The uncomfortable relationship

Margaret Canovan, the English political theorist who helped to expand the breadth and depth of research on populist movements, noted in *The People* that “relations between populists and the academy have seldom been comfortable.” This fact, she says further, “can make it hard for analysts to view such movements objectively” (2005, p. 81). Such an uncomfortable relationship between populists and their observers is hardly exclusive to academia. In fact, in other areas – such as in many mainstream media outlets and in the circles of political establishment – it has openly evolved into outright hostility to populist movements and actors. Moreover, *populism* is widely used as a term of abuse, often as no more than as a byword for simplicity, primitivism, and impending threat to the world as it is. Populist politics, on this view, is, in short, an out-of-bounds way of doing politics.

This current vernacular invocation of the term *populism* – in Europe, Latin America, and North-America, as well as in the places where populism has become a political force for liberal-democracies to reckon with – has been so dominant that many analysts see in it the reason why the term is not used as a self-describing label by populists themselves (Zanatta, 2015, p. 19). This, however, is not entirely true. In the first quarter of the 21st century, and as insurgent populist forces seem to be increasingly successful in forcing their entry in the dominion of what they see as a besieged oligarchic status quo, some of them accept and claim for themselves, as a sort of badge of honor, the populist “stigma.” That is certainly the case in Europe. In *Pour que vive la France*, Marine Le Pen, the leader (since 2011) of the paragon of European right-wing populist parties, the Front National (National Front), sees it as a mark of pride. After quoting the French catholic writer Georges Bernanos, who observed that “France will not be re-made by the elites, but will be re-made by its base,” Le Pen uttered her own proclamation. “When I see,” she wrote,

> the distressing spectacle that these rich, privileged people are offering us today, I am more than ever convinced of it. Is it “populist” to believe this? Yes, to be a populist is to believe in the people, and to want to serve them. In any case, I think it is realistic.

(*Le Pen,* 2012, p. 122)
Matteo Salvini, the head of the Italian political party Lega Nord (Northern League), boasts that “I have a T-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘I am a populist!’” While he says that the claim “is a sort of self-denunciation,” he also makes clear that the “guilt” that he experiences from such flagellation is actually a point of pride (Salvini, 2016). A relative newcomer in European politics, the comedian-turned-political actor Beppe Grillo has described the Italian party Movimiento 5 Stelle (“Five Star Movement”), which he co-founded in 2009, as “neither right or left, but on the side of citizens, fiercely populist” (Grillo, 2013). And finally, the rise in Spain since 2014 of the left-wing populist movement Podemos (We Can) is significant also because its leaders anchored the new formation in an explicit – and self-referential – populist framework. “What’s behind that accusation, that vulgar use of the term as something vague but pejorative, a term that reviles your opponent? Why is it so commonly used by the powerful and their allied sectors in the intelligentsia and the media?” asked Íñigo Errejón, the party’s first political secretary (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p. 94).

It is not a necessarily easy task to untie the vernacular, mostly pejorative and negative, use of the term populism (and the images that are associated with it) from its analytical use, especially in academic literature. Often in this last setting, whether implicitly or explicitly, value judgments pertaining to what the “proper” way of doing politics should be abound in the study of populism. It is hard to escape such normative framing. This comes with the territory, because, as argued, “populism is partially determined by how individuals and political systems envision the ideals of democracy, including the creation of collectives and the attainment of popular sovereignty” (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2018). One person’s populism as a “good,” “emancipatory” venture may be another person’s “bad” and “autocratic” nightmare. Scholarship reflects this tension, even if, ideally, a non-judgmental analytical approach is defended and, in theory, pursued. “I’m not sure we should apply labels such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to populism,” says Paul Taggart (2016).

I personally don’t think populism is inherently a bad thing. I think it attaches to different sets of ideas, some of which are very bad (in my opinion), but there’s nothing to stop populism attaching itself to ideas that I think are good.

In any case, because of the centrality of the question – whether populism is a good or a bad thing for democracy – within the academic study of populism, an exclusively empirical, value-free approach may, in the end, prove to be extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve. In response to such attempts, political theorist Paulina Ochoa Espejo writes that “given that most contemporary scholars agree that liberal democracy is the best form of political organization, describing a movement as ‘populist’ rather than ‘liberal democratic’ is a way of sneaking a normative judgment in through the back door” (Espejo, 2015, p. 60). With this in mind, Benjamin Moffitt, in his analysis of the complex relation between populism and democracy, recommends to such authors to “make their commitment to liberal democracy and pluralism (which is implicit in much of their work) clearer rather than obfuscating it in the name of a ‘non-normative’ approach to populism” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 140).

This alleged “obfuscation” – rooted in the idea that populism is fundamentally an accusation, an indictment – is just another variant, or expression, of what some critics in academia call “anti-populism.” It exists from moderate to extreme forms. This anti-populist trend has all but escalated since the turn of the 21st century and the rise of radical left-wing populist movements in Latin America and radical right-wing movements in Europe. Pierre André-Taguieff – himself one of the first scholars to analyze and describe, as the 20th century was drawing to a close, the French radical right explicitly as “populiste” – has denounced it as the mirror-image of populism itself. “Populism
is stigmatized as a perverse -ism,” he wrote, “or even as the evil political position par excellence, within the framework of a dualistic vision that tends toward Manichaeism” (Taguieff, 1998, p. 7). Following in Taguieff’s footsteps, Marco Tarchi, in his writings on Italian populism, insisted on the importance for scholars of “not falling into the trap of ‘anti-populist demagoguery’, symmetric and complementary to the one that its defenders attribute to their adversaries,” in order to take away their legitimacy (Tarchi, 2015, p. 16).

