian sensibility, marked by an alleged intolerance of different views and a proclivity to indulge in abuse of opponents both within and outside the party. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Phillip Stephens claimed that

> Populism of the left is catching up that of the right. What marks out Mr Corbyn's Labour is a style that is unabashedly authoritarian and relentlessly abusive. Power is held by the leader and a small coterie of loyalists. The party machine is in the hands of the Corbynistas who dominate the rank

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[6] To be clear: not all framings of Corbynism as populist have come from an anti-Corbyn position. See, for example, Smith (2020) for an affirmative framing of Corbynism as populist.

and file. Dissent has been declared a capital crime (Stephens, 2018, no pagination).

Even Tony Blair, who has become a key exponent of anti-populism in his later years, offered a similar warning:

> Mr Corbyn's campaign launch speech attacking 'dodgy landlords', 'billionaires' and a 'corrupt system' is textbook populism. It is no more acceptable in the mouth of someone who calls themselves leftwing than in the mouth of Donald Trump's right (Blair, 2019, no pagination).

While pitched in different ways, and highlighting different elements, the interventions of Blair and Stephens tap into a well-established anti-populist conception of populism as moralising and authoritarian. As such, Corbynism's 'populistness' was seen to inhere in its allegedly moralistic conception of itself and its opponents. However, the populist danger of Corbynism was also linked to Corbynism's supposed excess: although the nature of this excess was narrated differently, numerous commentators articulated an anti-populist view of Corbynism as somehow 'too much', or over the top, either in its ambition, its 'leftness', or its affective dynamics. This 'populist excess' attributed to Corbynism was commonly linked to the spending promises contained in the 2017 and (especially) 2019 Labour manifestoes. As political scientist Matthew Flinders argued in *The Conversation*,

> The most bizarre element of the opening skirmishes of the election is the manner in which the two main parties are already trying to out-compete each other, not just on who can make the most ridiculous public spending promises (a ploy destined to disappoint) but who can most effectively place the other on the wrong side of the moral barricade that populism seeks to erect (Flinders, 2019, no pagination).

Often the excessiveness of Corbynism in particular – and populism in general – was cast as indicative of a broader epistemic failure to grasp the limitations of democratic politics. Frequently, the supposed head-in-the-clouds populist utopianism of the Corbyn project was contrasted with the 'cold reality' of democratic politics, with the latter framed as uneven, messy or unfulfilling. For instance, writing in *The Guardian*, philosopher Julian Baggini argues that:

> [Corbynism] is populism in its purest form, with the people as the final and best judges. Its simplistic purity obscures the complex messiness of real political problems, the greatest of which is that an effective opposition leader needs to command the support of the party in parliament (Baggini, 2016, no pagination).

Here, the alleged simplicity and excess of the (so-called) 'populist' is cast as dangerous precisely because it risks misleading voters about what is feasible within the parameters of democratic politics. As such, anti-populism frequently defends the epistemic privilege of politics professionals, who are seen as able to grasp the very complexity and messiness of democratic politics which is ignored or downplayed by populist politicians and their supporters. In a similar vein, Tony Blair concluded a critique of Corbyn and Johnson's 'rival populisms' by suggesting that 'Government is about the hard challenge of analysis, policy development and delivery. It requires understanding of how the world is changing and how complex legacy systems can be adapted to technological change' (Blair, 2019, no pagination).

So while the above contributions are in many ways different – insofar as they come from slightly differently ideological positions and stress different elements of the Corbyn project – they converge in their articulation of an equivalence between Corbynism and populism, the latter inhering in Corbynism's supposed dangerousness (arising from an allegedly moralistic demarcation between itself and its opponents), excessiveness (in its affective flavour and policy proposals) and its simplicity (framed as an epistemic failure to grasp the messiness and contradictions of 'actually existing' democratic politics).

