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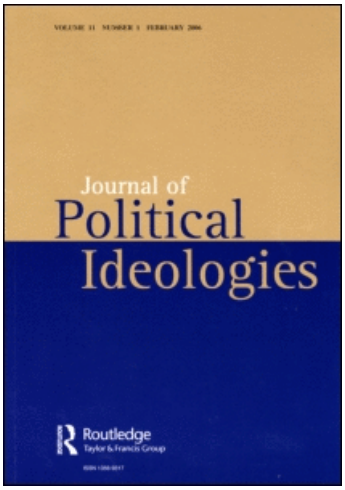

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The thin ideology of populism

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The thin ideology of populism

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ABSTRACT *The concept of populism has in recent years inspired much debate and much confusion. It has been described variously as a pathology, a style, a syndrome and a doctrine. Others have raised doubts as to whether the term has any analytical utility, concluding that it is simply too vague to tell us anything meaningful about politics. Drawing on recent developments in the theoretical literature, it is argued that populism should be regarded as a 'thin' ideology which, although of limited analytical use on its own terms, nevertheless conveys a distinct set of ideas about the political which interact with the established ideational traditions of full ideologies.*

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In spite of its reputation for persistently escaping the nets of theory, populism is a distinct concept, the study of which adds value to the understanding of party politics. The argument presented here is that populism is a 'thin' ideology that in practice is to be found in combination with established, 'full' ideologies.[1] The purpose of this paper is to set out the core concepts of populism and explain their interaction as ideology. This endeavour draws in particular on two recent threads of the literature on populism: Ernesto Laclau's work on the politics of antagonism and Margaret Canovan's analysis of the political concepts of 'the people' and popular sovereignty.

Laclau's discourse-theoretical approach is a welcome re-orientation away from theories of populism that seek to locate its essence in the content of particular policies and principles, and draws attention to the centrality of elite/popular antagonism to populism. However, it is ultimately too complacent about the difficulties involved in constituting the people. Instead of viewing the category of 'the people' as the structural effect of a formal logic immanent in politics itself, I draw on Canovan's focus on the concepts of 'the people' and popular sovereignty to argue that popular/elite antagonism plays an ideational rather than structural role in populism: it forms a key element of a distinct interpretation of the political.

I conclude that populism should be regarded as a distinct ideology in that it conveys a particular way of construing the political in the specific interaction of its core concepts. However, its thin nature means that it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology: it lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution to crucial political questions. Analysis of

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actually-existing populism will inevitably involve an examination of the ways in which populism inflects with contextually hospitable 'full' ideologies.

From antagonism to ideology

Populism and the politics of elite/popular antagonism

Discourse-theoretical approaches to populism break with 'content-based' approaches on the grounds that any attempt to stipulate an essential content to populism 'will always be overwhelmed by an avalanche of exceptions'.[2] To the vague intuition that 'populism says something about the relationship between "the elite" and "the people"'[3] this approach replies that populism is a product of this relationship. Populism is predicated upon an antagonistic relationship between the two entities, and is latent wherever the possibility occurs for the emergence of such a dichotomy.

Laclau's original thesis sited these antagonisms squarely in class relationships. However, the association of populism with class politics has been criticised for its failure to take account of the heterogeneous nature of 'the people' of populist politics.[4] The ambit of Laclau's theory has now been greatly widened; he now stresses that populist discourses 'can start from *any* place in the socio-institutional structure'.[5] A discourse of populism consists in the counterposition of the interests of a collectivity identified as 'the people' against those of a hegemonic elite, whose actions or inactions are antagonistic to 'the people'.[6] Laclau stresses that populism emerges through the failure to fulfil particular demands.[7] The political logic of populism has a relationship with 'fulfilment' such that where the demands of a variety of social groups are satisfied individually, the elite is able to stave off the emergence of antagonism and a '*logic of difference'* prevails. Where, however, elites are incapable of addressing a number of different demands, a '*logic of equivalence'* dominates and an antagonism arises between the people and the elite.[8] The 'equivalential moment' that signals the emergence of an instance of populism 'presupposes the constitution of a global political subject bringing together a plurality of social demands'.[9] Populism is therefore not to be found in the content of any particular appeal to the people, but in the degree to which the logic of equivalence prevails over that of difference.

This approach thus posits populism as 'a kind of common currency into which the concerns of most brands of politics can be converted'.[10] As Westlind suggests, its major strength is that it avoids a perennial problem with which content-based approaches struggle: that of how to retain 'populism' as a category whilst accounting for the heterogeneous nature of its manifestations.[11] It also works as a corrective to the intuitive association of populism with negative traits discerned against the backdrop of mainstream normality. Indeed, populism has become more and more 'mainstream' in recent years throughout western democracies as a result both of the growing independence and commercialisation of the popular media, and the increased cognitive mobilisation of a better educated public. The intrusion

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into the mainstream of 'outsider' parties, raising demands they perceive the 'establishment' to have failed to address, has forced 'mainstream' parties to react with the deployment of populist discourses of their own.[12]

The idea that myriad individuals might be moved to associate their experiences of dissatisfaction with exemplar cases is not a controversial one. The problem arises rather in accounting for how this occurs. Laclau resolves this by conceiving of populism as synonymous with politics itself: populism consists in 'putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as a historical agent'; thus it is of a piece with politics itself, 'which consists in "the gesture which embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it"'.[13] Populist discourse is simply an inevitable product of the logic of antagonism and contestation without which there is no politics, only administration.

