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Populism and the Mirror of Democracy

Edited by

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1

Populism: What's in a Name?

ERNESTO LACLAU

Any definition presupposes a theoretical grid giving sense to what is defined. This sense – as the very notion of definition asserts – can only be established on the basis of differentiating the defined term from something else that the definition excludes. This, in turn, presupposes a *terrain* within which those differences as such are thinkable. It is this terrain which is not immediately obvious when we call a movement (?), an ideology (?), a political practice (?), populist. In the first two cases – movements or ideologies – to call them populist would involve differentiating that attribute from other characterisations at the same defining level, such as 'fascist', 'liberal', 'communist', etc. This engages us immediately in a complicated and ultimately self-defeating task: finding that ultimate redoubt where we would find 'pure' populism, irreducible to those other alternative characterisations. If we attempt to do so we enter into a game in which any attribution of a social or ideological content to populism is immediately confronted with an avalanche of exceptions. Thus we are forced to conclude that when we use the term some actual meaning is presupposed by our linguistic practices, but that such a meaning is not, however, translatable into any definable sense. Furthermore, we can even less, through that meaning, point to any identifiable referent (which would exhaust that meaning).

What if we move from movements or ideologies as units of analysis, to political practices? Everything depends on how we conceive of that move. If it is governed by the unity of a subject constituted at the level of the ideology or the political movement, we have not, obviously, advanced a single step in the determination of what is specifically populist. The difficulties in determining the populistic character of the subjects of certain practices cannot but reproduce themselves in the analysis of the practices as such, as far as the latter simply *expresses* the inner nature of those subjects. There is, however a second possibility – namely, that the political practices do not *express* the nature of social agents but, instead, *constitute* the latter. In that case the political practice would have some kind of ontological priority over the agent – the latter would merely be the historical precipitate of the former. To put it in slightly different terms: practices would be more primary units of analysis than the group – that is, the group would only be the result of an articulation of social practices. If this approach is correct, we could say that a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populistic, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents – whatever those contents are.

A last remark is necessary before we enter into the substance of our argument. The category of 'articulation' has had some currency in theoretical language over the last thirty or forty years – especially within the Althusserian school and its area of influence. We should say, however, that the notion of articulation that Althusserianism developed was mainly limited to the *ontic* contents entering into the articulating process (the economic, the political, the ideological). There was some *ontological* theorisation as far as articulation is concerned (the notions of 'determination in the last instance' and of 'relative autonomy'), but as these formal logics appeared as necessarily derived from the ontic content of some categories (for example, the determination in the last instance could *only* correspond to the economy), the possibility of advancing an ontology of the social was strictly limited from the very beginning. Given these limitations, the political logic of populism was unthinkable.

In what follows, I will advance three theoretical propositions: 1) that to think the specificity of populism requires starting the analysis from units smaller than the group (whether at the political or at the ideological level); 2) that populism is an ontological and not an ontic category – i.e. its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political or ideological contents; 3) that that articulating form, apart from its contents, produces structuring effects which primarily manifest themselves at the level of the modes of representation.

Social demands and social totality

As we have just asserted, our starting point should be the isolation of smaller units than the group and the consideration of the social logics of their articulation. Populism is one of those logics. Let us say, to start with, that our analysis postulates an asymmetry between the community as a whole ('society') and whatever social actor operates within it. That is, there is no social agent whose will coincides with the actual workings of society conceived as a totality. Rousseau was perfectly aware that the constitution of a general will – which was for him the condition of democracy – was increasingly difficult under the conditions of modern societies, where their very dimensions and their heterogeneity make the recourse to mechanisms of representation imperative; Hegel attempted to address the question through the postulation of a division between civil and political society, where the first represented particularism and heterogeneity (the 'system of needs') and the second the moment of totalisation and universality; and Marx reasserted the utopia of an exact overlapping between communitarian space and collective will through the role of a universal class in a reconciled society. The starting point of our discussion is that no attempt to bridge the chasm between political will and communitarian space can ultimately succeed, but that the attempt to construct such a bridge defines the specifically political articulation of social identities.

