Pluralist Populism: How Populism and Liberal Democracy can Coexist

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Abstract:

I will argue in this thesis, that those within the field of democratic theory who dismiss populism as an inherent threat to liberal democracy do so based on a number of assumptions. The first of these assumptions concerns how populism should be defined, some within the literature treat it as an ideology in itself, defined by its distinctly illiberal aims. Others treat it as a style of doing politics, yet argue that by dividing society between ‘us’ and ‘them’, it violates liberal commitments to pluralism. The second assumption concerns the point of liberal democracy: theorists who dismiss populism as a threat to liberal democracy frequently do so based on their commitment to a particular normative theory of democracy, which is often not made explicit in their work. The third assumption is that there is no fundamental contradiction between the liberal and democratic dimensions of liberal democracy, but rather that the two presuppose each other. This thesis will aim to challenge these assumptions in turn, illuminating the normative commitments of those who claim populism is a threat. I will begin by arguing that, based on the definition provided by Mouffe and Laclau, populism should be conceived of in hegemonic terms. Using this understanding of populism, I will challenge the assumption that populism is incompatible with commitments to pluralism. I analyse populism through the lenses of social-choice theory, representative democracy and deliberative democracy, in order to demonstrate that this perceived incompatibility is largely dependent on the theorists’ commitment to these normative theories, rather than populism itself. Lastly, I will argue against the “co-originality” thesis in favour of a conception of liberal democracy in which both its constitutive elements are in contradiction, but, as has been argued by Mouffe, this contradiction may be productive. I conclude by arguing in favour of an agonistic conception of democracy, as a means by which competing hegemonic projects, such as populism, can inhabit the same political sphere, thereby demonstrating that populism and pluralism are not necessarily incompatible.
Acknowledgements:

I would first and foremost like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Thomas Fossen, for his time, guidance and enthusiasm for my project throughout. I would also like to convey my appreciation to everyone who provided me with much needed moral support and motivation, in particular Marianne and my parents. Thanks for always being open to discussion, without you this would not have been possible.
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Introduction:

This thesis will address the claim that populism is fundamentally incompatible with liberal democracy. I will argue that while existing populist parties may espouse values that contradict liberal democratic commitments to freedom and equality, this is not a necessary feature of populism. Populism should instead be conceived of a “political strategy” without a fixed ideological content, equally capable of being used to expand the demos to include previously marginalized groups. Moreover, authors who deem populism a threat to liberal democracy often base their claims on normative assumptions about the purpose of democracy that I will bring to the fore and challenge. I argue that the definition of populism provided by Mouffe and Laclau most satisfactorily explains the phenomena, while their agonistic conception of democracy best helps to explain its recurrence and how it can work within a liberal democratic framework.

Populism has become an increasingly relevant topic, in Europe, the United States and Latin America political parties labelled as populist have gained significant ground. A recent Guardian series entitled “The New Populism” claimed that one in four Europeans now votes for populist parties\(^1\). This development has provoked a number of questions from the political establishment. What has caused this sudden rise? What do these seemingly disparate parties and movements have in common? And how should they be dealt with? The latter question reveals an underlying assumption about the nature of populist parties, namely that they are fundamentally incompatible with the principles of liberal democracy. At best they are symptomatic, an indication of flaws within the current system that have resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, demonstrating the need for economic or

political reform. At worst, they could potentially undermine the entire liberal democratic project, a fear that has been substantiated in the European context by the rise of far-right nationalism and Euroscepticism. In his 2016 ‘State of the Union’ address, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker spoke of “galloping populism”\(^2\) caused by issues such as high unemployment and social injustice, indicating that such grievances must be addressed by parties within the political mainstream. The question of populism has become increasingly pertinent in light of the refugee crisis, as European populist parties have successfully mobilized support on the basis of anti-immigrant rhetoric, amplifying fears over the symbolic threat posed by Islam to traditional European ways of life. In the case of populist led governments, such as under Viktor Orban in Hungary, the response has been to violate the human rights of asylum seekers through indefinite detention and violent expulsion. In defying the EU’s Common Asylum Policy, Orban claims he is reasserting the sovereignty of the Hungarian people in the face of outside threat, both from the EU and “Muslim invaders”\(^3\). Under populist rule, Hungary and Poland have shown strong signs of democratic backsliding, characterised by “a departure from the rule of law as the foundation of liberal democracy, and secondly, a recourse to nationalism as the principal source of political legitimation, complete with hardened identity politics”\(^4\). Elsewhere, methods for dealing with successful populist parties, such as the *cordon sanitaire* implemented against Vlaams Belang in Belgium, and the PVV in the Netherlands as of 2012, further exemplify the perception of populism as an aberration of representative democracy, the ‘excess’ of an otherwise rational community. The topic of this thesis is therefore one of pressing political

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\(^2\) European Commission (2016) *State of the Union 2016*, Directorate-General for Communication (European Commission)


concern; a theoretical framework for understanding the causes and the solutions to the question of populism is necessary for a political response to prove effective.

However, the rise of populist movements has not been exclusively limited to the right. Parties such as Syriza and Podemos have managed to successfully mobilize the people in opposition to the policy of austerity implemented in the wake of the European debt crisis, as was prescribed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary fund. These parties are distinctly populist in that they aim to put decision-making power back into the hands of ‘the people’, by reducing the power of unelected ‘European bureaucrats’ who have gained increasing influence under each successive EU treaty. Like their right-wing counterparts, they present the EU’s increasing tendency towards economic governance dictated by experts as a threat to the principle of popular sovereignty, yet they differ in that ‘the people’ they claim to represent is a pluralistic one. Sanders and Corbyn provide further examples of how, by singling out the established neoliberal order as ‘the enemy’, and employing impassioned rhetoric, left-wing parties could engage previously apathetic constituencies, particularly the young. As opposed to the right-wing populist parties previously mentioned, these parties envisage an expansive idea of ‘the people’, not bound by any essentialist characteristic such as race or ethnicity. I argue that the response to left-populism, particularly in Europe, which has less of an established history than in South America, demonstrates the inadequacies of the popular discourse on populism, as left and right movements are frequently equated with each other. Headlines such as “Why Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders Both Appeal to Angry, White Men”\(^5\) and “Trump and Corbyn have both turned political tribes into fanatical cults”\(^6\), arguably predicated on a form of “horseshoe


theory”7, ignore the fundamentally opposing ideological commitments of these leaders by focusing on their populist way of ‘doing politics’. Populists are equated with demagogues, stirring up anger amongst their cult-like followers against an imagined ‘elite’. They must therefore necessarily pose a threat to the foundational principles of liberal democracy.

The populist question has begun to resonate within the field of democratic theory, which now offers a variety of perspectives on populism as a concept, its causes and how it should be dealt with. Theories on populism often struggle due to the ambiguity of the subject matter itself; the label has been attributed across the ideological spectrum, from those on the right such as Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, to those on the left such as Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders and Hugo Chavez, and those such as Beppe Grillo who cannot be neatly placed within either camp. Theorists have attempted to group populist movements together into categories based on their identities, such as “agrarian populism” and “political populism”8, or their platform, which is most commonly described as a response to the perceived threat of modernization and a valorisation of traditional ways of life. Others have focused on their emotive and highly symbolic rhetorical style. However, given the lack of commonality between populist movements, attempts to define populism as a substantive political ideology are met with a plethora of exceptions. The lack of correlation between the populist ‘ideal’ and the experiences of ‘actually existing populism’ render these theories unhelpful. The first task of this thesis will therefore be to provide an effective definition of populism that approaches the phenomenon as a political logic, rather than an ideology or type of movement.

In response to these inadequate definitions, theorists including Jan-Werner Müller and Cas Mudde have approached populism as a particular way of doing politics. While populist

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movements address widely varying demands, they do so through the articulation of a divide between us – ‘the people’, and those in power. They claim that populist parties distinguish themselves from their mainstream political counterparts by their rejection of pluralism. Their claim to represent the people is made on moral rather than empirical terms, they speak as the sole representative of the people even if they and their supporters make up a numerical minority. By contrast, their opponents are denied political legitimacy on moral terms, they are treated as enemies of the people rather than valid political adversaries. This rests on the assumption that the people can be spoken for as a whole, implying a level of homogeneity and a shared collective identity which is incompatible with the liberal democratic conception on the people as irreducibly diverse. Populist parties are described as inherently irrational, not only due their emphasis on symbolism, emotion and affect, as opposed to the rational deliberation between clearly defined positions and consensus-based politics associated with the centre, but also due to the previous claim to represent the people as a whole. The need for deliberation in order to form a volonté générale disappears when a single party claims to speak directly on behalf of the people. Although Müller and Mudde provide a nuanced and, in many respects, valid analysis of populism, they do so on empirical grounds. Their arguments are founded on a detailed study of ‘actually existing populism’, from which they have deduced that populism and liberal democracy are fundamentally incompatible. I will argue that while this analysis of existing populist movements may be correct, it does not address populism’s relationship towards liberal democracy on a theoretical basis. Moreover, their argument reveals several underlying assumptions about the role of reason in political decision making and the relationship between liberalism and democracy, that while understandable given the intended scope of their work, are contestable. I will aim to draw out

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10 Ibid P.29.
and challenge these assumptions in order to question his conclusion that populism and liberal democracy are necessarily incompatible.

The current “populist moment” we are experience is best contextualized by providing an account of the impact of neoliberalism on liberal democracy. The shift of major European left-wing parties towards the centre has led to a state of partisan dealignment, under which their traditional working-class voter bases no longer feels represented. By moving to the centre, left-wing parties have changed their focus away from class antagonism, towards a society in which, according to Tony Blair, “we are all middle class”. This claim runs contrary to statistical evidence demonstrating that lower-middle and working-class people in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, saw little to no gain in real income during the period of high globalization from 1988 – 2008, and fared even worse after the 2008 financial crisis. This has been coupled with the rising influence of economic regulatory bodies such as the World Bank, the IMF and intragovernmental organizations such as the EU, through which governance has been increasingly vertically integrated away from the state level. As is indicated by decreasing political participation, apathy is high among voters, who feel that national elections are a formality incapable of ushering in meaningful change. The resultant form of governance could be described as technocratic, rooted in the assumption that those best placed to make political decisions are experts, and that these decisions should take the form of rational economic calculi. Without an effective means to challenge neoliberalism from the traditional left, the large sections of the population who feel they lost out lack a channel through which their grievances can be represented. Populist parties, particularly on the far-right, have been able to monopolize on this gap by offering a narrative in which the ‘enemy’ is identified in the form of the liberal elite, migrants, or any other group

capable of fulfilling the role of the threatening ‘other’. This ‘other’ is formulated in contrast to ‘the people’, to whom they promise to return power. I therefore argue that an analysis of the impact of neoliberal hegemony on democracy is key to understanding the rise of populism.

