RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM AS SYMBOLIC CLASS STRUGGLE
Homology, Metaphor, and English Ale

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ABSTRACT: This contribution links the study of populism as a stylistic repertoire with Bourdieusian class analysis. The starting point is Ostiguy and Moffitt's observation that the populist repertoire draws on symbols of the 'sociocultural low' and 'the popular' produced in non-political fields like food and leisure. Borrowing from Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu, the article proposes to view these elements as *metaphors* for positions in vertical and horizontal class relations. Metaphorical signification rests on *homologies* between the symbolic sphere ('culture') and politics grounded in the divisions of social space ('the class structure'). This perspective allows us to situate the populist repertoire in social structure and analyze its entanglement in struggles over the classification of groups, or *symbolic class struggles*.

KEYWORDS: Populism, Class Analysis, Culture, Bourdieu, Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, Homology

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> "A large proportion of our most commonplace thoughts make use of an extensive but unconscious system of metaphorical concepts, that is, concepts from a typically concrete realm of thought that are used to comprehend another, completely different domain."

(Lakoff, 1995, 178)

> "If, notwithstanding their incoherences and uncertainties […] notions belonging to the family of the 'popular' are frequently used, even in scholarly discourse, it is because they are deeply embedded in the network of confused and quasi-mythical representations which social subjects create to meet the needs of an everyday knowledge of the social world. The vision of the social world [is] organized according to interconnected and partially independent oppositions which one can begin to grasp by examining […] the *system of paired adjectives* employed by users of the legitimate language."

(Bourdieu 1991, 93; original emphases)

1. 'A drop of English Ale'[1]

When inspecting the kitchen of a rented house in Italy with a friend from a former British colony, we came across a pint glass with a print of the English beer brand *Bombardier*. Its label showed a large and a small St. George's cross, as well as the claim 'ENGLISH ALE' in capital letters between the names of the brand and brewery. As the company website informs, 'bombardier' was the military rank of Billy Wells, a famous Heavyweight boxer in the early 20th century, who, coming from an East London working class family, had risen in the ranks of the colonial army. The brewery, now part of a large listed corporation, co-sponsors military flight shows until this day. In 1980 it named its beer after Wells to designate it as, "a beer for people who don't give a damn about fads or fashion. A beer that pint by pint, drop by drop, stays true to itself" (Eagle Brewery 2018).

> "Ugh", exclaimed my friend, turning the glass in his hand, "let's put this away, this reminds me of Brexit." Nor was he the only one to make that connection. When in 2018 the company redesigned its logo and dropped the letters 'English', a pub landlord refused to serve *Bombardier* and on an internet forum, cascades of angry comments continue to accumulate by the time of writing this, over one year later. One complaint reads, "I have always enjoyed a drop of English Ale, nothing like it in the world and when ordering my pint of Bombardier it always gave me a sense of pride in the logo on the pump clip. I don't

feel that any more. The new labelling no longer looks English it looks European!" (Drinks Business 2018)

A shift from banal to hot nationalism, a commercialized vision of working class culture with heroic and violent, colonial masculinities lurking in the background, a 'sense of pride' prompted in one man and disgust in another, all this connected with the 'populist' upheaval of the Brexit vote. As contemporaries, we likely recognize these scenes instantly, but imagining looking at them through the eyes of another epoch, we would surely be impressed by the visceral emotional power of a small label on a pint of beer, and the allusions and positionings it evokes.

What I mean to introduce by this story is a tricky question which has remained surprisingly implicit in the recent onslaught of populism research, namely how the cultural symbols deployed in and against populist mobilizations link with positions in social structure. Where do intuitive associations, like the one in this story, between a *symbol*, ideas about *social groups and classes*, and a *political positioning* towards 'populist' projects come from?

The question is tricky, because populist rhetoric – quasi by definition – totalizes its reference group, 'the people', and obscures its specific class or group character.[2] As Margaret Canovan notes, "'the people' is undoubtedly one of the least precise and most promiscuous of concepts. [It] cannot be restricted to a group with definite characteristics, boundaries, structure or permanence, although it is quite capable of carrying these senses" (Canovan 2002:140), underscored by its polyvalent use as a political (the people as sovereign), cultural (the people as a nation) and economic signifier (the people as a class) (Mény and Surel 2002); or in a slight variation, 'plebs', 'demos', or 'ethnos' (Brubaker 2017).

At the same time, populist projects *do* of course have anchorings among populations whose specific range of class positions shows up quite consistently in empirical studies (e.g. Alexandre, Gonthier, and Guerra 2019; Bornschier and Kriesi 2012; Oesch 2008). And these are more than statistical truths: many people believe to 'know' intuitively – viscerally even – what populist supporters are like, and there has been a strange return of images of the working class in public discourses around populism, echoing through my friend's association of 'Brexit' with a beer branded to signal traditional masculinity (see Bergfeld 2019). Obviously, the populist deployment of symbols alludes to, mobilizes, and actively constructs social group structures beneath the veneer of the unitary, socially unmarked 'people'. In their critique of political exclusion and social devaluation, populists appeal not just to 'everyone', but to a 'true core' of society whose deservingness is well established.

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[2] Incidentally, this seems to be a rare point in which approaches concur (e.g. Germani, 1978; Taggart, 2000, 91ff. Moffitt, 2016, p. 95ff.; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Schmitter, 2019). Laclauians would perhaps maintain that totalization is inherent in all political identities, but that too does not contradict the point.

