RESEARCH

Populism and its Horizon of Expectations: Threat to, Critique of, or Remedy for Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

Populism is variously understood to be a threat to, a critique of, or a remedy for liberal democracy. The normative consequences of populism, however, are not simply empirical questions. This paper contends that the normativity of populism is entailed already in its conceptualization; it is conditioned by the way in which scholars theorize populism, liberal democracy and the relationship between the two. This paper offers an examination of the *latent normativity* in conceptions of populism. By mapping the terrain of normative disputes within populism studies, I seek to contribute to a critical understanding of the conceptuality of populism.

Keywords: Populism, Liberal Democracy, Political concept, Normativity, Horizon of expectations

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1. Introduction

The continual debates over definitions of populism and approaches to its study are signs of a living and vibrant field. The vigor and growth of this transdisciplinary field of populism studies, however, also call for moments of self-reflection and taking stock of the motions that have animated the field; not to provide definitive resolution, but to mark signposts and open avenues of research. A cartography of the ongoing debate on the varieties of theoretical approaches and conceptualization of populism has been attended to (Gidron/Bonikowski 2014; de la Torre 2018; Pappas 2016). Some scholars have also traced a genealogy of the concept (Skenderovic 2017; Fuentes 2020). What remains not clearly mapped is the debate around the normative imaginaries of populism.

In the definitional contestations over populism, scholars problematize the conceptualizations of populism from mostly an empirical standpoint: the central question being whether the concept enables discrimination of empirical phenomena.[1] Furthermore in contestations over populisms' effects and consequences, the answer is again derived empirically (Kaltwasser 2012). As Michael Bernhard and Daniel O'Neill (2022) suggest, study of populism should reorient itself to focus on the behavior of populist actors, especially when in power. This, however, is not as straightforward as it seems.

The difficulties around assessing the effects and consequences of populism begin not with case selection, but in the moment of conceptualization. The divergences in thinking about what populism does arise out of the way in which scholars theorize populism, liberal democracy and the relationship between the two. The deployment of the concept of populism and the theorization of its relation to liberal democracy involves normative commitments. Scholarship on populism thus necessarily requires an examination and evaluation of the *latent normativity* in the varied conceptualities of populism.

This paper seeks to map the terrain of normative disputes within the field of populism studies. In doing this, I seek to contribute to a critical understanding of the very conceptuality of populism. I will begin first by putting forward a theoretical

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1   The whole debate around a 'minimal' or 'complex' definition of populism is precisely concerned with setting the criteria for case selection (Mudde 2004). De la Torre and Mazzoleni (2019) and Diehl (2022) offer formulations critical of Mudde.

method for conceptual analysis, and then apply this approach to major recent theorizations of populism. In conclusion, I will offer a heuristic schema for interpreting and evaluating the normative conceptualizations of populism. I underline the limitations on this procedure by pointing out that the field of populism studies is extremely broad and my schema cannot adequately capture the myriad axes of debates and contestations about populism – instead, it attempts to focus on one, albeit fundamental, axis of contestation: between populism and liberal democracy.[2] Many scholars with similar normative positions on what populism means for or does to liberal democracy might disagree on other aspects and features of populism. My ambition is therefore limited and is aimed principally at de-mythologizing the claims of 'empirical' or 'positivistic' studies of populism by exposing their unreflective conceptuality.

2. An Essentially Contested *Political* Concept

W.B. Gallie's timeless definition of essentially contested concepts which "inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users," remains instructive (Gallie 1955: 169). Essentially contested concepts entail internal complexity, that is there are distinct approaches to conceptualizing them and these approaches have their exemplars who reciprocally recognize the different strands. Further, there is an openness and competition in scholarship around the definition, analysis and judgement of the concepts. And finally, there are different criteria of *appraisiveness* – i.e. users endow the concept with different kinds of normative valence.

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2   Conceptual debates on populism entail other substantive issues that cannot be adequately encapsulated within the populism contra liberal democracy frame. One major issue in debates on populism revolve around concerns about pluralism and monism. This discussion has implications for the normativity of populism in relation to liberal democracy, but it is difficult to map within the heuristic schema I have developed. Essentially this debate is about representation. While Müller (2016), Urbinati (2019), and Arato and Cohen (2021) hold that populism is a monistic form of politics, Laclau (2005a), Stavrakakis (2017a) argue for heterogeneity and pluralism. On the other hand, there are matters of debate within advocates of populism: for example, one common criticism levelled against Laclau's equation of populism with democracy is his uncompromising insistence on the necessity of leadership. While some have made the case for the possibility of populism from below, what Paolo Gerbaudo (2017: 18) calls "populism of the leaderless people," or what Laura Grattan (2016) calls a left "grassroots populism." Laclau, and also Mouffe, remain convinced that a collective will "cannot be constructed without some form of crystallization of common affects" in the form of "affective bonds with a charismatic leader" (Mouffe 2018: 70). In his concluding remarks to On Populist Reason, Laclau even launches a scathing polemic against Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2009) notion of a leaderless "multitude" as the subject of democracy, which Laclau argues is politically ineffective and incapable of articulating a collective will (Laclau 2005a: 242-243).

Populism certainly fits the bill. It is an essentially contested concept with different theoretical conceptualizations and distinct strands of empirical research. The 'ideational' (Mudde 2004; Mudde 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017; Hawkins 2018), 'strategic' (Weyland 2001; Weyland 2017; Roberts 2015; Barr 2018; Pappas 2019), and 'discursive'[3] (approaches are well known and have scholars dedicated to these approaches, as well as some who are self-consciously synthetic in their approach.[4]

What I wish to primarily stress, however, is the fact that populism is an essentially contested *political* concept. It is instructive to follow the earliest, and in some ways, most insightful, theorization of "political concepts" that comes from Carl Schmitt. As he stressed in *The Concept of the Political*, "all political concepts, images and terms have a polemical meaning" (Schmitt 2007[1932]: 30). They refer to concrete political struggles and conflicts. The contested nature of political concepts is not simply restricted to definitional struggles, but to actual political antagonism. Political concepts dynamically reconfigure space of associations and dissociations among social groups, and the moment the concepts cease to produce these effects, they cease to be political.[5]

Political concepts entail not only contestations over definition but are discursively deployed in actual political struggle. William Connolly stresses this point in *The Terms of Political Discourse* (1993). Political concepts always intertwine descriptive and normative dimensions. They not only constitute and shape our understanding of political reality, but are also sites of disagreement, conflict and polemics precisely through which they acquire significance. Those who use political concepts disagree about the definition, but also crucially, about the value of the practices and actions *prescribed* by the concept.

