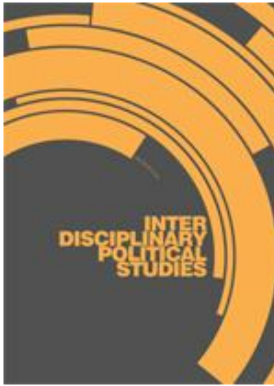

Interdisciplinary Political Studies
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps
ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue X(X) 2021: 29-62
DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v7n2p29
Published: December 23, 2021

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Shape of the People. Rethinking Populism Beyond Laclau

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ABSTRACT

In the theoretical discussion of populism, two main options can be identified: a perspective conceives the populism as a thin-centered ideology; a second perspective believes that populism is a set of rhetorical, stylistic and organizational tools, which can be used by any political force. With respect to these two perspectives, Ernesto Laclau's proposal outlines a further strategy. This article examines the merits and limitations of Laclau's proposal. This paper highlights two problematic aspects: for Laclau, populism is not only a logic of political discourse, but also a political proposal; furthermore, 'populism', in his perspective, is not a specific phenomenon, because it is the mechanism by which every political identity is produced. The paper suggests that a solution consists in recovering the distinction between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, which was advanced by Laclau and Mouffe during the 1980s.

KEYWORDS: Populism; People; Ideology; Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe

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1. Introduction

In the different versions of Maoism we can recognize rhetorical elements that are usually associated with “populism”. Many of these elements were present in the language of the Western far left of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and especially in the leaflets and documents of the small Italian, French and German Maoist groups, which had grown up in the myth of the Cultural Revolution. In the songs that were written in the early seventies by the ‘National Songbook of the Red Wind’ (‘Canzoniere Nazionale del Vento Rosso 1974’), a cultural organization linked to a small Italian Maoist party (UCI), we can find a striking example of populist rhetoric. In one song especially, the protagonist is an Italian worker, who was forced to emigrate abroad ‘by a frightening government’. In the song, he also remembers the times when, still ‘young and happy’, he went fishing with friends, or when he listened to the advice of ‘old and wise’ farmers. Furthermore, he says that, when the village factory closed, the workers were duped ‘by corrupt delegates’, ‘trapped by false and empty speeches and by those people who had been bought’. Finally, the song ends with a grim vision of the struggle between people and power: ‘the struggle against the boss / is a struggle between love and selfishness / is a struggle between the rich / who love only money / and the people who want altruism’ (Canzoniere Nazionale del Vento Rosso, 1974).

In the romantic image of the people celebrated in this Maoist song, we can probably recognize the core of ‘populism’, or at least the heart of that rhetoric that in recent decades we have called ‘populist’. Although there are no definitions of ‘populism’ that are accepted by all social scientists, in fact, many definitions underline the moralistic components of populism and the idea of a ‘united’ people, clearly opposed to the elites. Jan-Werner Müller, for example, defines populism as ‘a particular *moralistic vision of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior’ (Müller 2016, pp. 19–20). Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser write that populism is a *thin-centered ideology*: an ideology that ‘*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of*

the volonté générale (*general will) of the people*' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). According to these definitions, the song of the Italian Maoist group should be considered an authentic paradigm of the thin-centred populist ideology, or as an example of the 'moralistic vision of politics' that characterizes this phenomenon. However, this definition can be contested from various points of view, and in particular, the idea that the romantic image of a 'good people' is the distinctive element of populism may be unsatisfactory. We can thus ask ourselves a series of questions. For example, should we consider Maoist rhetoric as wholly 'populist' or even as 'Marxist'? Is this naïve representation of the 'good people' and the 'bad elite' an exclusive feature of populism, or is it an element present in many ideologies? Can we recognize in that song an ideology, or just a 'moralistic vision', or simply a rhetoric?

These questions are well known by scholars of populism, who have been wondering for more than half a century what the 'essence' of populism is (and whether there is anything like an 'essence' of populism). The word 'populism' has indeed known a rather singular story, especially from the moment in which, between the eighties and nineties of the last century, it began to be adopted by the language of journalism and the lexicon of political debate to identify radical positions. Since then, the term has become almost ubiquitous, following an 'inflationary spiral' that accelerated with Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, for many observers a sign of the triumph of 'global populism' (de La Torre 2014, 2018; Moffit 2016). Of course, the frequent use of the term has not reduced the polysemy of the concept. If today we ask ourselves 'who' the populists are, the answer seems obvious, for the simple reason that newspapers, TV and political debate contribute almost daily to crowding the gallery of 'populist' leaders and movements. On the other hand, if we ask ourselves 'what' populism is, the answer turns out to be much more difficult, particularly because the heterogeneity of the phenomena usually attributed to this category.

The difficulty of grasping the 'essence' of populism has become a real commonplace for scholars over the past 50 years. In the famous conference organized by 'Government and Opposition' at the London School of Economics and Political

Science in 1967, Isaiah Berlin noted that the debate on populism was a victim of the 'Cinderella complex' (Berlin 1968). In essence, Berlin observed that the scholars were destined to endlessly search for a paradigmatic case: a sort of Cinderella capable of perfectly fitting the 'slipper' of a theoretical definition. In half a century of discussions, the situation has not substantially improved. The field of populism studies has become increasingly crowded in the last ten years by political scientists, sociologists, communication scholars and economists, but neither the political fortune of populism nor the growth of research dedicated to this phenomenon has provided a decisive contribution to solving the 'puzzle' of the theoretical definition. And the discussion on 'what' populism is continues, without shared solutions (Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Canovan 1981; Tarchi 2004; Panizza 2005; Deiwiks 2009; Terragoni 2013; Chiapponi 2014; Bonaiuti 2015; Tarchi 2015; Tarizzo 2015; Anselmi 2017; De Cleen 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Freeden 2017; Palano 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; De Cleen et al. 2018; Moffitt 2020).