In the following chapters, I will examine the contributions of democratic theory to the subject of populism. I have divided the subsequent four chapters according to assumptions I have identified within the literature concerning the compatibility of populism and liberal democracy, which I will respond to in turn. The assumptions are, to a great extent, linked to the normative theory of democracy that the theorists subscribe to. I will therefore examine the merits of social choice theory, deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy in explaining the subject of populism. My responses draw largely on the work of the radical democratic theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, whom I argue provide the most helpful definition of populism, and have successfully disentangled it from its connection to the illiberalism of actually existing cases.

In Chapter 1, I will begin by addressing the various definitions of populism offered within the literature. I argue that in response to the ambiguous nature of the term, some theorists have assigned a specific ideological content to populism, or described a populist subject either demographically or psychologically. These attempts flatten out the inherent multiplicity of populist movements by focusing on their commonalities. As such, they are prone to arbitrarily excluding movements that would seem to conform to a common sense understanding of populism, or they are so vague as to be analytically unhelpful. I argue that theorists such as Müller, Mudde and Rummens come closer to apprehending the nature of populism, in that they treat it as a way of doing politics employed by movements from across the ideological spectrum. However, all three theorists ultimately contend that populism is incompatible with liberal commitments to pluralism, in that by demarcating ‘the people’ as
distinct from ‘the elite’, they deny the democratic legitimacy of their opponents. I argue that
this assumption is unfounded. Mouffe and Laclau’s conception of populism as a discursive
practice, under which “the people” are constructed in opposition to existing hegemonic power
structures, does not necessarily deny the freedom and equality of its political adversaries. As
hegemonic structures are necessarily incomplete, the political contestation over who occupies
the seat of power will remain ongoing.

In the subsequent chapters, I will aim to reveal the underlying normative conceptions of
democracy put forward by the theorists who conclude that populism and liberal democracy
are incompatible. Chapter 2 will analyse two strands of the ‘liberal’ tradition: social choice
theory and representative democracy. Social choice theory, grounded in economics, takes the
aggregation of individual, rational preferences to be the point of democracy. Much like in the
market, individuals are treated as utility maximisers, the role of the State being to manage
their competing interests so as to prevent outcomes that are worse for all. The ‘common
good’ is taken to mean a compromise in the allocation of public goods along the Pareto
optimal. Populism is incompatible with the normative conception of liberal democracy put
forward by social choice theorists on a number of grounds. Populism is a group phenomenon,
articulated along an us/them divide between the people and the elite, whereas social choice
theory takes the rational individual as its basic unit of inquiry. Furthermore, social choice
theory views compromise as the rational outcome of the democratic process, while the aim of
populism, when viewed in hegemonic terms, is the complete reconfiguration of the political
landscape. Moreover, social choice theory takes the demos and the political subjectivity of its
subjects as given, though conversely, the formation of ‘the people’ under populism is the
moment at which political subjectivity is acquired, as well the point at which previously
disenfranchised groups can be absorbed within the demos. After detailing the ways in which
populism and social choice theory are incompatible, I will argue that social choice fails to
provide a satisfactory normative account of liberal democracy. Representative democracy, on the other hand, focuses on preventing the ‘tyranny of the majority’ through a system of institutional checks and balances, as provided for by the constitution and the rule of law. Advocates of representative democracy view populism as a threat to liberal democracy, in that it aims to forego the need for representation, placing power directly in the hands of ‘the people’. I argue that this does not necessarily pose a threat to liberal democracy, provided that the rights of their political adversaries are upheld.

In Chapter 3, I will address an assumption grounded in the deliberative democratic tradition, namely that the outcome of the democratic process should be the production of a rational consensus. This principle, as posited by Habermas amongst others, states that the political process should provide the conditions for the generation of a common will, through rational deliberation between free and equal citizens. Mouffe argues, that this ‘ideal speech situation’ may prove to be ontologically impossible\(^\text{13}\). However, even if it were to be, it assumes that the point of democracy is consensus rather than contestation between groups with fundamentally irreconcilable aims. I will argue in favour of Mouffe’s view of democracy as inherently agonistic, which acknowledges the dimension of power in political decision making as irradicable, necessitating contestation, yet insists that this takes place between adversaries whose rights are upheld.

In Chapter 4, I will address the claim that liberalism and democracy are ‘co-original’ in that they necessarily pre-suppose each other. This view, put forward by theorists such as Habermas, Rawls, and applied to the subject of populism by Rummens, has significant implications. If it is true, then the agonistic understanding of democracy is fundamentally flawed, and the deliberative approach becomes more favourable. If, however, liberalism and

democracy are found to be in tension with each other, as I argue they are, then an agonistic conception is necessary, under which populism and pluralism pose no contradiction. To argue this, I will make use of Mouffé’s reading of Schmitt, in which the two pillars of liberalism and democracy contradict each other, yet this contradiction is productive in that it allows for a constant redrawing of the demos through minority groups’ demands for recognition. I will also address the debate between Rummens and Mouffé on whether populism violates Lefort’s ‘empty seat of power’ principle, necessary for the functioning of liberal democracy. I argue, in favour of Mouffé, that the hegemonic conception of populism put forward by her and Laclau is necessarily incomplete, so that while the populist hegemonic formation may temporarily fill the seat of power, this does not imply an end to democratic contestation.

Lastly, in Chapter 5 I will analyse agonistic democracy, the normative theory of democracy endorsed by Mouffé. Drawing upon the work of Schmitt, Mouffé argues that the need for collective identification frequently places these groups in a friend/enemy relation between each other. The management of the antagonism between groups is precisely the nature of “the political”, a fact she argues the other normative theories of democracy fail to account for. Populism, when conceived of in hegemonic terms, represents precisely such a struggle between collective identities with irreconcilable demands: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

Agonistic democracy aims to transform the antagonistic friend/enemy distinction into agonistic contestation between political adversaries, through a mutual agreed upon commitment to the freedom and equality of one’s opponents. I argue that this theory provides a framework whereby populism and pluralism can be made compatible. Lastly, I discuss the role of affect in the formation of collective identities. While the highly rhetorical style of populism is frequently used as a means by which to dismiss it as dangerous irrational, I argue

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on the contrary, that individuals acquire their political subjectivity through the mobilization of desire towards a particular collective identity. This underpins Mouffe’s anti-essentialist approach, she argues that membership of ‘the people’ need to not be conditional on any pre-given identity, precisely because identities are always discursively constituted.

Chapter 1: Defining Populism

A) The Prevailing Conception – Populism as Threat

The first assumption I have found within the literature on populism is that it is incompatible with liberal democracy due to its distinctly illiberal content or ideology. I argue that this is not necessarily the case, in fact much of the confusion surrounding populism can be explained due to its conceptual ambiguity. The term populism is used within the literature to describe such a broad range of phenomena that is seems to be analytically unhelpful. This is particularly the case for theorists who treat populism as having substantive content, or who examine populism as if it were an ideology in itself. In order for a definition of populism to be effective, it must capture the shared character of populist movements across the ideological spectrum, and provide clear reasoning for its exclusion of any movement that conforms to a common sense understanding of populism. I will therefore begin by examining a number of suggested definitions of populism drawn from the literature, in order to highlight their failure to truly capture the phenomenon.

Laclau begins his book *On Populist Reason* by distancing his definition of populism from the consensus within the literature. He argues that as populism is conceptually vague, and that the least effective definitions are therefore those that attempt to flatten out to the inherent multiplicity of populist movements by ascribing them a particular substantive content.\(^1\)

“when under threat of some kind of modernization, industrialization… …a predominantly agricultural segment of society asserts its charter of political action, its belief in a community and (usually) a Volk as uniquely virtuous, it is egalitarian and against any and all elite, looks to a mythical past… …confounds usurpation and alien conspiracy”\textsuperscript{17}.

Given this description of the populist ideal, it is unsurprising that McRae would be led to conclude the populist parties present a threat to liberal democracy. However, not only is his description theoretically simplistic, it is also empirically inaccurate given that many cases of actually existing populism do not conform to its criteria. His description of populism is grounded in historical examples that no longer apply to the present day. Populist parties continue to be relevant force in Western Europe, despite the enormous shrinkage of the agricultural sector. Moreover, the process of deindustrialization in many Western states since the 1980s as a result of globalization, has led to precisely the opposite of what McRae claims, as populist parties have run on platforms of reindustrialization and economic protectionism.

Laclau takes even greater exception to the definition provided by Peter Wiles in his essay ‘A Syndrome, not a Doctrine’. Wiles lists 24 features of populist movements, among them their tendency towards counterrevolution, opposition to class war and vaguely religious character\textsuperscript{18}. Given this description, it would seem evident that Wiles would have to exclude all cases of left-wing populism. Yet surprisingly, Wiles goes on to mention Lenin’s admission of the populist Narodnik and incorporation of populism within his ideas and practices, a move which was followed by others such as Gramsci and Mao Tse-Tung in turn\textsuperscript{19}. The inclusion of such movements under the umbrella of populism would seem to

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid P.9.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid P.10
conform to any common sensical understanding of the term, given that their ideology involved mass mobilization of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, yet they do not meet the requirements of Wiles definition. As Laclau points out, this approach is evidently flawed, in attempting to define populism substantively it misses out on any of the defining features specific to it.

From these definitions, Laclau moves on to list several definitions that come closer to capturing what is specific to populism. In Peter Worsley’s ‘The Concept of Populism’, he identifies three crucial elements. First, he claims that the importance of ideas for populist movements may not be in their content, which as we have seen in the previous definitions, is notoriously vague, but rather the role that ideas play within a given context. By making this shift, the conceptual and ideological simplicity that had provoked the previous authors to dismiss populism as a mature political phenomenon, becomes a matter of serious consideration in that it expresses a particular social rationality. Secondly, Worsley defines populism as a dimension of political culture, rather than a type of organization or ideology. He states “The populist syndrome… is much wider than its particular manifestation in the form of context of any particular policy, or of any particular kind of overall ideological system or type of polity… This suggests that populism is better regarded as an emphasis, a dimension of political culture in general”. By treating populism as such, he is no longer faced with the impossible task of trying to identify the universal content of populist movements. Rather, his definition rightly emphasises that populism cuts across the ideological spectrum and embodies a wide range of aims, ideas and social groups. Lastly, he argues that the populist focus on participation should not be reduced to “pseudo-participation” i.e. a false sense of connectedness to the populism leader established by means

21 Ibid
of symbolism and mystification. By acknowledging that calls for participation may be genuine, the necessary connection between populism and demagoguery is severed, allowing for it to be defined without being ethically condemned. Worsley’s definition, while more useful than those mentioned previously, has several shortcomings, the most significant being that it lacks a conceptual framework for understanding the role of ‘the people’ and how they are brought into being.

