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Introduction

The theorization of populism by Laclau and the so-called Essex School is today acknowledged as a major advance in populism studies even by scholars who seem to disagree with many aspects of his synthesis. For example, proponents of the ideational approach accept that 'The Laclauian approach to populism is particularly current within political philosophy, so-called critical studies, and in studies of West European and Latin American politics' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 3). Obviously, many differences do remain; differences of emphasis, method, overall orientation, etc. This is far from unexpected in social-scientific debate and, in fact, has facilitated a productive critical debate based on mutual respect and academic argument even though populism is a paradigmatic issue bound to create immense polarizations; the latter also influence academic research, never itself a value-free enterprise insulated from political and ideological stakes.²

Yet what has recently emerged with respect to Laclau's theorization of populism, but has its basis in arguments that had been circulating for some time in one way or the other, is a paradoxical criticism emanating from potential 'allies' of this approach. In what follows, I would like to examine in some detail this criticism, which focuses on its potential authoritarian or totalitarian implications due to its alleged monism. This is obviously quite serious, especially since we are talking about a perspective usually credited with highlighting the potentially progressive and inclusionary dynamics of populism:

radical democratic theorists have reclaimed populism's rebellious excess to return the paradox of popular sovereignty to the center of politics and democracy. The most influential among these theorists is Ernesto Laclau, for whom populism's oppositional identification and action can rupture hegemonic orders and open spaces to reconstitute the rules of the game (Grattan 2016: 15).

In this text, emphasis will be placed on the most recent articulation of this criticism, the one by Camila Vergara (2020), in order to highlight what is arguably a misrepresentation of Laclau's contribution based on a rather selective reading of his texts, often ignoring their broader epistemological and ontological framing.

¹ Many thanks are due to Chantal Mouffe, Jason Glynos and Giorgos Katsambekis for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Simply put, what we seem to have here, is a case of what Giddens has called a 'double hermeneutic': in the social sciences, scientific inquiry is not only has to take into account the significations that social actors ascribe to their actions and the social world at large; in addition, '[t]he "findings" of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe' (Giddens 1987: 20). And vice-versa, of course: such terms can return to the social sciences, from where they have often originated, with an additional ideological baggage acquired from their trajectory within political antagonism. In such cases, rigorous (self-)critical reflexivity is called for to avoid the circulation of stereotypical associations.

Admittedly, Vergara's text is not wholly devoted to an appraisal of Laclau's contribution; neither, however, is Laclau merely mentioned *en passant*. On the contrary, Vergara seems to articulate at quite some length a coherent and multi-pronged criticism. In addition, the implications of her criticism of Laclau, which are considerable, surely merit our attention: no matter how counterintuitive they may ring at first, they deserve to be considered carefully and debated in detail. This will provide a chance to also trace the family resemblances of this criticism within the terrain of contemporary political theory and to demonstrate how, although welcome as such within a spirit of critical exchange, this schema misses some of the most crucial dimensions of Laclau's theorization. Such an exercise offers, in addition, the possibility of clarifying the formal discursive perspective in some more detail and could thus prove beneficial for populism research in general.

I. Discursive Paradoxes of Populism Research

In 2020, Camila Vergara published an extremely challenging article in *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (Vergara 2020) in which she advances a view of populism as plebeian politics.³ Reading the paper from a discursive viewpoint, indeed a viewpoint that is framed within a radical democratic perspective (evident in Laclau's and Mouffe's work already from the 1970s; see Laclau 1977, Laclau & Mouffe [1985] 2001), one feels that she/he is encountering a type of argument that comes quite close to Laclau's (& Mouffe's) original sensibilities. For example, Vergara should certainly be credited for highlighting (a) the democratizing and emancipatory potential of populism as plebeian agency endowed with egalitarian energy; (b) the need to distinguish progressive populism from proto-totalitarian and ethno-nationalist types of politics; (c) the oligarchic disfigurements against which populism emerges as a corrective (Vergara 2020). Obviously, such insights are consistent with the theretico-political impetus of Laclau, Mouffe and the Essex School. Yet, as her argument unfolds, one realizes that affinities premised on the common attempt to legitimize claims and demands from plebeian sectors for inclusion and incorporation in the democratic political order (which are often denounced as 'populist' in the pejorative sense largely utilized by mainstream politicians and journalists as well as by some academics) and to classify them as internal to democracy, are then coupled with a rather unexpected distancing from Laclau's orientation. Let us consider this process of distantiation the way – and in the sequence – it is presented.

It starts with a minor point located in the beginning of Vergara's paper. Already in the first page she seems to disassociate herself from a discursive approach. She argues:

I argue that conceiving populism *exclusively* as a form of political discourse, performance, or strategy neglects the fact that these supposedly populist parties and leaders have very different conceptions of the people, goals, and relations to liberal democracy. Why should we lump together under the same label such radically different political projects? (Vergara 2020: 222, emphasis added).

³ It should be noted that this reply was initially offered for publication in the same journal. The offer has been declined.

