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**POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 9**

**Thessaloniki  
July 2019**

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

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## ***Popular or Hegemonic Subject? On the Limits of Democratic Populism***

### **Abstract:**

The present article contributes to recent theoretical discussions concerning the relationship between populism and democracy. An increasing amount of scholarship suggests that populism can enable democratic pursuits to the extent that 'the people' – a political category central to populist politics – assumes an inclusive character. By conducting a discourse-theoretical analysis of the social history of the category 'the people', I conclude that 'the people' is governed by ambiguous political potential due to the fact that it has on an on-going basis been symbolically associated with both democratic pursuits and the exclusive 'nation'. I further demonstrate that 'the people' is a hegemonically-constituted category that is closely associated with nation construction projects and the consolidation of nation-states. In this sense, 'the people' reflects, in part, the interests of 'the establishment', which has advanced its interests by inculcating and institutionalizing nationalist articulations of 'the people'. To the extent that 'the people' is associated with sedimented nationalistic narratives that purport 'the people' to be an exclusive community, political deployments of 'the people', even if articulated with reference to progressive democratic imaginaries, might invoke 'the people's' exclusionary nationalist phantom.

### **Introduction**

The relationship between populism and democracy constitutes one of the principal thematic foci of scholarly work on populism. The 'nature' of this relationship is to this day highly contested. While mainstream scholarship typically considers populism to be an irrational phenomenon or a modern pathology, and therefore a threat to democracy, recent literature has effectively absolved populism from the fetters of irrationality, and, by extension, effectively 'neutralized' it. Granted, the diversity of opinions reflects theoretical and epistemological differences, but controversy outpours from ethico-political considerations as well (Kaltwasser 2012: 185; Laclau 2005): Does populism behold the embryo of democratic potential, or is it anathema to democracy? Opinions span the full spectrum.

Given the acuteness of the controversy, one is compelled to inquire whether disagreements about the nature of populism are symptomatic of populism's inherent polyvalence. Is it perhaps the case that populism 'resists' being grounded in the operational logic of the social sciences and the rigidity of universal values, precisely because it is governed by a constitutive ambiguity that eludes determinate definitions? The political category 'the people'—so central to populist politics—far from being a static object of analysis, is an on-going cultural construction, a field of potential antagonisms and, therefore, the site of on-going political projects.

This is the perspective that is currently gaining momentum and which has increasingly displaced substantivist and value-laden understandings of populism (see Anastasiou 2019; Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005). Discourse-oriented theorists, and in particular those associated with the ‘Essex School’, are at the forefront of this impetus. ‘Essex School’ approaches highlight that populism is not reducible to any *essential* characteristic. Populism is, rather, understood as a political logic, whereby the social comes to be divided by an antagonistic frontier separating two oppositional camps, typically ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’. Each antagonistic camp may encapsulate heterogeneous identities and, therefore, a diversity of political demands and imaginaries, many of which may even be ‘contradictory’. Populism may therefore assume a variety of forms and is entirely context-dependent.

Building on these general premises, several recent studies suggest that populism can assume a democratic form to the extent that articulations of ‘the people’, as a category that is deployed to signify populist totalities, remains *empty* (Stavrakakis et al. 2017). ‘The people’ can be deployed inclusively and incorporate all-the-more identities if it is not symbolically tied to particularistic and exclusionary content, e.g. ethnocentric conceptions of ‘the people’ (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Populism is by extension understood as potentially beholding the embryo of radical democratic projects (Mouffe 2018; Stavrakakis 2014).

The present paper contributes to this theoretical conversation by examining how the articulation of populist logics comes to hinge on *extant hegemonic institutional arrangements*. I maintain that the relationship between the populist possibility and hegemony is consistently underemphasized in the literature. As I will argue, populist articulations, *in part, and on a certain level*, will come to incorporate uncontested narratives and life modalities that partially express existing hegemonic relations. The same holds for political categories that are central to populist politics, such as ‘the people’ and ‘democracy’. Therefore, attempts to articulate a purely ‘empty’ (i.e. inclusive) conception of the ‘the people’ may very well come to be dislocated, since the invocation of ‘the people’ may (implicitly) invoke already-existing narratives and institutional arrangements that disrupt its ‘emptiness’. As I will demonstrate, the interests of ‘the establishment’ have on an on-going basis been advanced through the institutionalization of nationalist ideology, which purports ‘the people’ to be an exclusive national community. Thus, the democratic potential inscribed in the political category ‘the people’—and by extension populism—is undermined by the category’s symbolic association with the exclusive ‘nation’, and by the fact that ‘democracy’ has been principally organized as a national(ist) project very often led by the efforts of ‘the establishment’.

## **Populism and democracy**

The present section sketches out the general conceptual contours of the relevant theoretical conversation. How has the relationship between populism and democracy been articulated in formal scholarship? As Laclau (2005) has effectively demonstrated, early theories of crowd behavior and mass psychology tend to treat collective political mobilization as an irrational or pathological phenomenon. One can easily cite, as an

example, Le Bon's (1895) most-influential work on crowd behavior, where he consistently denigrates collective forms of political mobilization. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature is replete with like-spirited accounts of crowd behavior, where collective political mobilization is assessed as either an irrational phenomenon or a social pathology (Laclau 2005). The notions of 'backward', 'irrational', 'pathological', 'dangerous' etc. masses, in all their (per)mutated forms, had consequently, either explicitly or implicitly, penetrated a plethora of accounts of populism thereafter (see Kornhauser 1959: 25–38; Laclau 2005: Chapters 1-3).