But how do we conceptualize the indirect link between populist symbolism and social structure? What to make of the fact populism is steeped in class dynamics, particularly in the misrecognition of dominated classes, while largely disavowing class vocabulary? What is the nature of the ambivalent link between symbolic and social structures that populism mobilizes? More than offering answers, this contribution articulates a conceptual strategy with which to approach these questions. Seeking to deepen the so-called sociocultural approach to populism developed by Pierre Ostiguy (Ostiguy 2017), I present a structuralist perspective on the problem gleaned from the work of Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu.

Noting how the populist repertoire draws on elements of 'the popular' produced in non-political fields like music, sports, gastronomy, and culture, this approach proposes to analyze these elements as sets of *metaphors* for vertical and, crucially, horizontal class relations, resting on a structural correspondence, or *homology*, between differentiations of the symbolic sphere ('culture') and politics, grounded in divisions of social space ('the class structure'). This makes it possible to situate the populist symbolic repertoire in social structure and analyze it as a tool deployed in struggles over the classification of social groups, or *symbolic class struggles*.

2. The populist repertoire

Any analysis of the social underpinnings of populist symbolic politics must begin with the advances made in the sociocultural approach to populism, which understands populism as a discursive and stylistic repertoire.[3] Repertoires are sets of classificatory principles that people draw on to bring order and meaning into the world (Steinberg 1995; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Speaking of repertoires means that within empirical social settings (like classes, regions, or political camps) we expect a variegated but ultimately limited set of shared cultural forms of meaning-making, that can be described and compared across contexts (see Bonikowski 2017; Jansen 2011). The repertoire concept lets us grasp how cognitive and symbolic structures historically pre-date and circumscribe any individual cultural performance, while also leaving space for the agency of selecting from a multiplicity of repertoires, or meaning sets.

Applied to populism, this allows the sociocultural approach to study the contours of the populist repertoire and the cultural sources it draws on (Brubaker 2017). Beginning with the former, Moffitt (2016) identifies three elements within the repertoire of populist performances: appeals to the will of "the people" against an elite, contrasted with anti-populist appeals to expertise; the conspicuous display of "bad manners", contrasted

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[3] As Moffitt specifies, 'the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life" (2016, 38).

with professional, tamed, and institutionally appropriate "good manners"; and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat, contrasted with the performance of stability (Moffitt 2016, 45; see also Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

According to Moffitt, this repertoire of "embodied, symbolically mediated performance" (2016, 38) is more central to contemporary mass political appeals than ideology or party identification. Populist performances function relationally, with reference to the dominant cultural code of normal politics. By breaking the expectations of professionalism and propriety, populist actors perform a distance from established politics as proximity to 'the people'. This is often achieved by rudeness and swearing, sexual references, theatrical postures, and the conspicuous breaking of the protocol of professional politics.

The social subtext of these performances is summarized by Ostiguy as a populist affectual narrative of 'flaunting the sociocultural low' (Ostiguy 2009, 2017): the populist cultural repertoire conspicuously parades a sociocultural style on the devalued side of a stratified symbolic sphere. Defined by degrees of sublimation, the 'low' is associated with informality, physical proximity, slang and dialect, rawness, as well as, in the political realm, personal authority of expressive, virile or affectionate leaders, speaking 'from the gut'. Populists flaunt this sociocultural style as that of the truest and most deserving core of the majority people, defending it against devaluation by the artificial or foreign cultures of the elites and their allies among nefarious minorities and global institutions.

The 'low' is the flipside, or "'unrepresentable Other' […] of a specific 'proper' civilizational project" such as liberalism, multi-culturalism, colonial culture, or neo-classical economic orthodoxy (Ostiguy 2017, 75). Appeals to the low crucially rely on the outrage of *anti*-populist fractions of the establishment defending the well-mannered and proper, rational, expertise-based sociocultural 'high' and its political ideal of institutionally mediated, impersonal authority and proceduralism, as Moffit nicely illustrates:

> "[Witness] the visceral distaste those from the anti-populist high in the United States have for Donald Trump's taste for McDonald's, KFC and Diet Coke, and the media attention these tastes have garnered. This distaste has little to do with ideology, but rather, codes of what is "appropriate" in sociocultural terms in the US: the implication, here, being that Trump's – and his followers' – tastes are vulgar, inappropriate and childish. Their "lowness" marks them as populist, against a far more refined and proper anti-populist high" (Moffitt 2018, 7).

Another example was Matteo Salvini's Mojito-sipping, speedo-clad tour of Southern Italian beaches in the summer of 2019, slammed by his 'high' opponents as unserious and lacking the dignity of political office (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2019). Salvini's half naked poses, revealing a healthy belly, also were a good example of the central role of the body in populist performances, highlighted among others by Paula Diehl and Maria Esperanza Casullo (Diehl 2017; Casullo 2018). The body is "a generator of symbolic

meaning" (Diehl 201, 361) whose appearance, activity, and interaction – hugging, gesticulating, etc. – is implicated in the production of a sense of 'the popular'.

Transposed to the political realm, food, relations to the body, etc. expressing 'down-to-earthness' and proximity to the people are what Roland Barthes calls a 'reality effect' (Barthes 2006), a stylistic device creating within an institutional performance the impression of a 'truer', less mediated reality outside of it.[4] Yet it is also palpable that to understand these *symbolic* politics of 'the popular' we require a sense of relations in *social structure*, i.e. class and group relations. How does this indexical type of linkage work?