Populism is a living political concept *par excellence* because it refers to ongoing concrete political struggles within and against liberal democracy (Finchelstein/Urbinati 2018). It is a concept used by defenders of liberal democracy against actors who

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3   The discursive approach includes two distinct strands which are worth differentiating. The first can be called the Laclauean strand which conceives of populism as a political logic of discursively constructing the "people" as a historical political actor (Laclau 2005a; Laclau 2005 b; Stavrakakis 2017a.; Mouffe 2018; Katsambekis 2022) The other strand within the "discursive approach" is what is better called the stylistic approach which focuses not on the construction of the "people" but the use of rhetoric and style of communication by populist actors (Moffitt/Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016; Norris/Inglehart 2019; Waisbord 2018).
4   There are approaches that mostly synthesize strategic and ideational (Urbinati 2014; Urbinati 2019, Müller 2016. Rosanvallon 2021), and few that all three (Arato/Cohen 2021).
5   Schmitt argues the political concepts "are bound to a concrete situation; the result is a friend-enemy grouping, and they turn into empty and ghostlike abstractions when this situation disappears." (Schmitt 30).

pose a threat to that political imaginary, or it is used by those who find liberal democracy itself to be undemocratic and see in populism a corrective or even democratizing force. Those who mobilize the concept often end up with completely different and oppositional conclusions about its effects. This is the point I wish to make explicit. Most scholars who invoke the notion of populism today, no matter how positivistic, neutral and scientific they aspire to be, assume the polemical intent of populism toward primarily, but certainly not exclusively, liberal democracy and vice versa.

A political concept's antagonistic effects can be understood in terms of the imaginaries it generates. When one uses the concept 'authoritarianism,' one conjures specific expectations that are hostile to liberalism and democracy – like dictatorial institutions, prerogative power, media control etc.; it is unlikely that the notion would arouse expectations of greater rule of law, or institutionalization of checks and balances. Populism gives rise to three contested expectations vis-à-vis liberal democracy: a pathological threat to, a [dangerous] critique of, or a remedy for liberal democracy.

Reworking the Koselleckian notion of 'horizons of expectations' can help elucidate this point.[6] Koselleck's metahistorical categories, 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectations,' make it intelligible to comprehend historical time, and thereby conceptual history (Koselleck 1985; Koselleck 2002). A concept in concrete history mediates experience and expectations. An essentially contested *political* concept, however, opens a horizon of expectations that is contested and is a site of dispute precisely because it involves the formulation of antagonistic alternatives that can stimulate different images of reality, evoking aspiration, hope, or perhaps even dread.

There are two complementary strategies for the study of normativity in conceptualizations of populism. Yannis Stavrakakis has already traced the genealogy of anti-populism and demonstrated how the negative/pejorative meaning of populism emerged out of and is rooted in a liberal normativity (Stavrakakis 2017b). This genealogical method reveals how the mere invocation of the concept already entails political bias because the concept's original formation and deployment was by scholars and commentator's hostile to what they deemed were 'populist' mobilizations (Stavrakais and Jäger 2018). The moniker was seldom used by the actors themselves. My procedure involves analyzing the concepts abstractly and is meant to be complementary to the genealogical method. Thinking together with Schmitt and Koselleck allows us to grasp how the normativity of political concepts entail contested horizons of expectations. I aim to read the field of populism studies from this understanding of political conceptuality.

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6   I borrow this interpretation of Koselleck from Andreas Kalyvas who shared this insight during a discussion on political concepts

Grasping the contestations around the normativity of the concept will offer greater clarity and understanding of the political stakes and commitments of various thinkers. It will show how the negative polemical meaning given to populism emerges out of a defense of liberal democracy, and how the positive polemical meaning given to it emerges out of a critical gesture towards liberal democracy. The normative political content of populism exists always already at the conceptual level, prior to empirical or scientific studies of the phenomena. By examining some of the major conceptualizations of populism, this paper will distill and sketch out populisms' contested horizon of expectations.

3. Normativity in Populism

Regardless of the theoretical approach one subscribes to, all major contemporary thinkers of the concept, implicitly or explicitly, posit certain expectations over what populism holds in store for liberal democracy. When the concept of populism is deployed, it generates specific and contested imaginaries and possibilities. These imaginaries are animated by the sense that the antagonism between populism and liberal democracy is a fundamental political struggle. The anti-populism of many liberal thinkers is amply documented – they view populism as a threat to liberal democracy and view it as necessarily authoritarian. Matthijs Rooduijn (2016: 316) for example, has proclaimed that scholars have "moral obligation to protect liberal democracy" against the threat of populism. The opposite is the case for Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau 2006; Mouffe 2018), both of whom view populism as an essential remedy for the democratic deficits of liberal democracy.

All the major contemporary theories of populism thus generate specific political horizon of expectations because they rely on specific (normative) conceptions of liberal democracy. The way populism, liberal democracy, and the relation between the two are conceived explain the divergences in their theories when it comes to assessing the effects and consequences of populism. I argue that the normative divergences among the theorists emanate from three criteria: (A) the commitments of these thinkers to their conceptions of democracy, (B) an appraisal of possible crises or deficits of democracy and (C) their relative emphasis on either the 'move-ment' or 'in-power' phase of populism.