Such crude overgeneralizations that are of a clearly normative orientation are not typically characteristic of recent literature. The vestiges of contempt are nonetheless encountered, albeit in attenuated forms. Let us assess some of the content in Meny and Surel's (2002) edited volume, suggestively entitled *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. In the introductory chapter, Meny and Surel propose that populism is an 'indication of democratic malaise' and should thus be understood as an expression of democratic deficits (see also Todorov 2007). Populism, then, as a political phenomenon or strategy, is not in and of itself accorded political legitimacy. It is merely deemed to be the epiphenomenal aspect of 'democratic malaise'. Taggart's essay in the same volume advances a similar argument, but in his case we are warned of populism's potential dangers, as well. His concluding remarks, stealthily embellished with normative and ethical overtones, allege that populism can, not only be damaging to representative politics, but that '[p]opulism qua populism has little to offer representative politics other than as an indicator of the latter's ill-health' (Taggart 2002: 78–79).

It is imperative to note that such tendencies to devalorize populism, or to treat it with suspicion, are particularly pronounced in the public sphere, as well, and are to a large extent characteristic of journalistic and political orthodoxy. The term 'populism' is typically deployed in a sneering fashion (Taguieff 1995), often in attempts to question the legitimacy of political movements that challenge the European status quo (Stavrakakis 2014: 508–10). Such ethico-political positions are directly connected to the fact that populism is conventionally understood in terms of its radical right-wing variant. Several studies have brought attention to how 'populism' is very often conflated with 'nationalism', 'nativism', and 'authoritarianism', where these terms are used interchangeably, in the absence of any conceptual specificity (see De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Taguieff 1995). The underlying but nonetheless pronounced implication is that populism, as a nationalist modality, constitutes a substantive threat to democracy. Various authors have explicitly identified 'nationalism' (e.g. Angell 1966: 316; Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou 2012; Jansen 2011: 82; Lukacs 2005: 72; Oliver and Rahn 2016) as a key element of populism, while others establish a relationship between nationalism and populism implicitly, vis-à-vis mediating concepts (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016; Minkenberg 1992; Mounk 2018; Taggart 2000). Based on what has been delineated thus far, one can clearly see why populism is subjected to prejudicial evaluations, explicitly or implicitly understood as a threat to (liberal representative) democracy (e.g. Mounk 2018; Müller 2016; Pappas 2016, 2018; Urbinati 1998).

Against the backdrop of such conventions, a string of scholarship has sought to 'neutralize' the concept of populism, by suggesting that populism can assume either a democratic or an undemocratic character, depending upon the socio-historical

conditions in which it emerges (Canovan 1999; Kaltwasser 2012; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004; Panizza 2005). This theoretical impetus was guided, in part, by considering actual instantiations of populism that challenged the idea that populism is inherently undemocratic, nationalist or exclusionary (see, as examples, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). The Latin American experience is of particular relevance, in this respect. Studies of Latin American politics reveal that, in certain instances, populist movements, e.g. those associated with Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, enabled the political inclusion of marginalized communities (see de la Torre 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). The recent rise of progressive democratic populist parties, such as SYRIZA and Podemos, in Europe, have also challenged the notion that populism is inherently undemocratic (see Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). These parties have attempted to advance humanistic, social democratic, and progressive democratic agendas, while articulating an inclusionary conception of ‘the people’. Pablo Iglesias of Podemos, as an example, consistently refers to Spain as a ‘plurinational’ country (Custodi 2018).

Formal scholarship, being informed by such developments—and in turn informing them—has increasingly been geared toward examining the democratic potential of populism. ‘Essex School’ theorists, in particular, have made notable contributions to this discussion (e.g. Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis 2014). By relinquishing substantivist (see Anastasiou 2019) understandings of populism that are ridden with value-judgments, ‘Essex School’ theorists understand populism as a political logic that can assume a variety of forms. Populism ensues when heterogeneous unfulfilled demands (e.g. economic, cultural, political) and identities come to be ‘aggregated’, as part of a political body that is represented as a totality, vis-à-vis ‘umbrella’ signifiers, such as ‘the people’ (Laclau 2005: Chapter 4). ‘The people’ does not symbolize the particularity of each identity/demand, but, rather, their mere *equivalence*—it becomes a ‘metaphorical replacement’ for each and every identity/demand that it comes to encapsulate (Laclau 2005: Chapter 4; Stavrakakis 2005: 234). To the extent that this incarnated political totality assumes an antagonistic character, where it is juxtaposed to a constructed ‘Other’, such as ‘the establishment’, one can speak of populism. While there are some minor disagreements among ‘Essex School’ theorists as to whether the political category ‘the people’ should be considered an essential characteristic of populism (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 10), the political centrality of ‘the people’ is nonetheless never doubted. ‘The people’ is seen as an ambiguous signifier that, by virtue of its profuse diffusion in the social, comes to operate as a potential site of political contestation and as a signifier that can be deployed in the context of antagonistic, i.e. populist, politics.