First of all, it is not entirely clear what 'exclusively' means in this context. If, by using 'exclusively', Vergara groups together 'discourse, performance, or strategy' as indicating a, more or less, singular approach neglecting other aspects (the 'material' aspect, for example), this may betray a rather simplified take on the way social and political research operate and what an emphasis on such axes involves in the first place. Very often, a particular approach will place emphasis on a dimension it considers crucial without disputing the fact that a phenomenon also has additional manifestations or dimensions. For example, when we prioritize a psychodynamic account of mental processes, this does not mean that we discount its chemical or neurological implications; it just means that the resulting nexus can be better understood if we posit the priority of meaning, inter-subjectivity and psychic structuration highlighted by psychoanalysis. With regard to populism, scholars focusing on discourse (or performance and strategy, for that matter) do not dispute that every populist mobilization will also exhibit, for example, organizational (and many other material) features; they only claim that this, say, organizational dimension can be hugely illuminated by the strategic emphasis on the articulation of a populist meaning and its performative (material also) operation (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014). In that sense, instead of studying organizational and other 'material' aspects independently from populist discourse, we can register them as dimensions of the discourses through which these movements and political identifications are constituted (Stavrakakis 2004: 256). Last but not least, this point is premised on a crucial but often neglected insight. An emphasis on discursive articulation is not disavowing 'material' aspects of mobilization to the extent that discursive articulation transcends the linguistic/extra-linguistic distinction. In the work of Laclau & Mouffe, 'discourse' does not *exclusively* amount to words and ideas, but encompasses all 'systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects' through 'the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers' (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2002: 3-4).

If, on the other hand, by using 'exclusively' she alludes to an isolated focus on discourse, for example, that disavows performance and strategy, this would also be problematic. Who said that 'political discourse' has nothing to do with 'performance' and 'strategy'? (see Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt, forthcoming) Isn't, in fact, the discursive approach the one that has so forcefully put forward the *performative* aspect of populism in the first place (see Laclau 2005: 97, 103, 118), which was then picked up by important scholars of populism like Moffitt (2017)? Something similar applies to strategy. Does it have no significance that already with the publication of their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe had highlighted issues of strategy as the last word in the title already indicates? – How could the theorization of populism constitute an exception? (also see Mouffe 2018).

The phrasing may be somewhat unclear, but the question is, nevertheless, valid and Vergara should be praised for raising this issue: *Why should we lump together under the same label of 'populism' so different political projects?* For, although the perspectives mentioned are clearly linked to each other and do not claim some sort of essentialist *exclusivity* (either in isolation or grouped together), although they do take the material aspect into account very seriously (from the materiality of the signifier and performativity to organization and mobilization), it is true that definitions of who 'the people' is, what are their 'goals' and their relationship with 'liberal democracy' do vary between different variants or cases of populism,

something amply revealed when we turn from theory to the situation on the ground.

Against the background of existing empirical variations, there is no doubt that populism research is often premised on a certain conceptual over-stretching; something visible in the way 'populism' is often employed to denote any political 'pathology' imaginable and to stigmatize popular participatory politics in generic terms. Vergara highlights this fact and it is difficult to disagree with her. Many academics, for example, reproduce obsolete pejorative stereotypes introduced mainly by Richard Hofstadter (Hofstadter 1955) and the American pluralists, within the Cold-War ideological horizon (Stavrakakis 2017b), and then reinforced by the employment of this concept by ruling elites to discredit any popular agency escaping the confines of a very schematic pattern of controlled representation (what Colin Crouch and others label 'post-democracy' and Sheldon Wolin 'managed democracy' – see Crouch 2004, Wolin 2008). However, certain additional issues emerge in her argumentation that require urgent attention.

Laclau's approach has been instrumental in also highlighting this; in showing, that is to say, that populism is many things beyond the boogeyman of democracy portrayed by many liberal theorists; that it often operates as a force rejuvenating democratic institutions and deepening popular participation. Why is his perspective then grouped together with those establishing the pejorative stereotype in the first place? Why is it, in fact, portrayed as the one enabling this move? Consider the following quote:

[...] Laclau's discursive theory has enabled a "conceptual stretching" [...] *allowing for* the neologism "rightwing populism"—a combination of nationalism, xenophobia, and oligarchic politics—to be recognized not only as part of the traditional conception of populism, but also to colonize it, attempting to supplant its original meaning. [...] It is in this way that the "discursive turn" in the interpretation of populism commenced by Laclau *has allowed for* liberal and anti-populist definitions of populism to build on his theory to define populist politics as anti-pluralist, and thus proto-totalitarian (Vergara 2020: 231, emphasis added).

In fact, not only is the substantial contribution of discursive approaches in challenging the pejorative stereotypes associated with populism ignored here; Laclau is, in addition, blamed for allowing anti-populist definitions of populism to flourish. As if, before Laclau, populism was 'exclusively' connected to a positive valuation of the people-as-plebs; evidently Vergara has a taste for establishing *exclusive* associations where none seem to exist. Well, for a start, the idea that anti-populist academics – or even anti-pluralist politicians; this where the problem originates, as we shall see – needed Laclau's supposed endorsement to demonize 'populism' (in the case of academics) – and to start referring to 'the people' (in the case of anti-pluralist politicians) – sounds a little bit bizarre and betrays a rather idiosyncratic version of intellectual history. We may resort, at this point, to Nicos Poulantzas' oft-quoted passage: 'The distance between theory and the real always persists despite the effort to fill it. Stalin is not Marx's "fault", any more than Napoleon I was the fault of Rousseau, Franco of Jesus, Hitler of Nietzsche, or Mussolini of Sorel' (Poulantzas 2000: 23). At least in some of these cases the temporal succession made some sense

– as did the explicit employment of the former figures to ‘give cover’ to the ensuing ‘totalitarian systems’, as Poulantzas also points out. In the case of Laclau this is obviously not the case. Where is the evidence that anti-populist theorists have been inspired by Laclau’s analysis and have built on his theory? Is it possible to argue, for example, that Hofstadter’s anti-populism, the matrix of many contemporary anti-populist stereotypes, was premised upon Laclau’s texts, which were written many decades later?