Peculiarly, despite the normative differences, all theorists think of 'liberal democ-racy' as having a necessary double character: broadly, they view this political order as the composite of a liberal (rights, constitutionalism, procedures) and a democratic (popular sovereignty and equality) dimension, intertwined in an either historically

contingent articulation of harmony (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2017) or of ongoing constitu-tive tension (Mouffe 2000).[7]

This is also true of Margaret Canovan (1999; 2005), who was one of the first to comprehend what Benjamin Arditi (2004) has called the 'spectral' nature of populism in democracy. For her, democracy has two irreconcilable but inextricably interde-pendent 'faces': the pragmatic and the redemptive. The pragmatic side of demo-cratic politics is concerned with the management and resolution of social conflicts through institutional means. The redemptive side of democracy, on the other hand, contains a secular promise to sovereignty of the people – that the government is by, for and of the people. Whenever a gap between the pragmatic and redemptive side of democracy widened, the ghost of populism emerged from the shadows to fill the abyss; "when too great a gap opens up between haloed democracy (redemptive face) and the grubby business of politics (pragmatic face), populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed" (Canovan 1999: 12).

Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen (2021) too, locate a similar dualism between consti-tutionalism and popular sovereignty. Nadia Urbinati's 'diarchic' model – entailing a domain of will that is proceduralized through institutions like elections, and a domain of opinion where citizens come together to deliberate and contest the collec-tive project – where the two domains are in a delicate balance, is also homologous (Urbinati 2014). What is common to all these formulations is that populism is located within and emerges from the 'democratic' realm, that of sovereignty, equality, or opinion formation – perhaps, the realm of the 'political' (in the Claude Lefort's (1988) sense of the term) – and outside, mostly *against*, the institutional, procedural frame-work of democracy.

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7 The thinkers I cite in this discussion about the distinction between the form and content of democracy are all theorizing within a liberal democratic paradigm. In this paradigm, the co-articulation of the distinct 19th century traditions liberalism and democracy is at the heart of the "paradox of democracy" (Canovan, 2002) or the "irreducible tension" (Mouffe 2005) between the two. Even when an author might mobilize the form/content distinction in reference to 'constitutional democracy' or 'representative democracy' they are locating its source in the traditions of liberalism and democracy. For instance, Arato and Cohen translate the tension between the two traditions into the tension between "liberal constitutionalism" and "popular sovereignty" (Arato/Cohen 2021: 153-156). Even Nadia Urbinati's "diarchic" model which marks the distinction between the realm of opinion and will, the latter is normatively justified on the proceluralism of political liberalism (Urbinati 2014: 11-12). The thinker that does pose a challenge to this framing is Margaret Canovan. Canovan's formulation of "two faces" of modern democracy (redemptive and pragmatic) do not align neatly with the distinction of liberalism and democracy, because as she notes, liberalism also has a redemptive and pragmatic sides. Nonetheless, the elements she discusses in her account of the pragmatic face – institutional and legal limitations on power – derive from the tradition of liberalism, while the principal element of the redemptive face is popular sovereignty (Canovan 1999: 9-14).

This highlights the second and third criteria for assessing the normativity of the various theories of populism. The framing of the double structure leads the different theorists to formulate somewhat similar accounts of crisis or the 'democratic deficit of liberal representative democracy' (Arato 2019: 318-341) to which populism is ostensibly a response. The Canovanian formulation remains central: populism emerges to reveal the redemptive face of democracy and the promise of popular sovereignty when there is social discontent and disaffection with the pragmatic face. Populism is an expression of popular sovereignty that is manifest outside of and typically against the institutional-procedural anatomy of democratic regimes. We can therefore see a parallel between these conceptions and the Lefortian distinction of *politics* and the *political* that Laclau builds on.

The normative positions on populism that follow from thinking of democracy in these dualistic terms, are ultimately predicated on the relative significance these theorists attribute to the institutional, procedural, and legal dimension, which can be called the *formal anatomy* of liberal democracy, and to the popular sovereign and egalitarian dimension, which can be called the *substantive content* of liberal democracy. To argue that populism's birth occurs with growing 'deficits' or gaps between the formal anatomy and the substantive content of liberal democracy then is to implicitly endow populism with oppositional and critical content. This is the third criteria for normative judgment on populism. If one then thinks of populism as an oppositional movement which reveals democratic deficits by critiquing the formal anatomy of liberal democracy, one can view it within the ambit of democratizing civil society movements. But many thinkers view populism as more than a movement in opposition, regarding it either as a strategy of coming to power or even a form of government. The theorization about the consequences of populism hence depends on the phase – movement or in-power – the theorist emphasizes. The crucial concern of most theorists in this transition from movement to in-power revolves around the centrality of leadership, and the anti-pluralism of populist politics.

We can thus formulate *three provisional axioms of normativity in theories of populism*. Of course, there are complexities entailed in the literature which I shall note, but the foregoing works as a useful heuristic schema. First, the thinkers who insist or implicitly believe on the separability of the formal anatomy and the substantive content of liberal democracy, and dispensability of the former are more likely to furnish accounts sympathetic to populism and view the phenomena as playing a productive critical role in democratization. Thinkers who are unwilling to accept the delinking of form and content, and focus more on populism in power, are likely to be more suspicious of and hostile to the phenomenon.

Second, if a scholar presents a diagnosis of a crisis of deficits (material, institutional and symbolic) of liberal democracy, they are likely to view populism as having a democratic aspect, while if the scholar does not, they likely view populism as

pathological. Third, if a scholar conceives of populism primarily as an oppositional movement, they are likely to view it as democratic, and on the other hand, if they conceive of populism primarily in-power, they are likely to view populism as hostile to liberal democracy.