In line with the obscuring of class in the study of populism that Jäger (2019) reconstructs, this question remains outside the scope of most current analyses. Interested in the performative and mediatized character of the populist repertoire, Moffitt, for instance, mainly highlights the gap between claims to the 'low' and the claimants' socioeconomic positions; as in the case of the "blue collar millionaire" Donald Trump (see also Ostiguy and Roberts, 2016). Equally, Moffitt recognizes the centrality of *audiences* as a demand side of the populist style (Moffitt 2016, 95ff.), but does not sociologically situate these, or populist performances more generally.[5]

In contrast, Ostiguy's thick descriptions of the high-low distinction, often exploring Latin American contexts with very strong and overt demarcations of the poor and popular classes, clearly imply a cultural materialist analysis.[6] But this analysis is not developed anywhere. In the following, I want to suggest one way of doing so, beginning with an analogy noted by Ostiguy himself: namely that of the 'high' and 'low' and the "powerfully accurate typological metaphor [of] 'the raw' and 'the cooked'" as proffered by the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (Ostiguy 2017, 83).

3. Homology and metaphor: The structuralist approach

In his 1962 book of that title, Lévi-Strauss deconstructed the theory of *totemism*, which had been central to early anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1991, also 1966). The theory postulated a universal pattern in 'primitive societies' by which social groups, like clans, tribes, or phratries would adopt the names of spirit-beings, like kangaroos or eagles, which they believed to be their ancestors. Anthropologists like Malinowski and Lévi-Bruhl had explained these as utilitarian practices related to food procurement and predators, or as testament to the illogical, emotional and mystic nature of the 'primitive'

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[4] Populists inherit this device from much of non-populist politics: One of Barack Obama's speechwriters recounts his team's obsession with "real people (RPs)", trying to litter speeches with "RP stories" to make them relatable (Litt, 2017 cit. in Robinson 2019). But while here the point is to reconcile the 'popular' and the 'proper', populist symbolic politics antagonistically wields the former against the latter.

[5] The same is true for most studies of political identities, such as Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2017).

[6] As when noting the historical emergence of the 'high' and 'low' in the course of 'civilizing projects', a trail that would deserve to be explored more thoroughly.

mind, oblivious to the workings of human procreation and the boundary between human beings and animals (Lévy-Bruhl 1926; Malinowski 1948, 27ff. see Lévi-Strauss 2013, ch. 2).

Lévi-Strauss' forcefully rebuked such interpretations. His analyses of indigenous systems of social and religious organization reconstructed their basic relation as that between the order of natural species and the order of social groups. He then showed that it is not the substantial meaning of totems, in the sense of a direct, or 'vertical' relation of similarity or believed kinship between group and natural species, that is primary to the totemistic phenomenon, but the relation between 'horizontally' differentiated systems of differences in the two orders:

> "*Not the resemblances but the differences resemble each other*. […] On the one hand there are animals which differ from each other […], and on the other are men […] who also differ from each other. […] The resemblance proposed by so-called totemistic systems is *between these systems of differences*" (Lévi-Strauss 1991, 77, original emphases).

Classifications of differences occurring in nature, like those of 'high flying birds' and 'low flying birds', are used as *metaphors* for the classification of social differences. This is based on a correspondence of structures of symbolic classification and social differences, a *homology* between the symbolic and social spheres. The metaphorical use of natural species for social classification is an intellectual operation not reducible to mystic beliefs or utilitarian function: "Natural species", Lévi-Strauss claimed, "are chosen [as totems] not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (ibid, p. 89).

Seen from this perspective, 'totemism' ceases to be a discrete phenomenon located in the religious order of 'primitive' society, instead appearing as an instance of a universal and enduring feature of human cognition in all societies: that of *metaphorical thought*, by which one object comes to stand for another, including the symbolization of social group differences by culturalized objects of the external world (see also Lakoff 1993; Lévi-Strauss 1991, 2013, 15ff.).[7]

These cultural objects, be they birds or brands of ale, do not inherently carry meanings but derive them from their relative position in a system of symbolic differences, whose *social* meaning derives from homologies to another system of differences, that of social groups and classes. To return to our introductory example, there is nothing inherently 'working class', 'populist', or 'masculine' about English ale. We could well imagine a time and place where the same drink was served only to kings or used as medicine for women in labour. But within the symbolic system of our societies, beer is positioned in difference

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[7] This perspective was inspired by Durkheim and Mauss (Durkheim 2008; Durkheim and Mauss 1963; see also Fourcade 2016), although Lévi-Strauss objected to their view of the symbolic order as *derived* from the social order.

to, say, prosecco or whiskey, a difference that comes to be metaphorically used as proxy for distinctions on the social plane.

Since both systems are organized differentially (or relationally, i.e. every element attains meaning by being different from other elements), the most basic level of structuralist analysis is that of pairs of opposites. It is through the homology of these systems (beer: male, plain, popular; prosecco: female, sophisticated, posh), that symbols acquire their social significance. Hence we are able to intuitively decipher accusations leveled against Nigel Farage of only drinking beer in public, while preferring Cava (!) behind closed doors (Daily Star 2019)[8] – an accusation deemed serious enough for a spokesperson of the Brexit Party to repudiate – as a scandalization of Farage's upper class background, and the fraudulent nature of his pint-swigging 'man of the people' performance. Under conditions of homology, cultural objects become metaphors for social positions. The pint becomes a totem.

4. Laclau and the post-structuralist challenge

Applying this 'totemistic' analysis in Lévi-Strauss' extended sense to the populist cultural repertoire means to document the system of differences which gives the sociocultural distinction of 'high' and 'low' its meaning (as Ostiguy does), and to then reconstruct how this distinction comes to metaphorically represent differences of sociostructural location. Ideally, this type of analysis would reveal an underlying group structure of symbolic distinction, that is, homologies of the symbolic and social orders. Such a structural analysis of populist symbolic politics would allow us to 'crack the code' of the implicit group symbolization of populism, below the literal wording of political appeals or the social background of leaders, uniting cultural, sociological, and political aspects of the populist phenomenon.