This conflation of politics and populism has been challenged by Arditi and Stavrakakis, who regard it as denying the precedence suggested by the name 'populism' to equivalential discourses articulated around 'the people'.[14] As Stavrakakis argues:

> if any signifier can potentially become the nodal point of a populist discourse, how can we conceptually account for the difference between an equivalential discourse articulated around 'the people' … and any other equivalential discourse? … [T]he risk here is to lose the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete political analysis.[15]

The objections raised by Stavrakakis and Arditi reflect more than just reluctance 'to endorse a conceptual inflation'[16]: they also bring into question the structuralist ontology present in Laclau's account. In this formulation, it is the logic of equivalence which 'articulates' the content of a populist discourse through the cumulation of numerous, heterogeneous unfulfilled demands. The 'equivalential moment' of populist identification 'cannot be found in any positive feature underlying all the demands, for—from the viewpoint of those features—they are entirely different from each other'.[17] Rather, individual negative experiences 'tend to reaggregate themselves'[18] into chains of equivalence which are united by 'a particular demand, [which] without entirely abandoning its own particularity, starts also functioning as a signifier representing the chain as a totality'.[19]

The reifying language draws attention to the ambiguous role of agency in Laclau's account: where the operation of the logic of difference can be attributed to the conscious actions of political authorities in satisfying particular demands, the emergence of popular identity is understood simply as the product of the alignment of unsatisfied demands in accordance with the ineluctable operation of a formal logic.[20] The implausibility of this notion is evident in attempts to illustrate its empirical operation. Laclau contends that

> [i]f, for instance, [a] group of people … who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation find that their neighbours are equally unsatisfied in their claims at the level of security, water supply, housing, schooling, and so on, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all: all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a *negative* dimension beyond their positive differential nature.[21]

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The assumption that popular solidarity inheres in shared experiences of dissatisfaction begs the question of whether the assorted discontents will necessarily find expression in solidaristic fashion. It is equally conceivable that these groups passively resign themselves to the hopelessness of their situation and that no solidarity emerges sufficient for a populist episode to occur, or that the various dissatisfactions find adversarial expression in mutual recrimination. To suggest merely that 'some kind of solidarity will arise' between dissatisfied parties by virtue of their alienation from power is to be altogether too sanguine about the prospects for populist identification.

Whilst I concur with the notion that a variety of experiences of unsatisfied demands create a potentially congenial environment for the emergence of populism, I maintain that the political consequentiality of individual demands—insofar as any demand articulated in a contextual field can ever be regarded as entirely 'individual'—depends not on the *fact* of their being granted or refused, but rather how that granting or refusing is *interpreted*. This rests on a basic ontological difference: to Laclau's formal logic I counterpose a concept of populism as an ideology articulated by political agents in the attempt to mobilise 'the people'.

Ideas, interpretation and ideology

The assertion that populism is an ideology requires a clear statement of hitherto implicit ontological assumptions. I follow Hay in positing a 'material-ideational dialectic' by which ideas are 'accorded an independent role in the causation of political outcomes' and are capable of producing 'demonstrable material effects'.[22] Ideas exist in a dialectical relationship with social and historical circumstances, emerging and evolving from the cogitations of materially situated actors and having in turn material effects on the shaping of that context through the strategic actions of those actors. Whether consciously or not, actors adopt and adapt established ideas, and innovate others, with regard to the world in which they perceive themselves. This ontological stance entails the claim that what actors are doing in 'having ideas' is *interpreting* the world in which they find themselves.[23]

The notion of interpretation is central to the morphological approach to the study of ideology elaborated by Freeden.[24] If ideas are individual interpretations, ideologies are interpretive frameworks that emerge as a result of the practice of putting ideas to work in language as concepts. In the efforts of actors to make sense of the political, they are confronted with an array of extant 'decontested' concepts: sedimented ideas about particular experiences.[25] That is, 'the political' consists of a range of material experiences which are 'politicised' by virtue of their being brought into the public sphere as a result of the reflective capacities of agents: for example, experiences of social relations may find their political articulation in the form of concepts of social structure; experiences of constraint may find their political articulation in the form of concepts of liberty.

Concepts are not eternally fixed in their meaning, but characterised by elements which are ineliminable 'in the sense that all known usages of the concept employ it, so that its absence would deprive the concept of intelligibility and

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communicability'.[26] These long-term and conventional elements are surrounded by adjacent and more obviously contingent elements. The morphology of ideologies mirrors the morphology of individual concepts: the core of an ideology is comprised of a cluster of decontested concepts which, as a result of their mutual proximity, form a relatively distinct and coherent ideational framework with a large degree of durability over time. They are 'the ineliminable key concepts that [the ideology] is deemed to have in actual political usage'.[27] Ideologies, as logically and culturally elaborated frameworks of interpretations, provide compelling, convincing and heuristically useful organisations of interpretive possibilities. The maps that they produce are necessarily partial, but also influential. The essence of ideology is simplification, but the 'processes of selectivity' that create ideologies exert an influence on 'the perceptual and conceptual frameworks we adopt'.[28] Ideologies do not simply reflect possible pathways through the political; they also play a role in shaping them. Having new ideas is not a costless enterprise, and extant ideologies are invaluable heuristics for individuals wishing to access the political world and build links with others.