We should add, to avoid misunderstanding, that this non-overlapping between the community as a totality and the actual and partial wills of social actors does not lead us to adopt any kind of methodologically individualistic approach to the question of agency. The latter presupposes that the individuals are meaningful, self-defined totalities; it is only one step from there to conclude that social interaction should be conceived in terms of negotiations between agents whose identities are constituted around clear-cut interests. Our approach is, on the contrary, entirely holistic, with the only qualification that the promise of fullness contained in the notion of an entirely self-determined social whole is unachievable. So the attempt at building communitarian spaces out of a plurality of collective wills can never adopt the form of a contract – the latter presupposing the notions of interests and self-determined wills that we are putting into question. The communitarian fullness that the social whole cannot provide cannot be transferred either to the individuals. Individuals are not coherent totalities but merely referential identities which have to be split up into a series of localised subject positions. And the articulation between these positions is a social and not an individual affair (the very notion of 'individual' does not make sense in our approach).

So what are these smaller units from which our analysis has to start? Our guiding thread will be the category of 'demand' as the elementary form in the building-up of the social link. The word 'demand' is ambiguous in English: it has, on the one hand, the meaning of *request* and, on the other, the more active meaning of *imposing* a request – a claim – on somebody else (as in 'demanding an explanation'). In other languages, like Spanish, there are different words for the two meanings: the word corresponding to our second meaning would be *reivindicación*. Although when in our analysis we use the term 'demand' we clearly put the stress on the second meaning, the very ambiguity between both is not without its advantages, because the theoretical notion of demand that we will employ implies a certain undecidability between the two meanings – in actual fact, as we will see, they correspond to two different forms of political articulation. Let us also add that there is a common hidden assumption underlying both meanings: namely that the demand is not

self-satisfied but has to be addressed to an instance different from that within which the demand was originally formulated.

Let us give the example of a straightforward demand: a group of people living in a certain neighbourhood want a bus route introduced to transport them from their places of residence to the area in which most of them work. Let us suppose that they approach the city hall with that request and that the request is satisfied. We have here the following set of structural features: 1) a social need adopts the form of a *request* – i.e. it is not satisfied through self-management but through the appeal to another instance which has the power of decision; 2) the very fact that a request takes place shows that the decisory power of the higher instance is not put into question at all – so we are fully within out first meaning of the term demand; 3) the demand is a punctual demand, closed in itself – it is not the tip of an iceberg or the symbol of a large variety of unformulated social demands. If we put these three features together we can formulate the following important conclusion: requests of this type, in which demands are punctual or individually satisfied, do not construct any chasm or frontier within the social. On the contrary, social actors are accepting, as a non-verbalised assumption of the whole process, the legitimacy of each of its instances: nobody puts into question either the right to present the request or the right of the decisory instance to take the decision. Each instance is a part (or a differential point) of a highly institutionalised social immanence. Social logics operating according to this institutionalised, differential model, we will call *logics of difference*. They presuppose that there is no social division and that any legitimate demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way. Examples of social utopias advocating the universal operation of differential logics come easily to mind: the Disraelian notion of 'one nation', the Welfare State, or the Saint-Simonian motto: 'From the government of men to the administration of things'.

Let us now go back to our example. Let us suppose that the request is rejected. A situation of social frustration will, no doubt, derive from that decision. But if it is only *one* demand that is not satisfied, that will not alter the situation substantially. If, however, for whatever reason, the variety of

demands that do not find satisfaction is very large, that multiple frustration will trigger social logics of an entirely different kind. If, for instance, the group of people in that area who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation find that their neighbours are equally unsatisfied in their claims at the levels of security, water supply, housing, schooling, and so on, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all: all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a *negative* dimension beyond their positive differential nature.