According to some scholars, the absence of a shared definition is a valid reason to get rid of the term: given that the theoretical category is so broad, flexible and poorly defined, we should give up using it. Although this position must be taken seriously, it is perhaps possible to try to think of the concept starting from its vagueness. In one of his first writings, Ernesto Laclau highlighted how many social scientists conceived the concept of 'populism' in an ambiguous way and how they used it to refer to movements with extremely heterogeneous characteristics. 'Populism,' wrote Laclau, 'is a concept both elusive and recurrent' and 'few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision' (Laclau 1979, p. 143). Surprisingly enough, this ambiguity was not meant to push to get rid of the concept, but it was meant to push to investigate the deeper causes of the phenomenon. In fact, the reason for the imprecision for Laclau was not accidental, because it was linked to the ambiguity of the concept of 'people': as he wrote, '*the people* is a concept without a defined theoretical status' and 'despite the frequency with which it is used in political discourse, its conceptual precision goes no further than the purely allusive metaphorical level' (Laclau 1979, p. 165). In many

ways, Laclau continued to question the peculiar nature of 'people' and 'populism' throughout his career, proposing different solutions. In general, ideology was conceived in terms close to those of Althusser in his early writings. Later, in his 'post-Marxist'' season, Laclau clearly distinguished the level of (ideological) representations from that of the economic 'structure' and, to a large extent, conceived populism as a process of formation of political identities. Although the contribution of the Argentine theorist is not without some limits, I think that some aspects of his proposal are valuable.

In particular, I think that Laclau's theory offers important suggestions for rethinking the idea of populism as an ideology (or as an ideology sui generis), proceeding in a different direction than that followed by many contemporary scholars. In the field of studies on populism, three ways of conceiving the phenomenon can generally be distinguished (Moffit 2020): a) the Ideational Approach, which considers populism as an ideology, or as a worldview (Mudde 2004; Abts & Rummens 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnel 2008; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn 2014; Müller 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017); b) the Strategic Approach, which interprets populism not as a 'thing' or an 'object' to be studied, but as 'a mode of political practice' (Jansen 2011, p. 75); c) the Discursive-Performative Approach, which is characterized, in general, by a 'primary focus on populism as a particular type of language that has significant effects on how politics (and political identity) is structrured and operates' (Moffit 2020, p .22). Although Laclau's theory represents one of the main pillars of the Discursive-Performative Approach, I think it can also be very useful for rethinking the relationship between populism and ideology from a non-positivist perspective. Many of the scholars of the Ideational Approach in fact share, in a more or less explicit way, the methodological principles of neo-positivism: therefore, they try to define populism as an ideology similar, or in any case comparable, to other structured ideologies. Laclau's proposal, on the other hand, indicates an alternative way to conceive both populism and ideology: the central point of his theory is in fact the idea that populism is a strategy for 'building' the people and that the elements of ideology are therefore the elements that are used to give a 'shape' to the people. In this

perspective, of course, ideologies become something very different from how they are conceived by the Ideational Approach: as a result of a sort of 'Copernican revolution', ideology is no longer the 'engine' that explains conflicts and collective identities; on the contrary, conflicts can explain the specific characteristics that ideology assumes, that is, the 'shape' in which the people present themselves.

In this article, I therefore propose to use some of his suggestions to redefine populism, or rather to clarify how populism can be conceived as an ideology. First, I will focus on the limitations of some of the main definitions of populism as an ideology (or as a *sui generis* ideology). In particular, I will examine two aspects that greatly complicate the discussion of populism as an ideology: the 'neo-positivist' strategy, which prompts scholars to construct generally exhaustive classifications, in which classes (and concepts) are mutually exclusive, and the idea that populism can be conceived as an ideology similar to other modern ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, communism, fascism, etc. Secondly, I will focus on some of Laclau's ideas that allow us to conceive populism as an ideology, or at least to identify a possible link between the logic of production of collective identities and the analysis of ideologies. In this regard, I will take up Laclau's idea that the main function of an ideology is the production of a collective identity, that is, the formation of a 'we'. For this reason, ideology must be conceived as a changing assemblage of central and peripheral concepts, but it must also be conceived as a 'relational' assembly, since the production of a 'we' always requires the establishment of a symbolic boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Laclau's theory of populism offers important elements precisely for this rethinking. But, since his proposal also appears ambiguous under various profiles, he will indicate some possible strategies for developing the idea of populism as a strategy for the construction of political identities.

2. Two strategies for studying populism

In general, social scientists, since the times of the old *Methodenstreit* of the late nineteenth century, have been able to adopt two different strategies to study a phenomenon: the first path, which today we can call 'constructivist', consists in

understanding (*Verstehen*) and interpreting reasons for social and political actions; the second strategy, on the other hand, has the objective of explanation (*Erklären*) and seeks to identify causal connections between independent and dependent variables. Although these strategies are not necessarily incompatible with each other, each of them implies different rules for constructing concepts. In the 'constructivist' perspective – whose origins can be found in the sociology of Max Weber – the concepts offer a guide to understanding socio-political phenomena and the great historical transformations. The goal, therefore, is not to place socio-political phenomena within taxonomies similar to those of the natural sciences, which are aimed at classifying, for example, living species. The intent, rather, is to understand what the logic is that moves the actors. An emblematic example is offered by the Weberian ideal types, whose purpose is not to place real phenomena within taxonomies (whose classes have mutually exclusive characteristics), but rather to exaggerate aspects of reality to grasp the logic that guides the phenomena (Weber 1904). For example, an ideal type of 'feudalism' or 'capitalism' can help in understanding whether, at a given historical moment, a specific society is closest to one or the other of the 'ideal-typical' configurations. And also, for this reason, Weber invited us to recognize how, in the political reality, the three different logics of legitimation of power, which he had identified thanks to his famous ideal types, were often intertwined (Weber 1926). From a 'Weberian' perspective, therefore, a definition of populism is aimed at grasping the 'essence' of the phenomenon; that is, it must clarify what the characterizing elements are. However, the objective of this strategy is not to 'add' the new box of 'populism' to a (more or less articulated) taxonomy. The intent is in fact to establish whether a particular movement approaches the ideal type of populism, or possibly whether the trend towards 'populism' is more evident in one given historical period than in others.