Arguably what stands at the basis of this criticism is that Laclau cannot but accept that a populist framing can be utilized by anti-democratic forces as well and that this is also bound to influence academic debate. But this is not based on some kind of normative judgment and cannot be resolved by recourse to normative argumentation, as Vergara seems to believe; neither does it reveal Laclau’s authentic political desire because, as everybody knows, this desire was located a little bit more to the left. Where is it based then? *Verba volant*. There is no way to limit in advance the language games one can play with signifiers like ‘populism’ – and any other signifier, for that matter. This is why far-right and anti-democratic forces can always utilize a populist vocabulary traditionally associated with democracy and the left, with Vergara’s *plebeian politics*. And this is also how anti-populist scholars have managed to elaborate and disseminate such a negative definition of populism. We can neither prohibit nor ignore such possibilities because they follow from the way language and signification operate: through fluidity and contingency, through mimesis and continuous re-signification, within an antagonistic terrain. Saussure has vividly shown, already from the beginning of the 20th century, how contingent associations between signifiers – like ‘populism’ and ‘the people’ – and signifieds – like, the ‘underdog’, the ‘non-privileged’, in left-wing variants of populism, or the ‘nation’ and ‘race’, in right-wing ones –, no matter how ‘arbitrary’ they sound (and are, in some cases) can become social conventions (Saussure 1959) which are hard to ignore or displace, especially when they get naturalized, forming mythical discursive units (Barthes 1973) that can even over-determine a whole hegemonic order (Gramsci 1971).

The only thing we can do here is perhaps to try to elaborate distinctions and highlight criteria able to distinguish between the various uses that develop in front of our eyes.⁴ Not only then it is not necessary to employ a slippery ‘normative interpretation’ in order to effectively distinguish the populist from the tyrant (who merely manipulates populist rhetoric) and the protototalitarian leader, ‘who appeals to the people-as-ethnos’ (Vergara 2020: 245) because this can be more effectively attempted through other methods, including discourse analysis. It is also impossible, I would argue, to resolve this issue merely by normative means ignoring the discursive constitution of politics.

Both in politics and in academia it is futile to believe that we can enforce such a gate-keeping that will only allow the supposedly correct (normatively consistent) uses of the term safeguarding the fantasy of a long-lost *exclusivity*; yet what we can still do is to expand the scope of populism research to encompass such misplaced

⁴ See, for example, our work with Benjamin De Cleen in which clear criteria are offered to disentangle nationalist uses of a populist grammar from populism proper, so to speak, at the political level (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017, 2020); as well as Stavrakakis 2017a on the need to restructure, from a discursive perspective, the relevant academic field.

and admittedly paradoxical usages of the term and reveal the discursive mechanisms and the ideological biases behind their circulation and force. Doing precisely that does not entail that one endorses the said misplaced use. In that sense, it is not 'we' who lump together different phenomena; it is the language games typical of the phenomena under examination themselves (and also present or even magnified in their – anti-populist – academic analyses) that perform this operation; and we need to take this into account if we want to arrive at a comprehensive analysis of the many, and often antithetical, political uses of 'populism' that mark our current theoretico-political predicament (De Cleen & Glynos forthcoming).

But wait a minute, Vergara is herself very much aware of that. Two lines after posing her main question, she goes on to argue against 'the recent theories that have in some sense contributed to a "totalitarian turn" in the conception of populism towards an identitarian, xenophobic, and oligarchic form of politics *clothed in populist rhetoric*' (Vergara 2020: 222-3, emphasis added). Yet what does it mean here to be 'clothed in populist rhetoric'? Does it mean that we can easily discard this secondary usage by very real, existing political forces, producing very real electoral and other effects? Maybe from a normative disciplinary perspective this could make sense, but at what cost? At the cost of a rather solipsistic insulation from the symbolic reality of concrete political struggles, gradually resulting in academic insignificance and political impotence.

From a discursive perspective, it rather means that radically different political projects can indeed have something in common, which informs their strategy and performance. Something that can be captured at the level of their discourse – of which rhetoric is just one aspect, but a crucial one, as repeatedly highlighted by Laclau; just consider the title of his last collection of texts: *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (Laclau 2014). This is why we have to study them together without, however, reducing one to the other, without misrecognizing their important ideological differences.⁵ To be 'clothed in populist rhetoric' is not some kind of secondary and insignificant matter; it indicates the political need to frame a particular message in a distinct way that retroactively affects the message itself and the agents employing it – and also, and more significantly, the way it can gain support from citizens/voters. It is thus crucial to the analysis of populism and plebeian politics. At any rate, what emerges here is a different epistemology and a different ontology of the social, which is arguably disavowed by Vergara. A discursive approach does not employ normative gate-keeping as a means to police the proper use of 'populism' because this ignores the way language, signification, politics and academia operate. It studies instead all the different uses, their motivations as well their ideological, strategic and policy implications, on a variety of levels, because it accepts that this constitutes part of their ontology even if, in certain cases, it starts as a (conscious) distortion. For better or worse, quite often a certain 'truth arises from misrecognition', as Lacan had pointed out (Žižek 1991). Vergara seems to fail to register this post-normative axis as well as the political ontology of the social implicit in Laclau. And this becomes more obvious in what follows.

2. Laclau's Implicit Totalitarianism?

⁵ For the need to develop rigorous typologies of such phenomena, see Stavrakakis 2017a.