A social situation in which demands tend to reaggregate themselves on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied is the first precondition – but by no means the only one – of that mode of political articulation that we call populism. Let us enumerate those of its structural features that we can detect at this stage of our argument: 1) While the institutional arrangement previously discussed was grounded on the logic of difference, we have here an inverse situation, which can be described as a *logic of equivalence* – i.e. one in which all the demands, in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an *equivalential chain*. This means that each individual demand is constitutively split: on the one hand it is its own particularised self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands. Returning to our image: each demand is, actually, the tip of an iceberg, because although it only shows itself in its own particularity, it presents its own manifest claim as only one among a larger set of social claims. 2) The subject of the demand is different in our two cases. In the first, the subject of the demand was as punctual as the demand itself. The subject of a demand conceived as differential particularity we will call *democratic subject*. In the other case the subject will be wider, for its subjectivity will result from the equivalential aggregation of a plurality of democratic demands. A subject constituted on the basis of this logic we will call *popular subject*. This shows clearly the conditions for either the emergence or disappearance of a popular subjectivity: the more social demands tend to be differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system, the weaker the equivalential links will be and the more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity; conversely, a situation in which a plurality

of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist, creates the conditions leading to a populist rupture. 3) It is a corollary of the previous analysis that there is no emergence of a popular subjectivity without the creation of an internal frontier. The equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all, and this requires the identification of the source of social negativity. Equivalential popular discourses divide, in this way, the social into two camps: power and the underdog. This transforms the nature of the demands: they cease to be simple requests and become fighting demands (*reivindicaciones*) – in other words we move to the second meaning of the term 'demand'.

Equivalences, popular subjectivity, dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier. We have apparently all the structural features to define populism. Not quite so, however. A crucial dimension is still missing, which we have now to consider.

Empty and floating signifiers

Our discussion so far has led us to recognise two conditions – which structurally require each other – for the emergence of a populist rupture: the dichotomisation of the social space through the creation of an internal frontier, and the construction of an equivalential chain between unfulfilled demands. These, strictly speaking, are not two conditions but two aspects of the same condition, for the internal frontier can only result from the operation of the equivalential chain. What is important, in any case, is to realise that the equivalential chain has an *anti-institutional* character: it subverts the particularistic, differential character of the demands. There is, at some point, a short-circuit in the relation between demands put to the 'system' and the ability of the latter to meet them. What we have to discuss now are the effects of that short-circuit on both the nature of the demands and the system conceived as a totality.

The equivalential demands confront us immediately with the problem of the representation of the specifically equivalential moment. For, obviously, the demands are always particular, while the more universal

dimension linked to the equivalence lacks any direct, evident mode of representation. It is our contention that the first precondition for the representation of the equivalential moment is the totalisation (through signification) of the power which is opposed to the ensemble of those demands constituting the popular will. This should be evident: for the equivalential chain to create a frontier within the social it is necessary somehow to represent the other side of the frontier. There is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy: the *ancien régime*, the oligarchy, the Establishment or whatever. We will later return to this aspect. What we will now concentrate on is the transition from democratic subject positions to popular ones on the basis of the frontier effects deriving from the equivalences.

So how does the equivalence *show* itself? As we have asserted, the equivalential moment cannot be found in any positive feature underlying all the demands, for – from the viewpoint of those features – they are entirely different from each other. The equivalence proceeds entirely from the opposition to the power beyond the frontier, which does not satisfy any of the equivalential demands. In that case, however, how can the chain as such be represented? As I have argued elsewhere,[1] that representation is only possible if a particular demand, without entirely abandoning its own particularity, starts also functioning as a signifier representing the chain as a totality (in the same way as gold, without ceasing to be a particular commodity, transforms its own materiality into the universal representation of value). This process by which a particular demand comes to represent an equivalential chain incommensurable with it is, of course, what we have called *hegemony*. The demands of Solidarność, for instance, started by being the demands of a particular working-class group in Gdansk, but as they were formulated in an oppressed society, where many social demands were frustrated, they became the signifiers of the popular camp in a new dichotomic discourse.

Now there is a feature of this process of constructing a universal popular signification which is particularly important for understanding populism. It is the following: the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic

demands which assume the function of universal representation. This leads us to a conclusion which is crucial for our analysis: the construction of a popular subjectivity is possible only on the basis of discursively producing *tendentially* empty signifiers. The so-called 'poverty' of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy – as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content. At the limit, this process reaches a point where the homogenising function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader.