As the putative assault on the liberal-democratic order by a myriad of populist movements intensifies – within newer, less-established democracies, as well as in older, and supposedly more-established democracies, regardless of the geographical context – a gloves-off anti-populism attitude is defended as necessary by a fair number of populist scholars. In other words, in the face of the danger of populism to the liberal-democratic way of life, scholars should take upon themselves the task of public condemnation of populism. Not only studying and analyzing populism but also exposing and denouncing it is, according to this view, the scholar’s intellectual and moral obligation. In a typical example of such militant anti-populism, the Dutch sociologist Matthijs Rooduijn, exposed the reasons for his change of heart. “Initially,” he wrote, “I took the view that academics investigating these parties and politicians should approach their study as objectively as possible. However, the spreading of populist narratives, even within the political establishment, led him to rethink his attitude. Thus,

I have changed my mind and approach. I will remain as neutral as possible in my academic work, but I increasingly feel obliged to take part in the public debate about this topic, and to warn the media of the increasing tension between populism and democracy. Accordingly, it is imperative that “[m]ore academics ... speak out and warn about where we are heading.” “Part of this is immediate self-interest,” which stems from the fear that academia is also the target of populists, but also is bound to the conviction that “academics have also a moral obligation to protect liberal democracy” (Rooduijn, 2016). “I fully agree,” Cas Mudde, a major contemporary writer on populism, tweeted in response. “Liberal democratic scholars of populism should be neutral in research but outspoken” about the phenomenon’s “dangers” to the liberal fabric of Western democracies. “One should call populists out for what they are: a danger to democracy and not a useful corrective for too much elite power as some commentators naively assume,” says the political theorist Jan-Werner Müller (2016) in a statement that summarizes his thought on the populist challenge. In the end, this discussion is related to the role that political science should play in society at large. Because populism constitutes a manifestation of democratic illiberalism, political scientists, as argued by Will Jennings and Martin Lodge (2016), need to descend from their ivory towers and engage with voters and communities; and be actively involved therefore in “promoting the normative foundations of liberal democracy” and the values of an “open” and “tolerant” society against the rise of populism.

From the standpoint of anti-anti-populism, the question becomes whether such an anti-populist combative outlook does not inevitably spill over upon – or become all too evident within – academic literature, saturating it with hidden or open normative assumptions and conclusions, and making the claim of “neutrality” even more problematic. Unless, of course, that claim is altogether discarded, as well as the need for empathy (not sympathy) with the subject of study in order to fully understand it. It is in such an anti-anti-populist mindset that Philippe Marlière, a professor of French and European politics, says that the association between populism and radicalism (which threatens the good, centrist, established order) leads to a “slippery slope, as such a type of research may no longer be driven by scientific motives, but by partisan values and prejudices.”
Why should political scientists uncritically use the media clichés about reasonable moderates opposing “undemocratic radicals/populists”? or why do some political scientists seem oblivious to the fact that the “moderates” who let down their electorates are mainly responsible for their own demise?

asks the professor of French and European politics. He suggests that instead of “looking down or dismissing all ‘radicals’ as undisputed ‘populists,’” political scientists should think instead about the reasons behind the implosion of the “enchanted world of ‘moderate politics’” (Marlière, 2013). In truth, it seems that the rise of the “populist question” in the first decades of the century has made the “uncomfortable relationship” between populists and academics spread into and within academia itself, with much of the debate ultimately coming down to a debate over whether populism is fundamentally a “bad” or a “good” thing.

Left-wing populism as the “good” populism

The Greek political scientist Stathis Kalyvas tweeted a “non-rhetorical question” to all his followers: “[H]as left-wing populism received a more favorable reception by [well-known academic and media] commentators than right-wing populism? If yes, why?” (Kalyvas, 2016). “Yes, but it also depends,” sums up most of the answers received – in tune with Benjamin Arditi’s view that “left-wing populism has a better press than right-wing one, but it depends where” (Arditi, 2017) – even if “nativism” is viewed as the deal breaker that makes right-wing populism more distasteful in general than left-wing populism. On the whole, said Wall Street Journal writer Marcus Walker in a statement that served as an answer to Kalyvas’s question, “International mainstream commentariat finds statist economic populism irresponsible, but ethno-nationalist populism nasty” (Walker, 2016).

The amalgamation of left-wing and right-wing insurgencies under the umbrella of “populism” is viewed by many left-wing thinkers and social critics as not only abusive but intentional, as an elitist operation to finish off any potential challenge to the status quo. In Hatred of Democracy the philosopher Jacques Rancière notes that “the hope is that under this name they will be able to lump together every form of dissent in relation to the prevailing consensus, whether it involves democratic affirmation or religious and racial fanaticism” (2006, p. 80). Rancière has been a persistent critic of what he calls the “ritual denunciations of populism” by “the world of the dominant,” pointing out that “the essential thing for them is to amalgamate the very idea of a democratic people with the image of the dangerous crowd.” In order “to draw the conclusion that we must all place our trust in those who govern us, any challenge to their legitimacy and integrity opening the door to totalitarianism” (2013). The Roman intellectual and former journalist with Il Manifesto, Marco d’Eramo, sounds a similar note, berating the anti-populist tradition that rose in post-WWII, especially through the influence of Cold War liberals, prime among them the Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter whose “view of populism” – as the realm of unreason, authoritarian, and containing the seeds of totalitarianism – “has been hegemonic ever since.” The “linguistic operation ‘populism’ devised by Hofstadter and his co-thinkers” allows today’s stigmatization of challenges of every kind to the “oligarchical order” (D’Eramo, 2013, pp. 19, 27; on this issue see also Postel, 2016, pp. 120–121). At the same time, D’Eramo says, this “operation” fuels – and is rooted in – the “theory of extremes” in which “political legitimacy properly rests on the exclusion of the extremes of the spectrum.” This makes the “vital center” the exclusive space for legitimate political activity. “The current uses of ‘populism’ are
grounded in the notion of the center versus these opposite extremes,” giving legitimacy to the exclusion of non-conformist so-called populist discourse, whether it comes from the Left or the Right (D’Eramo, 2013, pp. 21–23). In their antisystemic thrust, seen from the center, they become alike.