According to certain ‘Essex School’ theorists, the manner by which the signifier ‘the people’ is deployed is the principal criterion that determines whether a populist movement will assume a democratic character or not. Is ‘the people’ characterized by a conceptual ‘emptiness’ thus enabling it to encapsulate as many identities/demands as possible? Or is ‘the people’ reduced to exclusionary (e.g. nationalistic) imaginaries that restrict the definition of the populist body (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017)? The character that populist movements come to assume is understood as being strictly *articulated*, that is, a product of political practice. Ergo, an ‘empty’, i.e. inclusive, articulation of the people can potentially yield novel democratic possibilities. It

is for this reason that notable intellectuals such as Chantal Mouffe (2018) and Yannis Stavrakakis (2014) have emphasized the need for a ‘Left’ populism.

For Stavrakakis, the political efficacy of ‘the people’ is attributed to the category’s constitutive ambiguity. ‘The people’ references the community as a totality, as well as the socially excluded (Stavrakakis 2014:506). This enables a political possibility: a claim in the interest of a particular (excluded) identity can be made in the name of the communal totality, as both are subsumed under the category ‘the people’. ‘In democracy’s modern history, in particular, from the Chartists to the constitution of the welfare state and the new social movements, this ambiguity facilitated and, to a certain extent, guaranteed the constant *democratization of democracy*’ (Stavrakakis 2014: 506).

In the current political juncture, owing to the dislocating effects of neoliberalism and the de-democratization of modern democracy, societal dislocations and structural impasses are proliferating (see Mouffe 2018: Chapter 1; Stavrakakis 2014: 507). In other words, the current hegemonic configuration is undergoing a crisis of representation, unable to satisfy the demands of the identities it encapsulates (Mouffe 2018: Chapter 1; Stavrakakis 2014: 507). As an outcome, populism is ‘resurging’, something that is made evident with the increasing political references to ‘the people’, in a context where ‘inequality and social class divisions acquire a renewed salience’ (Stavrakakis 2014: 508). Stavrakakis seems to be confident that the egalitarian potential that germinates in the notion of ‘the people’ will continue to blossom. The proliferation of references to ‘the people’ and egalitarian democratic discourses is deemed to be a strong possibility (Stavrakakis 2014: 13).

Stavrakakis’ analysis is, however, made with a caveat. He emphasizes that populist movements may acquire either an inclusive or an exclusive character (Stavrakakis 2014:514). Thus, the current crisis of representation in Europe may *also* yield non-democratic populist articulations:

Populist or not, the far right, especially in its neo-Nazi variants, remains a major threat to a battered European democracy. Arguably, it is only the elaboration of a progressive populism that could be in a position to halt this dangerous trajectory. In this sense, apart from being inevitable, populism could also be desirable—that is, of course, under very precise conditions. Nobody should underestimate the risks involved here, and yet, nothing in life is risk-free [...] To simplify things a bit, populism is neither necessarily bad nor necessarily good. It involves a series of contradictory articulations (Stavrakakis 2014: 14).

Stavrakakis’ insightful remarks constitute a suitable theoretical starting point for the present analysis. As a preliminary step, it is paramount to consider where Stavrakakis, as well as Mouffe, locate the popular-democratic potential. The potential constitution of the populist body is ‘located’ in ‘the populist moment’—the historical juncture where the dominant hegemonic configuration cannot satisfy the demands of its subjects and, as a consequence, loses their allegiance (Mouffe 2018: 11; Stavrakakis 2014: 506–9). ‘As a result, the historical bloc that provides the social basis of a hegemonic formation is being disarticulated and the possibility arises of constructing a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust’ (Mouffe 2018: 11).

This line of reasoning follows Laclau's performative understanding of popular subjectivities. Laclau's intransigent anti-essentialist position led him to conclude that the identity of 'the people' is not epiphenomenal and, as such, is not (pre)determined by any one underlying social or historical factor. Indeed, the populist body emerges to the extent that the signifier 'the people', as a political category that comes to nominally circumscribe a plurality of unfulfilled heterogeneous demands, is deployed. The identity of 'the people' does not therefore precede the instance(s) where the signifier 'the people' is politically deployed. In other words, the constitution of the identity of 'the people' inheres in the performative act of *naming* the people—a process which invariably results in an excluded 'Other', or what Laclau calls a 'constitutive outside'. 'Essex School' theorists, following Laclau's footsteps, emphasize this *formalistic and performative* aspect of populist articulations, locating the democratic potential principally at the *nominal and synchronic* level of the constitution of the populist subject. Since the identity of 'the people' does not precede the performative act of naming 'the people', populism can assume an inclusive character to the extent that the category 'the people', remains, to the greatest extent possible, empty of content.

I maintain that, in the absence of further qualification, this argument on some level abstracts 'the populist moment' from its socio-historical contexts. Consequently, the content that populist movements can presumably assume appears to be markedly malleable. I want to forcefully emphasize that any synchronic articulating practice also inheres in a *diachronic* socio-political sequence whereby extant social elements are deployed in reference to future political imaginaries (see Vahabzadeh 2003: 54–57; White 1987). In this sense, 'the past', 'the future' and 'the present', can be understood as inhering in the precise moment where 'the people' come to be articulated. This means that any political practice hinges on an already-existing (hegemonic) socio-political fabric through which it pragmatically operates. Ergo, political practice is undercut and subverted by the limits of history.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is clear: the interpellation of popular-democratic subjects, i.e. 'the people', cannot be sought solely at the site of their nominal and synchronic constitution. Any sort of theoretical or political consideration of the 'populist moment', and the democratic potential inscribed in 'the people', needs to also take into consideration how a populist articulation may come to be undercut by extant hegemonic arrangements that may adulterate its character. As Vahabzadeh (2003) thoughtfully reminds us, '[i]n order to understand the fixity of identity in a hegemonic formation, we need to explicate precisely the historical conditions of possibility of each participant identity' (p. 56). Analysis, therefore, needs to bridge the dialectic between the political importance and potential of the signifier 'the people', with its corresponding *signifieds*, in all their polysemic and multifarious instantiations. This necessitates an examination of the social history of 'the people'. We proceed accordingly.