But what are the equivalents to 'clans' and 'totems' in populism? Can we seriously assume homological relations between cultural symbols on the one hand and classes and groups on the other in our complex societies? While mainstream populism research simply 'forgets' this question, the connection is outright *rejected* by the Laclauian approach. Laclau had developed his theory of populism in an explicit emancipation from structuralist Marxism, whose class reductionism clashed with the political experience of Peronism. Perón's charismatic leadership had welded together a popular nationalist and corporatist cross-class alliance of a relatively dispersed working class and parts of the Argentine bourgeoisie against the local oligarchy. Laclau credits this first-hand experience of a successful populist project with introducing him to all the themes of his theoretical oeuvre: "the dispersal of subject positions, the hegemonic recomposition

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[8] Googling 'Nigel Farage beer' yields, among others, a 30 minutes video collage of Farage drinking beer to the tune of the British national anthem.

of fragmented identities, the reconstitution of social identities through the political imaginary" (Laclau, 1990, cit. in Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos 2018, p. 2).[9]

In the following, Laclau elaborated these observations of Argentine class consciousness into a theoretical revolution against the core tenet of structuralism, i.e. the assumption of a discernable basic and holistic set of relations (such as the class structure) pervading all of society. For Laclau such relations are a posterior fiction in the face of an insurmountable 'heterogeneity' of the social (Laclau and Zac 1994). Unmoored from structural positions, identities are constructed from performative social practices, or *discourses*, according to an autonomous logic of political signification (Laclau 2005, 129ff.). In the place of a society pervaded by class relations remains a boundless field of differences and demands, which empty or floating signifiers, like that of 'the people', can unite and subsume under a 'logic of equivalence' (Laclau 2014). Moving the focus from the economic to the political, slogans essentially produce the very groups they invoke.[10]

Perhaps justified in its time as a corrective to the theological discourse of dogmatic Marxism, this kind of anti-structuralism today has run its course. Empirically, it is at odds with identifiable and persistent class bases of populist projects. Theoretically, we run into tautologies by eliding structural foundations: deducing symbolic relations from symbolic actions, we are unable to account for the *conditions of success* of populist invocations of 'the people', the resonance of their appeals, and the shape of potential class alliances. All these only become explicable by reference to social relations logically prior to their symbolic representation, as focalized in the structuralist paradigm. The discursive approach overcomes this tautology either at the cost of overstretching the concept of 'discourse' to include material relations,[11] or by a voluntarism, which, after the fact, credits the rhetorical ploys of leaders and cunning strategists for single-handedly manufacturing identification from sheer psychological lack.

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[9] In Omar Acha's words, the implicit center of Laclau's theorizing was "a national-anti-imperialist alliance among progressive classes", and the "critique of workerist, class-centred politics" (Acha 2019, 2).

[10] "For the Essex school it is only through populism, and the rhetorical devices, i.e. 'empty signifiers', deployed by their leaders, that 'the people' can be constituted as a popular subject. In other words, the 'people' only emerge as a recognizable political collectivity when a series of unsatisfied demands congeal by means of the logic of equivalence and generate new political identities around which subjects can mobilize" (Dean and Maiguashca 2020, 7). Interestingly, Laclau retains the concept of metaphor and sees the metaphorical substitution (as opposed to metonymic contiguity) as the highest level of equivalence in a chain of demands. But characteristic for his theory, the elements of metaphor all remain within the symbolic sphere (see Laclau 2014).

[11] "Economic practice itself should be considered as discourse" (Laclau 1980 cit. in Stavrakakis, 2004, FN 27).

5. Bourdieu: From clan structures to the social space

Still, it seems difficult to imagine an approach to contemporary politics inspired by Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology of segmentally differentiated societies that does not fall prey to journalistic clichés of a 'tribal' logic of politics (e.g. Goodhart, 2017). Functionally differentiated societies integrate the individual into more numerous and looser circles of socialization than tribal societies. The consequent breakdown of any 'natural', 'primordial' assignment of group membership *cum* integration into a cosmic symbolic order is a constitutive feature of modern societies (Luhmann 1992).

I think that these challenges are convincingly addressed and overcome in the theory of Lévi-Strauss' student Pierre Bourdieu, developed in the same historical conjuncture as the post-Marxism of Laclau and others. Bourdieu makes crucial advancements deviating from classical structuralism, while retaining its core analytical strategy of a structural, 'metaphorical' reading of cultural objects as embedded in systems of symbolic differences, and the search for homologies through the reconstruction of binary oppositional categories. In the following, I want to sketch some of Bourdieu's innovations in this analytical strategy, showing what it allows us to see in populist symbolic politics.

To recap: what a structural analysis of populist symbolic politics needs to establish is: a) the structure of groups symbolized in populism, i.e. an equivalent to the tribal group structure of 'totemism' that acknowledges the complexity and multi-dimensionality of contemporary social differentiation and accurately describes populist politics; b) in which sense the symbolic repertoire of populism 'metaphorically' indexes positions in this social structure.