The 'neo-positivist' strategy, however, points in a very different direction. The concepts are used in this case to construct exhaustive classifications, in which each class is mutually exclusive with respect to the others. In other words, the classification must make it possible to locate a certain phenomenon – for example, a leader, a party, a political regime, etc. – exclusively within a specific class. On the other hand,

the possibility that a single case may be placed in two different classes at the same time must be avoided. Since a classification is not a simple enumeration, it must in fact be composed only of classes that are 'exhaustive' and 'mutually exclusive' (Sartori 1970). In the first condition, one can be tolerant, but the second is mandatory: 'Classes are required to be mutually exclusive, i.e., class concepts represent characteristics that the object under consideration must have or lack.' Therefore, 'two items being compared must belong first to the same class, and either have or not have an attribute', and 'only if they have it can the two items be matched in terms of which has it *more* or *less*' (Sartori 1970, p. 1038). Within the neo-positivist strategy, it is therefore necessary to identify a balance point between *intension* (connotation) and *extension* (denotation) of the concept. Furthermore, it is essential to find a balance point between the historical anchoring of a term and the 'operational' definition; that is, the definition that must make it possible to classify phenomena. Both of these tasks are far from easy, but they are particularly complicated in the case of populism.

Some contemporary scholars of populism, in particular within the Discursive-performative approach, adopt a 'constructivist' strategy and, for example, ask themselves to what extent parties have the distinctive characteristics of 'populism' (Wodak & Meyer 2001; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014; Moffitt 2015; Wodak 2015; Aslanidis 2016; Bonikowski & Gidron 2016; Moffitt 2017). The overwhelming majority of researchers, however, take the 'neo-positivist' path (Mudde 2004; Abts & Rummens 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008; Stanley 2008; Müller 2016) and thus run into rather robust obstacles. I limit myself to pointing out two problems, the first relating to the relationship between intension and extension of the concept, the second relating to the historical anchoring of the term. First, the 'neo-positivist' scholars must in fact decide where on the 'ladder of abstraction' to place the concept of populism. Basically, a high level of extension can be maintained: in this case, all the historical cases of populism and neo-populism are considered, with the consequence of an impoverishment of the concept on the side of intension; on the contrary, it is possible to privilege the side of the intension, focusing only on the most recent cases and therefore enriching the concept with elements of contemporary populist

movements (for example, the request for direct democracy, the protest against migratory flows, etc.). The risk, in this case, is to sever any link between contemporary 'neo-populism' and the movements that in the past were defined as 'populists' (for example, the People's Party should not be considered a 'populist' party, even if the term was invented precisely to identify this political organization). Secondly, a specific problem concerns the historical anchoring of the concept of 'populism'. In general, the language of the social sciences requires that concepts be 'cleaned up', eliminating the margins of ambiguity and vagueness that exist in everyday language. At the same time, it is impossible to totally forget the historical anchoring of the terms, since the concepts (and especially the political concepts) are the result of long processes of cultural elaboration. In other words, it is not possible to completely overlook the meaning that a term has in everyday language.

Populism, however, has a very peculiar historical anchoring. First of all, very frequently (or almost always) this formula is used in an explicitly derogatory meaning, with the aim of disqualifying a political opponent. In other words, in common parlance the term has a strong negative connotation, while something similar is not found, for example, in concepts such as 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'socialism'; although these concepts have also received powerful criticism and frequent disputes, they have also found strong supporters. The concept of 'populism', on the other hand, has hardly any supporters. Furthermore, the social sciences have by no means contributed to 'cleansing' the concept of value 'encrustations'. On the contrary, scholars have 'reinvented' the concept, assembling in the idea of 'populism' characteristics of many movements, very different from each other. The term 'populism' was most likely coined in the United States in 1891 to refer to the militants and political positions of the People's Party (Hicks 1931; Gennaro Lerda 1984; Houwen 2011). Only later, starting from the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, was it associated with a broader meaning, which went beyond the historical experience of the People's Party. From that moment on, the formula 'populism' in fact began to be 'dilated' in two directions: it was historically expanded, to indicate the psycho-political dynamics that had marked the United States during 'McCarthyism' (Allcock 1971; Formisano 2004);

moreover, it was expanded geographically, to indicate some Latin American regimes with authoritarian tendencies, in Brazil, Mexico and especially Argentina. In the reinvention of the concept, the word 'populism' was considered an attenuated variant of 'fascism' or 'authoritarianism', and it was used to refer to irrational, fanatical, intolerant, illiberal political tendencies, but marked by the support of the popular classes (Houwen 2011, pp. 17–21). In this way, the outline of populism was built 'by theoretically assembling' elements of very different political movements, which were not conceived at all as belonging to a common ideological family (Jäger 2017; Stavrakakis 2017; Palano 2019). In other words, the 'reinvention' of the concept found the unifying element of 'populism' in the fact that movements defined as 'populists' represented a threat to liberal democracy.

As a result of these two problems, the 'neo-positivist' scholars of populism often arrive at fruitless, or questionable, results. The 'slipper' of the concept of 'populism' becomes so large that it can be 'worn' by (almost) any political movement, and the 'Cinderella complex' risks becoming truly a problem with no solution. In any case, these problems are even more evident in the research of those scholars who consider populism as an ideology.

3. A 'populist' ideology?

A striking example of the (probably insoluble) difficulties of the 'neo-positivist' strategy of studying populism is represented by the studies that focus on 'populist ideology'. In this case, the need to build taxonomies (with mutually exclusive classes) clashes both with the problems relating to historical anchoring and with the problems associated with the considerable extension of the concept. The 'neo-positivists' must in fact necessarily respect first of all the rules of construction of taxonomies; that is, they cannot forget that the classes of a taxonomy must be (hopefully) exhaustive and, above all, that they must be mutually exclusive. In other words, populist ideology must represent a specific class of a taxonomy aimed at classifying all existing ideologies; that is, populism is a new class, which is placed alongside the more consolidated ideologies, which are, for example, considered in the classifications of

'party families'. As we have seen, if a taxonomy may not be absolutely exhaustive, it is not possible to compromise on the requirement of mutual exclusivity of the classes. In this regard, however, we come across some intricate knots. When trying to identify the elements of an ideology, one must inevitably consider its historical anchoring, its intellectual matrices, its theoretical references, the concrete declinations of ideology. However, such an operation is very problematic in the case of populism, because evidently it cannot be placed side by side with liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, fascism, etc. Looking at the vast array of movements that scholars refer to as 'populist', it is clear that no one (or almost no one) has called themselves a 'populist', or has raised the banner of 'populism'.