## **The hegemonic constitution of the popular subject**

In the present section I would like to develop a theoretical platform that will enable us to graft the historiographic sequences inscribed in 'the people'. Our overarching aim is

to discern the principal semantic elements and semiotic movements that have, as part of on-going historical vicissitudes, come to constitute 'the people' as a political category. Our theoretical point of departure is the concept of hegemony, as articulated in the Gramscian tradition. As poignantly articulated by Vahabzadeh (2003), '[b]y the term 'hegemony', Gramsci refers to a political configuration of the social in which the element of consent that is given by the citizens to the leadership overrides the element of coercion' (p. 57). It is important to consider that 'consent' presupposes overcoming a political situation crisscrossed by particularistic interests and thus characterized by *plurality and conflict*. Ergo, 'consent' entails a process whereby particularistic interests are *partially subverted*, as they succumb to the close-grip of a precarious and incomplete 'homogeneity'.

'Homogeneity' does not entail simple commonality of experience—homogeneity proper would entail the absence of politics as it would eliminate all differences (see Anastasiou 2018: 181–85; Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 127–34). Rather, homogeneity here designates the constitution of *contiguous* experiences, modes of representation, spaces of communication, etc. (Anastasiou 2018: 186–91; Vahabzadeh 2003: 57–69). The notion of 'contiguity' is employed to emphasize that 'commonalities' of any sort (e.g. linguistic, in values, in lifestyle, in outlooks, in attitudes, etc.) are characterized by *overlap and negation, in various degrees of proximity, and in various configurations* (Anastasiou 2018, Chapter 8, Chapter 11). Thus, hegemony entails the aggregation of dispersed 'collective wills' vis-à-vis the institutionalization of contiguous experiences, modes of representation, world outlooks, life modalities, and so on and so forth (Anastasiou 2018: Chapter 11; Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 68; Vahabzadeh 2003: 66).

This process should not be understood as being consensual in character, but, rather, the product of effective politics, where the narratives and world outlooks of *particular* identities come to 'infiltrate' or 'produce' 'competing' identities (Hall 1986: 15), thus furnishing contiguous spaces of representation. This means that any hegemonic configuration will be constitutively 'contaminated' as it will partially incorporate narratives that are drawn from multiple identities. Hegemony, then, entails a particular form of political fusion, where a plurality of subject positions and interests are cemented together as a communal bloc, by a contiguous ideological field (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 66–67). The ideological field is comprised by narratives drawn from the identities it traverses.

However, given that the social is constitutively *uneven* (see Laclau 2007: 42–44), one identity will manage to saturate, to the greatest extent, the content of the ideological field with its own narratives and world outlooks. Consequently, the ideological field will come to reflect, to a greater extent, a particular identity's interests. *The ideological field is therefore predominantly drawn from a particular social identity, but is generalized by traversing a plurality of subject positions, while incorporating elements from these subject positions, as it comes to partially 'subsume' them under its own logic* (Hall 1986: 15–16; Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 67). The categories of 'ideology', 'narratives', 'world outlooks' etc. should not be understood as mere ideal modalities, but as ideas that come to be imbricated in a diverse fashion in the material fabric of the social world. Thus, ideology and action-oriented processes are understood as being co-constitutive (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 108–9). Ergo, hegemony entails the general imbrication of

particularistic narratives in institutional arrangements and life modalities, thus coinciding with processes that furnish, albeit always precariously, regularized modes of conduct (Anastasiou 2018: 260–88). Order and power are two sides of the same coin.

This means that a hegemonic configuration emerges to the extent that modes of conduct and thought come to be *partially fixed*. Such modes of fixity can be understood as *nodes* through which social arrangements, and therefore power relations, come to be structured. ‘Democracy’, ‘the nation’, ‘the people’, ‘the state’, ‘currency’, etc. can all be understood as ‘privileged’ nodes through which a broad range of social arrangements come to be aggregated, but through which particularistic interests are also asserted. As an example, if the node ‘democracy’, through which a whole institutional fabric is arranged, is more so reflective of liberal narratives, it will come to constitutively exclude or subvert competing understandings of democracy, e.g. communist, thus reflecting, to a greater extent, the interests of liberal-oriented political parties. ‘Privileged’ nodes are thus characterized by a pronounced political potential and it is for this reason that they can be understood as *hegemonic categories*.