There are two other important aspects that, at this point, we should take into consideration. The first concerns the particular kind of distortion that the equivalential logics introduce into the construction of the 'people' and 'power' as antagonistic poles. In the case of the 'people', as we have seen, the equivalential logic is based on an 'emptying' whose consequences are, at the same time, enriching and impoverishing. Enriching: the signifiers unifying an equivalential chain, because they must cover all the links integrating the latter, have a wider reference than a purely differential content which would attach a signifier to just one signified. Impoverishing: precisely because of this wider (potentially universal) reference, its connection with particular contents tends to be drastically reduced. Using a logical distinction, we could say that what it wins in *extension* it loses in *intension*. And the same happens in the construction of the pole of power: that pole does not simply function through the materiality of its differential content, for that content is the *bearer* of the negation of the popular pole (through the frustration of the latter's demands). As a result, there is an essential instability which permeates the various moments that we have isolated in our study. As far as the particular demands are concerned nothing anticipates, in their isolated contents, the way in which they will be differentially or equivalentially articulated – that will depend on the historical context – and nothing anticipates either (in the case of the equivalences) the extension and the composition of the chains in which they participate. And as for the two poles of the people/power dichotomy, their actual identity and

structure will be equally open to contestation and redefinition. France had experienced food riots since the Middle Ages but these riots, as a rule, did not identify the monarchy as their enemy. All the complex transformations of the eighteenth century were required to reach a stage in which food demands became part of revolutionary equivalential chains embracing the totality of the political system. And the American populism of farmers, at the end of the nineteenth century, failed because the attempt at creating chains of popular equivalence unifying the demands of the dispossessed groups found a decisive obstacle in a set of structural *differential* limits which proved to be stronger than the populist interpellations: namely, the difficulties in bringing together black and white farmers, the mutual distrust between farmers and urban workers, the deeply entrenched loyalty of Southern farmers to the Democratic Party, and so on.

This leads us to our second consideration. Throughout our previous study, we have been operating under the simplifying assumption of the de facto existence of a frontier separating two antagonistic equivalential chains. This is the assumption that we have now to put into question. Our whole approach leads us, actually, to this questioning, for if there is no a priori reason why a demand should enter into some particular equivalential chains and differential articulations rather than into others, we should expect that antagonistic political strategies would be based on different ways of creating political frontiers, and that the latter would be exposed to destabilisations and transformations.

If this is so, our assumptions must, to some extent, be modified. Each discursive element would be submitted to the structural pressure of contradictory articulating attempts. In our theorisation of the role of the empty signifiers, their very possibility depended on the presence of a chain of equivalences which involves, as we have seen, an internal frontier. The classical forms of populism – most of the Latin American populisms of the 1940s and 1950s, for instance – correspond to this description. The political dynamic of populism depends on this internal frontier being constantly reproduced. Using a simile from linguistics we could say that while an institutionalist political discourse tends to

privilege the syntagmatic pole of language – the number of differential locations articulated by relations of combination – the populist discourse tends to privilege the paradigmatic pole, i.e. the relations of substitution between elements (demands, in our case) aggregated around only two syntagmatic positions.

The internal frontier on which the populist discourse is grounded can, however, be subverted. This can happen in two different ways. One is to break the equivalential links between the various particular demands, through the individual satisfaction of the latter. This is the road to the decline of the populist form of politics, to the blurring of the internal frontiers and to the transition to a higher level of integration of the institutional system – a transformist operation, as Gramsci called it. It corresponds, broadly speaking, to Disraeli's project of 'one nation', or to the contemporary attempts by theoreticians of the Third Way and the 'radical centre' at substituting administration for politics.

The second way of subverting the internal frontier is of an entirely different nature. It does not consist in *eliminating* the frontiers but in *changing their political sign*. As we have seen, as the central signifiers of a popular discourse become partially empty, they weaken their former links with some particular contents – those contents become perfectly open to a *variety* of equivalential rearticulations. Now, it is enough that the empty popular signifiers keep their radicalism – that is, their ability to divide society into two camps – while, however, the chain of equivalences that they unify becomes a different one, for the political meaning of the whole populist operation to acquire an opposite political sign. The twentieth century provides countless examples of these reversals. In America, the signifiers of popular radicalism, which at the time of the New Deal had a mainly left-wing connotation, were later reappropriated by the radical Right, from George Wallace to the 'moral majority'. In France the radical 'tribunicial function' of the Communist Party has, to some extent, been absorbed by the National Front. And the whole expansion of fascism during the inter-war period would be unintelligible without making reference to the right-wing rearticulation of themes and demands belonging to the revolutionary tradition.