The specific combination of these assumptions and their normative thrusts, which are internal to any conceptualization of populism, generates for any theorist different expectations of populism. In all, populism's future horizon contains three conflicting expectations: populism is (a) a pathological threat to democracy, (b) a [potentially dangerous] mode of democratic critique, and (c) a democratic remedy for the deficiencies of liberal democracy. At a superficial level my distinctions seem to echo the tripartite distinction forwarded by C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2012): populism as democratic pathology, democratic corrective, and democratic ambivalence. However, the crucial point of disagreement is that Kaltwasser's whole agenda is to advocate for conceiving of populism as democratic ambivalence because it over-comes the 'normative bias' of the other two positions and is better at accounting for empirical phenomena – his whole discourse is rooted in what I have called the mythology of the positivist definition of populism. My point is precisely to show how conceptual and theoretical assumptions about *populism*, *liberal democracy* and their interplay are what determine the normativity of populism. In this sense, there is no escape from *normative bias*. All scholars of populism, regardless of whether they subscribe to a singular theoretical approach or work with a synthetic model, can be classified broadly into these three normative positions, and these positions follow from the axioms of normativity I have outlined in this section.

a. Populism as Pathological threat

The concept of populism invokes dread and fear for the liberal democratic imagi-nary. This is the negative expectation of populism's horizon. Not all thinkers agree that populism is conditioned by democratic deficits or democratic crises. In the stra-tegic-stylistic approach, which endows 'populist' actors with a certain kind of oppor-tunism in coming to power, crises can be staged to mobilize support. The strategy school purists, like Kurt Weyland (2020), in their very conception, view *populist* actors in Machiavellian shade. Weyland is explicitly committed to a pluralist conception of democracy and argues that populists in government tend to "asphyxiate democ-racy" by compromising institutions of checks and balances and political competi-tion. "They leverage their institutional attributions as chief executives, and the mass support certified by their initially democratic election to dismantle liberal pluralism gradually in formally legal or at least para-legal ways" (Weyland 2020: 389).

Nadia Urbinati (2014; 2019) and Pierre Rosanvallon (2008)[8], who work with synthetic conceptions, too, do not engage with the idea that contemporary populism is a response to a de-politicized and purely procedural democracy – a democracy rid of substance and left with form. Urbinati's two texts on the subject *Democracy Disfigured* (2014) and *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (2019) are vigorous defenses of procedural democracy. For Urbinati and Rosanvallon, what other scholars call the 'crisis of democracy' or 'crisis of representation' is in fact 'unpolitical democracy' – or rule of experts, technocracy etc. Populism in their view is not a response to unpolitical democracy but is an accompanying de-democratizing force.

Urbinati and Rosanvallon view populism as a pathology which undermines and displaces procedural democracy. Although they are not theoretically aligned, their treatment of the problem of populism has a degree of resonance. Both want to suggest that populism is neither a response nor a remedy to a crisis of democracy, but rather a symptom that unravels democracy and jeopardizes its liberal procedural elements. Their normative position on populism, crucially, is shaped by the theorization of democracy itself. Urbinati's diarchic conception of democracy consists of a 'realm of will' exercised through electoral decisions and democratic procedures and the 'realm of opinion' which is mediated through the public forum that plays a legitimating role by facilitating the exchange of ideas among citizens, ensuring that opinion is efficacious, and the will is restrained. This framework allows her to highlight the disfiguring threats of populism to democracy. Unpolitical democracy, in her words 'epistemic democracy' or technocracy, as well as populism are opposite sides of the same coin; they share an 'unpredicted proximity' (Urbinati 2014). Both emerge from the realm of opinion as forms of rabid distrust in the workings of democratic procedures and attack the realm of will. Both disrupt the delicate balance of the diarchy. While unpolitical democracy is a depoliticized form of assault, its sister symptom, populism, is a *hyper*-politicized manifestation where a mythical unity of the people as the sole author of a unified will emerges against the corrupt elite. Populism undercuts the institutional frameworks of representation by positing a verticalization of politics where the leader alone embodies the 'people,' which is what she calls 'direct representation' (Urbinati 2019: 7).

This shift in how citizens are portrayed explains "populism's profound antipathy to pluralism, dissent, minority views, and the dispersion of power, all of which are characteristics that democratic procedures intrinsically presume and promote" (Urbinati 2014: 133). Populism is for Urbinati a constant and ever-present possibility. It is a constant companion of representative democracy, a dark underside. But her

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8   Rosanvallon's position has changed with his latest text (2021), but it is still instructive to examine the argument in *Counter-Democracy*.

response to it is to double down on liberal proceduralism. To ensure that the public forums do not get corrupted by the insidious allure of populism.

She has developed her argument further in her most recent text *Me the People* (2019) emphasizing populism's in-power phase as a governmental form – a new form of representative government where the leader defines the people. But this new modality of representative government, which undermines fundamental political rights – which are themselves crucial for the realm of opinion formation – Urbinati is emphatic, is "not democracy at all" (2019: 10). Her critical view of populism stems precisely from her insistence that the formal anatomy of liberal democracy cannot be separated from democracy. Liberal democracy, for Urbinati, is a pleonasm, which is to say, democracy is liberal or it's not democracy. The "external form of democracy is essential to democracy. It is not merely 'an appearance,' and it is not the prerogative of liberalism alone. If one adopts a nondiarchic conception of democracy and stresses the moment of decision (of the people or their representatives) as the essence of democracy, the mobilization and dissent of citizens appears to signal a crisis in democracy instead of appearing as a component of democracy" (Urbinati 2019: 11). This is the critical point of her theory. Populism emerges from the realm of opinion formation; the very condition of its possibility is shaped by the formal anatomy of liberal democracy. But in instituting an alternative monist form of representation and undermining the formal structure which secures the realm of opinion formation, it poisons the very soil on which it stands.

Rosanvallon's argument is somewhat analogous and identifies populism as a pathological symptom of a crisis of democracy. Rosanvallon's project in *Counter Democracy* (2008) is to enunciate forms of democratic practices that rely on negative sovereignty, that is practices – ways of organizing distrust in the form of vigilance, denunciation and evaluation – through which citizens resist and defend, not positively exercise, their sovereignty. His model of liberal democracy is also dualistic and similar to Urbinati's diarchic conception. Democracy involves a positive popular sovereign dimension institutionalized through electoral representation, and a negative sovereign dimension, 'counter democracy.'