A comprehensive, 'full' ideology will 'contain particular interpretations and configurations of all the major political concepts attached to a general plan of public policy that a specific society requires'.[29] However, ideologies are not necessarily comprehensive: whilst various decontestations may lead to a variety of different expressions of the same ideology, the richness of any of these ultimately depends on the potential resident in the core concepts. 'Thin' ideologies are those whose morphological structure is restricted to a set of core concepts which alone are unable 'to provide a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate'.[30]

Nationalism, Freeden avers, is clearly impoverished in comparison with full ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism, possessing a core conceptual structure too restricted to provide alone 'a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address'.[31] The monotonic focus of nationalism on the political unit of the nation, its instantiation and justification, leave little potential for nationalist ideology to be elaborated in directions which permit it to offer answers to a broad range of political questions. In practice, thin ideologies such as nationalism are generally to be found cohabiting with full ideologies. In very specific contexts in which the realm of the political is significantly constrained, such as secessionism or wartime mobilization, nationalist ideology may strike out on its own; however, in times of politics-as-usual, such thin ideologies are more likely to be found under the auspices of their more established counterparts.

In light of these ontological assumptions, populism is not the inevitable product of an abstract formal logic but an ideology that has emerged empirically and contingently through the decontestation of concepts and their proximate articulation. Populism does not possess the characteristics of a comprehensive, or 'full', ideology, but the apparently contradictory nature of various manifestations of populism does not preclude its being identified as a distinct one. Rather, populism is a thin ideology; it is diffuse in its lack of a programmatic

centre of gravity, and open in its ability to cohabit with other, more comprehensive, ideologies.

Populist ideology: Concepts and core

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Since the conceptual core of any ideology is not 'ordained in some metaphysical outreach'[32] but is a product of the empirical practices of political actors; establishing the core concepts of a particular ideology requires empirical observation of what its exponents have thought and said. This is a circular argument, but unavoidable for all that: at some point, it is necessary to make the assumption that the congeries of ideas assumed to form an ideology is both logically and culturally tenable, and that attempts have been made to put it into practice.

In the case of populism, this requires a rather wider leap of assertion than for other ideologies. Whilst many prominent ideologies have 'left record' of themselves in the shape of philosophical-political institutions that transcend individual parties, movements or leaders, there is little evidence of institutional elements indicating a common purpose or unity amongst populists: there is no Populist International; no canon of key populist texts or calendar of significant moments; and the icons of populism are of local rather than universal appeal. Attempting to discern commonality at the demand side is also problematic: the addressee of populist ideology has proven notably protean, even within the same country.[33]

However, the lack of an *acknowledged* ideology is not the same as the lack of an ideology: the absence of a common history, programme and social base, whilst attesting to populism's 'thin' nature, does not warrant the conclusion that there is no coherence to the collection of concepts that comprise populist ideology. The term 'populism' has a history of usage in political discourse and although the meaning of the term has proven controversial in the literature, the persistence with which it has recurred suggests the existence at least of an ineliminable core: that is, that it refers to a distinct pattern of ideas. The first and most simple piece of evidence in support of this supposition is linguistic: the term 'populism' is widely understood to belong to a category of words produced through the linguistic practice of yoking the suffix '-ism' to certain key concepts with the intention to signify a distinct pattern of thinking.

So far, this simply suggests that populism has something to do with a set of ideas to which the concept of 'the people' is in some way relevant, but goes no further to illuminating or justifying the distinct nature of this ideology. Ideologies can freely be posited at the linguistic level, but they are products of contextual environments and thus exist within a logical and cultural opportunity structure conducive to the elaboration of particular forms of ideology. I contend that the prominence in modern political discourse of the concepts of the people and popular sovereignty and the presence of what Canovan terms the 'pragmatic' and 'redemptive' faces of democracy provide conditions suitable for the articulation of a distinct but limited ideology.

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Pragmatism and redemption: An opportunity structure for populism

Although 'populism' is very often deployed as a negative epithet with the purpose of definitively discrediting political opponents, ideologies are not necessarily the result of positive claims. The stigma attached to populism is itself evidence that populism exists as a distinct pattern of ideas, even if it has generally been regarded as something to be feared and discredited. Critics of populism typically charge their targets with demagogic practices: for playing on popular emotions, making irresponsible and unrealistic promises to the masses, and stoking an atmosphere of enmity and distrust towards political elites. The nature of this criticism has contributed to populism's being associated with demagogy to the extent that the two concepts are frequently conflated. However, whilst the critics' purpose may be to delegitimise populists, in pointing out the characteristic manifestations of populist demagoguery they acknowledge the existence of a distinct pattern of thought-practices: the division of the political into two opposed and antagonistic groups, the assumption of an essential harmony of interests among 'the people', and the assertion of the normative and moral legitimacy of this 'people's will' as the basis for decision-making. Although the stigmatisation of populism has tended to discourage unprompted identification, a number of populists have responded to being labelled as such through the rhetorical flourish of accepting an epithet conferred by 'the enemy' whilst simultaneously rejecting its negative connotations. The declaration of one prominent contemporary populist illustrates this move well:

> Populism precisely is taking into account the people's opinion. Have people the right, in a democracy, to hold an opinion? If that is the case, then yes, I am a populist.[34]

The existence of exchanges between political actors over attitudes to 'the people' and popular sovereignty is important in that it reflects the significance of these two concepts to modern political discourse. Popular sovereignty is, remarks Canovan, the 'foundation myth' of modern representative politics; the notion that 'we, the People, are somehow the source of political authority'.[35] The emphasis Canovan places on the appeal to the *idea* of popular sovereignty is of particular salience here. Drawing on Oakeshott's distinction between the 'politics of faith' and the 'politics of scepticism', Canovan posits the 'redemptive' and 'pragmatic' faces of democracy, which are 'opposed, [yet] are also interdependent'.[36] The pragmatic face sees democracy 'essentially as a way of coping peacefully with conflicting interests and views under conditions of mass mobilization and mass communication'.[37] The redemptive face, meanwhile, views democracy as 'the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people'.[38]The interdependence of these two faces is a crucial element. The pragmatic face of democracy stresses the need for intermediating institutions in the administration of complex societies, without which the empowerment through representation promised by democracy cannot operate efficiently. However, the redemptive vision of 'the people' as the legitimate sovereign entity, and democracy as, therefore, the mechanism by which the *vox populi* is expressed

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is in conflict with the existence of the battery of institutions required in order for democracy to function.

Appeal to 'the people' is an unavoidable aspect of modern political practice. In particular, elections and referenda are moments when 'we find it natural to say that "the people" should decide … [and] [p]opulist agitators are not alone in assuming that the outcome of such a vote can be taken to be a decision by the sovereign people'.[39] The objection that 'the people cannot rule as a corporate body'[40] is confronted by the simple fact that such moments of political participation are indispensable for the legitimacy of representative polities in that they enable voters to act *as if* such a corporate body existed. To criticise the notion of the popular will as an impossibility on the grounds that arriving at it through voting procedures is technically unachievable misses the point;[41] what matters is that the skein of popular legitimacy that hangs about democratic processes such as elections or referenda permits their being more or less successfully construed as mechanisms through which the voice of the people may be articulated.[42]

The constitutive interdependence and tension of the redemptive and pragmatic faces ensures that the concepts of 'the people' and popular sovereignty remain both central features of modern politics and sites of repeated contestation. The focus of the redemptive aspect of modern politics on the promise inherent in the idea of popular sovereignty is conducive to the development of interpretations of the political in which the will of the people needs to be freed from a repressive pragmatism. Given the centrality of this latent popular-democratic potential to modern politics it is wholly plausible that ideologies should emerge in which the concepts of popular sovereignty and the people play a key role. Even the most pragmatic of ideologists must take the people and their sovereign power seriously, if only at election time; for 'redemptivists', meanwhile, these concepts are replete with mobilisatory potential.

Populism as a distinct ideology: The conceptual core

Populism, like nationalism, focuses on the 'who' of politics; it is an ideology dedicated to identifying the people as the privileged subject of politics and justifying their place on this pedestal. Its core consists of four distinct but interrelated concepts:

- The existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: 'the people' and 'the elite'.
- The antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite.
- The idea of popular sovereignty.
- The positive valorisation of 'the people' and denigration of 'the elite'.

The following discussion illustrates how these concepts combine in populist ideological discourses. To illustrate how the abstract characterisations of populist concepts translate into practical populist discourse, I use examples drawn from

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two contemporary Polish parties commonly regarded as employing populist appeals: Law and Justice, and Self-Defence.

The concept of 'the people' is characterised by both 'rhetorical usefulness and … conceptual obscurity'.[43] In articulating a structure in which the political is divided into 'the people' and 'the elite' populists exploit this rhetorical usefulness whilst side-stepping the question of complexity. If 'the people' is decontested not as an individual concept but as one element in a binary ontology, then in an empirical articulation of the ideology any identification of the people will involve at the same time an identification of the elite. This is the point at which the second concept, the structure of antagonism, becomes relevant. 'The elite' of populism is neither the bulwark of the social order championed by conservatives; nor the enlightened legislative and administrative cadre of liberalism. Rather, its fundamental distinguishing feature is its adversarial relationship with the people. The populist subscribes to the Schmittean doctrine that '[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy'.[44] The relationship that obtains between these two groups is of a more intense nature than simple 'difference', it is a relationship of profound otherness and, in the extreme case, conflict.

This ontology is clearly articulated by Andrzej Lepper, leader of Self-Defence; a political party originating in a farmers' protest movement but which has broadened its appeal to incorporate also small-town and urban 'losers' in the transition from communism.