Jan-Werner Müller’s book What is Populism? is another example of a work that comes close to a successful definition of populism in many respects. However, his empirical focus on cases of ‘actually existing populism’, what populists do, how they tend to govern etc. leads him to conclude that they are symptomatic of the failure of liberal democracy. In many cases, Müller’s analysis comes close to that of Mouffe and Laclau, yet he comes to different conclusions in the final instance due to his empirical reasoning. It is therefore also interesting to note that he makes little use of their work directly. For instance, he begins much like Laclau by addressing many of the definitions of populism that have dismissed it as a form of political irrationality, arguing that the distinction between “responsible” and “irresponsible” is politically loaded in that it assumes an a priori standard by which this can be judged.

Furthermore, he claims that populism should not be conceived of as a particular socioeconomic phenomenon, as supporters of populist movements are found across every strata of society. He therefore dismisses the characterization of populists as “the losers in the process of modernization”, on that grounds that it is both patronizing and empirically false.

In recognizing that there is no ‘populist subject’, who can either be determined on the basis of their “authoritarian personality”, their socioeconomic status or level of education, Müller

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24 Ibid P.17.
25 Ibid P.16.
comes close to Mouffe’s anti-essentialist argument that “political identities are not a direct expression of objective positions in the social order”\textsuperscript{26}, meaning “there is nothing natural or inevitable in the struggles against relations of power, not in the form that they will take”\textsuperscript{27}.

Furthermore, in his concluding chapter “Seven Thesis on Populism”, Müller claims that:

“populism is neither the authentic part of modern democratic politics nor a kind of pathology caused by irrational citizens. It is the permanent shadow of representative politics. There is always the possibility for an actor to speak in the name of the “real people” as a way of contesting currently powerful elites”\textsuperscript{28}.

Although he goes on to state that populists are not against the principle of political representation, they merely present themselves as the sole legitimate representatives (a claim I will dispute in the following chapter), I would argue that his statement is to a large extent valid. In defining populism as an ever-present possibility under representative democracy, rather than a malign external force, Müller acknowledges the limits of the technocratic form of consensus-based politics. Any suggestion that political decision making should take on the form of a rational economic calculus that works in the benefit of all, operates under the assumption that all social groups have the same essential interests. This assumption attempts to mitigate the role of power struggle between groups by imposing a single hegemonic discourse as ‘common sense’. I argue in part B of this chapter that hegemony is necessarily a failed totality, meaning that the possibility of political struggle is never fully extinguished.

Where Müller’s work begins to differ markedly from that of Mouffe and Laclau is in his definition of populism. He claims that populism is a particularly moralistic imagination of politics that sets a morally pure and united, but ultimately fictional people, against corrupt

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\textsuperscript{26} Mouffe, C. (2018). For a Left Populism. P.41. & \\
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid P.42. & \\
\textsuperscript{28} Müller, J. (2016). What is Populism? P.101. & \\
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elites. While he is right that populism necessarily involves the mobilization of the people in opposition to those in power, it is unclear as to why this should necessarily take on a moral dimension beyond what he has deduced from empirical experience. He continues by claiming that populism involves a form of holism, an idea that the polity should no longer be split, but can be represented as a whole. If populist movements are considered on the level of party politics, as is the case in Müller’s work, then his conclusion may appear convincing. However, when populism is considered on the level of hegemonic discourses, that fact that the people is “fictional” becomes a redundant argument. Populism is no less holistic than any other hegemonic discourse, neoliberalism also presents itself as a form of common sense, capable of homogenizing the polity and subsuming all political differences.

Cas Mudde is considered one of the preeminent writers on the subject of populism; he has published several books on the subject and his definition of the term is frequently adopted in the media. He defines populism as a

“thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people,”

which clearly places him within the same camp as Müller. He argues that populism is “thin-centred” in that it is almost always attached to another ideology, either on the right or the left, the way it manifests therefore depending on the “host ideology.” Unlike Müller, Mudde acknowledges the contributions of radical democrats such as Laclau to the discussion on

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30 Ibid
32 Ibid
populism. He claims that Laclau is justified in asserting that populism may be a “corrective” for democracy, in that it allows for the engagement of previously marginalized demographics, who are granted a political voice by which they can challenge the establishment. However, Mudde also distinguishes between democracy in its pure form, meaning popular sovereignty and majority rule, and liberal democracy, characterized by independent institutions aimed at upholding fundamental rights and protecting minorities. Much like Müller, he asserts that populist parties, both on the left and the right pose a threat to liberal democracy due to their rejection of pluralism. He presents the claim that “nothing should constrain “the will of the (pure) people” and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the “institutional guarantees” that should protect them, as a necessary feature of populism, yet it is unclear why this should be the case. While he is able to cite cases of actually existing populist movements with expressly anti-pluralist aims, he fails to provide evidence that it is populism, rather than the host ideology which causes this.

Both Mudde and Müller are vague on the subject of European left-populism. In the introduction to What is Populism? Müller cites Syriza and Podemos as examples of the confusingly broad and ambiguous nature of the term, claiming that they are “labelled as populist”. Both parties receive scant mention throughout the rest of the book, at no point does Müller state whether he himself considers these parties to be populist. In fact, he states explicitly that it is impossible to characterize a populist party by its critical stance towards elite alone, “otherwise anyone criticizing the status quo in for instance Greece, Italy, or the United States would by definition be a populist”. One could reasonably interpret this to mean that Müller distinguishes anti-establishment left-wing parties, such as Syriza and

34 Ibid P.80.
37 Ibid. P.2.
Podemos, from populist parties who explicitly reject the validity of their political opponents. Mudde acknowledges Syriza to a greater extent, but fails to provide sufficient evidence for their opposition to pluralism. His claim that “Syriza politicians in Greece would refer to domestic opponents as “the fifth column” of Germany and one of its (now former) ministers even called the EU “terrorists”38 seems to conflate impassioned rhetoric between parties with conflicting ideologies with a rejection of pluralism in concrete terms. When in power, Syriza took no measure to prevent their opponents from engaging in the democratic process as equally legitimate adversaries. I therefore argue that the cases of European left-populism problematize any definition of populism that explicitly includes a rejection of pluralism. It may be the case that these examples, which conform to a common sense understanding of populism in that they formed ‘the people’ in opposition to an ‘elite’, do not fit their definition of populism, in which case they would have to provide a more compelling case for their exclusion. I argue, however, that populism does not necessarily entail a rejection of pluralism, particularly when liberal democracy is considered in agonistic terms, for which I will make the case in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the moralized rhetorical style described by Mudde is not unique to populist parties; as I argue in Chapter 5(b) the rhetoric of anti-populist is often similar in tone.

The examples I have provided from the literature seek to demonstrate an assumption that populism is incompatible with liberal democracy due to its illiberal content. Those mentioned who attempt to describe the multiplicity of populist movements in terms of a shared ideology, content or socioeconomic subject have failed to provide a definition that does immediately provoke numerous exceptions. These definitions, which have often attributed populism with a distinctly illiberal ideology can therefore be dismissed. The more nuanced definitions of populism provided by Müller and Mudde, which are right in treating populism as a way of

doing politics, also come to the conclusion that it is incompatible with liberal democracy. In Müller’s case, his empirical analysis of populist movements has led to him conclude that they do not acknowledge the legitimacy of their political opponents, and that they impose themselves as a tyrannical majority in claiming to speak on behalf of the people as a whole. The former claim may conform to the experience of many actually existing cases, but this does not mean it is a conceptually necessary feature of populism. The latter claim may appear convincing when contrasting right-populist parties with non-populist parties but becomes less so when populism is examined on the level of hegemonic discourses. Both Müller and Mudde’s definitions are vague on the subject of new European left-wing populist movements, whose ideological commitment towards egalitarianism would seem to work within a liberal democratic framework. Either these movements are not populist, which would violate a ‘common-sense’ understanding of what populism means, narrowing the scope of their definition to movements on the right. Or it is the moral terms in which the people are distinguished from the elite which violates commitments to pluralism, yet as Stavrakakis and Mouffe contend, conducting politics in a moral language is not unique to populism.

B) Populism reimagined – Mouffe and Laclau

I argue that Laclau and Mouffe provide a more convincing account of populism, in that they do not attribute a particular content to populist movements. Their theoretical approach to populism is not based on what actually existing populist movements have tended to do, which has led theorists such as Müller to the conclusion that they necessarily wish to undermine liberal democracy. Instead, they examine populism as a political logic, by which they mean that populism is a particular way of configuring the social in which a frontier is drawn up between two camps, in which the people are mobilized in opposition to those in power.

Populism is the process whereby “the people” is discursively created as a hegemonic identity, and although populist movements may attempt to mobilize around a particular anti-liberal discourse, such as the xenophobic invocation of the people along ethnic or nationally essentialist lines by far-right populists, a different discourse that upholds minority rights could serve the same purpose. It could consequently be argued that it is the political ideology of those who employ the logic of populism that is often incompatible with liberal democracy, but not the populist logic itself. Moreover, theorists including Müller have argued that populists do not respect the legitimacy of their opponents, and thereby undermine liberal democratic political institutions. One could also counter this claim with reference to the illiberal ideology espoused by particular populists, and not populism itself. However, the claim that in forming a people by excluding those in power populism violates their status as equals within the political process would remain unanswered. To refute this claim, I will argue that Mouffe’s concept of agonistic democracy successfully allows for irreconcilable power struggles between adversaries to take place within a liberal democratic framework, this will be explored in detail in Chapter 3.

Another key difference from the previous definitions, is that populism is described by Mouffe and Laclau as an ever-present possibility within democracy, which necessarily comes about due to the fact that society is made up of irreducible differences. Any hegemonic order that presents itself as a comprehensive totality, under which all power struggles are resolved, is destined to unravel over time due to its internal contradictions. The refocusing of Mouffe and Laclau’s definition of populism away from individual political parties or movements,

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42 Canovan’s article “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy” provides an argument for the importance of populism in maintaining a balance between democracy’s ‘pragmatic’ and ‘redemptive’ faces. While her contribution is worth noting, the terms in which she understands democracy differ from those within the scope of this thesis, and will therefore not be explored.
towards hegemonic discourses is pivotal, as populism is no longer conceived of as an aberration from normal party politics. Instead, the mainstream parties are constituted under a different discourse, that of neoliberalism.

In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau presents a description of hegemony necessary for understanding both his and Mouffe’s theory on populism. His definition of hegemony comes about as the result of a semiotic argument drawing upon the work of de Saussure, which he uses to describe how group identities are discursively constructed. Laclau argues that a discourse, meaning an objective whole, is made up of differential relations. This is necessarily the case, according to Saussure’s theory of language, words acquire meaning through their differential relationship to other words, in an unending referential chain. The question then becomes how these differential identities can be tied together in order to form a particular discourse, without postulating an a priori concept to structure them. This means that the unifying effect has to arise from the interaction of differences within the discourse itself. The totality that the discourse represents must therefore be present within each act of signification, as it is what gives it meaning, and so grasping the totality is therefore a necessary condition for signification. The discourse can only be grasped by drawing its limits, differentiating it from something other than itself. This requires another difference, yet it cannot be one already represented within the totality. Instead, in order to be capable of drawing a line between what is present within and what is outside the discourse, it must be an excluded element, something the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself.