Answers to these questions can be found in Bourdieu's class analysis, with its strong focus on symbolic dynamics. Bourdieu (2013) conceptualizes the class structure as a relational *social space* differentiated both vertically (into dominated and dominant positions) and horizontal (into class fractions). These class relations are active also without the existence of classes 'for themselves': While having classed positions 'on paper', populations are constituted as mobilized, self-aware groups and classes through struggles over symbolic *classifications*, principles of seeing and dividing society into groups and classes (Bourdieu 1985, 1987). These classification struggles are permanently ongoing in everyday practices of *distinction*, the relational demarcation of social identities, in which symbolic objects like food, clothes, cultural tastes, leisure activities, bodily postures, etc. take on the meaning of status markers. The ability to make and 'read' distinctions is grounded in the *habitus*, the embodied and hence wordless, intuitive, visceral knowledge of social space and one's place in it (Maton 2013). Let us explore these one by one.

6. Homologies

In the Bourdieusian update of the structural paradigm, the group relations, which in our totemistic example were formed by the structure of clans and phratries, are now recast as *vertical and horizontal class relations*. According to Bourdieu, class is constituted through relational means of appropriating and deploying social energy, or capitals. Importantly, besides economic capital in the form of property and monetary control over social energy, Bourdieu emphasizes the role of cultural capital, appropriated in the form of educational degrees, but also more subtly embodied forms of 'cultivation' and mastery of cultural codes and symbolic systems. 'Culture', in this sense, is not distinct from 'economy', but a central dimension of contemporary class domination, demarcating stratified chances of appropriation and status positions.

The acquisition and exploitation of cultural capital, both as education titles and the overall development of cultural mastery, is the core strategy of an increasingly important fraction of the dominant class (Bourdieu 1988, 2013), i.e. skilled white collar workers (in public administrations, the education system, the media and cultural industries, etc.). It is distinguished from, and overall less powerful than, an economic fraction of the dominant class whose 'investive status work' relies on property, wealth, and organizational power (e.g. as managers in private firms) (Savage et al. 1994; Groh-Samberg, Mau, and Schimank 2014; van de Werfhorst 2019). The horizontal division between dominant fractions, defined by the relative composition of cultural and economic capital types, is complemented by a vertical division based on the overall stock of capitals commanded, dividing society into a dominant and dominated pole. As the relative weight of economic and cultural capitals logically matters more the higher the overall volume of capital, this, at the most schematic level, creates a tripolar image of a dominated and two fractions of the dominant class, cultural and economic (see Fig. 1).[12]

The basic accuracy and predictive power of this type of spatial reconstruction has been confirmed in a number of large-scale studies across different countries (Bennett et al. 2009; Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund 2018; Jodhka, Rehbein, and Souza 2017; De Keere 2018) which often reconstruct the social space with the help of the geometric

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[12] "The distribution of political opinions between right and left should correspond fairly closely to the distribution of the classes and class fractions in the space whose first dimension is defined by overall volume of capital and the second by the composition of this capital: The propensity to vote on the right increases with the overall volume of the capital possessed and also with the relative weight of economic capital in the capital composition, and the propensity to vote on the left increases in the opposite direction in both cases. The homology between the oppositions established in these two respects - the fundamental opposition between the dominant and the dominated, and the secondary opposition between the dominant fractions and the dominated fractions of the dominant class - tends to favor encounters and alliances between the dominated fractions of the dominant class, intellectuals, artists or teachers, and the dominated classes, who each express their (objectively very different) relation to the same dominant fractions in a particular propensity to vote for the left." (Bourdieu 2013, 438)

statistics of Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). What MCA reveals are correspondences between clusters of responses to survey question on different substantive dimensions. Thus MCAs, like that produced by Flemmen et al. (2018), trace how responses to questions about cultural habits or political positionings cluster in similar regions of the social space. These analyses are interested in the dimensions in which patterns align with each other, that is, rendering visible the homologies between political and cultural forms of differentiation grounded in horizontal and vertical divisions of social structure.

The cultural and economic fractions of the upper regions of social space maintain distinct leisure styles from each other and those in the dominated regions. The same axes also structure differences in distinct dimensions of political positionings. Thus, the division of left and right on economic issues is mainly found to be one between the cultural (left) and economic (right) fractions of the dominant class, while divisions over 'new politics' map onto differences in the volume of capital (more 'liberal' views predominating in the higher regions of social space).

The finding of a homology of social divisions with symbolic and political differentiation is the key to a structural analysis of the populist symbolic repertoire. Indeed, the flaunting of the sociocultural 'low' contains both a revaluation of devalued 'popular' styles, that is, an upward, 'usurpatory' strategy vindicating dominated regions of social space (Murphy 1986; Jarness and Flemmen 2019), and an explicit refusal of behavioral expectations like 'good manners', sublimation, self-control, subtlety, etc. directly related to the inculcation of cultural capital.

This double boundary work against elites above and horizontally against the cultural pole of the dominant class corresponds with the populist class alliances described in the case of the European radical right (Rydgren 2013; Oesch 2012; Bornschier and Kriesi 2012; Kriesi et al. 2012): These particular populist formations have their bases among production workers, middle class fractions on the economic pole, like small owners, as well as, at times, traditional fractions of the economic elites (see Damhuis 2019).