> They call us boors. From the beginning of modern times Poles have been divided into gentlemen and boors.[45]

> The authorities in Poland can be called 'them'. They rule, they make laws, they give, they take, they permit—or not—others to live. The greatest success of Self-Defence is that when talking about us, Poles do not say 'them', but 'us'. In the last elections … [w]e took away from them the certainty of their domination. Achieving the support of more than one-tenth of the electorate, we served a reminder of what is ours. And that is what really builds the greatest anger among 'them'—the political elite. Post-Solidarity and postcommunist—as they call each other …[46]

Accepting the epithet bestowed upon him by the 'gentlemen', Lepper identifies it as one term of a basic and enduring division. Significantly, the elite is explicitly identified with representatives of both political traditions considered to constitute sides of the main domestic political cleavage in the post-communist era. The implication is that in spite of their mutual attempts to distinguish themselves from the other these groups have an underlying common identity and interest; they form what Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of Law and Justice, dubs an 'arrangement' [*układ*] which '"for the last few years has made decisions, handed out the cards in all areas"'.[47]

The real distinction thus lies not in cosmetic differences between elite groupings but in the antagonistic relationship of the authorities with ordinary Poles. Where the language of 'gentlemen and boors' conveys a social division between the high and low-born without necessarily implying a relationship of enmity, the distinction

between 'us' and 'them' introduces a discourse of solidarity and otherness in a context where the elite holds power—even that of life and death—over the people, and fiercely resists any perceived threat to this monopoly.

The ontological structure of populist ideology simplifies the complex task of 'constructing' the people by arranging the discursive field such that the people can be identified 'by contrast with the power-holders'.[48] It should be stressed, however, that the friend/enemy distinction simply 'denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation'.[49] In itself, it indicates that politics tends towards the confrontation of antithetical opposites, but it is not 'indicative of substantial content'.[50] Indeed, elitism, Mudde notes, 'shares [populism's] Manichean worldview'.[51] Populism requires more than ontological concepts alone if it is to stand apart as a distinct ideology.

This is where the third and fourth concepts enter to provide a qualitative, directional gloss on populism's ontology that distinguishes it from an elitism which' wants politics to be an expression of the views of the moral elite, instead of the amoral people'.[52] Populism wants precisely the opposite. To this end the idea of popular sovereignty is decontested as the normative principle that the general will of the people can be articulated and should be privileged over the preferences of the elite. This is accompanied by a dimension of positive valorisation and denigration that serves to underline the authenticity and legitimacy of the people and delegitimize the elite.

In the example cited above, Lepper portrays the elite as dominant but illegitimate power-holders who are jealously protective of their status in the face of attempts by the people to reclaim 'what is ours': the right to make decisions. The concept of popular sovereignty is the populist's trump card. As Canovan observes,

> once the notion of popular sovereignty is available in politics it is hard to avoid attempts to translate the abstract constituent sovereignty of the collective people into political action by concrete individuals, whether in populist attempts to 'give politics back to the people' or in the constitutional referendums that have become an increasingly familiar feature of modern democracy.[53]

Giving precedence to what the people want is the means by which to revive the redemptive aspect of modern politics: the world can be made a better place if the voice of the people is allowed to emerge; therefore it *should* be allowed to emerge. This 'general will' is glossed in accordance with two adjacent concepts: majoritarianism and authenticity.

The concept of majoritarianism has moved close to the core of populism, particularly in the era of mass franchise where attempts to separate the legitimate, propertied people from the 'idle and indigent rabble'[54] are clearly anachronistic. Populists are often to be found advocating the use of methods of direct democracy on the assumption that these instruments allow the majority voice to have an impact on decision-making and agenda-setting. However, support for direct democracy is not an essential attribute of populism. The importance of majoritarianism for populism is that it helps to reinforce the *authenticity* of the will

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of the people. The greater a majority in favour of a particular policy or moral value, the more credibly it can be said to reflect the popular will. Ultimately, though, what is most important is to appeal to the *idea* of an authentic people.

The invocation of authenticity and ordinariness is a key aspect of populism's appeal to the people, as it allows populists to lay claim to genuine representativeness. Lepper expresses this sentiment in his insistence that '[o]ur country should be ruled by the people and the representatives of their majority'.[55] Here, 'representation' refers not to the elite's enlightened stewardship of the general good but to the reflective expression of the popular will; made conceptual flesh in the form of one who originates from the people and can speak as one of them:

> I am the voice of the poor, deprived and humiliated ... Self-Defence and Andrzej Lepper never were, are not, and never will be 'them'. We are 'us'.[56]

Such a 'tribune of the people' is, avers Lepper,

> somebody who people want to listen to, and people listen to the truth. ... [My opponents] cannot be tribunes of the people, because people do not believe them anymore.[57]

Populists seek to portray themselves as sounding boards which resonate with the 'reason of the ordinary person'.[58] They typically seek to emphasise their physical proximity to the people and distance from the elites ('[m]y political activity was not born in the salons')[59] to underline their proximity to the 'truths' of the ordinary person. When Kaczyński declares that '[w]e are distrustful of initiatives which are not the authentic emanation of social movements'[60] the implication is that there are inauthentic social movements which reflect suspicious motives or interests, and that it is possible to distinguish between the two.