Although Vergara does praise Laclau for putting forward ‘the most sophisticated theoretical description of the constitutive discursive process at work in collective action’ (Vergara 2020: 230-1), she arguably thinks this as secondary – and in need to be replaced or, at least, modified by a clean-cut normative approach – because she does not register the *discursive* and *negative* ontology of Laclau. This is why she goes on to question Laclau’s ‘claim that a partial identity would necessarily aim at hegemony, at becoming the only legitimate identity’; for her this is ‘a conceptual leap that remains unexplained’ (Vergara 2020: 231). Yet this seems to touch the kernel of Laclau’s ‘sophisticated theoretical description’, his alleged *monism*, which, from now on, operates as her main target:

[...] Laclau formulates a theory of populism that is still trapped in the logic of *the people-as-one* [...] “The people” of populism is for him “a plebs who claims to be the only legitimate populus — that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community” (Vergara 2020: 230, emphasis added).

Let me clarify a latent misunderstanding. This is not Laclau’s normative contribution to political theory; it is the way he can map how politics and hegemony work on the basis of a particular social and political ontology. This is how he can make sense, on the basis of quite sophisticated conceptual tools (linguistic, psychoanalytic, etc.), of how politics works in practice, not how it *should* work in an ideal world. Besides, if I am not mistaken, he was not the one who invented ‘popular sovereignty’ or ‘the people’; although there is no doubt that he was the one who tried, perhaps more than anyone else, to study how such significations have been repeatedly used by popular sectors to further egalitarian and democratic causes. Alas, as Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ‘[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living’ (Marx 1996: 32). Yet, for Vergara, Laclau’s pragmatic account of the conditions of emergence of a hegemonic relation – the constitutive play between partiality and totality, particularity and universality – is eventually denounced as involving the totalitarian temptation of *the people as One*: ‘This *pars pro toto* logic (partiality supplanting the totality) would make populism a politico-theological form of power aimed at the embodiment of power’ (Vergara 2020: 230).

This point is also articulated later on in a way highlighting its supposedly debilitating effects on critical theory and analysis:

I would argue the uncritical engagement with the “totalitarian turn” in the recent conception of populism originates in the uncritical engagement with Laclau’s theory [...] Laclau’s anti-normative approach has left populism scholars without tools to challenge totalitarian interpretations of the term (Vergara 2020: 240).

It is striking how Vergara fails to register how the same approach – which, instead of being exclusively anti-normative, comprises both a-normative elements and elements that follow from very clear ethical and deontological commitments – has allowed Laclau himself and others to advance crucial arguments against the demonization of

populism and its exclusive association with these 'totalitarian interpretations of the term' (see, for example, Stavrakakis et al. 2017). Perhaps a more comprehensive engagement with the scholarship developed through the discursive conceptual apparatus would be beneficial here. However, what underlies Vergara's commentary is, I suspect, a deeper misrepresentation of Laclau's supposedly 'anti-normative approach'. This misrepresentation is also evident in other parts of her text (Vergara 2020: 232).

Let me devote to this issue a few paragraphs because it concerns the crux of the matter: the potentially totalitarian implications of Laclau's supposed monism. First of all, let me point to the broader theoretical and argumentative repertoire – the imaginary horizon – within which this argument is elaborated because Vergara is not alone in advancing such a misrepresentation.

By discussing the genealogies of political theology and its impact on conceiving 'sovereignty', mainly drawing on Lefort, Andrew Arato had already warned against the emergence of 'the people' as One – a God-like construction – and its potentially authoritarian implications. What is the solution he proposes? 'Thus it may be best to go beyond incarnation altogether, as Lefort and Habermas both repeatedly suggest, and replace the idea of popular sovereignty with that of democracy that can be defined only in procedural terms, the notion of the people in the singular by a model of pluralistic legitimation' (Arato 2013: 156). Here, Laclau is presented as introducing a transcendental 'political theology' (Arato 2013: 159). Furthermore, his theory is seen as no less than offering a justification of dictatorship:

To put a human actor like "the class" or "the people" or "the leader" in the place formerly occupied by theological or religious categories like "God" or "Christ" or "pope" means not only to endow the former with the quality of sacredness but to attribute to them supernatural traits that the empirical referent cannot sustain. In the face of such constructs the dehumanization of the inevitable enemies follows, along with the need to extricate the genuine agent from its empirical forms. Not only external but internal enemies follow from the conception, one that entails authoritarian suppression. Not only the leader and his or her group but the analyst participates in that suppression, at the very least by giving tools and useful disguises to a power that can never succeed if forced to act merely in its own name. Political theology, at least the type represented by Schmitt and Laclau, is what Machiavelli's Prince was wrongly assumed to be: justification of dictatorship (Arato 2013: 167).

It seems that Vergara's argument belongs to the same argumentative repertoire, which also seems to be shared by Miguel Vatter. The latter advances a similar argument in which 'Laclau's reference to Hobbes's notion of representation is not accidental, because his reconstruction of populism depends on a conception of a singular, sovereign representative' (Vatter 2012: 247). What is also shared is the idea that Laclau's theory of populism is premised on a problematic political theology – a point also stressed in Arato's account, as we have already seen: 'Augustine changes this idea of law and makes the equality of the populus and the plebs depend on the result of the action of government or providence, as an achievement of what Foucault terms pastoral power' (Vatter 2012: 249). Last but not least, Vergara's

argument with regard to how plebeian politics is distorted in an authoritarian direction by Laclau's embrace of political theology is also to be found here:

Augustine's turn from law to justice, from discord to concord, as the constitutive feature of a *populus* is of critical importance in the history of the plebeian conception of politics because it is perhaps the first time that the plebs are conceived as what stands in need of being ordered, governed and ultimately saved: it signals the overturning of the Greek and Roman conception of the people as endowed with a legislating power of their own in favour of a conception of a united people at peace as a result of the pastoral care exercised by God through His earthly lieutenants (Vatter 2012: 249).