Arguably, such refusal of moral and political equivalence between left-wing and right-wing populism is the common thread that runs through the radical left in its defense of a worthy, virtuous, and good populism, as opposed to the “bad” and “reactionary” populism that emerges from the extreme right of the political spectrum. This perspective became clear throughout the Great Recession of 2008–2009, the European debt-crisis of 2010–2012, and the adoption of austerity policies that powered both right-wing populisms and left-wing populisms. Prominent scholars of radical politics signed a manifesto in the newspaper The Guardian, titled “There is no contemporary symmetry between the so-called ‘extremism’ of left and right,” urging the media to stop misrepresenting the left-wing popular surge. “The efforts to dismiss the emphatic call for economic justice in both Greece and Spain as ‘populist’, ‘anti-European’ or ‘skepticism’ misreads their political reach and importance,” they argued. If the right-wing had a clear “racist platform,” the “rise of the left, on the other hand, offers a critique and alternative to social and economic inequalities.” They ended with a plea: “We demand vigilant attention to the difference between political objections to austerity that seek greater inequality and those that seek greater equality” (Butler et al., 2014).

The appeal to end what is viewed as a simplistic analogy between challenges to the political establishment that are different, is often complemented by a call to rescue the noble, emancipatory, and powerful promise of left-wing populism. This appeal takes many forms and is voiced in various forums. Writing with the US example in mind, the political scientist Laura Grattan contends that populism is not a “dirty word,” because there is a “good” and “rebellious” radical democratic tradition of popular struggle – rooted on the grassroots creation of decentered spaces and horizontal power, from the New Deal to the Occupy movement – that revitalizes, rather than threatens, democracy. Such promise of democratic renewal is at the heart of what she sees as “populism’s power” (Grattan, 2016). A more systematic defense of such “good” populism emerges in the public interventions and writings of the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (one of the signers of the Guardian manifesto), who does it by drawing on the writings on populism of her late husband, the Argentinian thinker Ernesto Laclau. The crucial aspect here is that, according to the former professor of political theory of the University of Essex, populism is a political logic, a discursive and performative operation that divides society into clear-cut antagonistic fields: the people versus the oligarchy. The “people” is thus a construct. And this is made by articulating/linking different demands by different groups – by a logic of equivalence – into a “people,” those at the bottom, united above all against those at the top, rejecting the way things stand, or the system (Laclau, 2005). Because what matters is this construction of the populist identity, it means that – and this is a point recurrently made in the Laclauan defense of left-wing populism – ultimately, there is a “good” and a “bad” way of constructing the people. A defender of populist ruptures in Latin American politics, Laclau believed that “Western Europe needs some kind of populist reconfiguration of the social space in a democratic direction since otherwise that space is going to be occupied [by extreme right-wing populism]” (2010, p. 78). Reinforcing this view, Mouffe regularly calls for a left-wing populism that could serve as a sort of antidote to its polar opposite. “The people can be constructed in very different ways and the problem is that not all are going towards a progressive direction”; consequently,
The only way to prevent the emergence of [right-wing populist parties] and to oppose those that already exist is through the construction of another people, promoting a progressive populist movement that is receptive to those democratic aspirations and orientates them toward a defense of equality and social justice.

(Mouffe, 2016)

This dichotomy between a progressive and a reactionary construction of the popular will is complemented also by the conviction that, in the end, left-wing populism will contribute to a revitalization of democracy. In tune with radical democratic writings that are critical of the liberal dimension of liberal democracy, with its supposed neutralization of contestation and disagreement in favor of a centrist managerial "post-politics" that blurs the frontiers between Left and Right, left-wing populism is viewed by such leftist scholars as the way to deepen democracy.

The answer should be: “Yes, we’re populist because we are democrats, and there’s necessarily a populist dimension in any democracy that aims to build a demos, a people. And we’re also left-wing populists because our objective is to radicalize democracy”. Is there anything wrong with that?

Mouffe asks rhetorically (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p. 127). Sounding a similar tone, the political scientist Thea Riofrancos criticizes “political analysts and strategists [who] are undermined by their faith in the limited democracy they prize.” They would do better to change their perspective, because “the ‘center’ they cling to has orchestrated, or been abetted by, abysmal voter turnout, mass disenfranchisement, feckless politicians and strategists, and the overwhelming influence of financial elites, amid staggering levels of inequality that rival the Gilded Age.” Redemption for such a sorrowful state of democratic affairs should be found elsewhere: “A left populism holds the potential to revitalize democracy, while defending it from the dual threats of technocracy and revanchism” (Riofrancos, 2017). The philosopher Santiago Zabala similarly castigates the “blindness of those” who cannot see “the difference between right-wing and leftist populism” as a “vital distinction,” not least because they are rooted in the mobilization of different emotions: “fear of the foreigner on the right and hope for a better future on the left.” Zabala says further, “The former is rooted in hatred and indifference, and the latter in justice and equality.” When right-wing populism gains traction in within a democratic country, the “failure of left-wing populism leaves democracy in an even more desperate state” (Zabala, 2017). Having established that “the people” is not an inherently reactionary entity, the supporters of left-wing populism, in the footsteps of Laclau, insist on the possibility of “creating” a progressive people that “radicalizes” democracy. At the basis of this project, however, still lies the “myth” of the people, as a voluntaristic construction (shaped as a unified and irresistible force), that redeems politics; for the skeptics this may very well lead to authoritarian politics where the “enemies” of the sacralized people are, potentially, suppressed. In this sense, the supposed road to the much-wanted emancipation takes a wrong turn to autocratic populism (De La Torre, 2015, pp. 14–17; Arato, 2015, pp. 50–51).