Even scholars who have tried to define populism as an ideology are well aware of the peculiar character of the phenomenon. Edward Shils recognized, for example, its qualifying element in assigning to the will of the people a value higher than any traditional norm and any institutional constraint; but in reality he observed that, rather than an autonomous ideology, it was a phenomenon recognizable in many ideologies (in agrarian radicalism, in German National Socialism, in Soviet Communist ideology) (Shils 1956). For Donald MacRae, despite his theoretical inconsistency, ambiguity and malleability, the elements of populist ideology were instead some rather simple traits: 1) faith in a virtuous community; 2) an egalitarianism hostile to any kind of elite; 3) the idea of a mythicized past, to be opposed to the threat represented by foreign conspiracy; 4) the belief in an 'imminent and instant apocalypse mediated by the charisma of heroic leaders and legislators' (MacRae 1969). According to Paul Taggart, some key themes recur in populist movements: 1) hostility towards representative politics; 2) identification with a mythologized image of the 'homeland' (heartland), from which 'alien' elements are excluded, a threat to the health of the people; 3) the absence of a solid anchorage to well-defined values (such as equality, freedom, social justice); 4) the belief that we are facing a process of extreme crisis; 5) the tendency towards simplification; 6) a chameleonic attitude (Taggart 2000). Loris Zanatta instead identifies the 'core' of the populist 'weak ideology' in some traits: 1) the reference to an idea of community; 2) an apolitical or even anti-

political vocation; 3) an aspiration to regeneration, which aims to restore sovereignty to the people; 4) the ambition to restore the values of a mythologized past and to regain lost social harmony; 5) the conviction of addressing the majority of the people; 6) the tendency to emerge in societies undergoing modernization or transformation processes (Zanatta 2002, 2013). Cas Mudde, in some very influential contributions, finally defines populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). If Freeden (1999) proposed the notion of thin-centred ideology to identify nationalism, feminism and environmentalism (Freeden 1999, 2017), Mudde suggests identifying populism with a simple conceptual core, composed only of two components: on the one hand, the idea of a society divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups; on the other hand, the idea that power, monopolized by the 'corrupt elite', should be handed back to the 'pure people' and that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004). For this reason, the antagonists of populism are mainly elitism and pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In more articulate terms, Ben Stanley also proposes the thesis that populism is a thin-centred ideology. More specifically, he specifies that his conceptual heart is made up of four elements: 1) the presence of two homogeneous units of analysis, namely 'the people' and the 'elite'; 2) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite; 3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and 4) the positive appreciation of the 'people' and the denigration of the 'elite' (Stanley 2008, p. 102).

Each of these proposals naturally captures significant aspects. Nevertheless, definitions of this type run quite significant risks, which I try to summarize. In the first place, a problem arises from the absence of a homogeneity between the phenomena that are traced back to the common populist ideology. In other words, populist ideology does not seem to be characterized by authors, doctrines or books that represent a common reference to all leaders and movements defined as 'populists'. This element therefore distinguishes the (alleged) populist ideology from the main ideologies of the last two centuries (Tarchi 2015, p. 40). Second, the label of 'populism' is not recognized as an identifying flag by the movements and leaders who are placed in this category. After the distant cases of the late nineteenth century, the

formula was used by scholars, opponents and journalists, but it was never claimed (in a lasting and not episodic way) by the protagonists. Indeed, many leaders disdainfully reject this label, which in their view represents only the accusation of resorting to easy demagogy. All this clearly distinguishes the behaviour of the 'populists' from that of the main ideological family protagonists of the last two centuries of the history of the Old Continent. Thirdly, traits that have been identified by scholars as distinctive of populist ideology actually seem very generic: they do not seem able to define a class whose characteristics are 'mutually exclusive' with respect to those of the classes included in an exhaustive taxonomy of ideological families or contemporary ideologies. The elements that have been highlighted are in fact shared by other ideologies as well. More generally, the elements that, according to many definitional proposals, characterize populism (i.e. the appeal to the people, the celebration of the virtues of the people, the conviction that the 'unity' of the people must be defended by the elites or by external enemies) are in fact central elements of the modern conception of politics. For example, the appeal to the people, as the source of the legitimacy of power, can be recognized as a recurring element in all the many variations of the doctrine of popular sovereignty and of the very modern conception of democracy; in many ways, there are therefore traces of appeal to the people in the rhetorical and ideological repertoire of socialist, nationalist, Christian Democrat, ethno-regionalist or liberal parties. Furthermore, even the 'anti-pluralist' trend, which is often attributed to populism, as a consequence of an organicist conception of the community, can be recognized in an extremely wide spectrum of positions. The same distrust towards institutional procedures seems only an element that recurs in various ideologies, or at least an element that occurs at certain stages in the history of political movements. Finally, a similar discourse also concerns the 'reactive' character, which cannot be conceived as exclusive to 'populism'. At the base of every collective identity, a more or less explicit opposition with an adversary (or an enemy) is always recognizable: the opposition towards an antagonist pole marks every political movement, for the simple reason that every collective identity must be defined by difference with respect to a subject considered at least potentially hostile. As Stein Rokkan has shown, the European

parties, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in fact drew their lifeblood from cultural and social cleavages, which divided the population of a state into clearly opposed fields and, therefore, they drew a boundary between us and them (Rokkan 1999).

All these criticalities make the path of a neo-positivist definition of populist ideology very problematic (Aslanidis 2016; Moffitt 2016; Freeden 2017; De Cleen et al. 2018; Stavrakakis & Jäger 2018). Therefore, Margaret Canovan's old statement, according to which 'attempts to define populism in terms of any such ideology fail, because in another context the anti-elitist mobilization concerned may be reacting to a different ideological environment' (Canovan 1999, p. 4), is still valid. Or at least, it remains valid if the goal of a definition is to build a concept that can be placed in some basically exhaustive taxonomy of ideological families, in which each class has mutually exclusive characteristics. In other words, the risk of these definitional proposals is that of placing, in the populist family, parties that can be hosted, at the same time, in the socialist, communist, liberal or radical-right family. In other words, the definitions of populism as an ideology risk being of little use for the purposes of empirical investigation: in essence, they do not allow us to establish whether a political formation is populist or not, that is, whether it can be placed in the class of parties with populist ideology or should be inserted elsewhere. Almost invariably, more or less all the protagonists of the contemporary political scene appear to us to be a bit populist, because they present some of the characteristic elements of this class, while no political force appears completely populist, because some traits make it extraneous to the class, or because its political choices are in contrast with the definition.