Figure 1: Simple model of social space (Fractions of the dominant class, social locations of 'sociocultural high' / 'low'; Y: Capital volume; X: Capital composition)
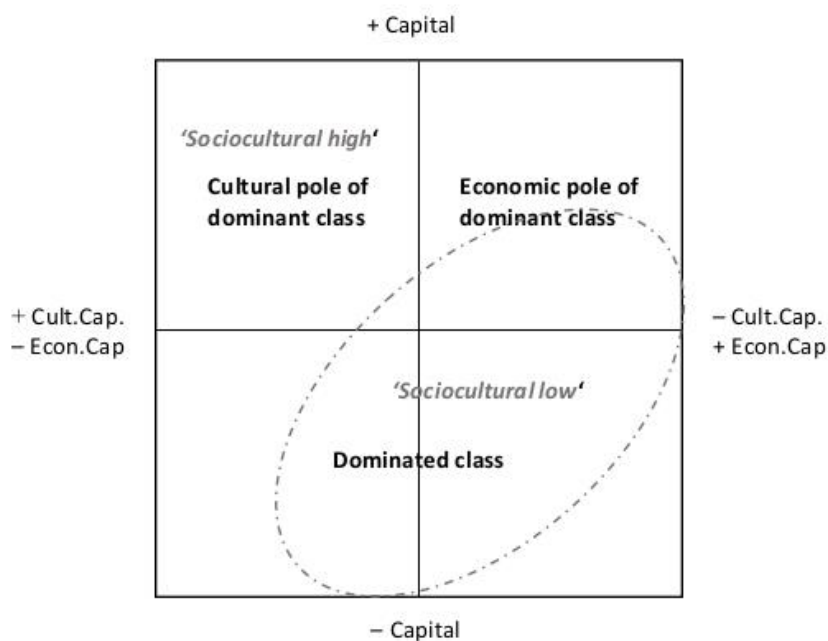
The cross-cutting nature of this class alliance on the economic side of social space explains why income rarely shows up as a clear predictor of populist support, but its location on the economic pole of social space explains why comparatively lower levels of *education* are virtually always among the strongest structural predictors (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013; Stubager 2013). The reverse is true for anti-populist attitudes, as well as support for the left-liberal forces of the 'New Left' most visibly opposing the populist radical right, which is increasingly based among the cultural middle class members employed in sociocultural professions (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Adding a horizontal axis of distinction between dominant class fractions to the vertical axis most commonly associated with talk of class politics reveals the basic structure of social differences, whose homologies with cultural and political differentiation explain the metaphorical function of cultural objects deployed in the repertoires of symbolic politics.

7. Class alliances

Koppetsch (2019) offers an insightful analysis from this point of departure. In her interpretation, the struggle between politicized versions of traditional, demarcation-oriented 'communitarianism' and libertarian, opening-oriented 'cosmopolitanism' – often mistaken for a vertical conflict of the disgruntled and left-behind periphery dwellers versus the urban, educated winners of globalization – is more accurately described as a 'horizontal struggle of positions' between two fractions of the middle class: "conservative against cosmopolitan, ethno-national against transnational, welfare chauvinistic against cosmopolitan-neoliberal milieus" (Koppetsch 2019, 121, my translation). The populist symbolic repertoire offers a tool by which traditional middle class fractions integrate the demands of dominated populations to lend authenticity to their own status struggles.

When Matteo Salvini kisses the rosary and invokes the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary in the name of the people and against laical parliamentary customs (Il Post 2019), he flaunts the symbolic language of an affective and emotional folk religiosity against the cool professionalism of parliamentary conduct, but he also speaks to the reactionary wing of political Catholicism located among the traditional middle class. And in a remarkable piece then-*Alternative für Deutschland* leader Alexander Gauland lays out the populist right's class analysis, when he describes how the 'new urban elite' of the 'culturally colorful' 'globalist class', that 'dreams of one world' in their apartments and restaurants in 'Berlin, London or Singapore',

> "is opposed by two heterogeneous groups [...]: the traditional middle class, including small business owners, who cannot just move their production to India to cut costs; and many so-called common people, whose jobs are paid miserably or have disappeared, who have toiled for a lifetime and now live off paltry pensions." (Gauland 2018, my translation).

Gauland's intervention is striking for the clarity in which the populist right's appeals to 'traditional' and 'common' people are named as a strategy of cross-class alliance.[13] Though usually less explicit, the heterogeneous makeup of populist class alliances and the sociostructural ambiguity of its appeals are by no means arguments against the sociostructural embeddedness of populist symbolic language. Instead, this language is part and parcel of a cross-class politics rooted among distinct class fractions. As Erik Olin Wright notes,

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[13] As Stuart Hall reminds us, "this is no rhetorical device or trick, for this populism is operating on genuine contradictions, [...] it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions – and yet is able to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the Right." (Hall 1979, 20)

> "'populism', to the extent that it provides a context for the pursuit of certain class inter-ests, can be viewed as a form of class formation that forges solidaristic ties between the working class and certain other class locations, typically the petty bourgeoisie" (Wright, 1997, 381).

A useful left populist point of comparison is Jean-Luc Mélenchon's speech at the Marseille harbor, a central moment in his 2017 presidential run. Demarcating his followers from both "the extreme right that debases our grand multi-colored people" and "the extreme market, this type of black magic that transforms suffering […] into gold and silver", he addressed his audience as "you, the central people, who aspire to live off their work, their inventions, their poems, their taste for loving the others" (Mélenchon 2017, 3:12ff.).[14] As even in France hardly anyone can hope to live off their poems, the references to this cultural object, as well as 'inventions' and 'the love of others' are to be read as metaphors for the cultural, scientific, and social professionals that formed part of the left-populist alliance Mélenchon attempted to unite with a working class following.

In Ostiguy's typology, poetry would clearly appear on the 'high' end of the spectrum.[15] Yet, Mélenchon clearly draws on the populist repertoire of defending a 'popular' life-world against enemies of the people and a nefarious elite (including the ever so subtly antisemitic trope of the 'black magic' of money). His intervention transposes the authoritative core of peoplehood (see White and Ypi 2017) to represent a diverse coalition of workers and sociocultural professionals. From this perspective, the symbolic politics of populism should be understood as reflecting the class alliances it attempts to assemble; its metaphorical invocations of 'the people' as reflecting the idealized self understandings of populations in specific sociostructural locations.