We now have a better picture of where Laclau's designation as a quasi-authoritarian monist originates and how its elaboration has proceeded within contemporary political theory at the cost of a much simpler explanation: that all these politico-theological logics and lineages may be grafted, for a variety of historical reasons, within political modernity itself and that, as a result, anyone wishing to democratize further the late modern hegemonic order in favour of a plurality of popular struggles would better pragmatically take this reality into account first, before putting forward a normative blueprint for its intellectual or political re-foundation.⁶

It is also important to register the affinities between this body of criticism and the inter-textual landscape, especially orthodox anti-populist approaches like the one advanced by Jan-Werner Müller, who also stresses populism's anti-pluralism and holistic monism:

Following Laclau, a real populist, for Müller, is the leader who "must claim that a part of the people is the people—and that only the populist authentically identifies and represents this real or true people" (Vergara 2020: 234).

Paradoxically, Vergara seems to distance her own argument from both Müller and Laclau (presenting the latter's perspective as, more or less, facilitating the articulation of the former's rather misguided take on populism). Yet if there is one book that stands at the antipodes of Laclau's sensibility, it has to be the book by Müller (Müller 2017; see Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017 for a critique from a discursive perspective). How can Müller's anti-populist orientation be turned into something conditioned by Laclau's view itself, with which it shares almost nothing, but it is, nevertheless, presented here as forming some kind of continuum? In actual fact, it is Vergara's argument that seems to share with Müller the same critical impetus. Of course, Müller rarely refers to Laclau; it is populism itself that forms his target, although its characteristics may be partly inspired by Laclau's take. It is mainly Vergara that implies the said continuity. Simply put, Laclau is seen as allowing Müller to formulate a negative, pejorative conceptualization of populism. Interestingly enough, however, the argument that facilitates the anti-populist perspective of Müller is the same on which Vergara attempts to establish the anti-pluralist and even totalitarian implications of Laclau's alleged monism.

⁶ Needless to say, this may be necessary, in the long-run.

What is this argument? We have just seen her castigate the political logic of hegemony and the choreography between part and whole, universal and particular, developed by Laclau: his '*pars pro toto* logic (partiality supplanting the totality)' is presented as the smoking gun demonstrating his authoritarian tendencies (Vergara 2020: 230). Astonishingly, it is her that is here revealed to share something so important with Müller. In fact, they also describe it in the same vocabulary: for Müller, one of the central problems with populism is that it is monist in a holistic sense, valuing only one segment of the population as worthy of taking part in democratic decision-making (Müller 2016: 3, 20): 'Populism requires a *pars pro toto* argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense' (Müller 2016: 20). It is this *pars pro toto* logic that offers the best criterion of populism (Müller 2016: 98) and demonstrates its anti-pluralism:

Populism, I suggest, is a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified – but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior. [...] In addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist. [...] The core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of antipluralism (Müller 2016: 19-20).

What is also shared between Müller and the argumentative repertoire castigating Laclau's quasi-totalitarianism is a similar – methodologically dry and (*exclusively?*) liberal, from a political point of view – conceptualization of politics devoid of a series of its constitutive dimensions; is it a coincidence that the latter are, in fact, the ones highlighted by discourse theory? His conceptualization of democracy allows only for 'a people of individuals, so that in the end only numbers (in elections) count' (Müller 2016: 77-8). Here, Müller seems to reduce the 'people' of democracy to a mere *population*. Throughout his book, appeals to collective representation and identification are effectively denounced as relying on a 'more or less mysterious "substance"' (Müller 2016: 77-78), on 'ultimately fictional', 'symbolic' constructs (Müller 2016: 19-20, 27), on 'fantasy' (Müller 2016: 31); and this is obviously something inadmissible for Müller's passionless, numerically objective, liberal dystopia. There is no room for desire here, nor for the symbols representing it, especially if such symbols are abstract and 'empty' (Müller 2016: 38) – perhaps an implicit reference to Laclau's 'empty signifiers'.⁷ Interestingly enough, Arato also portrays Laclau's 'stress on symbolic representation', through 'rhetorical devices bereft of rationality', as an 'authoritarian' move (Arato 2013: 156, 159). One wonders, as a result, whether Müller and the argumentative repertoire where Vergara's argument seems to belong indeed share the same reductionism that disavows the symbolic and imaginary constitution of human reality as well as the crucial role affect, emotion, and passion play in socio-political life.⁸

⁷ I am drawing here on certain arguments put forward in Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017: 555.

⁸ How easily can one disregard the simple idea that, as already indicated by the Gospel according to Luke, 'man shall not live by bread alone' (4, 1-15)? And at what cost? Obviously, this does not have to be interpreted in a strictly religious fashion and has broader resonance.