By virtue of the reasons briefly considered above, the mortgage weighing on the word 'populism' seems really too heavy. For some scholars, the word should in fact be set aside (Mastropaolo 2005; Colliot-Thélène 2016, 2018). Others believe instead that the survey should limit itself to asking 'how' populist movements act, and what their communication, organizational and strictly political strategies are (Anselmi 2017). According to others, the solution consists instead in recognizing a clear break between the 'old' populism and the 'neo-populism': in this way, one can get rid of the

cumbersome legacy of the past and understand the characteristics of a phenomenon substantially unpublished (Graziano 2018). If it certainly indicates a promising direction, even also this solution must consider the historical anchoring of the concept and be aware of the problematic aspects. Also, for this reason, it is probably more useful to abandon a neo-positivist definitional strategy and adopt a 'constructivist' or 'Weberian' strategy, which seeks to construct an ideal type of populism. The construction of an ideal type of populism can indeed allow the closeness (or remoteness) of specific political formations to the 'pure' type of populism to be measured, including empirically. On the other hand, many proposals move in this direction, and among these a particular place is occupied by the researches of Canovan, which invite us to shift our gaze from ideology to 'structural considerations', that is, to conceive populism as 'an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society' (Canovan 1999, p. 3). This means that the structure of populism is characterized by some recurring elements, such as a 'characteristic legitimating framework, political style and mood' (Canovan 1999, p. 3). In any case, populism is not associated with any specific content: the objectives of its protest take on completely different characters according to the historical and social context. In other words, despite the appeal to the people, no recurring 'ideological' content can be discerned.

Canovan's proposal still provides an effective indication, in the direction of an ideal-typical definition of populism, that in explicit terms abandons the path of a neo-positivist strategy. However, these suggestions must be taken from different points of view, and it is in this sense that Ernesto Laclau's theory can offer a useful contribution. If Canovan's 'phenomenological' perspective indicates an alternative to the neo-positivist strategy, Laclau's proposal instead suggests an important rethinking of the concept of 'ideology'. More specifically, the Argentine theorist argues in fact that ideologies are flexible tools, which constantly change to respond to the needs of action and conflict. And these insights can also be useful for rereading his theory of populism.

4. Laclau and the people

In the late 1970s, Laclau began building his own theory of populism, when he still shared the Marxist perspective. The starting point for his reflection was Perón's Argentine experience and in particular the role the leader had played in building a broad political alliance. Laclau had already begun to redefine the role of ideology and the idea of the link between ideology and the economic base. While in the Marxist tradition ideology is conceived as a 'false conscience', Laclau in fact proposed conceiving ideology as a tool capable of constructing collective identities. More specifically, he took from Louis Althusser the concept of 'interpellation' to indicate the process that attributes coherence to an ideological system and with which, at the same time, a subject is constituted as such. As regards the dynamics of populism, Laclau recognized that the 'superstructural' level on which discursive articulations operate is (at least relatively) autonomous from the level of production relations. More specifically, he proposed a sort of 'Copernican revolution' in the way of conceiving the relationship between ideology and subjects, because he suggested considering the 'interpellated' subject as the unifying element of ideology. First, 'the basic function of all ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects'; secondly, 'through interpellation individuals live their conditions of existence as if they were the autonomous principle of the latter'; furthermore, 'the unity of the distinct aspect of an ideological system is given by a specific interpellation that forms the axis and organizing principle of all ideology' (Laclau 1979, p. 101). Based on these premises, for Laclau, therefore, '*what constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological discourse is the 'subject' interpellated and thus constituted through the discourse*' (Laclau 1979, p. 101).

Although Laclau used Althusser's theory, he actually proposed a different vision of ideology, which still offers very useful elements to address a problem related to the temporal continuity of ideological families. In this case, the difficulty does not specifically concern populism, but, more generally, the concept of 'ideology' itself. As David McLellan pointed out, the concept of 'ideology' remains in fact 'the most elusive concept in the whole social sciences' (McLellan 1995). The concept weighs primarily on the negative meaning that, starting from the nineteenth century, conceived

ideology as a distorted representation of reality, as a 'false consciousness'. By abandoning this vision, one can conceive of ideology as a representation of reality: an inevitably partial representation of reality, but at the same time indispensable for politically mobilizing individuals. In this sense, ideology is a tool that political parties and actors cannot do without. In this perspective, Andrew Heywood, for example, defines ideology as 'a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power' (Heywood 2007, p. 11). Furthermore, he identifies three main characteristics in ideologies: 'a) they offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a 'world view'; b) they advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the 'good society'; c) they explain how political change can and should be brought about' (Heywood 2007, pp. 11–12). This is obviously a truly 'minimalist' definition, because it does not require an ideology to have a strong structure. It undoubtedly has many advantages, but it still does not allow the continuity over time of a given ideological party family to be explained: for example, this conception of ideology (like others that are used in the social sciences) is unable to explain why a party retains an organizational identity over time, although it changes its vision of the existing order, its model of reference society and its conception of political change. The socialist parties offer the emblematic example of this process: they have a long history, they have kept their name and their symbols for more than a century, they thus have a lasting identity, but they have modified several times, and even in a radical way, their ideology (i.e., the image of the existing order, the model of a desired future, the idea of how to bring about political change). How can we explain this continuity? Can we really speak of a continuity in the ideology of these parties? And can we therefore speak of an 'ideological family', even if the ideology changes so radically over time?

There are of course many alternative conceptions of ideology, which can contribute to the study of political phenomena and also of populism. In any case, I think Laclau's 'Copernican revolution' can offer an answer to these questions, because it invites us to shift our attention from the representations of reality to the function that representation performs: if the main function of the ideological

discourse is the constitution of the subject (the construction of 'we'), continuity must be sought in the representation of the subject, not in the conceptual elements that are used in ideological discourse. An effective example is offered in this regard by the analysis of populism that Laclau carried out in the seventies. Then Laclau tried to clarify the relationship between populism and class struggle, and in this context he tried to explain 'the relative continuity of popular traditions, in contrast to the historical discontinuities that characterize class structures' (Laclau 1979, p. 166). These traditions, Laclau wrote, 'are crystallized in symbols or values in which the subjects interpellated by them find a principle of identity' (Laclau 1979, p. 166). However, they must not be conceived as purely rhetorical elements or as tools used with opportunistic objectives by the working class. In contrast, "popular traditions' constitute the complex of interpellations that express the 'people'/power bloc contradiction and distinct form of class contradiction' (Laclau 1979. p. 167). In Laclau's analysis, therefore, this led to two conclusions: a) 'in so far as 'popular traditions' represent the ideological crystallization of resistance to oppression in general, that is, to every form of the state they will be longer-lasting than class ideologies and will constitute a structural frame of reference of greater stability'; b) 'popular traditions do not constitute consistent and organized discourses but merely elements that can only exist in articulation with class discourses', and 'this explains why the most divergent political movements appeal to the same ideological symbols' (Laclau 1979, p. 167).