Laclau provides the example of a section of the population that is excluded in order for society – the totality in this example, to gain a sense of cohesion. The discourse can now

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46 Ibid P.70.
48 Ibid
identify itself as a unified whole. However, a problem arises in that now all of the differences that make up the discourse are united in their equivalent exclusion of the external factor. Seeing as equivalence subverts difference, the identity of the unified whole rests on a tension between two fundamental logics and is therefore a failed totality. The totality is consequently both impossible and necessary, impossible as the tension between the two logics cannot be overcome, but necessary in order to provide the differential relations within with an identity allowing for signification49. The object cannot be grasped conceptually, given that it is an incomplete totality, but still requires access to the field of representation through difference. This means that one difference, without ceasing to be a particular difference, assumes representation of the totality. In doing so it becomes split between its particularity and the universal signification it becomes the bearer of. This taking up by a particularity of an incommensurable universal signification is what Laclau terms ‘hegemony’50. Hegemony as a unified totality is impossible, its incompleteness meaning that the hegemonic identity becomes the order of the empty signifier. By this, he means that while the totality cannot be eradicated, it is a failed totality which therefore acts more as a horizon to actively strive towards, requiring an investment in particular language games that differ from the conceptual, in which affect takes a prominent role51.

While the relevance of this discursive framework to the subject of populism is not immediately apparent, it is vital considering that for Laclau and Mouffe the aim of populism is the creation of a new hegemonic discourse. This becomes possible when the existing hegemonic order of signification is ruptured, revealing that it was only ever an illusion of totality. The financial crisis of 2008 was precisely such a moment, in which the neoliberal hegemonic order, which had previously presented itself as a panacea for all human needs, the

50 Ibid P.70.
51 Ibid P.71.
“end of history” etc. was revealed to be internally contradictory. It is precisely at this point, which Mouffe describes as the “populist moment”, that neoliberalism was unable to absorb the grievances that it had produced within its discursive framework. Populism works as a means by which these grievances, which differ from each other, can be linked together in an equivalential chain by means of identifying a common adversary. If for example, a disgruntled labourer raises an issue of housing before the local authority, it can be resolved differentially, meaning in isolation, and absorbed within the dominant hegemonic order. However, if it is left unresolved, the labourer may begin to see similarities between his demand and those of others, which while different in content, are equivalent in that they target the failings of the institutional system. This equivalential chain makes it increasingly difficult for the institutional system to separate these demands, as they are now articulated in the form of a common claim against the social order. The more demands this equivalential chain is able to connect, the more an antagonistic frontier will form between those making the claims and those they are directed against. This split allows for the constitution of “the people” as a new historical bloc, capable of acting in unison. However, in order for the people to achieve unity in the long-term, given that they embody a tension between fundamentally different yet equivalent actors, they need a stable system of signification to provide them with an identity and a horizon to strive towards. This is where discourses of “democracy”, “popular sovereignty”, and other similar empty signifiers come into play. They are essentially empty in that they do not have a direct referent or agreed upon meaning, but rather, they invoke an indefinite number of visions for a new society. Following the discursive framework provided by Laclau, a successful populist mobilization will constitute a new hegemonic identity through the exclusion of the elite, united by the shared signifier of

55 Ibid P.74.
“democracy”\textsuperscript{56}. Due to the irreducibility of the differences it is comprised of, this hegemonic articulation will necessarily be a failed totality, meaning the possibility of further antagonism arising is ever present.

My working definition of populism will therefore be the one provided by Laclau: “a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the ‘underdog’ against those in power”\textsuperscript{57}. This definition is more effective than those previously mentioned as it does not attribute a particular ideological or substantive content to populism, or arbitrarily exclude any movement that would conform to a common sense understanding of it. Based on this definition, it is possible to argue that populism can be used as a means by which to expand the demos to include previously excluded demographics, while maintaining a commitment to the liberal principle of pluralism within the democratic process.

**Chapter 2: Social Choice Theory and Representative Democracy**

In the following chapters, I will analyse populism through the lens of four of the prevailing strands of normative democratic theory: social choice theory, representative democracy, deliberative democracy and agonistic democracy. My justification as to why I have chosen to discuss these theories in particular is not only due to their predominance; other authors have also compared the three approach in respect to particular issues\textsuperscript{58}. It is also due to the fact that these approaches have informed the perspectives on liberal democracy present in the literature on populism. While most European democracies could be characterized as embodying a combination of the social choice and representative democratic traditions to a


\textsuperscript{57} Ibid P.127.

\textsuperscript{58} Fossen, T., & Anderson, J. (2014). What’s the point of voting advice applications? Competing perspectives on democracy and citizenship. Electoral Studies 36 PP.246-249.
greater extent than the deliberative approach, all three theories have proven highly influential in the democratic discourse during the period of ‘modernization’ discussed by Chantal Mouffe\(^59\). I will argue that the extent to which populism is considered a threat depends on normative assumptions about how democracy should function, a question to which these theories offer markedly different answers. While social choice theory, representative democracy and deliberative democracy differ substantially in terms of procedure, all three theories share a belief that liberal democracy should aim towards producing rational outcomes. On account of this, these theories treat antagonism between competing groups as something that can be overcome, either through the production of a rational consensus, or as a form of compromise that best satisfies all parties. It is on this basis that I will group these two theories together under the umbrella of “rationalistic”\(^60\). I will contrast this framework with agonistic democracy, as espoused by Mouffe. This theory differs in that it treats the us/them binary as the essence of “the political”, rather than something that can be overcome\(^61\). The focus is not on the production of rational consensus or compromise, but rather the struggle of competing hegemonic formations for dominance. Such hegemonic formations, if successful, are able to transform the political landscape, rearticulating what is broadly considered to be ‘common sense’\(^62\). Where Mouffe’s approach differs from pure antagonism, is that the conflict is channelled through the liberal democratic process, with a shared respect among participants for the principles of liberty and equality\(^63\). I argue that on the one hand social choice, representative democracy and deliberative democratic theory fail to provide an adequate solution to the question of populism, leading them to dismiss it as something extrinsic to liberal democracy. On the other hand, agonistic democracy provides

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\(^{60}\) Ibid P.70.
\(^{61}\) Ibid P.8.
for a clearer understanding as to why populism has been a persistent phenomenon, and allows for it to be incorporated within the liberal democratic framework.

A thorough analysis of all three normative democratic theories would fall outside of the scope of this thesis; social choice theory, representative democracy and deliberative democracy are broad strands of democratic theory, each containing a variety of authors and interpretations. So as to avoid misrepresenting these theories, I will discuss them only insofar as they are relevant to the subject of populism. I will therefore not argue that all of the strands of social choice, representative democracy and deliberative theory would necessarily lead to an anti-populist conclusion. Rather, I claim that these approaches have led writers on populism to this conclusion where an agonistic understanding of democracy may have not.

A. Social Choice Theory

Social choice theory, alternatively referred to as rational choice theory, the “liberal” approach by Habermas⁶⁴, and the “aggregative model” by Mouffe⁶⁵, refers to a broad strand of normative democratic theory, largely grounded in the theories of economics. Together with deliberative democracy, it makes up what Mouffe terms the “rhetorics of modernization”⁶⁶, owing to its prevalence within the discourse on democratic politics, particularly in the advent of the triumph of liberal democracy over the Soviet communist project. Social choice theory essentially argues that the role of democracy is the aggregation of individual preferences through elections, after which a compromise can be found over what constitutes the common good⁶⁷. It therefore places the individual as the principle political agent. The status of these individuals as political actors precedes the political process, they do not acquire their political

⁶⁶ Ibid P.54.
subjectivity by means of participating. Thus, the matter of forming a ‘demos’, and normatively justifying who falls within this political boundary, is not considered. Moreover, their preferences are also treated as given, complete and transitive, in that when confronted with a given set of alternatives, they will be able to rank their preferences ordinally. In this sense, the democratic process is much like the market place, in which the rationality of individual preferences is treated as such, provided that the preference is ‘theirs’ i.e. free from coercion, and takes into account the available information. The expression of preferences takes place through voting in secret ballots, there is no core emphasis on the “public use of reason” as in the deliberative approach, but rather the results of elections are intended to convey a form of instrumental rationality emanating from the pursuit of individual preferences. Political ideologies, which historically represented competing hegemonic articulations for how the political landscape should be structured, do not play a fundamental role.

Social choice theory is grounded in liberal assumptions about the relationship between the State and the market. The market is believed to be the most effective means by which the common good, meaning the aggregate of each individual’s utilitarian preference maximization can be realised. The role of the State is to mitigate market failures which arise when the pursuit of individual private interests leads to outcomes which are worse for all. This market failure may take the form of an inability of the market to provide public goods, or as a failure in the ability of the market mechanism to regulate itself. When this occurs, the State is tasked with redistributing public goods along the Pareto optimal, meaning a state in which it would be impossible to reallocate in order to make one individual or preference

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69 Ibid
72 Ibid P.5.
better off, without making another worse off\textsuperscript{73}. Due to the fact that individual preferences are taken as given, private interests cannot be expected to agree on what constitutes a fair distribution. The political outcome is therefore a compromise between these competing demands, where the majority opinion on each set of political questions will be adopted. Given that the plurality of interests within society will have been granted equal opportunity to take part in the process, the outcome can be considered an expression of the collective will.

B. Representative democracy

A difference in emphasis between social choice theory, and the broader tradition of representative democracy, is a commitment to the institutionalisation of checks and balances as a means by which the power of the State and the power of the ‘majority’ can be curtailed. Representative democracy presumes that democracy should function as a “regime that follows the rule of law with the aim of limiting the power of the state and allowing for a legitimate process of collective decision-making”, as is institutionally provided for by the constitution\textsuperscript{74}. In its commitment to governance through representation, it reveals an underlying mistrust of the people’s ability to govern themselves directly; those who are elected on behalf of the people are not mandated to implement their wishes. Kaltwasser highlights the fear of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ as a major concern of the liberal tradition, dating back to Alexis de Tocqueville\textsuperscript{75}. This fear informs the social choice theorists’ perspective on populism to a great extent, populism is treated as a pathology for liberal democracy in that it aims to forego the need for representative institutions by allowing “the people” to govern directly\textsuperscript{76}. Taggart provides an example of this when he asserts that “the fact that populism is a reaction against representative politics means that it has nothing

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid P.188.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid P.189.
substantial to offer in its place…Populism qua populism has little to offer representative politics other than as an indicator of the latter’s ill-health”

Taggart’s claims are mirrored by Galston, who argues that liberal democracy embodies four principles: the republican principle, i.e. popular sovereignty, democracy, by which he means equality among citizens and a broadly inclusive citizenship, constitutionalism, meaning the basic and enduring structure of formal institutional power, and liberalism, which he defines as the enjoyment of a protected sphere beyond the reach of government in which individuals can enjoy independence and privacy. Much like Mudde, Galston argues that populism prioritises popular sovereignty and democracy at the expense of constitutionalism and liberal protections of individual rights. Listing Orban, the Brexit campaign and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) among his examples, he asserts that populists aim towards “illiberal democracy”, under which institutional safeguards against the tyranny of the majority are dismantled. Moreover, he claims that populists are necessarily anti-pluralist, always asserting an essential identity, be it religion, nationality or ethnicity for the right, or class for the left. The idea of a homogenous demos, he claims, is directly contrary to the irreducible pluralism of modern liberal democracies.