Like this, Ostiguy's sociocultural approach to populism could be extended into a full-blown theory of populist symbolic class politics. 'Flaunting the low' here is only one type of performance in the populist repertoire, though one displaying its general form: an antagonistic elaboration of symbols of 'the popular' channeling class positions *sans phrase* with the aim of forging cross-class alliances. The point is not that populists win over populations low in social status by performances mimicking their 'lowness', but that populists organize cross-class appeals around symbols demarcating 'the popular' from various other cultural symbols of social position, including – at times – high, or elite culture.

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[14] "L'extrême droite, condamnant notre grand peuple multicoloré, […] l'extrême marché, sorte de magie noire, qui transforme la souffrance […] en or et en argent. Vous voici, vous autres, le peuple central, celui qui aspire à vivre de son travail, de ses inventions, de ses poèmes, de son gout d'amour pour les autres, vous avez laissé allumé la braise qui dorénavant incendie de nouveau nos clameurs et nos enthousiasmes." Thanks to Adrià Porta Caballé for pointing out this passage.

[15] Appeals to 'love' and 'poetry' are also references to a romanticized self-perception of Frenchness.

8. Symbolic class struggles

'Populism' then appears as a fuzzily demarcated sub-genre of a more fundamental process: that of the political construction and mobilization of group categories redescribing positions in class relations, or *symbolic class struggles*. Here, Bourdieu helps us get another step further. As mentioned, his model of social space is based on class relations, but not necessarily of classes, as in pre-existing and bounded groups (such as 'the workers', 'the petty bourgeoisie', or 'the capitalists') (Bourdieu 1987). The formation of classes on paper into mobilized groups instead is an object of symbolic struggles:

> "The social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition, in which each pursues not only the imposition of an advantageous representation of himself or herself, [...] but also the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favourable to his or her social being – individual and collective." (Bourdieu 2000, 187)

The populist symbolic repertoire is an intervention in these struggles over the construction of groups and the production of a sense of 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004). In Luc Boltanski's words, the taxonomies of the social implicit in populist symbols of 'the low' or 'the popular' are a 'travail de regroupement' (Boltanski 1979), an attempt to impose as obvious and self-evident a way of viewing and dividing society into groups, as we glimpsed in the introductory associaton of an English Ale, working class masculinity, and Brexit. As we saw here too, the sense of 'the popular' which populist symbolic politics draws on is an artefact co-produced by many entrepreneurs, from corporate advertising to the military and political mobilizations (Bourdieu 1991).

While the specific 'principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu 1985) differ, the populist 'flaunting of the low' has some characteristics that inform its uses in classification struggles throughout. As mentioned, the 'low' has the potential to be used both as a vindication of dominated lifestyles and/or an attack on the legitimacy of cultural capital (reversely, cultural capital forms the strongest structural base of anti-populism). Performances of the 'low' primarily rely on *culturalized* notions of social stratification, that is, regarding the recognition and status of lifestyles, customs, and demeanours (rather than, for example, relations of exploitation or oppression), often befitting blurry economic policies (Rovny and Polk 2019; Afonso 2015).

In line with this, populist symbolic revaluation is based on a form of moral protest linked to deservingness, revaluing a sense of 'the popular' as the 'from here', the familiar, authentic, unrefined, and real, in comparison with social others (above and/or below). With these characteristics, the populist symbolic repertoire is not only situated *in* social space, it also consists of a specific image *of* social space. The populist cultural

repertoire de-thematizes, culturalizes, and localizes class divisions, enabling insurgent and ambiguous, internally differentiated appeals to specific types of cross-class coalitions.[16]

9. Distinction

Bourdieu's double emphasis on structural situatedness of symbolic objects and the contested nature of symbolic representations of society makes his approach well suited for uncovering the subtext of class from beneath the headlines of 'the people' (Kalb 2011). But this could seem like a contradiction to the aspect discussed before: If 'objective' positions in social space are unavailable and contingent enough to be the object of classification struggles, why should sociostructural positions be the starting point for understanding symbolic appeals? Put differently, why should people's sociostructural position matter for the way they understand the 'metaphorical' language of populist symbolic appeals, if the very understanding of social positions is the object of symbolic struggles?[17]

Bourdieu's answer adds another vantage point: Going back to the principle of homologies, he contends that the divisions of social space are mirrored in real life by everyday cultural practices of *distinction*, and are internalized in a pre-reflexive, embodied sense of social position, the *habitus*. Because the distribution of leisure activities, cultural tastes, and the presentation of the body are specific to different regions of the social space, these cultural objects become positional markers. By learning to read these markers, individuals are socialized into 'knowing one's place' and 'finding one's way' in social space in a practical, pre-reflexive way (Boltanski and Thévenot 1983; Bourdieu 2013). Because it is formed in interaction with the minute signals of the social world, the habitus is an internalized version of the principles structuring society, telling us what is appropriate for 'people like us'.

For structurally locating the populist repertoire this is significant in two ways: Firstly, we understand how the social metaphors of this repertoire are grasped intuitively, viscerally even, without the necessity of class consciousness, ideology, the identification with groups or parties, nor the reflexive availability of the social space. Again we

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[16] This type of strategy competes with hegemonic modes of cross-class incorporation, as well as with the mobilization of class consciousness proper, letting us conjecture that the resonance of the populist cultural repertoire is predicated on crises in hegemonic class coalitions (Fraser 2017; Kumkar 2018), as well as low levels of class consciousness (Dörre et al. 2018; Kalb 2011).