Almost 30 years after that first attempt, Laclau completed his theory in *On Populist Reason*. Compared to the numerous contributions to the discussion, Laclau's reflection is characterized by various aspects, which are not exclusively related to the intent to give a positive evaluation of populism. His investigation of populism is aimed above all at the goal of bringing to light the dynamics of the formation of political identities. The qualifying point of his proposal, however, starts from dissatisfaction with the way in which the discussion on populism took place. If it is impossible to recognize a constant ideological core at the heart of the different populist movements, however, for Laclau the solution that ends up reducing populism to pure rhetoric is theoretically weak. In his eyes, rhetoric must in fact be conceived as a tool

through which identity and social structure are 'materially' constructed. Even according to the Argentine theorist, it is useless to seek a universal ideological content of populism; in other words, it is useless to find the 'essence' of the phenomenon in a precise value reference. Laclau's real goal, on the other hand, is to clarify the specific 'dimension' that qualifies populism. He thus conceives populism as a performative act and 'a constant dimension of political action that necessarily arises (in different degrees) in all political discourse' (Laclau 2005, p. 18). Therefore, 'rhetoric is not epiphenomenal vis-à-vis a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices' (Laclau 2005, p. 67).

The premises of *On Populist Reason* can of course be found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a book written by Laclau in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe in the mid-1980s (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). In the first place, according to Laclau, the terrain of constitution of objectivity is always defined by discourse, that is, by 'any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role' (Laclau, 2005 p. 68). Secondly, a hegemonic identity is 'something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness': 'it should be clear that the category of totality cannot be eradicated but that, as a failed totality, it is a horizon and not a ground' (Laclau 2005, p. 71). Finally, metaphors and rhetorical devices are part of the way in which the 'social' is constituted. In this sense, the rhetorical tool of 'catachresis' (a distortion of meaning that meets 'the need to express something that the literal term would simply not transmit') plays a fundamental role. Hegemonic totalization – and therefore also the construction of a 'people' – can in fact be conceived as a 'catachresic' operation: the naming of something that is 'essentially unnameable'. The 'people' produced by populism therefore does not have 'the nature of an ideological expression', but rather appears as 'a real relationship between social agents' and as 'a way of constituting the unity of the group' (Laclau 2005, p. 73).

Laclau also illustrates the specificity of the populist articulatory practice with which a unification is achieved starting from smaller units. The starting point is in fact constituted by a series of isolated questions, which can initiate a process of

articulation. The formulation of the questions represents the first step of a possible articulatory practice. However, for Laclau, the possible connection, within an 'equivalential chain', of unsatisfied questions is above all important. The question that remains isolated is therefore for Laclau a 'democratic question', while the popular question coincides with a plurality of questions that, through an equivalential articulation, constitutes a broader social subjectivity. Thus, the unsatisfied demands that combine in a chain of equivalences constitute the basic units of the 'people'. For Laclau, the populist configuration requires three elements: 1) 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power'; 2) 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible'; 3) 'the unification of these various questions – whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of solidarity – in a stable system of signification' (Laclau 2005, p. 74). Summarizing this view, Mouffe writes that Laclau defines populism ad a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society in two camps and calling for the mobilization of the 'underdog' against power' (Mouffe 2018, pp. 10–11). Furthermore, she points out that populism 'is not an ideology and cannot be attributed a specific programmatic content' and it is 'a way doing politics that can take various ideological forms according to both time and place, and is compatible with a variety of institutional frameworks*'* (Mouffe 2018, p. 11).

In general terms, I believe that this conception of populism can help to define more adequately the ideal-typical structure that Canovan had suggested. If Canovan had in fact invited us to conceive populism as 'an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society', Laclau's framework allows us to specify the 'morphological' elements of this 'appeal to the people'. In some way, we can recognize in the Argentine theorist's reflection a sort of 'morphological theory' of populism: a theory in which the focus is mainly on the 'shape' of political identities, while the 'contents' of these identities (concepts, ideas, values) are conceived 'only' as tools to give a 'shape' to a collective subject. Although apparently this view seems similar to Freeden's 'morphological' theory of ideologies, there is an important difference: while Freeden focuses on the

relationship between concepts, Laclau's theory invites us to consider above all the relationship between 'we' and 'them', which qualifies the construction of collective identities; therefore, it conceives the concepts and ideological elements as tools that are used in the strategy of constructing a frontier dividing society in two camps.

Laclau's theory has been criticized in recent years in terms of many aspects (Critchley & Marchart 2004; Marchart 2007; Baldassari & Melegari 2012; Chignola & Mezzadra 2012; Cacciatore 2019; Mazzolini 2020). A first problematic aspect is linked to the objectives of his theory of populism: his theory in fact provides an explanation of the dynamics of populism, but, at the same time, it presents itself as a political strategy to renew the left. For Laclau, populism is not only a logic of political discourse but also a political proposal; in other words, it is a strategy that, in his opinion, popular forces should adopt. A second aspect concerns Laclau's disinterest in the economic roots of the conflicts. And another aspect is related to the way in which unsatisfied questions are connected: Laclau seems to believe that questions can always 'add up' to other questions and that therefore they can always aggregate in an equivalential chain; however, he underestimates the specificity of the single questions and, moreover, the specificity of the institutional level in which the questions can aggregate. All these problems are absolutely relevant and the criticisms that have emerged in the last few years indicate weaknesses in Laclau's proposal. In the concluding section of this article, however, I intend to focus on a specific objective, which concerns the usefulness and limits of Laclau's contribution for a 'constructivist' study of populism.