His objective is to expand the view of what democracy is beyond its electoral shell. However, his main concern is that the organization of distrust, that is counter-democratic practices, can entirely displace all aspects of positive practices of democracy – procedures, elections, institutions etc. Populism achieves precisely this. Populism is "a pathology in two senses: as a pathology, first, of electoral-representative democracy and, second, of counter-democracy. Populism is not just an ideology. It is a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy" (Rosanvallon 2008: 265). It radicalizes counter-democratic practices and culminates in a "purely negative politics," "an acute manifestation of contemporary political disarray and a tragic expression of our inability to overcome it" (2008: 273).

Now the question is, why does this happen? Rosanvallon is more sympathetic than Urbinati to thinking of crises as key instigators of 'populist' phenomena. The cause of 'populism,' Rosanvallon argues, is the political disenchantment with democracy. The disenchantment has to do with the end of a future vision – a kind of depoliticization where there are no contestations about the collective project – and a crisis of representation. There are two factors at play: First, the greater complexity and differentiation of society with different groups posing unique demands makes unity impossible, and second, more strikingly, the decline of class politics leads to post-ideological politics devoid of grand narratives of emancipatory prospects. Populism is a pseudo response to this disenchantment, reliant on propping up a mythical unity of the people that attempts to break away from the state of disenchantment (2008: 168-170).

The hyper-negativity of populism is what makes it pathological. As Rosavallon develops his argument more in his recent publication, *The Populist Century* (2021), populism fosters a politics rooted in the language of rejection. Both Urbinati and Rosanvallon, therefore, view populism as a pathology that fosters distrust against democracy and 'disfigures' democracy from within.

The third paradigmatic voice that conceives of populism as a pathological threat to liberal democracy is that of Jan-Werner Müller (2016). Müller is somewhat sympathetic to populism's movement phase critique of democratic deficits: He argues that populism becomes potent in moments when fear, anger and frustrations are high, but he insists that there are legitimate reasons for these fears. Though Müller's analysis on the causes of populism is deficient, it nonetheless ascribes the wave of post 2011 American populism (Tea Party and Trump for example) chiefly to "very real material grievances," government response to interests of the few over the many, along with demography and politico-cultural changes, and the wave in Europe to the Euro Crisis and apathy of the EU technocracy (2016: 85-86).

Despite this, Müller is adamant to highlight the fundamentally undemocratic character of populism in power. Populism is an exclusively negative phenomenon, always representing a pathological threat to democracy. Populism in power, although not necessarily totalitarian, almost invariably culminates in 'defective democracies.' Making subtle links between fascist and populist ideology, and connections between their practices, Müller demonstrates that contemporary right-wing 'populists' operate with a monolithic and imaginary concept of 'the people,' drawing a 'friend–enemy' opposition and appealing to a mythical *Volksgemeinschaft*. Although populists always present a critique of elite politics, their insistence on being the exclusive representatives of a "single, homogenous, authentic people" is where the problem lies (2016: 3). Müller argues that populism is rooted in a *pars pro toto* logic which views only "a part of the people [as] the people" (2016: 22). This position insists that

populism is ultimately hostile and destructive to liberal democracy because of its illiberalism and undemocratic character that is unleashed when it is in power.

Urbinati, Rosanvallon, and Müller's respective theorizations of populism draw mostly on the strategic-stylistic approaches of populism and hence pays greater attention to how populist actors act and the kind of representational claims they make. That new kinds of popular political subjectivity emerge and contest to discursively open the space of political possibilities is not really taken seriously because they endow populist phenomena with a kind of rabid anti-institutional cynicism.

While Urbinati and Müller insist on strengthening the formal anatomy of liberal democracy and making room for institutionalized intermediate powers like political parties and the media (Urbinati 2015; Müller 2021) to counteract the populist pathology, Rosanvallon's recommendation to oppose this kind of politics, however, is slightly different. Instead of simply reinforcing the procedural aspects or the formal structure of liberal democracy, and preventing the realm of opinion from the disequilibrium of politicization, he argues that politics has to be particularized – a politics of presence (Rosanvallon 2011). It is no longer tenable to offer grand collective narratives, but political meaning has to be diffused to individual actors making politics proximate to their life's struggles.

They only superficially examine the conditions within liberal democracy that stimulate the emergence of populism, and remain confident that intermediary bodies, proceduralism and legitimacy through particularity, respectively, can be corrective and deflect the threat of populism. This is particularly striking because these solutions don't seem to address the very conditions that give rise to populism. More crucial is the fact that they view populism as not democratic, but not fully fascist or authoritarian either (Finchelstein/Urbinati 2018). This is quite a paradox, because as Urbinati admits, populism still retains its legitimacy in power through plebiscitary elections – in fact, she says populism, unlike anti-democratic phenomena like fascism, remains "parasitical on democracy" (Urbinati 2019: 20). If this is the case, populism, even in power, and to the extent that it does not actually subvert electoral competition, has a minimally democratic content. Admitting this however would put her very normative model of democracy in jeopardy. More importantly, it would force this line of argumentation to reckon with the democratic deficiencies and limitations of liberal democracy. The acceptance of a democratic dimension of populism is more explicitly articulated by the second type of normative position which recognizes the critical content of populism while robustly noting its dangers, especially as it enters power.

b. Populism as [Potentially Dangerous] Critique of Democracy

Populism gives rise to an ambivalent expectation as well (Kaltwasser 2012). A wide range of thinkers can be included in this camp. The principal difference between

these thinkers and the ones discussed in the previous section is that the former grant a democratic character to populism, especially in its movement and oppositional phase. This is because the thinkers in this camp understand that populism is often a response to serious crises or deficits in liberal democratic governance.