What is important is to grasp the pattern of this process of rearticulation: it depends on partially keeping in operation the central signifiers of popular radicalism while inscribing in a different chain of equivalences many of the democratic demands. This hegemonic rearticulation is possible because no social demand has ascribed to it, as a 'manifest destiny', any a priori form of inscription – everything depends on a hegemonic contest. Once a demand is submitted to the articulatory attempts of a plurality of antagonistic projects it lives in a no-man's-land vis-à-vis the latter – it acquires a partial and transitory autonomy. To refer to this ambiguity of the popular signifiers and of the demands that they articulate we will speak of *floating signifiers*. The kind of structural relation that constitutes them is different from the one that we have found operating in the empty signifiers: while the latter depend on a fully fledged internal frontier resulting from an equivalential chain, the floating signifiers are the expression of the ambiguity inherent to all frontiers and of the impossibility of the latter acquiring any ultimate stability. The distinction is, however, mainly analytic, for in practice empty and floating signifiers largely overlap: there is no historical situation where society is so consolidated that its internal frontier is not submitted to any subversion or displacement, and no organic crisis so deep that some forms of stability do not put limits on the operativity of the subversive tendencies.

Populism, politics and representation

Let us put together the various threads of our argument so as to formulate a coherent concept of populism. Such a coherence can only be obtained if the different dimensions entering into the elaboration of the concept are not just discrete features brought together through simple enumeration, but part of a theoretically articulated whole. To start with, we only have populism if there is a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and the precondition of the emergence of such a subject is, as we have seen, the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps. But the logic of that division is dictated, as we know, by the creation of an equivalential chain

between a series of social demands in which the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called *empty signifier*.

These are all the structural defining features which enter, in my view, into the category of populism. As can be seen, the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly *formal* one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation – the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independently of the actual *contents* that are articulated. That is the reason why, at the beginning of this essay, I asserted that 'populism' is an ontological and not an ontic category. Most of the attempts at defining populism have tried to locate what is specific to it in a particular ontic content and, as a result, they have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an 'intuition' which cannot be translated into any conceptual content.

This displacement of the conceptualisation, from contents to form, has several advantages (apart form the obvious one of avoiding the naïve sociologism which reduces the political forms to the preconstituted unity of the group). In the first place, we have a way of addressing the recurrent problem of dealing with the ubiquity of populism – the fact that it can emerge from different points of the socio-economic structure. If its defining features are found in the prevalence of the logic of equivalence, the production of empty signifiers and the construction of political frontiers through the interpellation of the underdog, we understand immediately that the discourses grounded in this articulatory logic can start from *any* place in the socio-institutional structure: clientelistic political organisations, established political parties, trade unions, the army, revolutionary movements, and so on. 'Populism' does not define the actual politics of these organisations, but is a way of articulating their themes – whatever those themes may be.

Secondly, we can grasp better, in this way, something which is essential for the understanding of the contemporary political scene: the circulation of the signifiers of radical protest between movements of entirely opposite political signs. We have made reference before to this question. To give just one example: the circulation of the signifiers of Mazzinism and Garibaldianism in Italy during the war of liberation (1943–45). These had been the signifiers of radical protest in Italy, going back to the Risorgimento. Both fascists and communists tried to articulate them to their discourses and, as a result, they became partially autonomous vis-à-vis those various forms of political articulation. They retained the dimension of radicalism, but whether that radicalism would move in a right or in a left direction was at the beginning undecided – they were floating signifiers, in the sense that we have discussed. It is obviously an idle exercise to ask oneself what social group expresses itself through those populist symbols: the chains of equivalence that they formed cut across many social sectors, and the radicalism that they signified could be articulated by movements of entirely opposite political signs. This migration of signifiers can be described if populism is conceived as a formal principle of articulation; not if that principle is concealed behind the particular contents that incarnate it in different political conjunctures.