Considering, specifically, the political significance of the category ‘the people’, we should note that it constitutes a terrain through which diverse particularistic interests are (historically) asserted. To the extent that the category ‘the people’ cannot comprehensively absorb such diversity, it will of course come to reflect, to a greater extent, the interests of the identities that manage to effectively assert their narratives through the category. This means that ‘the people’—and this is the case with all hegemonic categories, such as ‘the nation’ and ‘democracy’—is a site crisscrossed with political contestations, through which particularistic interests are *unevenly* asserted. Such contestations, concern, in part, the very meaning of ‘the people’, as alterations of its meaning result in associated political outcomes. Thus, as just one example, a pluralistic articulation of ‘the people’ will potentially result in more minorities being included in the political community, while an ethnocentric articulation of ‘the people’ will potentially result in modes of political exclusion.

Let us now connect this discussion with the question of populism and democracy. As a reminder, Essex School theorists suggest that populist articulations can assume a democratic character to the extent that ‘the people’, when deployed to signify a populist totality, remains empty of content. I would like to incorporate an additional dimension to this argument by considering the political significance of the *conceptual* makeup of hegemonic categories, focusing principally on the category ‘the people’. I would also like to critically examine whether and to what extent ‘the people’ can actually be deployed in the absence of meaningful attributions and thus remain empty.

Let me begin my exploration with a banal consideration, by simply stating that hegemonic categories have a history. Their current meanings, in all their polysemic instantiations, reflect, in part, the *sedimentation* of past articulatory practices (Vahabzadeh 2003: 56). I cautiously note that emphasizing the diachronic dimension of social and political categories, by zeroing in on their corresponding contents, does not entail recourse to essentialism (see Vahabzadeh 2003:54–57). The sedimentation of meanings ‘within’ a political category *did* come from somewhere, but such meanings are invariably a product of political practice and nothing more. This means that the

articulation of populist totalities, vis-à-vis the signifier ‘the people’, will on some level invoke the history of ‘the people’, as sedimented, however precariously, in its semantic and practical modalities.

Indeed, while Laclau privileges the synchronic and performative dimension of political practice, he has in various instances ‘supplemented’ his position with much needed theoretical clarifications. He notes that while hegemonic formations are strictly articulated, they ‘can have a high degree of stability, but this stability is itself the result of a construction operating on a plurality of heterogeneous elements’ (Laclau 2014: 169). Ergo, historical parameters restrict the pliability of political categories, e.g. ‘the people’. Laclau has also made several clarifications in his later works, specifically about the notion of the ‘empty signifier’. He asserts that the notion of the empty signifier is ‘self-defeating’, as it would amount to mere noise (Laclau 2005: 105). Rather, politically significant categories such as ‘the people’, are characterized by a *dimension of emptiness*, because such categories cannot correspond to the entirety of demands and identities that they encapsulate (Laclau 2005: Chapter 4). Rather, as a metaphorical tool, they come to signify the mere equivalence between heterogeneous demands and identities. In this sense, categories such as ‘the people’ cannot be *subordinated* to any particularistic demand, nor include, as a necessary element, any one particularistic demand. Thus, *strictly speaking*, ‘the people’, and thus the constitution of the populist body, is *nominal* in character. It is this nominal aspect of populist aggregations that the concept of the ‘empty signifier’ designates. This does not however mean that meaningful content will not be attributed to the ‘empty’ signifier, by the plurality of identities that it comes to represent. Ergo, while politically significant categories, such as ‘the people’, are characterized by a dimension of emptiness when they are deployed to signify a constitutively heterogeneous totality, they will nonetheless *also* come to be imbued with contested meaningful content and become all the more polysemic (see Laclau 2005: 131–33). ‘The people’, thus, can never be devoid of content.

In connecting the two theoretical arguments thus far delineated, one can suggest that the category ‘the people’ can be understood as a terrain through which political interests are, on an on-going basis, unevenly asserted. Current hegemonic configurations, at least in ‘the West’, consist of on-going political battles that are situated at the ‘site’ of ‘the people’. This means that performative articulation of ‘the people’ within the ‘populist moment’ will have to ‘answer’, in part, *to the phantom of ‘the people’s’ history*. The invocation of the ‘the people’ will inevitably re-call and be flooded with myriad meanings that came to be sedimented, historically, ‘within’ the category.

The conclusion cannot be unambiguous: the performative constitution of ‘the people’ involves the uneven deployment and reactivation of extant meanings that are associated with ‘the people’, in reference to contextual political considerations and future political imaginaries. The question that now needs to be answered is what narratives and whose interests does ‘the people’ express, and what political possibilities are, by extension, enabled and foreclosed.

## People, nation, citizenship, sovereignty, democracy

In the present section, I wish to examine the historical trajectory of ‘the people’, in efforts of illuminating the political vicissitudes that have accompanied the category. What I intent to do is to reveal how the category ‘the people’ has historically hinged on a political dualism: (a) that of the pursuit of democratic rights; and (b) that of the construction of national identity and national communities. What is therefore of principal interest is how the political history of the category ‘the people’ has accompanied both inclusive (democratic) and exclusive (nationalist) political pursuits. These efforts will by extension highlight the duality that ‘inheres’ to populist articulations, as well as the potentials and limits of democratic populism. We delimit our empirical considerations to the history of Europe and North America, in efforts of avoiding overgeneralizations.