With or without doubters, the fact of the matter is that the idea of a renewal of democracy driven by left-wing populism is pervasive in all these narratives and often it takes the form of the defense of a transnational left-wing populism, as a progressive, inclusive, movement across national borders. Panos Panayotu (a student of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis) believes that a transnational left-wing populism may revive democracy in technocratic and post-political times, and constitute a model for contemporary “anti-fascist resistance.” The
pan-European movement Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) co-founded in 2016 by the Croatian philosopher Srećko Horvat and Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece, constitutes, in his eyes, a promising example of a “left-wing, inclusive, pluralist and transnational populism” because “The people” that DiEM constructs is an inclusive, active, democratic and transnational one, which can stand against transnational European elites, the supranational structures of the EU and the international markets to take back democracy” (Panayotu, 2017, p. 15). The attachment to a transnational vision emerges also in the work of the French Marxist philosopher Étienne Balibar. An outspoken voice for a “renaissance of politics” in a time of “de-democratization” or the “post-democracy” rule of technocracy, Balibar sees such renaissance as the recreation of a “politics made by the people and for the people.” Against the “devastating effects of national-populisms which are on the rise in one country after another,” Balibar urges, “we must imagine a transnational counter-populism.” Like other forms of populism, this transnational counter-populism “criticizes the dispossession or disempowerment of the masses in the oligarchic regime.” Yet in doing so “it [would not] confer the task of ending dispossession to the dispossessor themselves,” but would seek and require the empowerment of the citizenry (Balibar, 2017). This new citizen-driven internationalism – taking inspiration from the “movements of the squares” that have emerged in the second decade of the new century – is at the root of a new variation on the theme of left-wing populism, in which the primary reference is no longer the people but the citizen. In The Third Space: Beyond establishment and populism, DiEM25’s Lorenzo Marsili and Varoufakis make reference to this new direction, saying, in their defense of a new, transnational “Europe of citizenship”, that “We want to distance ourselves from monolithic conceptions of a ‘European people’, carrier of common ‘values’ and ‘identities’ . . . instead of demos we should use the plural, demoi . . . as diverse examples of transnational active citizenship that constitute a demos among others” (2017, p. 126). The antagonistic relationship is thus between the citizenry versus the oligarchy, or citizenism, and has been described by the Italian sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo as “the populism of the citizens,” or “anarcho-populism.” It is basically left-populism for a new generation of protesters that is interconnected, reared in anti-globalization tactics and goals, and demanding more democracy. This “radical reclaiming of the notion of citizenship” is anti-oligarchic and aims at “a reassertion of the power of the dispersed citizenry against the concentrated power of economic and political elites, who are accused of having hijacked and emptied out the institution of popular sovereignty.” Drawing from Laclau’s work, Gerbaudo sees in this discourse of citizenship a “construction,” the “common ground” that united activists in these newer protest waves of the 21st century (Gerbaudo, 2017, pp. 37, 46–47). In fact, it is anything but an overstatement to say that much of the work on left-wing populism, either in terms of research agenda and political combat, remains under the long shadow of Laclau’s work.

Laclau’s influence is thoroughly evident in what may be called the Complutense Cluster of Populism. This byname refers to the intellectual activity of mostly young political scientists based at Complutense University in Madrid. From their ranks emerged the leadership of a new political formation, Podemos, in 2014. Influenced by the radical populist experiences of early 21st-century Latin America, and gaining its impetus from the anti-austerity 15-M movement (also known as the Indignados), which reclaimed a new politics based on popular sovereignty able to replace the old oligarchic system, a distinguishing trait of Podemos was that its political strategy was based on Laclau’s philosophy. It has been appropriately described as a “reflexive application of populist theory which is unique in the history of modern populism” (Kioupkiolis, 2016, p. 110). At a time of regime crisis and widespread discontent – signaled by a wave of protests – with the political economic and social status quo, a “populist moment” emerged.
Podemos developed as the political actor that articulated a discourse that federated different demands around a central antagonistic axis: the people against the *casta*, the caste, the elites. Such a new, radical way of reorienting the political space was at the basis of Podemos’s “populist hypothesis.” What was behind this articulation, as Íñigo Errejón never failed to point out in his description of Podemos’s ultimate goal of “building a people,” was Laclau’s understanding of populism as an identity construction praxis. Also, through Podemos, such identity is no longer rooted on the “old” left–right axis, but instead exists on a vertical “new frontier” of people–elites. “The elite was very comfortable with the left–right axis,” explained Podemos’s strategist in a conversation with Chantal Mouffe.

They located themselves at the center-right/center-left, and placed the “challengers” – those who defied them – at the margins. But if we draw a cross-cutting citizens – *casta* frontier, all of a sudden they are confused; they are out of their comfort zone.

*(Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p. 121)*

In typical Laclauan fashion, the hope was that this new above–below frontier would create a “populist rupture” that would enable the rescue of democracy from the oligarchy and create a “new hegemony.” Errejón’s fellow political scientist Pablo Iglesias, Podemos leader, reaffirmed the Laclauan nature of the party-political offer. If one understands Laclau’s theory, Iglesias argues,

it is easy to understand the phenomenon of Podemos: in a moment of organic crisis, of profound disaffection, Podemos builds the empty signifier and the aggregation of demands that connects with a new shared direction. Suddenly, there is an electoral tool.

*(Iglesias, 2016)*

Electorally, the party achieved immediate success; although it was not able to lead a popular majority it helped to put an end, at least temporarily, to Spain’s two-party system. Importantly, the interaction between the Laclau-inspired Podemos theory of populism and the practical world of electoral and institutional politics, with all its intricacies, has also led to a rethinking of the validity of the theory itself, at least in some of its aspects. Juan Carlos Monedero, an influential figure of Podemos’ early period, believes that Laclau’s theory of populism is particularly important in an initial phase – which he calls “destituent” – where the focus is on the challenge from the outside to the existing neoliberal and post-democratic model, by constructing a sort of warpath between the people and the elites. It is vulnerable, though, in a posterior phase – which he calls “constituent” – because it is less adept in building alternatives and dealing with a complex reality that, ultimately, cannot be encapsulated in any one “discourse,” no matter how enticing it may be (Monedero, 2016, 2017).