The second key element of anti-populist constructions of Corbynism concerns a particular articulation of the left/right distinction, in which Corbynism – as a *left politics – was framed as equivalent, or substantively similar, to the (far) right*. This reflected and consolidated a familiar anti-populist tendency to try to bypass, or even transcend, the left/right distinction. For the anti-populist, the key political cleavage is not between left and right but, rather, sensible, moderate anti-populism, on the one hand, and a dangerous, excessive populism (be it left or right), on the other. Again, this is articulated in different ways. Sometimes, it is suggested that the Corbynite left and the (Trump/Johnson) right are similar in form and style. For instance, Tom McTague, writing in *The Atlantic*, suggests that 'Corbyn is a populist who wants to remake his country and change the way it behaves in the world—just like Trump' (McTague, 2019, no pagination). Similarly, James Bloodworth (2019, no pagination) notes that 'Corbyn's populist division of the world into oppositional "us" and "them" camps has more in common with the politics of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán than it does with the traditions of democratic socialism'. On occasion, however, anti-populist discourse constructs a much deeper, substantive set of similarities between (populist) left and (populist) right.

In the *Daily Mirror*, a satirical article under the nom-de-plume 'Fleet Street Fox' entitled 'Can you spot a difference between Jeremy Corbyn and Donald Trump?' contains a composite image of Trump and Corbyn's faces, and warns that 'populism is not the same as popular, and it's extremely bad for your health' (Fleet Street Fox, 2019, no pagination). A sustained anti-Corbyn polemic by Phillip Stephens in the *Financial Times* also argues that the 'populistness' of Corbynism makes it not just equivalent to Trumpism, but substantively similar. He is worth quoting at length:

> Much as Mr Corbyn rails against the US president, there is an unmistakable read-across to Mr Trump's populism. Both men have their armies of angry footsoldiers and stocks of alternative truths to rail against the 'fake' news of the elites. They share a soft spot for autocrats such as Vladimir Putin. Mr Trump wants to do business with the Russian president. Mr Corbyn is an apologist for the invasion of Ukraine. He can scarcely bring himself to criticise the raining down of Russian bombs on civilians in Syria. His political icons are men of the left such as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, who were never much bothered by human rights. Far-left and far-right have always shaken hands in their disdain for democracy, preferring to elevate the nation, the common good or the collective above trivial things such as personal freedom (Stephens, 2019, no pagination).

Here, Stephens constructs populism as outside the mainstream of democratic politics, equating it with support for, or sanguinity about, various kinds of anti-democratic regimes, and attributing to it a lack of concern for individual liberty. In so doing, Stephens and others mentioned above implicitly draw on what is popularly referred

to as the 'horseshoe theory', the notion that political extremes of left and right are similar in terms of content and style (see Choat, 2018). As well as furthering the familiar anti-populist tendency to 'lump together every form of dissent in relation to the prevailing consensus' (Rancière, 2014: 80), such a move implicitly renders 'populism' synonymous with extremism and radicalism. Anti-populism is therefore cast as authentically democratic in contrast to populism's status as, at best, an inauthentic interloper and, at worst, overtly anti-democratic.

Populism's alleged inauthenticity is then further consolidated by a third key feature, namely a well-established set of affective relationships that the anti-populist evinces towards the figure of "the populist". More specifically, *populism is cast as dangerous and inauthentic in part because it is cast as an overly emotional form of politics*, one which taps into and amplifies voters' irrational tendencies. As Emmy Eklundh (2020: 71) has pointed out, the anti-populist argues that 'democratic institutions are largely reliant upon rationality and knowledge, thus positing the "good" citizens who vote according to their informed choices, and the 'bad' citizens who vote following their hearts'.

This implicit distinction – between bad, irrational populism, and good, rational anti-populism – was central to the discursive and affective construction of Corbynism, with the latter regularly invested with a range of emotional pathologies such as juvenility, indulgence, and a desire for instant gratification. Metaphors of youth and adulthood were particularly prevalent, with Corbynism frequently cast as a youthful indulgence. Blair himself remarked of the rise of Corbyn and Johnson that 'we are witnessing the *infantilisation* of British politics' (Blair, 2019, no pagination, my italics). Writing in *The Daily Telegraph* following Keir Starmer's ascent to the Labour leadership in 2020, Tom Harris even went so far as to suggest that 'Labour can only play grown-up politics once the Corbynite children are disciplined' (Harris, 2020, no pagination). Some on the non-Corbynite centre-left were similarly reproachful. Jonathan Freedland, writing in *The Guardian*, suggested 'we can skip the first stage of grief. A result like this leaves no room for denial. Let's move instead to the next stage: anger' (Freedland, 2019, no pagination). Meanwhile, comedian and former Labour-staffer Ayesha Hazarika penned a vitriolic denunciation of Corbyn-supporters in *The Evening Standard*, casting them as 'nasty, self-indulgent, infantile, illiterate' (Hazarika, 2019, no pagination).