In the context of European and North American history, it is generally accepted that the increasing significance of ‘the people’, as a political compass, is intimately associated with the liberal and national political and cultural revolutions and reforms of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 2012: Chapter 1). Such transformative events included, on the one hand, the increasing assertion of democratic demands and, on the other, the institutionalization of forms of state control (Giddens 1981; Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 2012; Mann 2010). These transformative historical developments were legitimated, in part, in the name of ‘the people’. We can cite, as relevant historical documents, the English Bill of Rights (1689), The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), and the United States Declaration of Independence (1776). What these documents display—and the US Declaration of Independence in particular—is the burgeoning political relevance of popular sovereignty. The political revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth century were likewise executed with abounding references to ‘the people’, fashioned in the spirit of their forbearers—the French and American revolutions. The ‘global’ political significance of the French and American revolutions should be emphasized. Benedict Anderson (2006) suggests that the independence movements in the Americas became a ‘blueprint’ upon which other revolutions and nation(-state) building projects were based (p. 81), while Laclau and Mouffe (2001) assert that the French Revolution unleashed a ‘democratic imaginary’ that, through its proliferating dispersion, enabled the increasing assertion and diversification of democratic demands (pp. 152–159).

The argument I wish to advance is that, historically, the increasing political significance of ‘the people’ was caught up in the quinquepartite symbolic configuration of ‘people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy’. This configuration enabled the increasing assertion of democratic rights and, concomitantly, state-led projects of nation construction, where the categories ‘the people’ and ‘democracy’ came to be undercut and ‘adulterated’ by the pursuits of ‘the establishment’, vis-à-vis the political category ‘the nation’. The symbolic conjunction of ‘people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy’ can therefore be understood as a key political field through which modern political ‘establishments’ asserted their hegemony.

As an analytic category that is central to the analysis of nations and nationalism, ‘the establishment’ here designates the on-going institutionalization of variable and

changing relations that disproportionately benefit particular identities or institutions. Care, however, should be taken not to conceive of 'the establishment' as a unitary and singular entity across time. 'The establishment' is but a nominal category that designates plural configurations of power, invariably subject to flux, but nonetheless characterized by dimensions of historical contiguity. The constitutive components of 'the establishment' are invariably context-specific, but as examples, they can include the following elements: 'the economic and political elite', 'the state', 'the intelligentsia', 'the military', 'the education system', 'the religious establishment', etc. In studies of European nationalisms, these elements are very often identified as the principal 'drivers' of nation building projects (Brass 1991; Gellner 1983; Giddens 1985; Hobsbawm 2012; Smith 1986; Weber 1976).

Let us now proceed by sketching out the historical trajectory of the 'people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy' complex. Socio-historical studies of nationalism reveal that the association, to the extent that there was one, between 'the people', 'the nation' and 'the citizen', as the bearers of rights and sovereignty, was entirely context dependent (Greenfeld 1992; Hobsbawm 2012: 18–22). However, with the increasing pursuit of nation building projects, these categories increasingly start co-penetrating one another (Giddens 1985: 94; Greenfeld 1996: 10–11; Habermas 1996: 10–11; Hobsbawm 2012: 18–22, 90, 103–4; Kohn 1965: 30, 89). Hobsbawm (2012), as an example, suggests that nationalist considerations were, by and large, absent from the 'grammar' of the French and American revolutions, especially when compared to the revolutions of the late nineteenth and twentieth century (pp. 18–20).

Nevertheless, the various elements later used to discover definitions of non-state nationality, were undoubtedly present, either associated with the revolutionary nation or creating problems for it; and the more one and indivisible it claimed to be, the more heterogeneity within it created problems. There is little doubt that for most Jacobins a Frenchman who did not speak French was suspect, and that in practice the ethno-linguistic criterion of nationality was often accepted (Hobsbawm 2012: 20–21).

What this passage reveals is the historical emergence of the people-citizen-nation complex, as it comes to be incorporated in the sovereignty-democracy nexus. I believe that I would not be overgeneralizing in stating that at the current historical juncture, these political categories are inextricably connected. Liah Greenfeld (1996) has examined the historical development of this relationship, noting that conceptions of 'the people' *as a nation* that is the bearer of 'sovereignty' is one of the principal elements of nationalism and modernity (pp. 10–11). As a related example, the Cyclopedia of Political Science, as early as 1889, under the entry 'nation', specifies the following: 'in relation to the state, the *citizens* constitute the *people*; in relation to the human race, they constitute the *nation*' (Lalor 1889: 923).

What is, in addition, paramount to consider is that, historically, the assertion of democratic demands and thus popular sovereignty accompanied state expansion projects, through which forms of state control and articulations of nationality had come to proliferate (Habermas 1996, 2003: 88–89; Hobsbawm 2012: 110). As Mann (2010)

suggests, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century, state coordination of society and the economy intensified (p. 730). He further notes that

state expansion intensified both representative and national issues. The late eighteenth century fiscal and conscription consequences of increased militarism resulted in greater representative pressures but very different crystallizations on the national issue, ranging from the centralization attempted by Jacobin revolutionaries to the confederalism of most Austrian dissidents. Yet the later industrial capitalist phase intensified pressures toward both more representative and more national societies. 'Naturalization' was especially effective because it was unconscious, unintended, interstitial, and so unopposed. It involved the emotions as well as instrumental reason, subtly changing conceptions of communities of attachment (Mann 2010: 731).