The ensuing robotic and ultra-rationalist version of human sociality and democratic politics may be consistent in normative terms, but ignores completely the strategic role of populist unification; for the drive to develop passionate and salient political identifications around popular symbols of relative unity is primarily the answer to a strategic problem. The 'pluralistic legitimation' posited by Arato (Arato 2013: 156) and the way Vergara bypasses Laclau's universal-particular dialectic to advance her own normative plebeian orientation presuppose a well-functioning 'structure of liberal representative government' (Vergara 2020: 236). However, today's political predicament is that the turn to liberal procedures increasingly takes a post-democratic direction resulting in the 'expulsion' of marginalized and precarious multitudes (Sassen 2014). How will these multitudes demand equality and access to decision-making if they remain in isolation from one another? Without constructing a potent collective subject able to question elite rule? Can we have such a construction without populist equivalential articulation and the emergence of 'the people' in Laclau's sense? Trapped within normativity, the normative camp seems to forget the realities of political struggle where some sort of strategic unification through popular symbols seems to be inescapable... Furthermore, what if elites fail to honor their commitment to a pluralistic legal framework? (by the way, such occasions are not limited to Latin American coups, from where most of Vergara's examples originate) How can plebeian sectors resist this? It is here that political fictions and symbolic invocations become unavoidable (Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017: 555-556). Excessive rationalism and the disavowal of the discursive (partly fictional) constitution of society and politics seriously undermine popular empowerment:

it really is the case that people who can manage to believe in the possibility of collective action and to unite behind it can exercise more power than if they give up and concentrate on their private affairs. Popular movements have often demonstrated the truth of this [...] Unrealistic visions may be a condition of real achievements as well as being a recipe for disappointment. Democracy, it seems, is obliged to face in two opposite directions at the same time (Canovan 1999: 13).

Let us, however, return to monism. The only difference between the arguments advanced by Müller and Vergara respectively is that, for Müller, this monism applies mainly to populism on the ground (and, we can also infer, to Laclau's argument), while for Vergara it only applies to Laclau's argument and not to a normatively purified populism exclusively defined as egalitarian plebeian agency. At any rate, we have now reached the kernel of the misrepresentation of Laclau's position. Let us formulate the crucial question: *Is Vergara's suspicion of monism addressed towards Laclau (and implicit in Müller's criticism of populism) justified on the basis of Laclau's analysis of populism and his overall orientation? What if his discursive ontology is also a negative ontology that explodes the alleged monism?*

Let me start by saying that it is, no doubt, important to castigate authoritarian monist tendencies in both theory and praxis (see Stavrakakis 1999, 2007). *However, is Laclau the arch-proponent of such a monist view within populism research?* In her recent book, *For a Left Populism* (Mouffe 2018), Chantal Mouffe attempts to tackle precisely this criticism, which is often articulated around a critique

of *homogeneity*:⁹ ‘Another objection [...] is that “the people” as conceived by populism is from the start envisaged as being homogeneous and that this perspective is incompatible with democratic pluralism’ (Mouffe 2018: 62). In her view, this criticism betrays a failure to register the intricacies of the anti-essentialist approach put forward by Laclau & Mouffe: ‘Those critiques reveal a lack of understanding of the operation through which a people is constructed. As a collective will created through a chain of equivalence, the people is not a homogeneous subject in which all the differences are somehow reduced to unity’ (Mouffe 2018: 62). One could add that it betrays an inability to acknowledge the negative ontology and the inverted causality (Freud’s *nachträglichkeit*) marking this approach.

Where does Mouffe base her rejection of the aforementioned criticism? ‘[W]e find ourselves within a process of articulation in which an equivalence is established between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group’, she argues (Mouffe 2018: 62-63):

As Laclau and I have repeatedly stressed, a relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity but in which differences are still active. If such differences were eliminated, that would not be equivalence but a simple identity (Mouffe 2018: 63).

In that sense, the process of the construction of ‘the people’, the way populist discourse establishes a hegemonic relation, is neither holistic nor monist; it never results in establishing homogeneity. In fact, this would be impossible within the negative ontology of hegemony theory as it is re-signified by a discursive perspective. Why? Well, simply because hegemony as a *process* is enabled because hegemony as a *final state* is ultimately impossible. Complex realities demand complex interpretations and we can encounter here phenomena or principles that flourish on the crossroads between the necessary and the impossible. Indeed, very often we desire and commit ourselves to ideals that are ultimately impossible or fictional, but are also necessary to kick off a certain process and potentially change reality.¹⁰

⁹ We have already seen Müller reproducing this idea, which constitutes the cornerstone of the criticism advanced by ideational approaches towards populism. It has also been addressed to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s perspective and adds another dimension to the alleged (overlapping) pathologies highlighted up to now: monism, holism, homogeneity. For critical discussions of this idea, from a discursive perspective, see Stavrakakis & Jäger 2017 and Katsambekis forthcoming.

¹⁰ The most graphic example is offered by someone who, in the start of a sexual relationship, says ‘I love you!’, ‘you are the best!’ or something along these lines, as a result of a feeling of desire or infatuation towards the love-object. Obviously, this is bound to entail some exaggeration, an *over-estimation* or *idealisation* in Freud’s sense (Freud 1949a: 74). We know, again from Freud, that such a – quite often arbitrary – overvaluation of the sexual partner is, typically, the necessary background opening the road to a sexual act: ‘It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stops short at its genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it’ (Freud 1949b: 150). As a result, ‘the loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism, and [...] all its characteristics are valued more highly than those of people who are not loved, or than its own were at a time when it itself was not loved’ (Freud 1949a: 73). We also know from Lacan that love implies desiring and offering something that one does not possess: ‘love means giving what you don’t have’ (Lacan 2017: 34). Can it really happen otherwise? Is it really possible to start an intimate relationship by saying something like ‘I feel a 55% love for you!’ or ‘I suspect that an IQ test would reveal that you are an idiot, but would like to engage in intercourse with you?’ To eliminate idealisation, fantasy, desire and their discursive conditions of

Let us consider hegemony, from Laclau's and Mouffe's viewpoint. Their argument is premised on a constructionist (discursive) ontology that only makes sense against a horizon of dislocation – their focus on the generative and enabling operation of discursive articulation(s) relies on a horizon of negativity: 'It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices' (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 134). What they designate as 'hegemony' comprises an irreducible Sisyphean struggle to negotiate the dislocations, failures and crises that political projects encounter from within (from their inherent inability to fully capture and reshape *the real* and to represent their constituencies in a definitive way), and from without (from the challenges put forward by other representations within political antagonism).