In On Populist Reason, Laclau discusses how the association in liberal theory between the individual and rationality, and the group or ‘mob’ with irrationality is grounded in 19th century group psychology. For psychologists such as Le Bon, “the crowd” was pathological in that it was prone to bouts of suggestibility, owing to the evocative power of signifiers such as “democracy” and “freedom” that lacked a fixed ‘signified’ referent. For Le Bon, this was a perversion of language, which he argued should operate based on a defined signifier-

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77 Taggart, P. (2002). Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics. P.78.
79 Ibid P.11.
signifier relation, which given later developments in semiotics, we would now understand to be impossible\textsuperscript{82}. The ability of words like democracy and freedom to evoke endless different images in the minds of the crowd was therefore seen as a negative reversal of rationality in the strict sense, hypnotising the otherwise rational individual with their “supernatural” power and driving the crowd into a frenzy\textsuperscript{83}. While the exact worries of Le Bon may no longer be articulated in discussions of populism, the liberal response to mass phenomena often reveals an underlying assumption about the irrational and emotional behaviour of the ‘crowd’\textsuperscript{84}.

C. Critiques of Social Choice Theory and Representative Democracy

Social choice theory has been widely critiqued within normative democracy, particularly by those operating within the deliberative and agonistic traditions. While the critiques converge on a number of grounds, agonistic theorists depart from the theoretical pre-suppositions of social choice theory to a greater extent.

In ‘The Market and the Forum’, Jon Elster analyses social choice theory and deliberative democracy side by side. He enumerates a set of criteria necessary for the implementation of social choice theory, which as previously mentioned involve assumptions about the fixity, completeness and transitivity of preferences, the pre-political nature of the demos etc. He argues on a number of practical grounds that the expression of preferences may be subject to a far greater, and possibly ineliminable set of complications than social choice theory accounts for. For instance, he asserts that feasibility plays a role in how we would rank our preferences, even if the seemingly less feasible option would offer us more utility\textsuperscript{85}.

Influences such as feasibility, morality and conformity, among others, are not revealed when

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid P.23.
\textsuperscript{84} Nelson, F. (2015). Mob rules: Would-be leaders of the left are harnessing the mood of angry populism. Spectator, 327(9738), 14.
individuals state their preferences, which throws the idea of individual preferences as an expression of rational utility maximization into doubt. Moreover, it is unclear as to whether it would always be rational for individuals to express their preferences as they are, rather than attempt to vote strategically. This leads Elster to conclude that the social choice model is suitable for ‘the market’, but not for the ‘forum’, the distinctly political realm to which principles of popular sovereignty and equality should apply. While it may be able to eliminate inefficiency, creating justice cannot be done simply through aggregating individual preferences.

Elster’s critique is echoed within the literature on populism. A foundational claim of Mouffe and Laclau’s is that the individualised, market-based form of liberal democracy espoused by social choice theorists fails to take into account the necessity of the us/them divide. For Mouffe, it is precisely the unavoidability of antagonism in human society that necessitates the management of group conflict through liberal democratic politics. Social choice theory is grounded on the assumption that human beings have moved beyond mass movements towards a rational, individualized politics, mediated through a constitutionally safeguarded institutional framework. However, as is shown by Laclau, when enough people feel their demands cannot be resolved within the existing representative system, the populist call to reform and democratise the political landscape through the imposition of a new hegemonic formation becomes a likelihood. This is exemplified by the “new movements” of the 1960s and 70s, as was the focus of Laclau and Mouffe’s work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. The struggle of women, ethnic and sexual minorities for political representation demonstrated the importance of collective action in achieving

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88 Ibid P.22.
radical democratic transformation, something which would not have been possible within the existing political framework. The populist phenomenon is poorly explained by social theory in that it aims to expand the boundaries of ‘the public’, to provide a voice for those constituencies previously excluded from the political discourse. It does so by discursively constituting ‘the people’ by equivalentially linking together various political demands that have fallen outside the hegemonic political discourse set by the ‘elite’. As Kaltwasser rightly observes, populism stems from a recognition that the “people” is a historically contingent entity, representing a crystallized set of political and social power relations at a given time, it does not correlate with the population as a whole. Social choice theory fails to provide an answer to the boundary problem, instead treating the demos as consisting of pre-existing political subjects. The political subject as ‘given’, is an impossibility according to Mouffe, as individuals acquire their political subjectivity by means of collective identification, as I will elaborate on in Chapter 5. Mass mobilization of demands for further inclusivity and democratic representation, as is the focus of populist movements, will therefore necessarily appear as a dangerous excess to a normative conception of democracy focused on the aggregation of preferences of a fully formed people.

The binary Galston presents between the homogeneity of the populist conception of ‘the people’, and the irreducible plurality of the modern liberal democracy, used to dismiss populism as illiberal in many ways resembles Mouffe’s anti-essentialism. Citing Müller, Galston argues that “in circumstances of even partial liberty, different social groups will have different interests, values and origins”, homogeneity therefore provides an illusion of wholeness and stability, only capable of temporarily preventing a divergence between groups

within “essential” identities. Mouffe’s anti-essentialist stance also entails a rejection of identities as pre-existing, fixed categories. She states that “the ‘identity’ of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent, precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those discourses and dependent on specific forms of identification”94. If political identities are contingent, and shaped by hegemonic discursive practices, then membership of ‘the people’ remains open to contestation. The discursive formation of political subject is what allows her to conceive of a pluralist form of populism, whereby individuals come to recognize themselves as part of ‘the people’ through a discourse of democracy that unites their various demands95. It is on the grounds of this anti-essentialism that Mouffe distances herself from Schmitt’s call for a homogenous nation-state, which gains its internal cohesion and equality in relation to an unequal, excluded outsider. Mouffe contends that internal antagonism cannot be overcome, rather it is the productive tension within ‘the people’ that allows for the absorption of new democratic demands within the demos96.

Taggart’s argument that populism is a reaction to representative governance, which aims to do away with the need for institutional safeguards against direct majoritarian rule is also questionable. If populism is conceived of as the discursive formation of ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’, with the aim of radically reforming the political landscape in order to include previously excluded demographics, then this would not entail a departure from representation per se. This is particularly the case for advocates of agonistic democracy such as Mouffe, who argues that the liberal democratic framework should be capable of managing struggles between competing hegemonic formations, provided there is a consensus on the

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95 Ibid P.66.
liberty and equality of all participants in the democratic process.\footnote{Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? P.755.} In \textit{For A Left Populism}, she claims that an agonistic model of democracy would invigorate democratic participation directly within agonistic public spaces, but also allow for representative institutions to “retain, or regain, a decisive role”\footnote{Ibid P.69}.\footnote{Ibid P.751.}

\textbf{Chapter 3: Deliberative Democracy}

\textbf{A: The Deliberative Approach}

Deliberative democracy refers to a broad tradition within normative democratic theory, associated primarily with theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. Deliberative democrats frequently present their normative conception of democracy in response to the failings of social choice theory mentioned previously. Like Elster, they argue that the mode of individual rationality used to explain market behaviour lends itself poorly to political life, which should operate according to distinctly political principles of popular sovereignty, equality and justice. In order to achieve this, deliberative democrats envisage the “public sphere” as a site of deliberation, which when governed by a set of procedural guarantees or “pragmatic presuppositions”, should produce rational outcomes by means of consensus.\footnote{Ibid P.751.}

A fundamental question that the deliberative approach aims to answer, is how the principles of rationality and legitimacy can be reconciled. Benhabib articulates this as such:

\begin{quote}
“it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decisions making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes
\end{quote}
of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals”\textsuperscript{100}.

In the case of Habermas’ discourse model, democratic institutions can claim obligatory power on the assumption that they are impartial and produce outcomes in the interest of all. This comes about through the procedural guarantees introduced by Habermas to ensure that norms and institutional agreements are valid in that they are agreed upon by all. These procedures governing deliberation are such:

“1. Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chance to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate, and to open debate;

2. All have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation;

3. All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. There are no prima facie rules limiting the agenda or the conversation, nor the identity of the participants, as long as each excluded person or group can justifiably show that they are relevantly affected by the proposed norm under question”\textsuperscript{101}

Under this “ideal speech situation”, the role that power normally plays in setting the agenda, dictating who can speak and for how long within discourse is negated in favour of a situation in which the freedom and equality of all participants is guaranteed. The aim of deliberative democracy is to engage the public to participate in the creation of the laws by which they are governed. Deliberative democrats such as Habermas concede that the perfect implementation of such a situation is perhaps impossible, due to practical


\textsuperscript{101} Ibid
constraints on time, the willingness of all to participate etc. Instead, it operates as an ideal to which actually existing democratic practices can be oriented\textsuperscript{102}.

The relationship between deliberative democracy and populism is more ambiguous than that of social choice theory and representative democracy. While the consensus within the literature is that populism presents a threat, authors representing different branches of the tradition come to different conclusions as to whether it could be integrated within a deliberative framework\textsuperscript{103}. Müller’s anti-populist stance, as put forward in \textit{What is Populism?}, becomes clearer once his normative commitment to ‘constitutional patriotism’ is made explicit, something he does not reveal in the book. Constitutional patriotism is an idea first put forward by Habermas, that combines the constitutional commitments of liberal democracy, with an emphasis on deliberation as a means by which majority decisions can be justified. Müller views constitutional patriotism as a potential solution to the need for the state to justify its right to exercise coercive political power over minorities, in a modern, pluralistic context in which national identity cannot form the basis for such an “attachment”\textsuperscript{104}. This attachment should come about when citizens recognize the legitimacy of the law-making process, a set of “constitutional essentials” which they as free and equal co-inhabitants are equally compelled by, and responsible for maintaining\textsuperscript{105}. Much like the procedural guarantees governing Habermas’ ideal speech situation, a consensus on the terms of the constitution is intended to produce laws that are understood as just by those in the minority, who understand themselves as co-authors of the system of


\textsuperscript{103} In her article “Deliberation in Democracy’s Dark Times”, Curato argues for example that by expanding the role of ‘mini-publics’, those who feel resentment towards the establishment could take part in the deliberative process. This would act as a preventative measure against the “surge of populism” which she claims places liberal democracy under threat.


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid
rules by which these laws came about. Through this process a “constitutional culture” can come into being, where the terms of the constitution are subject to reasonable debate, thereby providing the political conditions under which “contained disagreement” or “limited diversity” can exist stably within the state\textsuperscript{106}. Müller claims that “polities subscribing to constitutional patriotism strengthen their defences against illiberal and antidemocratic challenges”\textsuperscript{107}, populism presenting one such a challenge.