Eugene Weber's (1976) captivating historical account of how rural populations were converted into French national citizens by coming to be subsumed by the administrative workings of the state and its nationalist ideology, speaks to this point, as well. One can therefore suggest that democracy, at least in the European context, included, as a contingent element, (instrumental) articulations of 'the people' and 'the nation' as state or elite projects of control (see Brass 1991; Hobsbawm 2012: Chapter 4). The democratic potential inscribed in 'the people' is thus intimately bound up with the construction of a state-articulated hegemony. As Breuilly (1994) aptly suggests, the modern state was

regarded as deriving its sovereignty from the people, not from God. At the same time the 'people' were a particular set of people, often seen as the members of the civil society which the state ruled, and also as the occupants of the clearly defined territory the state claimed as its own (p. 374).

This metaphorical interplay between people and nation (see Anastasiou 2019), in all its particularistic and universalistic manifestations, constitutes one of the principal dimensions of political discourse in modern times (Greenfeld 1996). The intimate association between 'nation' and 'people' is one of the main reasons why studies of populism have been unable to apodictically differentiate between inclusionary and exclusionary populist movements, since the step from 'the people', as an inclusionary category, to 'the nation', as an exclusive community, is easily (and often unconsciously) taken (see De Cleen 2017; Mudde 2004: 549).

Let us now consider the associated political implications. If I am indeed correct that the political significance of 'the people' was intimately bound up with the quinquepartite symbolic configuration of 'people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy', and if, as theorists of nationalism suggest, such configuration constitutes one of the principal dimensions of modernity and nationalism, then one might very well suggest that these categories can be understood as *hegemonic nodes through which national communities came to be organized*. They represent privileged symbolic points of reference that came to be deeply imbricated in institutional arrangements and diverse life modalities. The 'people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy' complex can be understood as an ambiguous symbolic terrain through which heterogeneous identities

and lifeworlds came to be aggregated, and, therefore, through which *particularistic interests were asserted*. It is a symbolic site penetrating the materiality of the social fabric crisscrossed with political contestations and antagonisms. To the extent that we can speak of ‘the establishment’, it follows that it is ‘it’ that has saturated, to the greatest extent, the content of this symbolic configuration with its narratives.

When assessing the people-nation nexus in particular, we can refer to a string of studies that have examined how articulations of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’—and ‘the people’ as ‘nation’—were intimately bound up with nation building projects that were principally led by the ‘centres of power’, and the state in particular (Gellner 1983; Giddens 1985; Hobsbawm 2012). ‘The people’ and ‘the nation’, as well as their symbolic associations, were *constructed* through: the institutionalization of public education (Gellner 1983), the institutionalization of inter-territorial networks of capitalist relations and labour division (Giddens 1981; Mann 2010; Smith 1986), (mandatory) military conscription (Tilly 1975; Weber 1976), the ‘invention of traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2013), the politicization of ethnicity (Smith 1986), administrative control of civil society (Giddens 1985; Mann 2010), the regulation of gender and sexual norms (Mosse 1985; Yuval-Davis 1993), and so on and so forth. These processes involved the inculcation and on-going construction of a broad range of meaningful identifications that are intimately bound up with the notions of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’. And while this process is by no means unidirectional and is executed at a plurality of sites, it is, to the greatest extent, ‘led’ by the centres of power and the state, in particular. History bears witness to the fact that ‘the establishment’ has consolidated its power by consolidating, in the breadth of its polysemic instantiations, the notion of the exclusive national community.

What is, moreover, crucial to consider is that the construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ is intimately bound up with actors’ commonsense experience (see Vahabzadeh 2003: 71). The various strands of meaning that come to unevenly comprise the ‘people-nation-citizen-sovereignty-democracy’ nexus will thus find their counterpart in actors’ self-understanding. It is in light of this realization that I assert that articulation of a popular-democratic subject, i.e. ‘the people’, in the ‘populist moment’ is bound to confront the phantom of ‘the people’s’ already-existing and sedimented hegemonic counterpart. This, of course, does not mean that the democratic-popular subject is comprehensibly subsumed by the hegemonic logic, or that in times where dislocations have proliferated it cannot take on radical forms. As already stated, hegemony is always ‘contaminated’, encapsulating elements from the plurality of subjectivities that it comes to subsume. Thus, articulations of ‘the people’ in the ‘populist moment’ will be constitutively *split* between ‘the people’—as a hegemonically-constituted category—and the inculcation of novel political desires and imaginaries. ‘The people’ is invariably caught up within the temporality of its unfolding.

We can thus conclude that interpellations of popular-democratic subjects in the ‘populist moment’ will be chimerically constituted, incorporating, in part, narratives that will on some level reflect the interests of ‘the establishment’. The extent and the manner by which such narratives come to comprise popular-democratic subjectivities is contingent upon the political (im)balance between ‘the establishment’ and ‘anti-establishment’ offensives. Identities operating in a common communal space invariably

'infiltrate' one another *but unevenly so*. Power effects are, as a consequence, yielded. This realization compels us to scrutinize a series of long-held dichotomies that have guided, not only social and political theory, but political practice, more generally: the people and the establishment, democracy and oligarchy, freedom and control, state and civil society, etc. As Vahabzadeh (2003) emphatically notes, if hegemony 'animates a delicate balance between the state and civil society, then the two will be only different corners of one world, aspects of the same principle, domains of related experiences' (Vahabzadeh 2003: 69). The banality of such dichotomies, so ingrained in theoretical and political discourse, only obfuscates the constitutive 'promiscuity' of socio-political arrangements, while reinforcing '*the illusion of an ultimate freedom from one sphere while supposedly keeping oneself within the borders of another*' (Vahabzadeh 2003: 70). Consequently, the democratic potential inscribed in 'the people' is prolifically asserted, without sufficient consideration of how the category 'the people' is thoroughly imbued with the narratives of 'the establishment' and intimately associated with its potentially non-democratic variant—the exclusive nation and its associated ideological 'family resemblances' (see Anastasiou 2018: 210–12, 272–88).