The emotional and affective dynamics of anti-populism have been thrown into even sharper relief following Keir Starmer's victory in the 2020 Labour leadership contest. For many anti-populists, Starmer's victory became invested with the hope or the expectation that Labour's supposedly infantile, populist deviation under Corbyn would be brought to an end. This anti-populist construction of Starmer's leadership was especially prominent in two articles, an editorial in *The Guardian* and a column under the penname 'Bagehot' in *The Economist* which repeat, almost verbatim, the same anti-populist tropes about Starmer. *The Guardian* piece is headlined 'a serious politician', while *The Economist* goes with 'a serious Labour man' who is 'competent, credible, diligent, cautious and even boring'. *The Guardian* editorial offers the following appraisal:

> There is no resonant phrase, or signature policy, that one can decode to understand the incipient Starmer project. This makes it hard to define what Sir Keir stands for politically. But it is clear what he is not: a populist' (*The Guardian*, 2020, no pagination).

Meanwhile, *The Economist* has this to say:

> While it is hard to define what Sir Keir stands for politically, it is clear what he isn't: a populist (Bagehot, 2020, no pagination).

Leaving aside the curious coincidence of both publications using the same language almost verbatim, the anti-populist relief in both statements is palpable. At last, they argue, the indulgent, infantile populist deviation is over, the excessive impulses and desires of Corbynism have been reigned in, and some semblance of order, maturity, normality and sobriety has been restored. As Blairite pundit John Rentoul put it in *The Independent*, 'we had our fun. It is back to boring normal politics now' (Rentoul, 2020, no pagination). Such a narrative explicitly frames Corbynism as both populist and as mad, irrational or overly emotional. Implicit in such a framing is a particular kind of self-representation as sensible, rational, unemotional, and in possession of the epistemic and affective faculties necessary for a healthy democratic politics to be preserved.

The above three elements of an anti-populist sensibility converge in their implicit reliance on a particular set of affective orientations towards, and discursive constructions of, the recent history of British politics. Corbynism – and populism in general – is seen as bad in part because it is seen as a disruptive interloper who arrived on the scene relatively recently, disrupting the hitherto orderly landscape of 'normal' post-Cold War democratic politics. As such, the positing of a left/right equivalence – or a 'horseshoe theory' – can be linked to feelings of loss and disorientation on the part of the liberal centre. The equivalence that liberal anti-populists establish between "rival populisms" of left and right arises not from any substantive ideological similarities between, say, Corbyn and Trump. Instead, it reflects the fact that both left and right so-called 'populisms' contribute to a feeling of besiegement and dislocation, a sense that the established political contours that many commentators had previously taken for granted are slipping from under their feet. This in turn has led to anti-populism in the UK taking on a rather curious affective flavour. On the one hand, there is a presumption that the 'reasonable' anti-populist has a monopoly on rationality. But this in turn engenders feelings of anger, reproach and hostility towards the populist for their failure to adhere to the epistemic and affective rules of democratic politics. As Stavrakakis points out, anti-populism 'can be equally – if not more – confrontational, vitriolic and polarising than its populist opponent; […] They engage in the *demonization* and even in the *dehumanization* of those challenging the growing inequality and the elite monopoly of decision making, camouflaged as meritocratic, technocratic governance' (2018: 51).