What may be named the *Thessaloniki Cluster of Populism* – based in the School of Political Sciences of Aristotle University of the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki – constitutes a major 21st-century center of irradiation of Laclauan studies on populism, particularly under the guidance of Yannis Stavrakakis, a former student of Laclau’s at Essex. The discursive approach to populism research informs its academic production. Very much influenced by the context of the Greek crisis, the imposition of austerity measures, and the rise and fall – as a left-wing populist party – of the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), the leading premise of this school of research is the rejection of the theory of the extremes, viewed as the hallmark of dogmatic anti-populism. In an oligarchic system – which is technocratic and post-democratic, de-activates political conflict, and eradicates all reference to the people – progressive populism
(viewed here as pluralist and inclusive) has the potential to invigorate and deepen European democracy. This, however, is “everything that contemporary anti-populism denounces” (Stavrakakis, 2014, p. 514). “Whoever utilizes in her/his discourse the forgotten symbolic resource of ‘the people’, is bound to be accused as an ‘irresponsible populist’ or a ‘demagogue’ and to be demonized as an irrational enemy of democracy,” Katsambekis and Stavrakakis write, “even if we are dealing with inclusionary populism and not with exclusionary dystopias of so-called ‘right-wing populists’” (2013, p. 3). By lumping together “good” and “bad” populisms – undistinguishing political actors, specific contents and messages, dismissing all as “populist devils” (Katsambekis, 2016, p. 7) – mainstream anti-populism only deepens the autism of elites to the structural problems of contemporary democracies. “To describe such [radical right] movements as predominantly ‘populist’,” Stavrakakis (2016) warns, is not only a category mistake; it also delegitimizes any reference to popular demands and demonizes the forces representing them, even when they have nothing in common with the far right. As soon as the extreme right is named “populist” the vilification and demonization of all popular movements becomes easier.

In Greece, these authors argue, such demonization happened with Syriza, which they view, in Laclauan terms, as a textbook case of populism – of the inclusionary kind – able to put forward an “antagonistic representation of the socio-political field along an Us/Them dichotomy” while “elevating the ‘people’ to the position of the privileged signifier, the nodal point, representing the “Us” camp in a sufficiently flexible “(tendentially empty) manner that allows diverse groups and subjects hit by the crisis to identify themselves with this position” (Stavrakakis, 2016). The fact that Syriza succeeded in the “destituent phase” (the challenge to the system) while failed in the “constituent phase” (having to adopt in government the policies that it vowed to overcome, thereby operating in practice as a center-left party) may give intellectual validation to Monedero’s criticism of the “vulnerability” of Laclau’s theory of populism. In any case, the fate of Syriza and the anti-populist assault on other left-wing populist movements in early 21st-century Europe, is at the basis of Stavrakakis’s view that the axis between populism and anti-populism is becoming the dominant cleavage of contemporary politics. The fact that anti-populism, unlike populism, is not the subject of intense scrutiny only reinforces the need to study it in all its amplitude. As a “distinctive discursive repertoire, or even a ‘political weapon’ aiming at the discrediting of disagreement and the marginalization of ‘the people’ and democratic dissent,” anti-populism “constitutes an under-researched area within the field of populism and democracy that needs to be dealt with in its own right” (Katsambekis, 2014, p. 577). Dealing with this issue has been a major focus of the Thessaloniki research agenda. Their affiliated Populismus research project – as well as its Observatory – aimed at developing a methodology able 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” (2015). In an interview given to the Populismus research project, the English philosopher Simon Critchley, an active voice in radical political thought, argues for a “clear distinction between forms of populism which are local, which are defending the idea of the particular nation, the particular race, and forms of populism which are universalist and are defending ideas of equality or equal participation” (2014, pp. 1–2). In truth, the particular–universal distinction fuels many of the narratives that attempt to understand, in a manner that is not anti-populism, the phenomenon of right-wing populism.
Right-wing populism as the self-defense of the people

At least in Europe, most studies on populism have focused on right-wing populism. John B. Judis, an American political analyst who wrote *The Populist Explosion*, said that this has resulted “partly because populist parties initially arose on the right there [and] perhaps because of the memory of Hitler and Mussolini,” which may have inspired the authors of “many of these studies [to] see Western populism as a threat to democracy” (Judis, 2016, p. 165). In effect, if in contemporary Latin America right-wing populism has been for the most part confined to the so-called 1990s neoliberal wave of populism, European right-wing populism not only has been more prevalent in the years before and since the turn of the century; it also has emerged as a different breed of populism owing to its increased focus on economic and cultural protectionism. At the same time, in the case of the defense of right-wing populism, French authors are the one who are overrepresented. If the rise of Syriza in Greece led to a dramatic increase of a Greek left-wing intellectual defense of populism, the political trajectory of the Front national in France was accompanied throughout the years by a strong defense of right-wing populism by French theorists and authors.

Populism as democracy

As emphasized by a triad of Dutch political scientists, the European right-wing populist platform goes along with a pronounced “disloyalty to the political establishment.” They argue that, “in contrast to mainstream parties, which are committed to the status quo, radical right-wing populist parties display anti-establishment attitudes and behavior” (Akkerman et al., 2016, p. 8). Such “disloyalty” to the establishment is, however, seen as being more than warranted by the parties described in academic circles as belonging to the radical right. Decades-long socioeconomic and (especially) sociocultural policies espoused and codified in law have, according to them, jeopardized the interests and the identity of “the people.” These right-wing parties claim to be the voice of this people and promise to reinstate its rule and counter that of the treacherous “elite.” These parties often articulate the end-result of such re-appropriation of the popular will as constituting a return to a “real” and “true” democracy (Zúquete, 2015). In view of that, it is argued, behind the explosion in political, media, and academic circles of the narrative of the “danger of populism” associated to these parties, lies both a hatred and fear of “real” democracy. As mentioned by the British sociologist Frank Furedi,

> It is important to note that, historically, anti-populist ideas have been mostly hostile to democracy, not demagoguery. From Plato onwards, the social and cultural outlook of the political elites has been suspicious of and often hostile towards public opinion. Typically, they viewed the people as a “problem.”