5. Beyond Laclau

As we have seen in the previous pages, the 'neo-positivist' strategies of defining populist ideology lead to rather disappointing results. The drawbacks of these proposals can be avoided thanks to a 'constructivist' and 'Weberian' strategy, which is able to identify the elements of a populist ideal type. One solution is represented, for example, by the 'minimalist' conception that considers populism as a set of rhetorical tools. As we have seen, Canovan believes that populism consists of a repertoire

of rhetorical instruments, based on the appeal to the people. However, this solution may be 'too' minimalist, and in turn may appear disappointing for students of populism. Laclau's theory can probably offer useful elements to enrich Canovan's ideal-typical definition of populism.

As we have seen, for Canovan, populism is not an ideology, but a set of tools and above all a framework of legitimation. In this definition, however, a piece seems to be missing, at least in part: the objective for which the rhetorical tools of populism are mobilized. For Canovan, these tools are mainly used to organize a protest 'against' power, and the scholar emphasizes that this protest can take, from time to time, very different political colors. Following Laclau, we can argue that the goal of mobilization is the 'construction' of the people. In other words, the rhetorical tools that characterize populism are mobilized with the aim of building a new political identity, that is, of a 'people' that previously did not exist (or that were not 'represented'). In more ambitious terms, we can also say that populist logic has the objective of a sort of 'original accumulation' of 'political capital': in essence, it creates the symbolic capital that a political movement can draw on to mobilize its militants and own followers. Basically, 'building a people' means, according to Laclau, building a (fictitious) collective subject, to which the individual militant feels linked, through a relationship of emotional and symbolic identification. When the leader of a party mobilizes their followers, they draw on that symbolic and political capital that consists in the emotional bond that unites the individual to the collective subject (the class, the homeland, the nation, etc.).

On the basis of this general idea, we can identify the condition of the emergence of populist logic in the weakening of the relationship between citizens and the political class, or rather in the weakening of the previous identification mechanisms that linked individual citizens to leaders, symbols and organizations. In other words, populist logic can assert itself politically when it can occupy the space left free by previous political identities. Only when the identity bond between citizens and the political class weakens, that is, a space opens up for populist logic, can populist logic, appealing to the people and their sovereign authority, propose a representation of the

political space that is completely alternative to the previous one, i.e., a different representation of the fracture lines present in society. In this sense, populist logic, as Laclau foresees, can establish 'an antagonistic internal frontier that separates the 'people' from power', elaborating 'an equivalential articulation of the questions that finally makes the emergence of the 'people' possible', and finally proceed to the unification of the various questions 'in a stable system of signification'. When it emerges, this logic tries to propose a new cleavage (between the 'people' and its adversaries), but it is by no means certain that the new fracture line will be consolidated in the future.

If Laclau's theory provides many useful elements for rethinking populism, it is by no means devoid of problematic elements. The main problem, at least from my perspective, is represented by the relationship between populism and the 'political'. For Laclau, 'populism' is not olny a specific phenomenon: in essence, 'populism' is the mechanism by which every political identity is produced. In *On Populist Reason*, he writes that 'populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political*'* (Laclau 2005 p. 9), but, in a more radical way, he seems to conceive populism as a synonym for the 'political'. In Laclau's scheme, it is clear that the distinction between 'political' and 'economic' struggles has no relevance: every conflict, since it expresses an antagonistic dimension, is 'political'. Furthermore, the distinction between 'political' and populism tends to disappear, because the logic of populism coincides with the logic of the formation of political identities; every political project, therefore, has a populist element in it. In essence, Laclau seems to have a 'totalizing' vision of populism; therefore, populism must be considered as a tool that can (and must) use any political force that tries to represent its demands as 'general' interests. This represented for Laclau a precious element of his theory, but undoubtedly it can represent a weak point for a reflection on the specificity of populism. If all political movements are, to some extent, 'populist', perhaps it becomes useless to try to grasp the specificity of the phenomenon, which could instead be identified by other more general terms.

This problem, however, is linked to a further ambiguity, which concerns the relationship between conflicts and the space in which these conflicts take place. In schematic terms, the formation of a collective identity coincides, in fact, in Laclau's

theory, with the construction of a conflictual cleavage: following the proposal of the Argentine theorist, we can in fact believe that, when an antagonistic border is established between 'us' and 'they', at the same time a certain conflictual level also takes shape, within which the conflict takes place. Furthermore, since social identities do not have roots in the 'objective' structure of society, we must also believe that there is a multiplicity of possible conflictual cleavages, each of which is concretely activated when questions begin to be formulated and when an equivalential chain is formed. In essence, we should thus imagine a plurality of possible collective identities and a plurality of conflicting cleavages. Actually, in *On Populist Reason* Laclau seems to presuppose the existence of a single conflictual space. Although he often claims that the terrain is shaped by the conflict itself, the logical presuppositions of his whole discourse and the historical examples he uses tend to proceed in a different direction. It seems that the Argentine thinker believes that there is an instance capable of answering social demands and that the existence of such an instance does not depend on political conflict. In other words, he seems to hypothesize that there is a specific 'political' space in which all demands can be effectively aggregated. Although Laclau is obviously very far from admitting this point, many clues tend to confirm that he conceives the space in which the conflict takes place coincides with the national space. In the first place, all the examples he uses in *On Populist Reason* (the struggle against Russian tsarism, Peronism, Mao's 'Long March', the Italian Communist Party during the leadership of Palmiro Togliatti) refer to movements that have as their objective the conquest of the state and that, to achieve this result, are able to aggregate extremely heterogeneous social demands. Secondly, the discussion on 'heterogeneous' questions only makes sense if one assumes the existence of a space that coincides with the space of the national state, because the only way to consider them 'homogeneous' is to conceive a given conflictual space as prevalent with respect to other potential areas of conflict. Laclau's theory therefore tends to think that the conflict between collective identities takes place on the terrain of state institutions: in the first place, therefore, he assumes that the conflict takes place within the perimeter of the national state; moreover, at least implicitly, he assumes that state institutions are

endowed with the necessary resources to act in society (Palano 2012; 2016; Filippini 2019).