This is the point at which the positive valorization of the people and denigration of the elite becomes relevant to populist discourse. By itself, the populist decontestation of the idea of popular sovereignty is simply a justification for the primacy of the authentic general will of the people. However, populism involves not only identifying the people as the underdog, but also celebrating them *as* the people; similarly it is not only about identifying the elites with reference to their structural position as antagonists of the people, but also condemning them for the identities and interests they represent. The positive–negative schema allows the populist to posit antithetical criteria by which the people and the elite can be identified.

The manner in which these identifications occur will depend on the particular context in which a populist discourse is articulated: the populist has access to a wide repertoire of possible antitheses but not all will be relevant and credible in the circumstances. Where ethnic origins are (or can be presented as) salient to the context of elite/popular antagonism, the positive valorisation of the people can be expressed in terms of the superior virtues of a particular ethnicity, and the elite denigrated in kind as either outsiders or multiculturalist 'ethnic traitors'. Where other factors are salient populists may instead choose to emphasise other dichotomous categories: in the Polish case, a very high degree of ethnic and

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religious homogeneity allows a line of equivalence to be drawn between 'the faithful' and 'the people' on one hand, and 'unbelievers' and 'elites' on the other.

This 'Pole-Catholic' [*Polak-katolik*] discourse has proven effective in providing budding populists with a positive–negative antithesis to which a number of issues can be linked and friends and enemies identified. In the early 1990s Jarosław Kaczyński initially expressed strong reservations toward a surfeit of religious sentiment in the political sphere, dubbing the clerical Christian National Union 'the shortest road to the de-Christianisation of Poland'.[61] However, a decade later, he declared that Christian values 'embrace … our activity … in all dimensions—from the material and fiscal rights of the family to the institutional bases of moral order'[62] and committed his party to the defence of these institutions against the 'new threats' of liberal rights and freedoms which 'attack values, structures and institutions inherited from generations past'.[63] At Jasna Góra, a hallowed site of Catholic pilgrimage, Kaczyński addressed a gathering of supporters of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, a controversial priest and proprietor of an extremist Catholic media empire, with the declaration: 'Today, Poland is here. I can say that with full conviction and belief'.[64] The identification of 'Pole' with 'devout Catholic' and 'liberal' with 'atheist' provided a positive–negative dimension of identification across multiple dimensions of political activity, with lines of equivalence drawn between the upholding of Christian morality (opposition to abortion, feminism and rights for sexual minorities) and social solidarity (tax breaks for families, extended maternity leave, and social housing).

Populism as a thin ideology

The ideology of populism offers a distinct interpretation of the political. However, it is clearly a thin one. There is limited potential in these core concepts for populism alone to address 'the famous "who gets what, when, how" question that is seen to be central to politics'.[65] The obstacle to populism's further development as an ideology is that, for all the gusto with which populists have set about the task of decontesting the people, it is very difficult to translate the concepts of populism into a coherent ideological tradition. Full ideologies are internally diverse, but on the basis of relatively clear and comprehensible core concepts it has proven possible in these cases to elaborate distinct traditions of political thought that can transcend the proximate context in which they emerge. There is no purely logical reason why this should be so, but ideologies are not products only of logical thought-processes but must resonate with the context in which they are located. In the case of ideologies such as liberalism and socialism, the concepts identified with these traditions of thought have proven quite easily translatable: they 'speak' credibly to actual experience and have in turn influenced the content of that experience. The coherence of these ideologies is vindicated by their own tradition. However, whilst all concepts are contestable, some have proven more contestable than others.

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The plasticity of the concept of 'the people' assists the individual populist, for whom it can expand or contract to suit the chosen criteria of inclusion or exclusion. However, the openness of this concept has hampered the development of populism as an ideology in its own right. In order to engage with politics in the concrete, the abstractions of core concepts must be translatable into those peripheral concepts which link ideology to a particular context. The particular vagueness of the people makes it very difficult to do this, impeding the development of an intellectual tradition possessing a fuller range of responses to political questions. The people may be decontested in so many ways that going beyond the 'who' of politics to identifying what the people want and in what way they should receive it has not elicited a coherent body of ideas that may be identified with the ideology of populism. Thus whilst there are certain family resemblances between different instances of populism, no coherent tradition informs them all.

On its own terms, populism has only been able to insist that 'the people ought to get what they want, when they want, however they want'. As a response to the realities of modern politics, this is rather impractical. Ideologies are not *obliged* to be practical, but the less they are, the less likely their development into ideational traditions through the dialectic of practical experience and theoretical reflection. Pure populism remains thin because it has never really been tried. In practice, it is more often to be found in consort with more established ideologies that can fill out its appeal. Conceptual overlapping is a feature common to all ideologies: after all, ideologies commonly address the same set of political issues and it is inevitable that they share certain points of consensus.[66] However, the thinness of populism ensures that in practice it is a complementary ideology: it does not so much overlap with as diffuse itself throughout full ideologies. The wide variety of forms populism takes is attributable not to conceptual incoherence but conceptual thinness: the sheer openness and contestability of populism's core concepts makes it a receptive partner for full ideologies.