B. Critiques of the Deliberative Approach

Mouffe argues against the deliberative approach on a number of grounds. Firstly, she argues that the idea of a rational and impartial dialogue requires a far greater degree of commonality between participants than deliberative democrats take into account. She claims, drawing on the work of Wittgenstein, that where there may appear to be agreement on matters of opinion following the deliberative process, this may be illusory due to the way our different forms of life inform language. In order for there to be consensus on an opinion, there would also have to be consensus on the understanding and use of language\textsuperscript{108}. For Wittgenstein, this would imply a shared form of life among participants, as speaking a language is an activity which takes place in a given communal setting, and is imbued with cultural concerns\textsuperscript{109}. This problematises the idea that procedures, or “constitutional essentials”, could be pre-emptively agreed upon and understood.

Mouffe invokes Wittgenstein again to challenge the validity of the agreements which come about as a result of deliberation. Wittgenstein states “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting that is at the bottom of the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid P.76.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid
language-game”\textsuperscript{110} Wittgenstein’s concept of \textit{Einstimmung} – meaning the fusion of voices through common life, explains the way in which agreement can be established despite a lack of agreement on significations (\textit{meinungen})\textsuperscript{111}. Reason is therefore less important than a common form a life in coming to a consensus, which is explained by the fact that when there is a disagreement on two fundamentally incompatible principles, agreement becomes a matter of persuasion. This has significant implications, as it allows for the reintroduction of rhetoric as a necessary feature of political deliberation. The rhetorical dimension of populism is often used as a means by which to dismiss it as irrational in comparison to consensus-based politics, which is portrayed as a process of rational deliberation between pre-existing political actors representing fixed positions, an idea clearly rooted in the deliberative tradition.

Wittgenstein’s claim fundamentally challenges the assumption that the rhetorical, and therefore also the affective dimension, could ever be reduced from the realm of politics, a conclusion which favours Mouffe’s agonistic framework.

Mouffe notes the similarities between her use of Wittgenstein to critique Habermas’ deliberative approach, and that taken by Cavell to critique the competing deliberative conception of politics put forward by Rawls. Rawls claims that “those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certain institutions are unjust or how others have injured them”\textsuperscript{112}, if they fail to do so, the conversation about this particular injustice can be closed. This assumes that the flaw is in the implementation of an otherwise sound institutional framework, which can be pointed out and resolved. What this fails to account for is those who feel deprived of a voice precisely due to the way the institutional framework has been designed. Cavell rightly raises the question, "what if there is a cry of justice that expresses a sense not of having lost out in an unequal yet fair struggle, but of having from the

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid P.750.
start being left out”? The idea that the procedural framework may systematically exclude certain voices problematises the deliberative ideal of an impartial discursive situation. Closing a conversation ultimately requires making a decision between options, a fact which the invocation of rules and principles merely obfuscates. Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy not only focuses on the nature of consensus reached through the deliberative process, but also on the ontological impossibility of the “ideal speech situation”. This concept refers to the procedural conditions governing intersubjective communication in the public sphere, designed to ensure that a rational consensus can be reached among participants. Under these conditions, all forms of communication such as appeals to emotion, coercion and rhetorical devices, that do not take the form of a reasoned premise based on the available information, are dismissed. Mouffe’s critique of the possibility of such a situation relies on Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan. Within an ideal speech situation, all speech is judged based on the extent to which it is reasonable. It is therefore reason which ties all of the free-floating signifiers which make up language together, separating the ‘rational’ and therefore permitted, from the ‘irrational’ and excluded within the symbolic field. Reason therefore fulfils the role of the ‘master signifier’, in that it becomes the point at which the chain of signification ends, i.e. every argument within made with ideal speech situation can be justified with reference to reason. This is due to the fact that in order for the master signifier to function as the end of signification, it must be self-referential. Much like the concepts of God, or money, the privileged position of reason in discourse cannot be justified without referring to reason as its measure of value. Its presence is therefore transcendental, rather than rationally justifiable. For Žižek, this intervention of the master signifier into the symbolic field is authoritarian, in that through the process of

114 Ibid P.751.
“quilting” signifiers together, it “distorts” and “curves” them, making the very establishment of the discourse of reason an act of symbolic violence. As was mentioned in the discussion of hegemony in the previous chapter, master signifiers are necessarily empty, in that they do not have a direct referent, instead serving the purpose of distinguishing the discourse and the signifiers within it from that which it is not. Once reason is subtracted, the equivalential bond linking the signifiers within the discourse together is removed, and the symbolic field “de-quilts”. Habermas’ ideal speech situation relies on pragmatic presuppositions, which aim to ensure that discourse will be reasonable, yet Lacan’s insight into how discourse is structured demonstrates that these presuppositions are authoritarian in that they enforce an arbitrary limit on speech.

Although her critiques are valid in themselves, it could justifiably be argued that Mouffe’s over-simplifies and caricatures deliberative democracy somewhat by reducing its aims to the generation of a perfect consensus. As Habermas makes clear, even were the ideal speech situation to be an ontological impossibility, it is something deliberation should aim towards, rather than hope to achieve. I argue that Mouffe’s wholesale dismissal of deliberative democracy is in fact unnecessary for her claims concerning populism to stand. For example, her argument concerning the role of reason as a master signifier is compelling in light of Müller’s constitutional patriotism. Müller claims that the terms of the constitution should be subject to reasonable debate, yet as Mouffe argues, when reason becomes both the scope of the debate, and the measure of value, it becomes difficult to assert what constitutes a reasonable argument. The exclusion of voices who present a radical alternative as “unreasonable” limits the scope for contestation. Populism, as understood by Mouffe and

116 Ibid
Laclau, aims to radically transform the political landscape, replacing the existing hegemonic formation with another, in which case constitutional patriotism exercises a degree of authoritarianism in that it would not permit such a challenge to the established order. This does not however mean that populism is incompatible with liberal democracy. The agonistic conception of democracy put forward by Mouffe accepts the inevitability of antagonism between collective identities with incompatible aims\textsuperscript{119}. By removing reason as the standard by which political arguments are judged, it opens the potential populist challengers to the establishment to share liberal institutions with those they oppose, provided there is a consensus on the values of liberty and equality. If the aim of democracy is to manage antagonism, rather than to generate consensus, populism cannot be dismissed as a threat for not achieving the latter. The emergence of populism as a recurring political phenomenon within liberal democracies demonstrates an irreducible aspect of ‘the political’ that the rationalist framework disregards: conflict between adversarial collective identities. The task is then to expound a conception of democracy which is not centred on reason or geared towards the production of consensus, but yet does not violate the liberal commitment to pluralism.

Chapter 4: Co-Originality v Productive Contradiction

A: Rummens’ Challenge

Rummens engages with the subject of populism from within the deliberative tradition. His claim against the agonistic model employed by Mouffe has significant implications, as if it holds, the case for deliberative democracy becomes much greater. As it could be argued

that populism does not function within a deliberative framework, it therefore presents a potential threat to liberal democracy.

Rummens highlights the intersubjective and communicative model of popular sovereignty employed by deliberative democrats. He distinguishes it from pure liberalism (or social choice theory) – in which the focus is on individual citizens and the legitimacy of the regime in terms of safeguards it provides for the pre-political (natural) rights these citizens are supposed to enjoy\textsuperscript{120}. This is because under the deliberative model espoused by Habermas, liberty rights are not pre-political, but are enjoyed only insofar as they are granted by the demos as sovereign. He also distinguishes it from pure democracy – where the focus is on the political community with a common identity, effectively the political subject writ large, capable of expressing a common will\textsuperscript{121}. Rummens equates populism with pure democracy, as the irreducible plurality of free and equal citizens inherent to liberal democracy is reduced by the need for homogeneity among “the people”, in order for them to be spoken for directly.

His opposition to both pure liberalism and pure democracy come as a result of his commitment to the co-originality thesis. Termed the “co-originality of public and private autonomy” by Habermas\textsuperscript{122}, this entails that individual liberty (private autonomy) and popular sovereignty (public autonomy) presuppose each other, thereby aiming to solve classical tension between liberalism and democracy. Habermas explains the reasoning behind this principle as such,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid
\end{flushleft}
“Citizens can make appropriate use of their public autonomy, as guaranteed by political rights, only if they are sufficiently independent in virtue of an equally protected private autonomy in their life conduct. But members of society actually enjoy their equal private autonomy to an equal extent – e.g. distributed individual liberties have “equal value” for them – only if as a citizen they make an appropriate use of their political autonomy.”

Citizens have “autonomy” in the sense that as addressees of the law they must also understand themselves as its author. However, this autonomy does not grant them the freedom to make any decision they like. Rather, as decisions can only come about through consensus following a deliberative process among equals, the only decision that can be reached is one that is reasonable, in that it is in the equal interest of each. This self-legislation ensures that a relationship is maintained between will and reason, under which the will of the people cannot be wielded as an oppressive power against those in the minority. It is on these grounds that Rummens claims populism and liberal democracy are incompatible. On the liberal dimension, he claims that populism tends to undermine the individual liberties of parts of the citizenry and disregards constitutional checks and balances. While on the democratic dimension, populism fails to recognize the legitimacy of its opponents and presents itself as the role representative of the true people.

The co-originality thesis is presented in opposition to the Schmittian claim that liberalism and democracy are fundamentally in tension with each other. According to Schmitt, the liberal commitment to inalienable natural rights contradicts the democratic commitment to

125 Ibid P.9.
126 Ibid
popular sovereignty. Democracy requires drawing up a demos, which necessarily entails delineating the boundary between citizens and non-citizens. Within this demos, citizens are substantively equal, yet this can only be the case under the condition that they are unequal to non-citizens, otherwise the distinction would be meaningless. Conversely, the liberal emphasis on the individual as the bearer of inalienable rights tends towards a form of cosmopolitanism. However, the equality of citizens within a cosmopolitan system would be an abstract rather than a political notion, as it would not correlate with membership of a community. It is for this reason that democracy takes ‘the people’, rather than humanity as a whole as its basis, expressed in the modern day through the principle that rights are awarded on the basis of citizenship. Furthermore, the liberal commitment to pluralism is equated with the disintegration of political unity within the state, and a return to the ‘state of nature’. Schmitt claims that in order for the demos to be a political community, it requires a degree of homogeneity. This could be ethnicity, nationality, or adherence to a particular religious or ideological worldview, but in essence the political community must be “given”. Liberal democracy is therefore considered by Schmitt to be a contradiction in terms.