[17] We remember that there were doubts as to whether we could apply the logic of a homology between symbolic and social differences to societies in which – different from clan societies – there is a multitude of symbolic systems signaling group membership. Bourdieu's more elaborate answer underlying the aspects presented in this section consists of a double role of the habitus as incorporated structure and generator of symbolic distinctions that by and large repeat these structures: 'structured structure' and 'structuring structure' (Bourdieu 1990; Maton 2013).

encounter here the instinctive disgust and pride over our pint glass, as well as the deeper reason for the centrality of the body, its public presentation, sublimation, cultivation, and use as a metaphor for class positions (including middle class imaginaries of 'white working class' bodies and tastes (Lawler 2005)).

Secondly, the mechanism of distinction – the sense of 'what is (not) appropriate for people like me' – can reveal how specific symbolic objects deployed in the populist repertoire derive their appeal from the relational demarcation of social identities localizable in social space. The structural focus on meaning created by systems of *difference* can refocus our understanding of why certain symbolic objects become the center of symbolic struggles. We would expect them to be defined by the lines of distinction that stabilize the social identities of constituent parts of populist class alliances; either as objects allowing for a positive symbolic revaluation common to heterogeneous class constituencies, or as metaphors for social positions that are the object of common boundary drawing.

10. What is gained by viewing populism as symbolic class struggle?

Such a differential, or relational perspective might help overcome certain impasses and inconsistencies encountered in the attempt to isolate the populist element of the 'attitudes' and 'values' of populist sympathizers (Fatke 2019; Castanho Silva et al. 2019). These efforts, though often insightful in their own right, are at times reminiscent of older theories of 'totemism', searching for a direct link between discrete social groups and their symbolic representations by similarity or irrational beliefs. The structural perspective helps us to widen the angle, proposing instead to look at the populist repertoire as a means by which populations impose distinctions and classifications of the social world favorable to their own social being and self understandings; and as a set of positional metaphors that are primarily differentiated from *other* symbolic representations of social position.

Operationalizing this type of understanding for empirical research certainly requires a deeper knowledge of the social, cultural, and political cleavages structuring the context under study. But the search for homologies and metaphors sketched here is perfectly compatible with conventional quantitative frameworks and designs. This is shown in a highly original survey-based study by Bornschier et al. (2019) who gauge the subjective closeness of Swiss voters with a set of culturally demarcated social groups, such as 'cosmopolitans', 'culturally interested people', or 'rural residents'; as well as their distance from other groups.

The authors firstly show that there is a strong correspondence between structural locations and culturally connoted group identities: Highly educated respondents and those belonging to the occupational class of sociocultural professionals (i.e. the cultural fraction of the dominant class) identify with 'cosmopolitans', 'culturally interested

people', and 'people with migration background' but not 'with Swiss people' (although all survey participants were Swiss nationals). The opposite is true for workers.

Secondly, these expressions of closeness mediate the effect of class locations on political support for the populist right and 'New Left': The probability of voting for the populist right is less than 15% for someone who feels 'very close to culturally interested people', while it is 50% for someone who feels 'not at all close' to this group (Bornschier et al. 2019, 23-4). Lastly, the cultural identity categories associated with structural positions and political camps do not simply reflect respondents' circumstances of living. There is, for instance, a high identification with 'rural residents' among supporters of the populist right, including those *not* living in the countryside themselves.

In this way, the authors reveal the striking centrality of class-based cultural distinctions for political realignments in the 'populist moment'. Systems of symbolic differences on the level of social geography (center – periphery), cultural consumption (interested – not interested), group categories (migrants and cosmopolitans – Swiss nationals) and political camps exhibit a large degree of homology. They are organized by the symbolic distinctions of the Swiss populist repertoire, associating the 'popular' with the rural, down-to-earth, unrefined, 'from here'. Cultural elements (like feeling close to rural dwellers) attain their meaning as metaphors for locations in a relational social space.[18]

On the side of populist performances, revisiting Bourdieu's update of structuralist analysis gives us a clearer picture of the populist 'totemism' at work around an innocent pint of English Ale, Salvini on the beach, Farage enjoying Spanish champagne, or Trump eating burgers, that is, their involvement in symbolic struggles over and within definite class relations. These struggles are waged both between dominant and dominated positions, as well as, perhaps more importantly, between fractions of the dominant class. Their objects result from social practices of distinction, a visceral form of metaphorical thought based on an embodied and habitual sense for social differences. The populist symbolic repertoire's double structure allows for both usurpatory boundary drawing against higher regions of social space and horizontal ones, e.g. against the cultural pole of the dominant class, predisposing it for specific forms of class alliances.

Investigations of all these elements could help extend the insights of the sociocultural approach to populism developed by Ostiguy, Moffitt, and others. We could begin by picking apart elements of the populist symbolic repertoire and clarifying empirically how they resonate with the relational self-understandings of various class fractions. My intention in this article was to provide some theoretical indications as to what a sociologically grounded sociocultural approach to populism could be founded upon, first and

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[18] Seen from the vantage point of the 'ideational approach' to populism (Mudde 2007), such identifications appear also as ripe with *ideology*. But once connected with its structural locations, 'ideology' would here perhaps take on a more classical sense: less mental system of normative propositions about a 'society' divided in parts or the primacy of the '*volonté general*', more "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1970), i.e. their social position.

foremost by inviting a more fearless re-appropriation of the structuralist tradition, which has been unduly sidelined both by mainstream research on populism and the Laclauian camp.

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