However, all of them recognize that populism when it transitions from movement to 'in-power' phase can and often does become a danger to democracy (Levitsky/ Loxton 2012). Scholars, especially those working with a synthetic model with a strong emphasis on the strategic approach, see a *necessarily* authoritarian tendency in populism, while others, especially those more influenced by the ideational approach, classify 'populists' as *potentially* anti-democratic, precisely because they are more willing to insist on the separability of the formal anatomy and substantive content of liberal democracy.

Drawing on the causal schema developed by Gino Germani in *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism* (1978), integrating three temporal-structural levels of long-term, middle-term and short-term factors, Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen offer a Canovanian formulation locating populism as an ever-present possibility due to the long-term structural tension between constitutionalism and popular sovereignty that is intrinsic to liberal democracies. However, they also add that the trigger for 'populist' phenomena are more immediately found in middle-term 'deficits' of representation (especially of party systems) and welfare, and short-term 'crises' phenomena (Arato/Cohen 2021: 29-46).

"Populism," when it emerges from below in civil society, typically is symptomatic of democratic deficit against which it protests. "We do not wish to deny that contemporary populism has a point that should be taken seriously. This we see in its critical dimension, especially in the early phase when populism is a movement in civil society" (Arato/Cohen 2021: 2). However, they also note, learning from the strategic-stylistic approach, that populism need not always emerge in movement form from below, but can be mobilized from above. This leader-centric claim of representation of a homogenous people, which takes the part it represents to be the whole, and seeks to exclude the antagonistic opponents, has a phenomenal political logic, which Arato and Cohen demonstrate is immanently authoritarian. Building on their previous critique of populism's anti-pluralism, with specific attention to populism's animosity towards the functions of civil society, they argue that as populism transitions from the critical movement phase to contestation for power in the party phase, and then the three 'in-power' stages – "in government," "the government" and "regime" – it becomes progressively anti-democratic (Ibid.: 110-145; Arato/Cohen 2018). In this analysis "populism in-power" becomes a necessary threat to liberal democracy, because although they accept that liberalism and democracy are two distinct intellectual and political traditions, like Urbinati they insist that democracy without the descriptor liberal is not democracy at all.

Though populism comes to power through electoral victory, its logic is such that to maintain power, it gradually either transforms democracy – hybridizes it (Peruzzotti 2017) – or altogether eliminates electoral competition and democratic contestation. "The logic of populism is authoritarian, despite its reliance on democratic legitimation and on forms such as elections and participatory mobilization. The authoritarianism inherent in populist logic becomes discernible once populists win power, shape government institutions, reshape the norms of governing, and replace or revise constitutions to expand and ensure their power. Populism's logic leads to the production of hybrid political forms when populists enter and especially when they become 'the' government. Indeed, if they enter government and remain populist, populist politicians ultimately tend toward regime change" (Arato/Cohen 2021: 107). The expectations for populism in power are authoritarian.

The most sympathetic account of populism within this camp are those that see populism as essentially democratic but not liberal. Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) are influential proponents of this position. This account, as I tried to schematize in the introduction to this section on normativity of theories of populism, has to do with how these thinkers conceive of the separability of liberal democracy's dualism. As Mudde and Kaltwasser put it, "In our opinion, democracy (sans adjectives) refers to the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule; nothing more, nothing less. Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal" (Mudde /Kaltwasser 2012: 10). Mudde and Kaltwasser thus describe populism as "the illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism," a formulation which insinuates that both the formal anatomy of liberal democracy can exist without substance – 'undemocratic liberalism' – and that populism, though illiberal, is democratic (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2018: 116).

An identical separation is also made by Takis Pappas. In fact, he defines populism as "democratic illiberalism." He argues that "the terms populism and 'democratic illiberalism' … carry exactly the same meaning and denote exactly the same thing" (Pappas 2019: 33). Mudde and Kaltwasser, and Pappas are 'positivists' who attempt a balanced study of what they determine were populist movements in different socio-historical contexts, and argue that populism has an ambivalent relation to liberal democracy in general.

Mudde and Kaltwasser's analysis is strongly concerned with populism as movement or in-opposition. Here they even argue that leadership, a central concern for all normative criticisms of populism, is not essential. "An elective affinity between populism and a strong leader seems to exist. However, the former can exist without the latter" (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2014: 382). Their reliance on the demand-supply framework and the ideational approach pushes them to engage with the conditions which 'activate' populist attitudes. What they insist on is that populism, by simplifying politics and politicizing 'unpolitical' issues, brings marginalized or disillusioned

individuals into the fold of active political life. But this impetus can only work in certain conditions.

Nonetheless, by the time populism begins its contest for or acquires political power, Mudde and Kaltwasser recognize that it *can* (not as a logical necessity *a la* Arato and Cohen) become inimical to liberal democracy as a regime form. This is due to its monistic and antagonistic dimensions. Here they rehearse an argument like that of Arato and Cohen. Given populism crystallizes political conflict between two homogenous and monistic groups, pure people and corrupt elite, it has a tendency to be exclusionary and hostile to pluralism. Nationalistic, racist, xeno-phobic rhetoric in the populist movements they identify embody this illiberalism. The problem gets intensified when populism comes to power; its reliance on lead-ership makes it extremely dangerous to constitutional, institutional, and procedural elements of liberal democracy. Because 'populists' embody the 'general will' they can take decisions that undermine liberal democratic forms and institutions. Even though populism mobilizes people, and has a democratic element, its illiberalism and vertical structure can be a threat to democracy as such.

Though Mudde and Kaltwasser make a gesture towards a critical stance on liberal democracy their recommendations include engagement with populists through deliberation, engagement with issues that populists raise, and articulating more specific critiques of politics (for example anti-austerity) rather than making claims about 'the people.' Ultimately, they all advocate for strategies of containing populist politics. For most thinkers in this camp, liberal democracy remains the normative sphere of politics, and even if they recognize the need for further democratization of liberal democracy, they emphatically agree that populism is not the way to achieve this.