Finally, approaching the question of populism formally makes it possible to address another, otherwise intractable issue. To ask oneself if a movement *is* or *is not* populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: *to what extent* is a movement populist? As we know, this question is identical to this other one: to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse? We have presented political practices as operating at diverse points of a continuum whose two *reductio ad absurdum* extremes would be an institutionalist discourse, dominated by a pure logic of difference, and a populist one, in which the logic of equivalence operates unchallenged. These two extremes are actually unreachable: pure difference would mean a society so dominated by administration and by the individualisation of social demands that no struggle around internal frontiers – i.e. no politics – would be possible; and pure

equivalence would involve such a dissolution of social links that the very notion of 'social demand' would lose any meaning – this is the image of the 'crowd' as depicted by the nineteenth-century theorists of 'mass psychology' (Taine, Le Bon, Sighele, etc.).

It is important to realise that the impossibility of the two extremes of pure difference or pure equivalence is not an empirical one – it is logical. The subversion of difference by an equivalential logic does not take the form of a total elimination of the former through the latter. A relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity, but one in which differences are still very active. The equivalence eliminates the *separation* between the demands, but not the demands themselves. If a series of demands – transport, housing, employment and so on, to go back to our initial example – are unfulfilled, the equivalence existent between them – and the popular identity resulting from that equivalence – requires very much the persistence of the demands. So equivalence is still definitely a particular way of articulating differences. Thus between equivalence and difference there is a complex dialectic, an unstable compromise. We will have a variety of historical situations which presuppose the *presence* of both, but at the same time, their *tension*. Let us mention some of them:

1) An institutional system becomes less and less able to differentially absorb social demands, and this leads to an internal chasm within society and the construction of two antagonistic chains of equivalences. This is the classic experience of a populist or revolutionary rupture, which results generally from the types of crisis of representation that Gramsci called 'organic crises'.
2) The regime resulting from a populist rupture becomes progressively institutionalised, so that the differential logic starts prevailing again and the equivalential popular identity increasingly becomes an inoperative *langue de bois* governing less and less the actual workings of politics. Peronism, in Argentina, attempted to move from an initial politics of confrontation – whose popular subject was the *descamisado* (the equivalent of the *sans-culotte*) to an increasingly institutionalised discourse grounded in what was called 'the organised community' (*la comunidad organizada*). We find another variant of this increasing asymmetry between actual demands and equivalential discourse in those cases in which the latter becomes the *langue de bois* of the state. We find in them that the increasing distance between actual social demands and dominant equivalential discourse frequently leads to the repression of the former and the violent imposition of the latter. Many African regimes, after the process of decolonisation, followed this pattern.
3) Some dominant groups attempt to constantly recreate the internal frontiers through an increasingly anti-institutional discourse. These attempts generally fail. Let us just think of the process, in France, leading from Jacobinism to the Directoire and, in China, the various stages in the cycle of the 'cultural revolution'.

A movement or an ideology – or, to put both under their common genus, a discourse – will be more or less populistic depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics. This means that no political movement will be entirely exempt from populism, because none will fail to interpellate to some extent the 'people' against an enemy, through the construction of a social frontier. That is why its populist credentials will be shown in a particularly clear way at moments of political transition, when the future of the community is in the balance. The degree of 'populism', in that sense, will depend on the depth of the chasm separating political alternatives. This poses a problem, however. If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative. Populism means putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent – i.e. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand. But this is the same as politics. We only have politics through the gesture which embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it (or, conversely, when we defend

that system against existing potential alternatives). That is the reason why the end of populism coincides with the end of politics. We have an end of politics when the community conceived as a totality, and the will representing that totality, become indistinguishable from each other. In that case, as I have argued throughout this essay, politics is replaced by administration and the traces of social division disappear. Hobbes' Leviathan as the undivided will of an absolute ruler, or Marx's universal subject of a classless society, represent parallel ways – although, of course, of an opposite sign – of the end of politics. A total, unchallengeable state and the withering away of the state are both ways of cancelling out the traces of social division. But it is easy, in that sense, to see that the conditions of possibility of the political and the conditions of possibility of populism are the same: they both presuppose social division; in both we find an ambiguous *demos* which is, on the one hand, a section within the community (an underdog) and, on the other hand, an agent presenting itself, in an antagonistic way, as *the whole* community.