The requirements of "hegemony" as a central category of political analysis are essentially three. The first is that something constitutively heterogeneous to the social system or structure has to be present in the latter from the very beginning, preventing it from constituting itself as a closed or representable totality. If such a closure were achievable, no hegemonic event would be possible, and the political, far from being an ontological dimension of the social – an 'existential' of the social – would be just an ontic dimension of the latter. Secondly, however, the hegemonic suture has to produce a re-totalizing effect, without which no hegemonic articulation would be possible either. But, thirdly, this re-totalization must not have the character of a dialectical reintegration. It has, on the contrary, to maintain alive and visible the original and constitutive heterogeneity from which the hegemonic articulation started (Laclau 2014: 80-81).

Accordingly, what is at stake in politics is never the end of history or some sort of definitive resolution of all contradictions and antagonisms. On the contrary, it is rather a temporary crystallization, a partial fixation of the balance of forces and representations, which may retroactively and temporarily be accepted as the 'common sense' of a community, as what it 'takes for granted' (Panizza & Stavrakakis forthcoming).

This constitutive character of negativity and heterogeneity, of limits and impossibilities (Biglieri & Perello 2011), was part and parcel of Laclau's theory from very early on and it is a mystery how it has escaped the attention of Vergara and her 'co-travellers': 'For me, on the other hand, "populism" is the permanent expression

possibility from sexuality, human sociality and politics would be impossible; no normative exorcism can banish them from our theoretico-political horizon. What we can do is to work from within the irreducible structural positionality they install in human affairs to retroactively traverse fantasy and to deactivate its potentially pernicious implications (Stavrakakis 1999, 2007). No doubt, as soon as it is established, a sexual relationship will benefit from registering the ultimate impossibility of sexual union. In social and political life, declarations of radical affirmation must, sooner or later (the sooner the better), negotiate a *modus vivendi* with a reflexive registering of their limitations. It is here that normative intervention finds a role as exhibited by Mouffe's passage from raw 'antagonism' to 'agonism' as a prerequisite for a pluralist democracy. The constitutivity of antagonism and polarization cannot be eliminated or ignored (see Mouffe 2000: 98-105; Stavrakakis 2018). Yet as soon as they are properly registered, an effort to mitigate their potential side-effects can be cautiously attempted at both the ethical and the institutional level.

of the fact that in the final instance, a society always fails in its efforts to constitute itself as an objective order' (Laclau 1990: 201). It is against such an impossibility that hegemony and populism operate (Panizza & Stavrakakis forthcoming). Furthermore, it is an impossibility they cannot eliminate and are bound to reproduce; yet, in negotiating this failure they may also facilitate a populist unification process potentially increasing the chances of popular empowerment: 'If the fullness of society is unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail – although they will be able, in the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems' (Laclau 2014: 93).

All hegemonic projects eventually face their politico-discursive limits. In Laclau's perspective, all discourses are always already dislocated, so to speak; no full identification or social closure, no monism, holism or homogeneity are ultimately attainable. It is only the registering of such irreducible impossibilities that introduces political *pluralization*: 'The fullness of society is an impossible object which successive [antagonistic] contingent contents try to impersonate *ad infinitum*' (Laclau in Butler, Laclau & Žižek, 2000: 79). In other words, the monism Vergara attributes to Laclau does not seem to be part of his conceptual apparatus. The One – and 'the people' as One – is impossible and cannot be achieved; the One is a constitutively split one (here the Lacanian influence is important). Yet its structural position does not evaporate; it remains as a potent invocation in human life, although its designation is ontologically unstable and marked by an internal division, which is impossible to remedy. It can only indicate the presence of an absence. The universal pole remains operational, but the universality at stake is always a contaminated, weak universality: 'This relation, by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it, is what we call a hegemonic relation. As a result, its universality is a contaminated universality: (1) it lives in this unresolvable tension between universality and particularity; (2) its function of hegemonic universality is not acquired for good but is, on the contrary, always reversible' (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: xiii). In that sense, the employment of a *pars pro toto* logic by Laclau (Van de Sande 2020: 404) is, in actual fact, what demonstrates that this operation cannot be fully consumed, it is itself the trace of its irreducible partiality, impurity and instability.

Most important, it draws on the role *synecdoche* plays in all signification. And *synecdoche* is a very common (metonymic) rhetorical trope, a linguistic device in which the part is presented as representing the whole. As we read in the *Cambridge Dictionary*, we have *synecdoche* when 'a part of something is used to refer to the whole of it, for example "a pair of hands" for "a worker" ' (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/synecdoche>). It is precisely this operation that, for Laclau, 'forms the ultimate basis for our understanding of political representation' (Van de Sande 2020: 405): 'The hegemonic relation is *synecdochal*' (Laclau 2014: 98).

Admittedly, the resulting choreography is paradoxical, even the *synecdoche* in question is an 'impure *synecdoche*' (Laclau 2014: 98), but arguably manages to capture political antagonism in a more illuminating way than any normative solipsism. And, most important, in the way Laclau employs it, within his distinct discursive as well as negative ontology, it is neither monist, nor does it entail authoritarian or totalitarian implications:

By identifying 'the people' and their 'enemy' as unstable categories, however, Laclau leaves them open to internal contestation and redefinition. Thus, in Laclau's theory, populist discourse is able to reconstitute symbolic political community along lines that allow for deeper internal agonism and greater recognition of the impermanent edges of every expression of collective identity (Grattan 2016: 31).