One thinker whose theorization of populism exists at the boundaries of this tendency and bleeds into the affirmative normative position of populism is Margaret Canovan. She does think that populism is an essential democratic ideology but not that populism is necessarily a corrective remedy. The Canovanian theory of populism as the mode of politics through which the redemptive face of democracy realizes itself against a stagnant pragmatic face has been developed earlier. Canovan's argu-ment, however, is much stronger in its endorsement of populism than the variants we encountered in this section. Her claim is that populism is the *necessary* dialectical response to a widening chasm between the pragmatic and redemptive face of liberal democracy. She argues that "democratic institutions need an occasional upsurge of faith *as a means of renewal*. In cases where radical populist mobilization… leads to the formation of new parties or to a reform of the institutional structure, democracy may indeed be regarded as a self-correcting system in which both aspects play their part" (Canovan 1999: 14).

Canovan's theory puts greater emphasis on the movement and oppositional phase of populism. It's populism's critique of the ossified formal anatomy of liberal democracy that paradoxically revitalizes liberal democracy. In other words, the survival of the pragmatic face, especially when it has ossified and become unresponsive to the demands of citizens, itself depends on populist response. This does not mean that populism necessarily democratizes regimes. The populist response however can go awry in an authoritarian and monistic direction, but its existence is part of an unresolvable paradox of democracy. As she argues, populism "which reduces the complexities of politics to dogmatic simplicity, is ill-fitted to deal adequately with these intricacies [of democracy], and yet is at the same time indispensable in mass politics" (Canovan 2002: 26).

c. Populism as a Democratic Remedy

The positive expectation on the horizon instituted by the concept of populism is that it is a remedy for emaciated and deficient democracy. Thinkers within this imaginary conceive of populism as both a critical and normative concept: critical in the sense that it points to the limitations and deficiencies of existing liberal democracy, and normative in the sense that phenomena understood as populism are the corrective measures to strengthen democracy. Within this normative position, however, a stronger tendency exists: this tendency, best embodied by Ernesto Laclau, views populism as inherently democratic. The normative position of democratic remedy, including the Laclauean tendency, emerges out of three theoretical suppositions: first, that democracy as a political form can be conceived as separable from liberalism; second, that populist mobilizations are response to deficits of liberal democracies; and finally, that populist mobilizations are mostly oppositional movements not governmental or regime types.

This strand of thinking about populism begins with a critical diagnosis of liberal democracy. They contend that the outburst of populist phenomena is an expression of liberal democracy's de-democratization. Camila Vergara, for example, refutes Nadia Urbinati's argument in her normative endorsement of populism as a form of plebian politics: "Rather than a *disfigurement*, I would argue populism should be considered as a response to an already existing deformity in liberal democracies: the overgrowth of oligarchic power. Populism should be considered as a badly needed, corrective plebeian intervention against oligarchy" (Vergara 2018: 239-240). While Vergara provides a distinctively republican interpretation of populism, the phenomena for her operates within the liberal-democratic political space. Populism is, as she puts it, "a republican symptom of democracy, as a particular manifestation of the plebeian principle within the current framework of liberal democracy and electoral politics" (Ibid.: 237). The strand of thinking that conceives of populism as a remedy thus inverts the argumentation of the strand that conceives of populism as

a pathology. They contend, instead, that it is the pathologies of liberal democracy – neoliberal oligarchy and technocracy – that populism seeks to correct.

The critical gesture towards liberal democracy is also present in the two major endorsers of populism, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Yet, there are significant differences between them that are worth highlighting. While Laclau's account is a formal-theoretical one and is laid out with a great deal of nuance, Mouffe, in her latest *For a Left Populism* (2018) furnishes a more conjunctural and concrete normative project. For Laclau the conditions for populism's emergence arise when a political regime – including, and I would argue specifically, liberal democratic ones – is unable to respond properly or adequately to the demands of those it aims to govern (Laclau 2005a). Laclau argues that "populism presents itself both as subversive of the existing state of things and as the starting point for a more or less radical reconstruction of a new order whenever the previous one has been shaken"; It "proceeds by articulating fragmented and dislocated demands around a new core....[Thus] some degree of crisis in the old structure is a necessary precondition of populism." This analysis leads Laclau to the conclusion "that populism *is the democratic element* in contemporary representative systems" (Laclau 2005a: 176-177).

For Laclau, populism is the political form through which a 'people' as a political subject gets constituted within an existing political order. Populism is therefore necessarily oppositional. It is the inevitable political act through which antagonism is generated against a prevailing system. Since populism is the activity of constituting a 'people' that is to be the subject of political sovereignty, the populist logic becomes identical, in Laclau's theory, with democracy as such. The analysis culminates in the following formula: Populism = political = democracy (Peruzzotti 2018). Normativity is entailed in the equation.

An important caveat, however, is that populism for Laclau is not specifically antagonistic towards liberal democracy. Populism can be constructed against any target. Given the abstract nature of his theory of populism, he can even maintain that 'liberalism' itself can become one of the demands articulated by populism (Laclau 2005c). However, given the global hegemony of liberal democracy, Laclau's theoretical ambition has been to think of democracy outside of the liberal-democratic symbolic space. This is most clearly laid out in Laclau's critical discussion of Claude Lefort in *On Populist Reason* (2005a: 164-171). Populism thus becomes for Laclau one modality of opening up possibilities for the rearticulations of democracy as populist or radical democracy (Laclau 2005c). "Once the articulation between liberalism and democracy is considered as merely contingent" the conclusion that follows is "other contingent articulations are also possible, so that there are forms of democracy outside the liberal symbolic framework" (Laclau 2005a: 167).

He is thus not interested in the liberal institutional dimension of liberal-democracy. He is only interested in the work of the *political* realm in the Lefortian sense

of the term, because the constituting a popular subject is intrinsically democratic and the central task of radical politics (Laclau 2006). In his system, therefore, there is no 'populism in power' because that already marks the transition from the *political* to *politics*. This reticence of Laclau in examining what populism does or wants to achieve when in power and in what context is not fully satisfactory.