These problems make it difficult to use Laclau's proposal to interpret contemporary populism (and to distinguish the different examples of populisms). One solution, however, consists in recovering a distinction that Laclau himself formulated in the 1980s, precisely with regard to the relationship between the birth of collective identities and the structure of the political space. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, with Chantal Mouffe, he distinguished between the *logic of equivalence* and *the logic of difference*. 'The logic of equivalence,' they wrote, 'is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 130). For Laclau and Mouffe, the *logic of difference* is a logic that multiplies the spaces of conflict: for example, in postmodern society, there are many conflicts (economic, social, cultural, gender) that are independent of each other. In this sense, the logic of difference is used by those subjects who intend to propose a new conflictual cleavage, rejecting the existence of a unity: for example, the workers' movement, feminism, etc., which affirm an interest different from the interest of the 'nation', of the 'people', of the 'homeland'. The *logic of equivalence* is instead a logic that tends to divide the political space between two opposing fields (absorbing the other potential cleavages) : 'in the countries of the Third World, imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a center, with a single and clearly defined enemy. Here the division of the political space into two fields is present from the outset, but the diversity of democratic struggles is more reduced' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 131).

This distinction, 'correcting' the all-encompassing vision of *On Populist Reason*, makes it clear that not all political identities are 'populist'; that is, not all political identities have the objective of aggregating different positions in this common popular front. For example, movements that aim to claim a partiality that cannot be recomposed cannot be considered (even tendentially) as 'populist', because they aim to assert a 'partial' identity and do not try to be spokespersons for the people. Following

this proposal, we can consider populism as a specific variant of the logic of equivalence: it is not important what the ideological elements are that are used to justify the unity of the people, but the point is that the populist logic aims to propose a vision of the political space, in which it is divided into two opposing fields. The stages are therefore those identified by Laclau himself: 1) fixing 'an antagonistic internal frontier separating the 'people' from power'; 2) elaborating 'an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible'; and finally 3) unifying the various questions 'in a stable system of signification'.

This way of conceiving populism clearly allows us to establish what populism is 'not', but it also allows us to identify other logics that are similar to populism. In fact, nationalism is another variant of the logic of equivalence: in all these cases, the political space is divided into two opposing fields and the individual claims are 'merged' into the unity of the 'people' or the 'nation'. Examples of 'non-populist' logics are movements that 'complicate' the political space, because they propose new lines of division: a youth movement, a women's movement, a religious minority, etc. In all these cases, the movement proposes a new division line that does not aspire to reabsorb all the other lines: simply, these movements aim to affirm a difference, establishing a conflictual line (young/old, men/women, etc.) that previously did not exist. In essence, both the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference propose a division of the political space. The logic of equivalence, however, aims to reabsorb all the differences existing in only two opposing fields. And for this reason, populist logic can represent the political space as a division between the people and the establishment.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe always seem to presuppose two conditions, which in reality can also be considered problematic. Indeed, the two scholars seem to believe that conflicts take place within a political space that has certain characteristics: first, the boundaries of the political space always seem to be those of the state, that is, of the political space that is identified by existing political institutions; secondly, Laclau and Mouffe think of a 'democratic' political space, within which antagonism can therefore always express itself. These assumptions were

linked to the particular goal that the book pursued. Using today, for another purpose, the distinction between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference, it is probably necessary to 'complicate' the discourse, adding two further logics. In view of a further development of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, we can in fact identify two further logics for the formation of collective identities: first, the logic of *totality*, which not only tries to oppose a rival, but which aims to eliminate antagonism by expelling enemies; secondly, the logic of *secession*, which aims to leave the political space to give shape to a new space: in others words, it does not simply seek to 'complicate' the structure of the political space, but pursues the objective of a radical separation from the political space, through the construction of a totally alternative political space.

Through this reformulation of Laclau's theory, we can therefore identify four different logics for the formation of collective identities: a) the logic of equivalence (populist); b) the logic of difference; c) the logic of *totality*, d) the logic of *secession*. Evidently, all these logics describe a process of unification and construction of an identity; moreover, all can appeal to the sovereignty of the people. Furthermore, these four logics represent ideal-types, that is 'pure' theoretical types, which can often occur in an overlapping way. However, what distinguishes them are other aspects that concern politically crucial questions, such as: On what ground are the people built? Who is the enemy/rival? How is the unity of the people defended? But the different ways in which these questions can be answered confirm, once again, that the faces of the people are multiple and, in many ways, even infinite.

6. Conclusions

In recent years, the reflections of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on populism, and on the structure of collective identities, have offered a series of important stimuli to radical theory. The discussion on their proposals will probably also continue in the next few years, and in particular, scholars interested in studying the structure of the 'political' will have to deal with their hypotheses. Instead, in this article I have focused only on one aspect of Laclau's theory and tried to show its usefulness for contemporary debate. In particular, Laclau's proposal offers some valuable

elements to elaborate an ideal-typical definition of populism. As we have seen, the 'neo-positivist' strategy of defining populism leads to very disappointing results, especially when it tries to identify the elements of a 'populist ideology'. Laclau's contribution, on the other hand, suggests not only conceiving populism differently but also conceiving ideology in very different terms from traditional ones.

As we have seen, in Laclau's 'morphological' theory, the 'people' is not the result of a specific ideology or traditional conceptions: the people is the result of a rhetorical construction, which can use elements of different ideologies and political traditions. More precisely, the structure of the populist configuration requires three elements: 1) an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power; 2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible; 3) the unification of these questions in a stable system of signification. This configuration can be considered as a parsimonious definition of the ideal-typical structure of the appeal to the people that characterizes populism. Even if some 'pieces' of ideologies can be used to appeal to the people, what characterizes populism is not the ideology, but the set of these three elements, which allow to give a specific shape to the people.

As it turns out, the small 'Copernican revolution' proposed by Laclau is not without some ambiguity. In particular, in *On Populist Reason* it is not clear whether Laclau conceives populism as the only logic of formation of political identities, or if he instead conceives populism as one of the possible ways in which political identities can be formed. Furthermore, the Argentine theorist seems implicitly to believe that the space of conflict, in which political identities are formed and in which they collide, coincides with the space of the nation-state. To overcome both of these ambiguities, in the final part of this article I tried to 'correct' through an idea developed by Laclau himself and by Mouffe in the 1980s, relating to the distinction between a logic of (populist) equivalence and a logic of difference (which is a kind of logic of autonomy). And in this regard, in my opinion, a space opens up for further developing the hypotheses of the two scholars on the formation of collective identities and on the forms of political conflict.

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