This receptivity should not be mistaken for heedless ideological promiscuity. Albertazzi remarks that 'because they do not believe in a well-defined ideology that needs to be adhered to, populist leaders are thus free to borrow at will from diverse political traditions'.[67] Whilst it is true that populist movements have exhibited a large degree of diversity in their choice of ideological bedfellows, this somewhat overstates the freedom of choice populists possess. First, there is an ideological core to populism to which populists must make reference. The reason populists need to associate with other ideologies is not because they are bereft of their own, but because populist ideology is not sufficiently 'thick' to translate into a coherent and comprehensive policy offer in its own right. Second, the suggestion that populists are 'free to borrow at will' overstates the degree of freedom they possess in choosing their ideological partners. Whilst populism's thinness gives populists rather more latitude than others, there are nevertheless restrictions on the ideological partnerships a populist party can make within a given party system, given that a core element of populism is its anti-elite appeal. In any particular context, a variety of ideological options will be conducive partners for populism, but at least some will be off limits by virtue of their association with the elite.[68]

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The mercurial nature of populism has often exasperated those attempting to take it seriously. An approach to populism that understands it as a thin ideology does not seek to deny the intellectual vagueness and conceptual slipperiness of populism, but treats those features as symptoms of populism's thin, diffuse nature. Seeking to locate the essence of populism in a particular policy content is a mistaken approach, for it is precisely the extreme contestability of populism's core concepts that prevents it from developing into a coherent and consistent set of policies. However, it is also mistaken to conceive of populism as so featureless that it cannot be distinguished from politics itself. However thin it may be, nevertheless it possesses a distinct interpretive framework that can be generalised across all its manifestations.

As such it is possible to pursue a comparative research strategy for the study of populism in parties and social movements that does not require ever more complex intellectual contortions to render populism coherent at the level of policy content. Researchers of populism ought to start from the principle that in theory it may emerge from anywhere, such is its potential for combining with different full ideologies. The task is then to identify those individual or collective political actors advancing an analysis of the political that corresponds to the core concepts of populism, and the context-specific ideational resources that permit them to do so. This will of necessity involve identifying the full ideologies with which populists associate themselves. At any given point, certain parties and social movements will be 'more populist' than others, in that populism is a more salient aspect of their appeal. Some may retain over time a consistent combination of populism and another, full ideology. Others may hitch their populism to a variety of passing ideological bandwagons. Still others may keep to a consistent full ideology with a waxing or waning populist element. Finally, in some cases they may exhibit no particular ideological consistency, thin or full. Amidst all these divagations, the identification of populism will continue to be a demanding and controversial task, but no less important or relevant for all that.

Notes and References

1. For more on populism as 'thin ideology' see C. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), pp. 542–563, and C. Fieschi, 'Introduction', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2004), pp. 235–240.
2. E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005), p. 117.
3. Mudde, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 543.
4. See L. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. *xvi*; and F. Panizza, 'Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy', in F. Panizza (Ed.) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 16.
5. E. Laclau, 'Populism: What's In a Name?', in F. Panizza (Ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 44.
6. D. Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity: Understanding Recent Populist Movements in Sweden and the United States* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1996), p. 54.
7. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, p. 120.
8. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, pp. 36–37.
9. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 2, p. 116.