Mouffe uses the work of Schmitt as the foundation for her thoughts on liberal democracy. While she agrees that liberalism and democracy represent conflicting “pillars”, rather than co-original principles, she does not share Schmitt’s scepticism about the feasibility of liberal democracy. As was discussed in Chapter 1, Mouffe conceives of ‘the people’ as a discursively constituted historic bloc, rather than an existing community. It is this

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128 Ibid P.22.
129 Ibid P.31.
130 Ibid P.29.
argument that allows her to bypass the need for homogeneity among the demos, instead allowing for the creation of the demos through a process of collective identification with a particular hegemonic formation. As the idea of homogenous political community is an impossibility, antagonism will exist within the people, not just between the people and those outside as imagined by Schmitt. These antagonisms do not necessarily pose a threat to democracy, provided that a consensus over the principles of freedom of equality exists to transform these antagonisms into agonisms. This “thin consensus” allows conflicting hegemonic projects, such as social democracy and neoliberalism, to occupy the same political space. In doing so, the tension between liberalism and democracy becomes a productive one, as the question of who is contained within the demos will be continuously contested by new democratic demands. By conceiving of democracy and liberalism as separate pillars, Mouffe is also better able to explain the rise of populism as the result of an over-emphasis on the liberal pillar, at the expense of democracy. She points towards the technocratic style of governance favoured under neoliberalism as an expression of this. Populism therefore seeks to restore the balance between the pillars by emphasising popular sovereignty.

Unlike Müller and Mudde, Rummens engages directly with the contributions of Mouffe and Laclau. Rummens presents a head-on challenge to the very idea of agonistic pluralism put forward by Mouffe, as he claims that by characterizing democracy as a hegemonic power struggle, the “empty seat of power” necessary for the functioning of democracy would be filled. To make this argument, Rummens draws upon the work of Lefort, another influential theorist who argues that liberalism and democracy presuppose each

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other. Lefort’s co-originality thesis differs from that of Habermas, he argues that liberal democracy protects the freedom that people are confronted with in the absence of divine rule. Under monarchy, power was incorporated into the person of the prince, he represented the unity of the people in his whole person. As this power was unconditional, the spheres of power, law and knowledge were therefore bound together, providing a degree of certainty to social life. As Lefort argues “a latent but effective knowledge of what one meant to the other existed throughout the social”\(^\text{137}\), as the “seat of power” was permanently filled by the monarch. Under democracy, this fundamentally changes. A fundamental tenet of democratic rule is that positions of political power are only held temporarily, and are subject to continuous contestation. Those who hold positions of political power therefore temporarily represent the people, but cannot embody the unity of the people within themselves. The people necessarily remain fragmented, as the will of the majority represented in government is not equated with the will of the whole, the minority cannot be excluded as a part of the people. While politicians compete for the opportunity to temporarily represent the majority, the “seat of power” as the symbolic locus of political power can never be filled.

Rummens alleges that a fundamental contradiction exists between the horizontal democratic struggle envisaged by Lefort, which leaves the “seat of power” empty, and the vertical struggle between hegemonic formations that he attributes to Laclau, which he argues fills this seat\(^\text{138}\). He argues that the “synecdochal” movement described by Laclau, whereby “the people” as the particular, claims to represent the universal i.e. the populus, suppresses the distinction between the two\(^\text{139}\). Those who are not part of the people, or as


\(^{139}\) Ibid
Rummens terms them “the plebs”, are excluded from the populus\textsuperscript{140}. Mouffe relies on liberal democracy to recognise the “constitutive gap” between the people and its identification, yet Rummens argues that through this process the symbolic locus of power becomes occupied\textsuperscript{141}.

Secondly, he claims that Mouffe’s agonistic framework, in which a common symbolic framework ensures a thin consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality, does not do enough to resolve this tension. Rummens distinguishes between two different political struggles, the first being the struggle to establish and maintain the democratic regime, in which the hegemonic formation around the ethico-political values of liberty and equality would play a fundamental role\textsuperscript{142}. However, he claims that a second political struggle that occurs once this democratic symbolic framework has been established, should no longer be hegemonic. If hegemony represents a rupture in the conceptual space, a form of discontinuity in the symbolic field, then on what basis would the shared commitment towards liberty and equality be upheld\textsuperscript{143}. This is particularly the case seeing as according to Mouffe, these values are contingent, not co-original. Yet for the agonistic framework to function, it should require a degree of discursive continuity.

**B: Mouffe’s Response**

In order for populism and liberal democracy to be compatible, the tensions raised by Rummens must be resolved. If not, then his defence of a co-original conception of liberalism and democracy will render my thesis invalid. However, I argue that Mouffe provides an answer to these tensions, that while not wholly satisfying, provides enough of a basis to allow me to proceed. She begins by disputing Rummens’ reading of Lefort. While Rummens uses

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid P. 383.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid
Lefort to argue that the majority must be distinguished from the people as a whole, and can therefore never fill the ‘empty place of power’, she argues instead that the place of power is always occupied\textsuperscript{144}. This occupation is necessary in order to have a political order, but what distinguishes democracy from totalitarianism is that the occupation is always temporary and contestable. The fact that during the “synecdochal movement” described by Laclau, the “people” come to fill the space of power and represent the populis, does not in itself render populism a threat to liberal democracy, provided that this occupation is temporary\textsuperscript{145}. However, as previously stated, Rummens claims that due to the hegemonic nature of the struggle for political power envisaged by Mouffe, there is no guarantee that the successful party will only occupy the seat of power temporarily\textsuperscript{146}. In making this argument, Rummens misapprehends the nature of hegemony. Hegemonic formations are particularities presenting themselves as universalities, they are necessarily incomplete and therefore will always remain contestable. Hegemonic neoliberalism was successful in occupying the locus of power, reshaping the political landscape and asserting its ideology as common sense, yet when faced with crisis the contradictions inherent to it come to the fore. Populism is an attempt to present a certain, contingent understanding of the people as a whole, that will ultimately be unsuccessful, and the struggle for hegemony will restart. Mouffe echoes Lefort’s position, that the ‘original division of society’ cannot be resolved\textsuperscript{147}.

Rummens’ most compelling claim against agonistic pluralism is arguably the contradiction between the common symbolic framework that allows for a consensus on liberalism and


\textsuperscript{145} Ibid


equality, and the struggle between hegemonic formations\textsuperscript{148}. Mouffe’s response to this is that the symbolic order, which is always a hegemonic order, is a specific articulation of practices around certain “nodal points”\textsuperscript{149}. The democratic revolution introduced the nodal points of freedom and equality, which are now inextricably bound to the way we conceive of political life, regardless of the extent to which they are adhered to. Hegemonic discourses question how we understand these nodal points and put them into practice. While the fact that freedom and equality have become so embedded in our way of thinking about politics does not guarantee that freedom and equality will be respected, this does not render Mouffe’s theory invalid.

Chapter 5. Agonistic Democracy

A. From Antagonism to Agonism

Mouffe presents agonistic democracy as a model of politics designed to acknowledge the antagonistic nature of “the political”, and manage it within a liberal democratic framework. Mouffe uses the term agonism to mean a relation between adversaries, who share a thin consensus on respect for the freedom and equality of their opponents\textsuperscript{150}. The aim is to convert the friend/enemy distinction used by Schmitt, which forms the basis of political antagonisms, into an agonistic distinction between political adversaries\textsuperscript{151}. This normative theory provides a means by which conflicting hegemonic formations, with fundamentally incompatible aims that cannot be resolved by rational or consensual means, to coexist. The public sphere is thus treated as a “battleground on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility of a final reconciliation”\textsuperscript{152}. By ensuring that it is the public sphere where these


battles take place, the risk of actual conflict is diminished. For this reason, Mouffe claims that agonistic confrontation, of which the populist challenge is a form, is not a threat to, but an inherent part of democracy\textsuperscript{153}. Democracy requires a consensus on the principle of freedom and equality exists in order for the decisions it reaches to be legitimate. Yet at the same time, democracy must also enable agonistic conflict between radically different political positions.

Mouffe highlights the fact that consensus-based conceptions of democracy, which present the centrist position as the rational solution to ideological extremes, cannot transform antagonisms into agonisms. She uses the example of the right-wing populist FPÖ party in Austria, whose essentialist identification of “the people” pitted “native” Austrians against foreigners\textsuperscript{154}. The party emerged as a result of a power sharing agreement between the centre-left and centre-right parties implemented after WWII, under which all government posts were evenly distributed, and all decisions were achieved by consensus. The FPÖ was able to exploit this lack of valid political choice by presenting itself as the only valid alternative through which grievances against the establishment could be channelled. Their nationalist aims clearly contradict liberal democratic commitments to freedom and equality\textsuperscript{155}, yet the only response from the centrist coalition was to morally denounce them as evil extremists. Such a phenomenon has not been limited to Austria, in fact the emergence of illiberal forms of right-populism in Europe has largely come about as a result of a narrowing of the party-political spectrum\textsuperscript{156}. Conversely, the adversarial two-party system in the United Kingdom explains the lack of a rise of a populist alternative within the same time frame\textsuperscript{157}.

\textsuperscript{155} See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/austria/1316634/Nazi-rule-trivialised-by-Haider-court-rules.html
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid
Mouffe argues that by moving towards an agonistic conception of democracy, the rise of illiberal forms of populism can be dealt with in political rather than moral terms. She claims that advocates of a rational consensus-based form of politics do not in fact overcome the we/they distinction, they merely disguise it in moral terms. Populist parties are morally condemned as evil and irrational, as demonstrated by the *cordon sanitaire* tactics often employed against them\(^\text{158}\). The mobilization of passions, which is used as a way of delineating populist parties from rational “mainstream” parties, is also a feature of the anti-populist consensus. Denouncing the “evil populist threat” has a strong affective, unifying dimension. It is used to establish the collective identity of the “we” against the them. Yet, as populist parties are associated with illiberalism, this moral denunciation is acknowledged as the “rational thing to do”\(^\text{159}\). Mouffe claims that this moralization of politics has come about as a result of the failure of consensus-based, rational politics to manage antagonisms.

### B. Collective Identity and the role of Affect

A central claim made by advocates of ‘radical democracy’, such as Mouffe, Laclau and Stavrakakis, is that the we/they division cannot be overcome. Consensus-based democratic theories present a binary between the rational/individual on the one hand, and the irrational/group on the other\(^\text{160}\). The need for collective identification is portrayed as an irrational, pre-Enlightenment hangover, capable of being resolved institutionally. However, it is the belief that the need for collective identification can be overcome that renders consensus-based democratic theories ill-equipped to answer the question of group phenomena such as populism. For Mouffe, the reason behind this failure is clear; using the work of Carl Schmitt, she argues that the liberal commitment to achieving universal consensus is doomed to fail, due to the persistence of antagonism and the inherent need for collective

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\(^\text{159}\) Ibid
identification\textsuperscript{161}. Here, Mouffe’s distinction between politics as the ontic – describing concrete practices, and “the political” as the ontological – describing the dimension of antagonism inherent to human societies, is instructive\textsuperscript{162}.