This conclusion leads us to a last consideration. As far as we have politics (and also, if our argument is correct, its derivative which is populism) we are going to have social division. A corollary of this social division is that a section within the community will present itself as the expression and representation of the community as a whole. This chasm is ineradicable as far as we have a *political* society. This means that the 'people' can only be constituted in the terrain of the relations of representation. We have already explained the representative matrix out of which the 'people' emerges: a certain particularity which assumes a function of universal representation; the distortion of the identity of this particularity through the constitution of equivalential chains; the popular camp resulting from these substitutions presenting itself as representing society as a whole. These considerations have some important consequences. The first is that the 'people', as operating in populist discourses, is never a primary datum but a construct – populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter. The second is that, as a result, relations of representation are not a secondary level reflecting a primary social reality

constituted elsewhere; they are, on the contrary, the primary terrain within which the social is constituted. Any kind of political transformation will, as a result, take place as an internal displacement of the elements entering the representation process. The third consequence is that representation is not a second best, as Rousseau would have had it, resulting from the increasing chasm between the universal communitarian space and the particularism of the actually existing collective wills. On the contrary, the asymmetry between community as a whole and collective wills is the source of that exhilarating game that we call politics, from which we find our limits but also our possibilities. Many important things result from the impossibility of an ultimate universality – among others, the emergence of the 'people'.

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64 George Shulman, 'The Pathos of Identification and Politics', paper presented for the *Identification and Politics Workshop II*, 23–24 May 2002, The University of Essex, Colchester, UK.
65 Crabtree, 2000, p. 164.
66 Canovan, 1981, p. 9.
67 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democacy, Totalitarianism*, London 1986, p. 279.
68 Quoted in Shulman, 'The Pathos of Idenfitication and Politics'.
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1 ERNESTO LACLAU

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2 CHANTAL MOUFFE

I want to thank Marcus Klein, my research assistant of several years, for his invaluable help in collecting very extensive documentation about the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

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2 C. B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford 1977.
3 For a critique of the 'Third Way' from such a perspective see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London 2000, Chapter 5.
4 I have elaborated on this distinction between 'antagonism' and 'agonism' in *The Democratic Paradox*, Chapter 4.
5 For a useful overall discussion, see *The Haider Phenomenon in Austria*, in Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka, eds, New Brunswick and London 2002.
6 One can find a comprehensive presentation of the FPÖ in Kurt Richard Luther, 'Die Freiheitlichen (F)' in *Handbuch des politischen Systems in Osterreich: Die Zweite Republik*, Herbert Dachs et al., Wien 1997.
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10 For a good discussion of this strategy see Sebastian Reinfeldt, *Nicht-wir und Die-da: Studiem zum rechten Populismus*, Wien 2000.
11 Jörg Haider, *The Freedom I Mean*, 1995, p. 16.
12 Ibid., p. 34.
13 See for instance Brigitte Bailer-Galanda and Wolfgang Neugebauer, *Haider und die 'Freiheitlichen' in Osterreich*, Berlin 1997.
14 Haider's background is examined by Christa Zöchling in *Haider – Licht und Schatten einer Karriere*, Wien 1999.
15 See in this connection the article by Richard Mitten, 'Jörg Haider, the Anti-immigrant Petition and Immigration Policy in Austria', in *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1994.
16 The French press saw itself as the vanguard of this 'moral crusade', and serious journals like *Libération* and *Le Monde* were full of ill-informed, hysterical pieces attacking Austria in a way that in other circumstances would have been considered 'racist'.
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18 A very good analysis of the reasons for the success of the VB is provided by Patrick De Vos in his article, 'The Sacralisation of Consensus and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism: the Case of the Vlaams Blok', *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 7, September 2002.
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3 BENJAMIN ARDITI

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