*Furedi, 2016*

The French novelist Michel Michel Houellebecq sums up this sentiment:

When I hear someone talk about populism I know that deep down that person is against democracy. The word populism was invented, or rather recovered, because it was no longer possible to accuse certain [political] parties of fascism, it would have been too false. Then a new insult was found, populist.

*Houellebecq, 2017*
The scribes of the System have identified the Loch Ness monster: it is called populism,” writes Pierre Vial in the French Identitarian magazine Terre et Peuple. “In fact, their hateful reaction is due to the fact that they have understood that there is a strong direct threat against their omnipotence” (Vial, 2016, p. 14). In these times, demophobia “is the main phobia encouraged by the System,” contends the Dictionaire de novlangue – or Dictionary of Newspeak, written to “uncover” the politically correct/totalitarian language used by the dominant powers to subvert reality and stifle dissent – while “the word ‘populist’ is used by the oligarchy to disqualify the word ‘democrat’” (Le Gallou et al., 2015, pp. 59, 152).

Populism, for example, becomes the infamous accusation with which the intellectual class and the journalistic clergy silence whoever assumes a perspective that does not coincide with theirs and which – far from protecting, from the superstructure, the interests of the oligarchic elites – gives voice to the interests of the people and of the subordinate classes that compose it

says the Italian philosopher Diego Fusaro in his critique of the “dissent-crushing” Newspeak that supports capitalist globalization and a one-culture model of society all over the world (Fusaro, 2017, p. 101). The populists’ “power to the people” battles the anti-populists’ “power without the people.” The historian, journalist, and political strategist Patrick Buisson, who has been active in the French conservative camp, connects the rise of right-wing populism to a reaction against what he calls the “democracy of the demo-latronis [from the Latin ‘plunderers’],” a “kratos without demos.” Its roots, Buisson claims, go back to the aftermath of the French Revolution and the birth of representative democracy, which aimed at “protecting” the people against both its immaturity and its intent on exercising its sovereignty; the goal must be to give back to the people its “dignity as a political subject” and remake government into a “true democracy,” or the “democracy of the demophiles – the democracy that gives back to the people the ability to decide of its own destiny.” Hence, firing up populist movements are also the claims made by the people as demos: “In populism there is a demand for democracy, direct democracy. The popular classes are well aware that we live in a post-democracy, which is a diversion of democratic procedures that reinforces the power of the oligarchies” (Buisson, 2016a, 2016b). Against the elite-favored “procedural and empty democracy,” populist movements have risen.

**Populism as a conservatism**

Clearly, argues Buisson, within right-wing populisms, together with the protest of the people as demos (reclaiming more democracy), coexists the protest of the people as ethnos (reclaiming more identity). This last protest is expressed by peoples

who do not want to die and are attached to a culture, a patrimony and sense very well that there are two menaces: globalized finance and radicalized Islam. In face of these threats, the act of re-appropriation of its Identitarian patrimony is the first act of resistance.

*Buisson, 2016a*

The French thinker is hardly alone in this idea that at the basis of populism is a deep-rooted cry for sociocultural and economic preservation.
Describing herself as “conservative-liberal,” Chantal Delsol, in Populisme, les demeures de l’Histoire, or “Populism, the Backward Ones of History,” puts forth a philosophy of history that traces the ongoing elitist excommunication of populism to a historical clash between emancipation and rootedness. The belief system of emancipation, which has gained ground particularly since the French Enlightenment, has become a Western dogma, in its defense of the “new world” of humans “detached from their temporal and spatial roots [as well as] of communitarian obligations.” This ideology, “in its content, speaks in the name of all men in time and space, disregards all separations, crosses borders, despises the circumstances,” and in its march “knows no country, no clan, no anthropology – it is suspicious of costumes, which it takes for prejudices. It is a vast undertaking of rationalization which, if necessary, levels the diversity of mores to extend its law as far as possible” (Delsol, 2016, pp. 102, 106–107). The opposite of this universalistic project of emancipation is the defense of the particular. Today the resistance – a revolt, really – comes from the popular/working-class milieus that think that globalization has gone too far, that the liberalization of ways of life has gone too far, that cosmopolitanism has gone too far. They become the number one adversary, the wanted of our times, owing to their dangerous irreducibility to the elitist vision of emancipation.

In this sense, populism responds to this popular demand to protect the particular (in terms of traditions, ways of life, borders, and so forth) against the universal, reflecting the attempt to save “some anchor points” in a society that is “carried toward more and more emancipation, in a compulsory and almost blind way, as inhabited by the Hegelian spirit.” The populist, ultimately, is a “traitor to the cause of emancipation, or the only cause that merits to be defended,” and becomes to the governing classes not an adversary but an enemy. “I know of no greater brutality in our democracies,” wrote Delsol, “than that used against the populist currents.” The populist’s “rebellion of the real” expresses, then, a sort of primal “conservatism” against the violent disruption unleashed by conceptual and abstract schemes. At a time of “excess of emancipation,” the French philosopher argues for a return of equilibrium between rootedness and rootlessness – the two poles of human thought. In the 21st century, more than to “educate the popular classes to openness,” what is needed, especially, is to “educate the elites to the exigency of limits and to regain a sense of reality” (Delsol, 2016, pp. 11, 183, 188, 258).