Consequently, anti-populism offers a somewhat paradoxical defence of rationality which is itself deeply emotional, irrational even. As such, the analysis offered here suggests that UK politics is marked by similar tendencies to those identified in studies of anti-populist discourse in other national contexts such as Greece (Katsambekis, 2016) and Bulgaria (Medarov, 2015). These include: the denigration of expressions of popular sovereignty, the casting of populism as dangerously antagonistic, and the ascription to populism of qualities such as naivety, youthful indulgence and emotionality. However, one key feature under-explored in previous studies is the way the affective dynamics of anti-populism are tied to a particular construction of political history/temporality, in which the supposedly sensible, mature, non-populist recent past has given way to a mad, irrational populist present, rendering the supposedly pre-populist recent past a site of profound loss. In the following

section, I suggest that this loss narrative – of a shift from a sensible, non-populist recent past, to a mad, irrational populist present – means that melancholia should be seen as a central feature of anti-populist discourse in contemporary Britain.

Anti-Populist Melancholia, or, Nostalgia for the End of History

This section aims to identify more precisely the ideological assumptions and affective orientations that shape the anti-populist narrative of a shift from a sensible, moderate pre-populist recent past to a mad, irrational populist present. As we saw in the previous section, implied in much anti-populist discourse is the view that everything was (more or less) functioning well prior to the uninvited arrival of a host of populists and other undesirables. There is, therefore, a pervasive longing among anti-populists for the pre-populist times of the 'long 90s', a time temporally located after the Cold War and before the upheavals of Corbyn and Brexit in 2015-16.[7] Such longing is often implicit, but is sometimes manifest more explicitly in, for example, fond invocations of the Blair/New Labour governments (O'Hara, 2018), compounded by Blair re-styling himself as a prophet of anti-populism, in which he makes regular interventions into the news cycle to warn of the dangers of populism. A similar anti-populist nostalgia also underpins the surprisingly common tendency to narrate the London 2012 Olympic Games as a time of (pre-populist) unity and consensus (O'Brien, 2019).

In light of the above, anti-populism should, I argue, be seen as a profoundly *melancholic* politics. In this context, melancholia, as per Freud, is to be contrasted with mourning. The latter refers to the process of working through an acknowledged 'loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (Freud, 2001: 243). With melancholia, by contrast, the loss is not consciously avowed. According to Freud (2001: 243), 'the distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment'. Crucially, after a period of mourning is completed 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (Freud, 2001: 245), but as melancholia is 'related to an object loss that is withdrawn from consciousness' (Freud, 2001: 245) it often remains persistent, enduring and intransigent.[8]

Anti-populism can, I suggest, usefully be seen as melancholic in at least two senses. First, there is, as we saw, an incessant longing for a return to post-Cold War liberal consensus politics, in which the latter is seen as 'normal', and populism a mad deviation. Second, the palpable sense of bewilderment and disorientation in the face of new political antagonisms arises from a failure of adaptation to the current conjuncture or – to put it in Freudian terms – a melancholia arising from a failure to avow and work through the loss of 90s-style consensus politics. As Srila Roy (2009:

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[7] The designation 'long 90s,' coined by Jeremy Gilbert (2015), is frequently used as a shorthand for the period in British cultural and political history from the end of the Cold War until the financial crash of 2008.

[8] One could also cast the argument in Lacanian rather than Freudian terms: one could argue that anti-populism exhibits a fantasmatic structure grounded in a fantasy of a (now lost) moment of political cohesion or wholeness prior to the appearance of the populist intruder who stole the liberal centre's enjoyment (Glynos and Mondon, 2016; Sant and Brown, 2021).

342) notes in a discussion of melancholia in Indian feminism, 'the contemporary crisis of the left [or, in our case, the liberal centre] is symptomatic of a melancholic inability or even unwillingness to let go of an idealized political past in order to fully apprehend or come to terms with the character of the present'. Consequently, the anti-populist preoccupation with 'populism' should not be taken at face value. Rather, the obsession with 'the populist' *stands in for* the failure of post-Blair liberal and centre-left politics to meaningfully renew itself, such is the depth of its melancholic attachment to the recent past. This state of affairs corroborates Joan Miró's (2019) observation that anti-populism is fundamentally a symptom of failure, in which the dominant classes prove unable or unwilling to incorporate demands from below into the existing order, further compounding a pervasive sense of crisis and dislocation, a phenomenon illustrated perhaps most vividly in Tony Blair's much reported remark in 2016 that 'I'm not sure I understand politics right now' (Simons, 2016).