10. M. Canovan, '"People", Politicians and Populism', *Government and Opposition*, 19 (1984), pp. 312–327, p. 314.
11. Westlind, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 31–32.
12. Mudde, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 550, p. 563.
13. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, p. 47.
14. B. Arditi, 'Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan', *Political Studies*, 52 (2004), pp. 135–143; pp. 139–40. Y. Stavrakakis, 'Antinomies of Formalism: Laclau's Theory of Populism and the Lessons from Religious Populism in Greece', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9 (2004), pp. 253–268; p. 263.
15. Stavrakakis, *Ibid*., p. 263.
16. Arditi, *op. cit.*, Ref. 14, p. 140.
17. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, p. 39.
18. Laclau, *Ibid*., p. 37.
19. Laclau, *Ibid*., p. 39.
20. The curious metaphysical alchemy of these reifications is well illustrated in Laclau's own example of how material objects are transmuted into signifiers of something else: 'gold, without ceasing to be a particular commodity, *transforms its own materiality* into the universal representation of value'. Laclau, *Ibid*., p. 39. It is not entirely clear whether Laclau is speaking metaphorically; if so, it simply supports the point being made about the problems of a literal structuralism.
21. Laclau, *Ibid*., p. 37.
22. C. Hay, *Political Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 210. As Hay suggests, justifications for ontological commitments are always to some extent ineffable, influenced as they are by a variety of equally mercurial factors: experience; normative judgements and intuitions. I would also stress the importance of the persuasiveness of others' accounts; certainly my interpretation of populism is testament to the persuasiveness of (what I perceive to be) a common thread uniting Hay's discussion of ideas and Freeden's of ideology. Indeed, the very fact that I speak of my 'interpretation' of populism (as my set of ideas about a set of ideas) is evidence of the extent to which their work has persuaded me.
23. Hay, *Ibid*., p. 209.
24. M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
25. M. Freeden, 'Ideology and Political Theory', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (2006), pp. 3–22, p. 19.
26. M. Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 62.
27. Freeden, *Ibid*., p. 61.
28. Freeden, *Ibid*., p. 65.
29. M. Freeden, 'Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?', *Political Studies*, XLVI (1998), pp. 748–765, p. 750.
30. Freeden, *Ibid*., p. 750.
31. Freeden, *Ibid*., p. 751.
32. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26, p. 62.
33. Frank comments on the 'remarkable inversion' of populist politics in America since the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century. Where populism in the 1890s connoted a Middle American socialist radicalism that pitted the interests of the people against elitist, metropolitan, Republican industrial capitalism, by the 1990s it had effected a volte-face, celebrating the virtues of the self-sufficient capitalism of the common man against a liberal, cosmopolitan Democratic elite. (T. Frank*, What's the Matter With America?: The Resistible Rise of the American Right* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), pp. 15–17).
34. Jean-Marie Le Pen, in N. Mayer, 'French Populism: The Aftermath of 21st April 2002', in B. Ociepka (Ed.), *Populism and Media Democracy* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005), p. 74.
35. M. Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 128.
36. M. Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studie*s, 47 (1999), pp. 2–16, p. 9.
37. Canovan, *Ibid*., p. 10.
38. Canovan, *Ibid*., p. 11.
39. Canovan, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35, p. 108.
40. W. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (San Francisco, CA: Freeman, 1982), p. 244.
41. Riker rejects the validity of the premise he regards as fundamental to populism: that the popular will can be 'computed' by consulting the people (Riker, *Ibid*., p. 11). The rationality and coherence of voter preferences in the singular translate, when aggregated, into incoherent results that cannot reflect any coherent popular consensus). Thus, Riker concludes, falls the notion that popular sovereignty can be translated into policy: 'what the people want cannot be social policy simply because we do not and cannot know what the people want' (Riker, *ibid*., p. 238).

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42. Indeed, this logic can be discerned in Riker's own argument in favour of the liberal interpretation of voting as 'the veto by which it is sometimes possible to restrain official tyranny' (Riker, *Ibid*., p. 244). Riker suggests that this veto is the product of 'the concrete self-direction of individuals, who vote and organize voting to make the democratic veto work' (Riker, *ibid*., p. 245). Whilst voting is indeed an individual act in a certain sense, the production of a 'democratic veto' requires, far from the accidental amalgamation of individual values through the voting process, a conscious process of mobilisation in the 'organisation' of voting. Populist politicians may aim at making a more telling impact than the 'curb on policy, a veto at the margins' that Riker (*ibid*. p. 245) views as the quintessence of liberal democratic participation, but whether the aim is to 'exercise a democratic veto' or to 'kick the bastards out', the notion of the articulation of a common popular voice is common to both cases; the difference is only of degree.
43. Canovan, *op. cit.*, Ref. 35, p. 39.
44. C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 26.
45. A. Lepper, *Lista Leppera* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KAMEA, 2002), p. 8.
46. Lepper, *Ibid*., p. 9.
47. Jarosław Kaczyński, cited in M. Janicki and W. Władyka (Eds), *Cień Wielkiego Brata: Ideologia i praktyka IV RP* (Warszawa: POLITYKA Spółdzielnia Pracy, 2007), p. 82.
48. Canovan, *op. cit.*, Ref. 5, p. 5.
49. Schmitt, *op. cit.,* Ref. 44, p. 26.
50. Schmitt, *Ibid*., p. 26.
51. Mudde, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 543–544.
52. Mudde, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 543–544.
53. Canovan, *op. cit*., Ref. 5, p. 93.
54. Thomas Gordon, in Canovan, *Ibid*., p. 69.
55. Lepper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 45, p. 196.
56. Lepper, *Ibid*., p. 11.
57. A. Lepper, 'Tańczący z wilkami—rozmowa z Andrzejem Lepperem', *Elity*, 11(12) (2002).
58. Lepper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 45, p. 34.
59. Lepper, *op. cit.*, Ref. 57.
60. Jarosław Kaczyński, in Janicki and Wladyka, *op. cit.*, Ref. 47, p. 134.
61. Jarosław Kaczyński, cited in W. Załuska, 'Dlaczego Jarosław Kaczyński zaprzyjaźnił się z ojcem Rydzykiem?' *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12/12/2005.
62. Komitet Wyborczy Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Electoral Committee of 'Law and Justice'], *Polska katolicka w chrześciańskiej Europie* (Warszawa, 2005), p. 7.
63. Komitet Wyborczy Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, *Ibid*., p. 9.
64. M. Mamoń, 'Tu jest Polska Kaczyńskiego', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 09/07/2007.
65. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26, p. 98.
66. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26, p. 64.
67. D. Albertazzi, 'The Liga dei Ticinesi: The Embodiment of Populism', *Politics,* 26 (2006), pp. 133–139, p. 136.
68. Naturally, it is always possible for populists to side with the ideological options represented by the elite, but only at the expense of their credibility as populists.

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