Similarly, the Quebecois sociologist Mathieu Bock-Côté, says that the rising tide of populisms must be seen in the light of the “ending of the enchanted narrative of the happy globalization.” Against its anthropological revolution aimed at fabricating “a new man without memory, without history, without roots, without homeland, without political community,” in the early 21st century “the peoples protest against what they have experienced as a mutilation. They are haunted by the fear of their dissolution, their disintegration, and they turn to those who are not occupied in despising or denying this anguish.” In the end, in the struggle against a “radical modernity,” what is at stake is a battle for conservatism. “Needless to say, one becomes easily conservative, and even reactionary, in a world devoted to perpetual motion. One becomes it almost in spite of oneself,” Bock-Côté says in his review of Delso’s work (Bock-Côté, 2015, 2016). Critic of the “pejorative usage that political science makes of the term [populism] with the intention to designate parties and a political offer to be delegitimized,” Vincent Coussedière, for his turn, adopts a “phenomenological perspective” of populism, in terms of the subjective experience of the people, arguing that the “instinct of conservation” of the people has been “re-baptized as populism.” There is an inherent “populism of the people” (which is different from “populist demagoguery”) that manifests
itself as the rejection by the people – understood in a political sense – of the decomposition of its specific sociability and sovereignty. Against the dual challenge of the EU-promoted multiculturalism as well as of Islamism, populism represents the attachment to the nation, to shared mores, and to the sovereignty of its state. “European populisms, whatever the credibility of their leaders, are the entry into resistance of European peoples against their programmed destruction,” Coussedière argues in Le retour du peuple, An I (2016a, p. 20; also 2016b, pp. 38–40). In an interview, Delsol argues that “what we see today in the world is not a clash of civilizations, as Huntington used to say, but the surge of holistic societies against individualistic societies” (Delsol, 2016, p. 7). This “holistic” dimension is certainly present in the anti–anti-populist narrative of populism’s dismissal of progress.

**Populism as sanity against progress**

“In his own age and ours,” wrote George Orwell about the Victorian-era English novelist Charles Dickens, “he has been popular chiefly because he was able to express in a comic, simplified and therefore memorable form the native decency of the common man” (Orwell, 1946, p. 55). In fact, Orwell recurrently used the words “common decency” to show his high regard for the honesty, simplicity, fortitude, and general wholesomeness of regular folks, or the “common man.” This vision is at the very basis of his defense – similarly, and also influenced by, Jack London’s portrayal of the working class – of a real, nonideological socialism; as he argued at the end of The Road to Wigan Pier, “All that is needed is to hammer two facts home into the public consciousness. One, that the interests of all exploited people are the same; the other, that socialism is compatible with common decency” (Orwell, 2001, p. 214). The elevation of popular “decency” also runs throughout the writings of late 20th-century American social critic Christopher Lasch. “Liberals have lost sight of what is valuable in lower-middle–class culture in their eagerness to condemn what is objectionable,” he wrote in The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, “its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress” (Lasch, 1991, p. 17).

For contemporary critics of dogmatic anti-populism, a major virtue of the oppressed people is that it does not mistake at all the promised land of progress for the true and only heaven. Limitless emancipation in the name of progress is hellish to popular, traditional milieus. In fact, both Orwell’s and Lasch’s views are brought back in support of the anti-liberal critique of the French philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa – a defender of the anti–progressivist and communitarian roots of the original socialism – who sees modern Western societies as the scorched earth of economic liberalism and cultural liberalism, advanced by both the Right and the Left, and intellectually promoted by the media and academic “clergy.” The only obstacles against such “progress” (worshipped as a religion) are traditional, mostly working-class constituencies, that are still attached to communitarian and solidaristic ways of life, as well as reciprocal gift exchange. Further, Michéa says, “[w]herever the ruling class always argues in terms of law and/or economy, the popular classes continue to accord decisive importance to the notions of common decency and personal moral responsibility to the great despair of leftist academicians.” (Michéa, 2017, p. 243). In such a context it is no surprise, following this logic, that the popular classes – whose common sense is met with open or hidden sarcasm by the political establishments – abandon the parties that are unable to translate (unlike populist movements) their own experience with the ravages, in all its forms, of the liberal/capitalist system.

Michéa’s writings have found a very positive feedback within the thought of Alain de Benoist, the intellectual leader of the French Nouvelle Droite, a school of thought characterized by a radical critique of liberal modernity. “Michéa upsets [the Left] because he recognizes,
even emphasizes, the ‘conservative’ impulses of the working class whose values are most often traditional and communitarian,” De Benoist wrote, adding that those values, in sum, “frontally oppose the individualism of merchant society and the transformation of humanity in atomized monads” (De Benoist, 2017a, p. 153). The mounting of populism shows that the Left–Right divide is obsolete in order to understand the political world; the new dominant cleavage is the defense of the ordinary people against the New Class, in sum, a vertical opposition between “those below” and the privileged “up high.” This opposition, therefore, is against a nomadic financial and technocratic elite, settled in the media as well as in the corridors of power, which has taken over democracy, creating a post-democratic expertocracy that has robbed the people of its sovereignty. Anti-populism, which operates as a stigmatization of populism, ultimately rests on the stigmatization of the people itself. “The insistence with which it is stressed that the people are ‘less educated’ is particularly revealing. Higher education becomes a guarantee of a propensity to adhere to the right ideas – which should make one smile,” writes De Benoist.

In fact, it might be equally true that the less educated are also the least conditioned by the dominant ideology, and that the most ‘cultivated’ are in fact the most likely to repeat the fashionable mantras and identify themselves with social conformity.

In the face of an all-powerful New Class – “which joins politicians, businessmen and media representatives, all intimately linked with each other, all convinced of the ‘danger’ of popular aspirations [the people as plethos]” – what populism does is to reassemble the people in all its forms, as demos (the political people), ethnos (the historical and cultural people), and as plebs, meaning the popular classes under domination. These dimensions are inextricable. And the great characteristic and merit of populism is to join, in different proportions for each case, all these meanings of “the people.” In the end, the 21st-century populist revolt is viewed as a sign of things to come. “We are not at end of the world, but at the end of a world,” says De Benoist in reference to modernity’s chief ideology of liberalism, and the pursuit of emancipation in the name of progress, “and populisms are political forms of transition that announce something that will be put in place” (De Benoist, 2017a, pp. 107, 121–122, 2017b, p. 13).