However, to fully understand the contours of anti-populist melancholia in British politics, we need to examine some of the more specific conjunctural forces shaping its expression. First, we need to consider the specific ideological politics that underpins anti-populist melancholia. The latter, I argue, is often grounded in a normative commitment to something akin to the Blair-style Third Way politics that held sway for much of the 90s and 2000s (see Giddens, 2000). As such, anti-populism in the UK must be understood in relation to the contradictory afterlives of the tradition of 'Third Way' centre/centre-left politics Blair represents. On the one hand, the 'Blairite' tradition is arguably now rather marginal in mainstream British politics. Recent years have seen a widespread repudiation of Blairism across the political spectrum, such that 'Blairite' is now invariably used pejoratively, particularly – but by no means exclusively – within the (post-)Corbynite left. The much-vaunted, yet ultimately unsuccessful, 2018 split from Labour by a small group of Blairite MPs to form (the explicitly anti-populist) Change UK was also interpreted by many as indicating the electoral weakness of Blair-style centrist politics (see Gilbert, 2019). And current leader Keir Starmer, despite being ideologically much closer to Blair than his predecessor, has gone to some lengths to distance himself from Blairism. But on the other hand, an assumed fidelity to many of the normative and epistemological assumptions underpinning Third Way-style politics (if not necessarily to Blair himself) continues, I would argue, to shape the worldviews of much of what Peter Allen calls 'the intensely politically involved', including many of the commentators referred to in the preceding section (not least Blair himself!). In this context, Allen uses the designation 'the intensely politically involved' to refer to:

> A group of individuals who hold positions of social power that allow them to shape dominant conceptions of politics and political activity. These people make a lot of the proverbial political weather and are continually asked to comment on it in some sort of professional capacity. They include prominent members of the news media, notable academics or other leading political professionals, and former or current politicians who are especially influential or highly thought-of within the two previous groups (Allen, 2020: 71).

Two further important features of this group are: first, they are assumed to enjoy a degree of epistemic privilege that 'ordinary citizens' lack, on account of their proximity to, familiarity with, and capacity to shape, the contours of everyday elite politics in Britain. Second, they are relatively homogeneous in terms of demographics,

background and epistemic/normative assumptions, the latter of which tend to align with a specifically 'Third Way' style of centrist or centre-left politics. As Allen and Moon put it (2020: 6), the intensely politically involved reside 'in an online universe of sensible political commentary that is supportive of a brand of centrist politics similar to that advocated by Tony Blair in the 1990s […] and bemoan the inability of those on the left to accept that their ideas are beyond credibility'. Anti-populist denunciations of Corbynism should therefore be seen as attempts, often unsuccessful, by the 'intensely politically involved' to, first, consolidate their *epistemic* privilege by casting pro-Corbyn knowledge claims as laughable and, second, cast themselves as would-be saviours of a liberal democracy besieged by populisms left and right.

But anti-populist melancholia references not just Blairism as a specific ideological politics, but also a more diffuse comfort of the relative stability of the immediate post-Cold War era, embodied in the optimism and triumphalism of Fukuyama's declarations of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). For the anti-populist, this era is now memorialised as one of stability, moderation, pragmatism and 'grown-up' politics, and was also one in which 'the intensely politically involved' felt more secure in their epistemic privilege, and less besieged by unruly political forces. As Robert Howse (2019: 649) puts it, anti-populism is manifest in part through 'nostalgia for a time of less intense confrontation between opposing political positions'. But critics – particularly from the left – have long argued that the broad political contours of this era (variously dubbed 'post-political' or 'post-democratic') were at best depoliticising and at worst anti-democratic (see, for example, Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). As Donald Kingsbury puts it, 'post-politics' is:

> A condition of hollowed out citizenship, individualism over collectivism, the privatization of public spaces, goods and services, and an era of ubiquitous and naturalized surveillance. Post-politics refers to a global historical moment that presents itself as eternal, where outsides or alternatives are rendered unthinkable and governance decisions are best left to experts and elites (Kingsbury, 2016: 588).