What are the potential risks involved here? Let us be specific. While an essentialist understanding of nationalism is by no means endorsed (see Anastasiou 2019), it is prudent to acknowledge that political deployments of 'the people', might potentially invoke 'the people's' exclusionary 'nationalist phantom'. This is something that theorists and political movements should be keenly aware of. In the context of Western politics, 'bellicose nationalism' comprises, in part, the national(ist) ideological family resemblances. Harry Anastasiou (2008) has identified the key ideational currents of this 'family cluster'. He suggests that nationalism conjures up an absolute or universalistic conception of 'the nation', endowing it with 'asymmetrical distribution of positive values and rightness' in contrast with the particularity of 'the other' and 'the enemy' (Anastasiou 2008: 36–37). Consequently, 'the nationalist approach to nationhood places the nation in an untouchable "moral realm", beyond question, reproach, and accountability' (Anastasiou 2009: 34).

Now, does the invocation of 'the people' *by default* invoke this bellicose 'family cluster'? Certainly not. But it is easy to see how under particular conditions of possibility, it could be 'summoned', either explicitly or unconsciously and by implication. And it is all too common for attitudes to take a radical turn (in either direction) under conditions where grievance and dislocations have proliferated. This is one of the reasons why, in the current political juncture, owing to the gradual unraveling of neoliberal hegemony, radical right-wing parties are increasingly making political gains in Europe. Relatedly, Laclau (2003), in his critique of Benedict Anderson, has warned 'that a racist or xenophobic turn is one of the inherent possibilities of nationalism' (p. 28). And while I do agree with the position that the 'the nation' can be articulated in reference to progressive, democratic and inclusionary imaginaries, one has to be mindful that *at this particular historical juncture*, bellicose nationalism, and its associated xenophobic and racist variants, are still widely ingrained in diverse albeit uneven ways in actors' national self-understanding. Therein lies the risk of populist politics.

It is in light of the total sum of my argument that I critique, albeit with qualification, the tendency to locate the democratic potential in the demotic corpus, in

all its polysemic instantiations (e.g. populism, ‘the people’, ‘democracy’, civil society, public sphere, cosmopolitanism, etc.), a practice replete in social and political theory (e.g. Benhabib 1996; Castells 2009: 41–42; Habermas 2003: 98–99; Mouffe 2018). ‘Democracy’ is valorized, without sufficiently considering that the ‘the democratic subject’ is *hegemonically constituted and that the modern democratic project has been principally framed in national(ist) terms*. When considering populism’s democratic potential, in particular, we therefore have to be keenly aware of how references to ‘the people’, even if articulated with reference to democratic imaginaries, can easily come to be infiltrated by an extant nationalist ideological framework that attributes an exclusivity to ‘the people’. The constitutive ambiguities that govern the hegemonic categories ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ requires political mastery of the greatest order if they are to be deployed effectively against the hegemonic grip that has, as part of an on-going historical process, saturated these categories with narratives that purport the nation to be an exclusive community and selectively democratic.

## Conclusion

The present article contributes to recent theoretical discussions concerning the relationship between populism and democracy. Much in line with recent literature, the democratic potential inscribed in the political category ‘the people’, and populism more generally, is acknowledged. However, this affirmation is made with caution and qualification, calling for an examination of the social history of ‘the people’. It is argued that ‘the people’ is governed by ambiguous political potential. ‘The people’ has, on an on-going basis been symbolically associated with ‘the nation’. The historical political centrality of ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ emerged alongside nation construction projects, in which democracy was articulated primarily in national(ist) terms. In light of the fact that ‘the nation’ is often associated with nationalistic narratives that purport ‘the nation’ to be an exclusive community, one has to be mindful that political deployments of ‘the people’, might very well invoke its exclusionary ‘nationalist phantom’. This illuminates why it has proven impossible to apodictically differentiate ‘democratic’ and ‘inclusionary’ from ‘nationalist’ and ‘exclusionary’ populisms.

By implication, we are called upon to examine with a heightened degree of urgency, how and to what extent the hegemonic configuration of nation-states enables and delimits democratic politics. It is argued that the symbolic association between ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’ is a historical construct that coincided with the on-going construction of national communities. ‘The people’ and ‘the nation’ constitute privileged nodes, through which diverse life modalities come to be organized and, most importantly, through which particularistic interests were and are unevenly asserted. ‘The people’ and ‘the nation’, have, therefore, hitherto expressed, albeit in part, the interests of ‘the establishment’. This means that articulations of ‘the people’ might very well invoke historical meanings that represent the interests of the establishment, such as the notion of the exclusive national community. Awareness of the constitutively chimeric nature of populist politics alarms us to the fact that a creativity of the highest order is necessitated if populist articulations are to evade the close grip of national(ist)

hegemony. This realization prefigures the direction that critical research on populism has to take.

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

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments 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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