**The impossible alliance?**

The left-wing and right-wing critiques of anti-populism see populism as the unavoidable – and legitimate – answer to a democracy that, in their minds, divests, instead of empowering, the sovereign people. The culprits behind such dispossession are often the same – a mixture of businessmen, corporate media types, politicians – in sum, a globalist elite behold to financial capitalism and enemy of the real people, invariably portrayed in anti-anti-populism narratives as decent, honest, hard-working and the victim of technocratic and post-democratic betrayal. For these critiques, “populism” is inherently a good thing, even if the term is used by the powers that be as a disqualifier for valid and reasonable challenges to the oligarchic status quo. Although in both anti-establishment criticisms visions of a “real democracy” abound, such democracy is based on different conceptions of the people. In right-wing critiques there is a much greater emphasis on the people’s historical/traditional/cultural (and more often than not ethnic) roots – in short, on a “way of life” that is critically threatened by globalization. By contrast, left-wing narratives, in their defense of populism, tend to emphasize rights, and civic understandings of the people – much more detached from ethno-cultural foundations – and often articulated around values such as solidarity, redistribution, and equality, against the putative onslaught of the
neoliberal order. If right-wing critics base their pro-populist narratives on the need to preserve and/or recover what has been lost – hence their attachment to conservatism (as quasi-innate and instinctual within the “real people”) against the “mad” rush of progress – left-wing critics, for their part, see populism as a way of continuing the path of progress against traditional atavisms while reorienting the wrong turn that it took toward hegemonic turbo capitalism.

The shared antagonism against the power elite so far, at least in Europe, has not gave birth to any sort of alliance between both antiglobalist camps, and such meeting of populist anticonformists has yet to make an impact in the still short 21st century. This “impossible alliance” is in part blamed to these populism supporters “ideological purism” and lack of a “sense of compromise” that makes them prioritize what separates rather than what unites them. One of the issues in which this chasm is most obvious regards mass immigration; the antiglobalist Left calls for open borders and sees minorities as “allies”, while the antiglobalist Right calls instead for closed borders and sees immigrants as an “other” that threatens to the cultural identity of the autochthonous people. If the pro-globalist camp of centrist forces (the moderate/liberal right and left) is much more homogenous and easy to coalesce, on the contrary the formation of an “antiglobalist axis, both conservative and progressive, that could assemble an electoral majority” seems, therefore, irreversibly far in the horizon (Isabel, 2017). For right-wing and left-wing advocates of populism, the proverb “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” does not quite seem to apply.

Conclusion – unwrapping the gift

Within populism studies, argues Paris Aslanidis, an “ideological battle is simmering among academics of different ideological origins,” with the growth of the populist challenge “tempting academics to use their analytical tools in the service of wider political aims,” and “exaggerating populism’s positive or negative impact on democratic institutions.” This tendency is at the basis of what the Greek political scientist calls the “normative bias” in the study of populism (Aslanidis, 2017, pp. 279–282). It is hard to deny such bias – often implicit in the literature – while explicit in the political commentary of scholars of populism, in traditional media and, especially strident, in social media. In the same vein, and in his criticism of what he calls the “anti-populist cultural zeitgeist” of Western societies, Frank Furedi says that the mainstream academic literature on populism “tends to treat its subject matter with the kind of hostility that is usually directed at an enemy” (2018, p. 8). This is certainly frequent in regard to right-wing populism: in many of the narratives it comes across as just another name for fascism. Warnings are plentiful. Sometimes it is as if reality had become an episode of the popular TV series Game of Thrones: “Winter is coming” and critics see themselves as members of the Night’s Watch. At the same time, left-wing populism is customarily viewed in a dual manner: as either completely irresponsible and reckless or just another version – admittedly, mitigated – of “the land flowing with milk and honey.”

Instead of a Manichean “good” and “bad” dichotomy, a “gray-zone” perspective seems more true-to-life and realistic in the study of populism. The Flemish author David Van Reybrouck sees it as an opportunity, if an ambivalent one. “The anger of citizens we see today is not a danger for democracy,” he argued. “It’s a gift. It shows that people are committed to and are willing to engage with their society.” “It’s a gift,” he insisted, “but it’s wrapped in barbed wire” (Van Reybrouck, 2016). The supposed “gift,” however, may be of little comfort for anti-populists, of every kind and degree, for whom, at the end of the day, populism is a barbed wire kiss of death for liberal-democratic societies. Populist defenders, in all their diversity, ultimately see the popular mobilization as a chance to overtake what for
them is not a democracy but an oligarchic regime. Only then a genuine democracy— with popular sovereignty reinstated—may emerge. That would be the ultimate “gift.”

It is true that at the very heart of the clash between anti-populists and anti-anti-populists lies a contrasting interpretation of what really matters and what should be prioritized in democracy—should it be procedures and institutions, or should it be the larger substantive pursuit of inclusion and popular empowerment within a more participatory framework? What this means is that illiberal outcomes of populist dynamics and experiences—in terms of friction with political pluralism, the rights of minorities, or checks and balances—will always be countered by the denunciation of the antidemocratic or post-democratic nature of representative democracies in which a small number of people govern without “the people.” What this means, in the end, is that what for anti-populists constitutes a fear—the erosion of the liberal pillar of liberal democracy—is, conversely, a hope—the revival of the democratic pillar—for anti-anti-populists everywhere. The “gift” unwrapped, democracy, as a totalizing and regenerative force, can thus fully blossom, to the chagrin of liberals everywhere.

To conclude, in a “gray-zone” style, the surge of populist forces may lead to a healthy and necessary shake-up of a closed, and irresponsible, political system—bringing with it (not least because of the “threat” to a stagnant status quo that they represent) the pressure to change wrongheaded and unpopular policies, as well as new perspectives and alternatives. This outcome can be, normatively speaking, a “good” thing. Such emancipatory turn may be short-lived, however, if the system itself (its institutions) is not able to refrain the revolutionary impetus that many populisms carry in their womb—the enthusiasm and fervor for totalizing and holistic changes—which may well lead to another version—potentially, and in practice, much more oppressive—of a “closed” system; but this time not a liberal-antidemocratic one, but an autocratic (or increasingly dictatorial) regime. Normatively speaking, therefore, a “bad” thing. Or a gift turned sour.

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