This does not mean, of course, that the risk of an authoritarian degeneration can ever be eliminated in practice – this danger is always present (Van de Sande 2020: 409) and applies to all political families, not only to populist mobilizations. As far as political practice is concerned, here some sort of reflexive normative intervention may have a role to play in cultivating an ethos and a political culture of *agonism*, in Mouffe's sense: a mutual respect between political adversaries. Under particular conditions, an agonistic ethos may be potentially able to mitigate the ever-present anti-pluralist implications of political struggle and the pernicious degeneration of polarization (Stavrakakis 2003, 2018, forthcoming). Here, however, established forces are equally to blame for a failure to do so: 'In contemporary times, as in times gone by, it seems that democracies do not break down unless political elites deliberately destroy them' (Bermeo 2003: 254).

Conclusion

In this paper, a distinct type of criticism and rejection of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism has been thoroughly examined. We have focused on the critical remarks put forward very recently by Camila Vergara – which encapsulate what seems to be a broader sensibility in certain quarters of (normative) political theory. Affinities between this argumentative line and other theoretico-political arguments critical of Laclau and populism itself have also been highlighted. Most of the points raised – for example, the idea that Laclau's perspective is to blame for the often biased emphasis mainstream research puts on (far) right populism – can only be sustained on the basis of disavowals betraying a rather superficial engagement with the genealogies of populism research and its epistemological preconditions. Many of these problems emanate from the normative benchmarks set by Vergara. Very often Vergara does raise significant questions, but her normative framework arguably fails (1) to capture Laclau's pragmatic approach to populism and the intricacies of his emphasis on discourse and signification; (2) to account for the challenges and limitations populism research faces today and the complex but rewarding way in which discourse theory attempts to deal with them.

Special emphasis was placed on examining in detail one of the central claims of her paper, namely that Laclau's perspective and especially the unavoidable choreography he describes between part and whole, universal and particular, is monist and *ergo* anti-pluralist and potentially authoritarian or totalitarian. Yet, we have seen that this argument makes sense only if one disregards Laclau's *discursive* as well as *negative* ontology and his sophisticated negotiation of the necessary/impossible nexus. Social and political life encompasses antithetical dynamics that need to be registered within any schema that attempts to offer a comprehensive account of populism (and of any other phenomenon, for that

matter). Laclau's performative prioritisation of meaning processes demands that one takes seriously common tropes like synecdoche in the constitution of 'the people'. However, his negative ontology also highlights the constitutive limitations of such processes, exploding the alleged monism. Only by ignoring a very substantial part of Laclau's and Mouffe's theorization, can anyone suspect them of authoritarian tendencies. 'The people' emerges, of course, within particular contexts, as a single signifying unit and only thus (through its valuation) can it facilitate the strategic unification necessary for popular empowerment. However, this single signifier can only operate, within Laclau's Lacanian ontology, as a signifier of the lack in the Other, as a vanishing mediator. It points to and renders visible a constitutive split; its partial meaning is never transparent and holistic, it is always subject to anomalies and displacements, within a horizon of ultimate failure and negativity. It is in this sense that Laclau offers a crucial extension of Lefort's thesis on the democratic emptiness in the locus of power making it compatible with the (symbolic and strategic) unification process on which popular agency and struggles rely: 'if the notion of emptiness is restricted to a place of power that anybody can occupy, a vital aspect of the whole question is omitted, namely, that occupation of an empty place is not possible without the occupying force becoming itself, to some extent, the signifier of emptiness' (Laclau 2006: 675; also see Inston 2010).

As a result, 'the people' is never seen in a monist light banishing heterogeneity in favour of homogeneity. Only at the cost of such a significant exclusion of this aspect of his work can Laclau be seen as an authoritarian monist. Arguably this may be an effect of Vergara's decision to stick to her normative schema at all cost. At best, we could say that the resulting misrepresentation is due to a failure to negotiate a reflexive passage between different levels of argumentation or different epistemological registers and politico-theoretical orientations. For the differences she would have to reconcile would be equivalent to those between Newtonian physics and the theory of relativity, between Euclidian and Riemmanian geometries. Judging on the basis of the problematic areas we have highlighted in her account, we could conclude that something like that could, perhaps, be impossible. At any rate, any such attempt at reflexive reconciliation must first be premised on an accurate representation of the positions to be reconciled; on an effort to rigorously capture what really animates them, no matter how paradoxical it may seem at first. It is here that stereotypical views can often be discerned in the eye of the beholder. And this is how scholars of populism as well as critics of Laclau can end up reproducing the fallacy Christopher Lasch has described *vis-à-vis* the criticism of religion:

Those who worry overmuch about ideological fanaticism often fall into a complacency of their own, which we see especially in liberal intellectuals. It is as if they alone understood the danger of universality, the relativity of truth, the need for suspended judgement. They see themselves, these devoutly open-minded intellectuals, as a civilized minority in a sea of fanaticism. Priding themselves on their emancipation from religion, they misunderstand religion as a set of definitive, absolute dogmas resistant to any kind of intelligent appraisal. They miss the discipline against fanaticism in religion itself. The "quest for certainty", as Dewey called it, is nowhere condemned with such relentless passion as in the prophetic tradition common to Judaism and Christianity, which warns again and again against

idolatry, the idolatry of the church included (Lasch 1996: 90).

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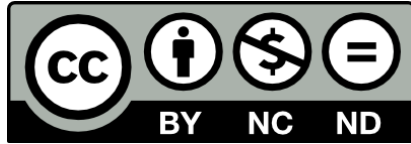
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Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified 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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