Mouffe uses the concept of “the political” in order to demonstrate the misguidedness of the neoliberal “end of history thesis”. According to neoliberal ideology, which following a Gramscian analysis of hegemony presents itself as common sense, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the spread of globalization had ushered in a new political epoch in which liberal democracy had emerged as the preponderant political system. This in turn fostered the idea of a world without enemies, a post-ideological situation in which human beings had emerged from irrational collective identities, and could govern themselves by means of rational consensus. According to this theory, democracy should therefore provide the institutional means through which impartial procedures could be implemented in order to achieve a rational conception of the common good. Hostility and antagonism would consequently be resigned to the past. However, as Stavrakakis argues, “simply put, already from Greek antiquity, antagonism and polarization have been seen as the unavoidable predicament of a democratic polity—indeed as a challenge to be actively assumed and not as a symptom of a political pathology to be eliminated.”\textsuperscript{163}

As well as subscribing to Schmitt’s views concerning the tension between liberalism and democracy, as discussed in the previous chapter, Mouffe is also able to use it critique the consensus based-forms of democratic theory mentioned previously. Schmitt argues that the liberal focus on the individual is antithetical to what Mouffe terms the political, he claims that “In a very systematic fashion liberal thought evades or ignores state and politics and moves

instead in a typical recurring polarity of two heterogenous spheres, namely ethics and economics, intellect and trade, education and property”\textsuperscript{164}. The utility-maximizing individual of social choice theory, and the individual who takes part in rational deliberation according to deliberative democracy are unfit starting points for a realm of human life fundamentally driven by distinctions between friend and enemy. For Schmitt this distinction is unavoidable, it is the conflict and antagonism associated with it that defines the political domain; “every religious, moral, economic, ethical or other anthesis transforms itself into a political one if it sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy”\textsuperscript{165}. Mouffe employs Henry Staten’s notion of the ‘constitutive outside’, used to describe concepts of ‘\textit{supplement}’, ‘\textit{trace}’ and ‘\textit{différance}’ used by Derrida to highlight how the friend/enemy distinction arises out of the process of identification\textsuperscript{166}. This concept highlights the fact that the creation of an identity involves the creation of a difference, as for example there cannot be a ‘we’ without reference to a ‘them’. The issue arises in that the construction of this difference is often done on a hierarchical basis, as in the case of the examples mentioned by Derrida: “form and matter”, “white and black”, “man and woman” etc. In political terms, it makes clear why the process by which the ‘other’ is created can lead to antagonism. For Schmitt, this tension between friends and enemies is what necessitates a bounded, homogenous demos, an idea fundamentally opposed to the liberal principle of pluralism. Yet, it is at this point at which Mouffe and Schmitt diverge. The fact that Mouffe maintains a commitment to pluralism is central to my argument concerning the compatibility of her conception of left-populism with liberal democracy.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid P.12.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid P.15.
As Mouffe claims in *On the Political*, her approach involves “using Schmitt against Schmitt”\(^{167}\). By this she means using his critique of liberal individualism to propose a new understanding of liberal democratic politics, rather than rejecting it as he does. What she adopts from Schmitt is the we/they distinction which arises out of social relations and forms the basis for political conflict between groups. The relational nature of political identity is paramount, as it informs her anti-essentialist idea of political identities, which are formed through the process of social relations, rather than preceding them\(^{168}\). It is this anti-essentialism that allows for her to conceive of left-populism in an inclusive way, as it does not involve the mobilization of the “working classes”, as a given entity characterized by their position within the relations of production, but rather it allows for the production of a new hegemonic formation uniting various democratic struggles through the process of identification with “the people”\(^{169}\). As described in Chapter 1, the “people” is discursively constituted through hegemonic practices, and is therefore contingent and ever-shifting. What she consequently rejects is Schmitt’s insistence on the need for a homogenous demos, based on his idea that the friend/enemy distinction was the only potential form the antagonism on groups could take.

The need for collective identification is central to Mouffe’s theory of agonistic democracy. She maintains that the we/they dynamic cannot be overcome through a transition towards rational individualism, as is imagined by deliberative and social choice theorists. This is due to the psychological need for collective identification, based on the essential role played by affect and emotion in politics. For Mouffe, the individual is not the fundamental unit of analysis in politics, as politics is a matter of struggle between groups advancing different

\(^{167}\) Ibid P.14.
\(^{169}\) Ibid P.105.
visions of society. The crowd is therefore significant for Mouffe, as it embodies an essential human psychological drive to act in unison, feel a sense of collective identity and political agency in numbers. In order to make this claim, she draws upon the findings of psychoanalysis. Freud claims that collective identity – the “we”, is the result of libidinal investment in the form of love (Eros) which is a necessary correlative to man’s aggressive tendencies characterized by the Death instinct. It is this libidinal investment that allows of communities to develop a sense of cohesion with one another, however it is precisely this emotional investment in the community that causes an aggressive need to defend it.

This idea is further developed by Lacan using his concept of jouissance, meaning enjoyment beyond Freud’s pleasure principle (the instinctive seeking of pleasure and avoidance of pain for biological and psychological purposes). As is argued by Stavrakakis, the power of socio-political identification is explained by the fact that it provides a sense of enjoyment for the social agent. He states that “support of social fantasies is partly rooted in the ‘jouissance of the body’. What is at stake in these fields, according to Lacanian theory, is not only symbolic coherence and discursive closure but also enjoyment. the jouissance animating human desire.” Žižek’s use of jouissance to explain the appeal of nationalism helps to elucidate Stavrakakis’ argument. He claims that communities are held together not only by a point of symbolic identification, but that their bonds always imply a shared relation towards a thing, which in the case of nationalism, is the nation as Enjoyment incarnated. It is the emotional investment in the nation as our source of Enjoyment that we view outsider as a threat to “our way of life”, as those who wish to steal “our Enjoyment” from us. Nationalism is something which although irrational from the perspective of the rationalistic framework, has

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a particularly strong affective dimension, considering that the national cause is ultimately the way subjects of a given ethnic community organise their enjoyment through national myths. However, were it not for the strength of such bonds fostered through a shared sense of enjoyment, the nation-state itself could not exist. Here agonistic democracy succeeds where deliberative democracy and social choice theory do not, in that the psychological drive towards collective identification explains why populism’s appeal to ‘the people’ is so attractive.

If collective identification forms the basis of “the political”, as is argued by Mouffe, and if this process is an unavoidable facet of human social life, then the “affective dimension” becomes a central feature of political mobilization. Mouffe argues that in order to bring about the collective identification necessary for the formation of “the people”, individuals have to be externally “affected”, prompting their desire to act. This is where the highly rhetorical style of populism, which is often used as a means by which to dismiss it as irrational, plays a fundamental role. The “affective” and “discursive” dimensions are inherently linked, as it is not through rational argumentation, but through “language games” that democratic forms of individuality are constructed. Signifiers such as “the people” acquire new meaning when employed within a discursive field used to tie together the demands of the previously excluded, it becomes a shared identity through which they can channel their grievances. In order for people to become political engaged, it is therefore necessary for them to passionately identify with a political identity – such as that of the “people”. This is even acknowledged to a certain extent by Müller, who argues that “the simple fact is that “anger” and “frustration” might not always be very articulate – but they are not “just emotions” in the sense of being completely divorced from thought.”

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174 Ibid P.75.
democracy fail to acknowledge the great extent to which affect, as opposed to reason, is what drives “the political”.

The use of “affect” as a means of mobilizing people is achieved by populist parties through the use of rhetorical devices. As Laclau explains, populist parties employ metaphor as a necessary means of equivalently connecting various democratic demands, i.e. wrongs suffered vis-à-vis the oligarchy are connected by means of analogy through the experience of oligarchic power. The very discursive formation of the people is a form of synecdoche, in that it employs one part of the populus, “the people”, as a signifier to represent the whole, as was illustrated in the discussion of hegemony in the previous chapter. It is in this sense that the rhetorical style of populism cannot be separated from its content, as it is through the employment of rhetoric that the social field and the subjects within it are constructed.

Theorists such as Minogue, who treat rhetoric as pure adornment of language, distinct from the substantive content of ideology, rely on a classical distinction between rhetoric and logic that does not hold. This classical distinction treats rhetoric in opposition to “a notion of social actors as constituted around well-defined interests and rationally negotiating with an external milieu.” It is on such grounds that those who analyse populism within the rationalist framework conclude that “the image of social agents whose identities are constituted around diffuse populist symbols can only be an expression of irrationality.” This is certainly the case for social choice theorists, who treat both the actors as political subjects, and the preference they express – meaning the ways in which they negotiate their external milieu, as given. However, for radical democrats such as Mouffe and Laclau, rhetorical devices constitute populist subjects; this is what allows them to employ an anti-essentialist conception

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177 Ibid P.72.
178 Ibid P.12.
179 Ibid
of the people. It is also the case for deliberative democrats, who assume the individual as their basic unit of analysis and proceed with the aim of producing rational consensus among them. Yet, as I claim the divide between us/them is the very foundation of the “the political”, an agonistic conception of democracy is required to manage the conflicts between collective identities, rather than replace them with rational deliberation.

**Conclusion:**

Populism is often presented as inherently threatening to liberal democracy. As I have demonstrated, this occurs on two grounds. Firstly, theorists employ definitions of populism that are demonstrably insufficient to understand the nature of populism, as they attribute it with a particular substantive or ideological content. This fails to account for the broad range of manifestations of populism, from across the ideological spectrum. In response to this inadequacy, it is more appropriate to treat populism as a “way of doing politics”. Theorists such as Mudde and Müller take this first step, but then argue that populism is incompatible with liberal commitments to pluralism, as they present themselves as the sole representative of the people. This reveals a second assumption, namely that these theorists view liberal democracy through a normative framework, either social choice theory, representative democracy or deliberative democracy, that leads them to this conclusion. Mouffe attempts to discredit social choice theory, representative democracy and deliberative democracy on several grounds. She claims that their prioritisation of reason over affect, compromise and consensus over division, and the individual over the group means that they fail to apprehend the nature of ‘the political’, which, based on her reading of Schmitt, is the realm of struggle between collective identities. Populism presents one such a struggle, which according to Mouffe and Laclau’s definition, aims to fundamentally transform the political landscape through the introduction of a new hegemonic discourse. As populism is a style of doing
politics, rather than a specific ideology, this struggle could lead to greater inclusion within the demos, or exclusion along essentialist lines.

While I argue that Mouffe’s characterisation of the other normative democratic theories is unfairly simplistic, her theory of agonistic democracy has clear advantages in understanding the populist phenomena. As agonistic democracy takes the ineradicability of antagonism between conflicting hegemonic starting points as its starting point, it is better equipped to understand populism than those that aim to resolve conflict through reconciliation. Agonistic democracy aims to transform the friend/enemy division between hegemonic projects into a struggle between political adversaries. This requires a limited consensus between both sides on the principle of liberty and equality, which if implemented successfully, should lead to a reinvigorated democratic culture in which voters are presented with real alternatives, thus presenting a vision of populism within a pluralistic liberal democracy. This is not to say that all populist movements meet this criteria, particularly those that explicitly reject the validity of their political opponents, but rather that populist style of doing politics is not incompatible with a commitment to liberal values.

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