Anti-populist melancholia should therefore be contextualised within the context of the *breakdown* or *crisis* of the post-political condition Kingsbury describes, a condition which formed the backdrop to the political coming of age of much of the 'intensely politically involved'. To some extent, this observation corroborates Katsambekis's (2016) analysis of anti-populism as a constitutive feature of the post-democratic condition that has shaped much global politics during the post-Cold War era. However, the analysis offered here suggests that anti-populism is, in many ways, a politics of failure, haunted by the unmourned loss of a recent period of (relative) success. While anti-populism may have been – in Katsambekis's (2016: 52) words – 'an (initially) effective technique for disciplining a public sphere on the lookout for alternatives' – the contemporary British experience suggests the prominence of anti-populist discourse reflects precisely the failure of 'the intensely politically involved' to neutralise the various challenges to post-democratic, neoliberal politics that have emerged in recent years.

Anti-populist melancholia, in the UK at least, is thus shaped by of two features in conjunction with one another: namely, the continued *prevalence* of post-Blair Third Way politics amongst 'the intensely politically involved', alongside the *failure* of the self-same politics to cultivate the ideological and electoral clout it enjoyed in the late 1990s, *or* to offer an intellectually compelling response to the collapse of liberalism

and centrism in British politics.[9] In failing to respond to the challenges of the present, anti-populist discourse simply projects its political aspirations onto the recent past, in the hope that the (now lost) ideal of a well-functioning post-democratic politics might be reconstituted in the future.

Conclusion

To some extent, this paper has been a simple plea for more analytic attention to be paid to anti-populism, particularly given the disjuncture between the vast and proliferating literature on populism, and the rather modest scale of research on anti-populism. However, as I have argued, there is still scope for further conceptual clarification and refinement when it comes to the study of anti-populism. I argued that anti-populism should be studied on its own terms, as a *sui generis* mode of politics, rather than simply the opposite or inverse of populism. In pursuing this task of conceptual clarification, there is little doubt that the Laclauian framework has been particularly fruitful in its sensitivity to the theory and practice of anti-populism, despite the difficulties arising from Laclau's formalism. Following my discussion of Laclau, I invoked the category of 'sensibility' to cast anti-populism as a distinctive way of thinking, feeling and practicing politics. I suggested that certain kinds of affective orientations, as well as particular framings of recent political history, are central to anti-populist sensibilities. Anti-populism, so defined, has been particularly prevalent in British politics in recent years, and has played a central role in shaping the wider ideological, discursive and affective parameters of post-2015 British politics. To capture this analytically, I offered an analysis of anti-populist responses to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, and offered an explanation of anti-populism's ubiquity by casting it as a symptom of a profound melancholia on the part of the post-Blair centre-left.

I want to conclude with a reflection on the scope of my analysis. Clearly, my argument is specific to the UK, and much of my argument about the afterlives of Blairism references a very specific trajectory of post-Cold War British politics. However, the anti-populist melancholia diagnosed in my analysis of the British Labour Party is not specific to the UK. Analysis of anti-populism in sites as diverse as Greece, Spain and Argentina (Markou, 2021; Miró, 2019; Stavrakakis, 2014) indicate similar dynamics, whereby 'the populist' is cast as a new unwelcome interloper in need of neutralisation. This in turn suggests that narratives of a shift from a sensible, moderate recent past, to an irrational, populist, present are a more general feature of global politics, particularly given the global scope of ongoing worries about the 'rise of populism' (see, for example, Cox, 2018). Furthermore, the feelings of anger, reproach and disorientation traced in existing work on anti-populism in a range of national contexts suggests that anti-populist melancholia is a widespread feature. A fruitful avenue for future research would therefore be to undertake comparative work tracing different forms of anti-populist affect, memory and melancholia in different contexts. And given that 'populism' continues to feature prominently in wider political discourse, then the robust analysis of anti-populism as a distinct phenomenon *in itself* will remain a crucial task.

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[9] See Davies (2020) for a thorough and compelling account of the ideological crisis afflicting contemporary British liberalism.

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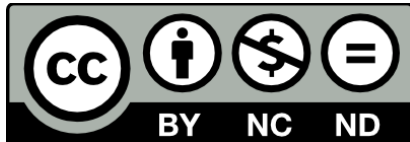
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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

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 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 (2014-5) 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 endorsed 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 and the continuation of its activities we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it put 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 consecutive crises.

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