For a more specific normative argument in explicit relation to liberal democracy, we'll have to look at Mouffe. She in fact explicitly proposes that populism leads not to the utter disfigurement of democracy but to concrete possibilities for recovering and radicalizing it. Her programmatic manifesto, *For a Left Populism* (2018) makes precisely this case. Mouffe's short but dense manifesto is the most comprehensive formulation of how populism is a democratic remedy, but it is also paradoxical because it ends up undercutting the very Laclauean theoretical bedrock upon which it stands. This tension is worth pausing on because Mouffe, unlike Laclau, does not want to depart from the normative model of liberal democracy. Her whole project is to show how populism can play a democratic role within liberal democracy.

Mouffe's conception of liberal democracy, which she developed in her work on the *Democratic Paradox* (2000) and *On the Political* (2005), is that of a historically contingent articulation of liberalism and democracy; two ultimately irreconcilable principles that exist in a paradoxical and conflictual relation. Democratism defends egalitarianism and popular sovereignty, and liberalism, propounding universal liberty, promotes inclusion and pluralism. They, ideally, exist in a necessarily conflictual relation stabilizing the hegemonic configuration of liberal democratic regime. This conflictual relation, she argues, was manifest in the form of "an 'agonistic' negotiation between right and left" (Mouffe 2018: 14-15).

The neoliberal onslaught, after the crisis of social democracy, established the hegemony of a 'Third-way' that depoliticized liberal democracy. "As a consequence of neoliberal hegemony, the agonistic tension between the liberal and the democratic principles [...] has been eliminated. With the demise of the democratic values of equality and popular sovereignty, the agonistic spaces where different projects of society could confront each other have disappeared and citizens have been deprived of the possibility of exercising their democratic rights. To be sure, 'democracy' is still spoken of, but it has been reduced to its liberal component and it only signifies the presence of free elections and the defense of human rights. What has become increasingly central is economic liberalism with its defense of the free market and many aspects of political liberalism have been relegated to second place, if not simply eliminated" (Ibid.: 16).

This new reality is what she, drawing on the work of Colin Crouch (2004) and Jacques Ranciere (2014), calls post-democracy. For Mouffe, post-democracy is a specific diagnosis of the crisis of liberal democratic regimes of post-war Europe. Post-democracy is the erosion of principles of popular sovereignty and equality

and the displacement of liberal values by neoliberal individualism, decline of political representation,[9] and oligarchic tendencies within liberal democratic regimes. Colin Crouch (2021) and Wendy Brown (2019) have similarly furnished accounts of 'post-democracy,' a concept that critically points out the limitations and deficiencies of liberal democracy to which populism is a response.

Mouffe also wants to highlight this organic relation between post-democracy and populism. After decades of emphasis on administration and governance, the financial crisis led to the unraveling of the neoliberal order. The rise of austerity and generalized economic inequality intensified the deficits of governmentality and representation, polarizing society. After the 2008 financial crisis, a new opening emerged. The financial crisis put the neoliberal hegemonic order in jeopardy, fostering conditions for the rise of populism. The 'populist moment' thus signals the crisis of a *post-democratic* condition.

Post-democracy has stimulated a right-wing populist response that, Mouffe claims, has a 'democratic nucleus,' and to which the liberal and social democratic consensus is unable to respond, rendering naked its inability to escape the post-political imprisonment. The Left, Mouffe proclaims, must seize the opportunity to re-politicize itself. Mouffe is emphatic about the urgency of the moment: The Left must put forward its own populist project because the democratic possibilities for the future depend on that. Mouffe acknowledges that this is a political gamble which might lead to unfavorable outcomes. There is no guarantee of a successful radical democratic project, but the cost of letting go of this opening for a Left Populism is pretty severe (Mouffe 2018: 85). This is in immediate contrast to those who view populism as a pathology that can be contained. Mouffe's point is precisely that the crisis of post-democracy is so severe that the choice is only between right and left populisms. Non-populist deliberative and pluralistic strategies will not win.

Mouffe's concern is the alleged eradication of a previously existing and thriving agonism between liberalism and democracy. Her whole project therefore is animated by her critical attitude towards liberal democracy. She does not view that as a sufficiently democratic end, but nonetheless is not entirely willing to dispense with the liberal dimension. She wants to first recover this because the liberal democratic ideal is where possibilities for a radical democratic project lie; neoliberalism cannot be radicalized. Therefore, the populist response to this moment must be aimed at constructing a 'people' which articulates a collective democratic will. This 'people' must incorporate again all forms of democratic demands, "of workers, the

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9   For post-democracy debates on representation and political parties, see Mair 2013; Katz/Mair 2018. For critique of capitalist advance within liberal democracy see: Winters 2011; Streeck 2014; Jessop 2013: 83-105; Crouch 2004.

immigrants, and the precarious middle class, as well as other democratic demands, such as those of the LGBTQ community" (Ibid.: 24).

Her text is peppered with cautions about uncertainty: "this might lead to authoritarianism," "there is no guarantee that the new order will bring about significant advances," "refusal of neoliberalism is not a guarantee of a democratic advance" etc. (Ibid.: 6, 34, 64, 85). It is a gamble that might pay off.

There is, however, an important tension in her prescription. To recall Laclau, although it is impossible to determine what his position on this text would be, his theoretical outline on the political role of populism is quite open-ended. The point of a populist articulation is to open up space for alternatives. Mouffe, on the other hand, is more deterministic. She is trapped in a conundrum. She wants a transformative hegemonic formation, but because of the emphasis on leadership, she is forced to constrict it within the paradigm of liberal-democracy, most possibly to contain authoritarian tendencies. While Laclauean populism leads to a real rupture in the political space, she attempts to prefigure its scope and make it compatible with liberal democracy. Once left populism comes to power, a democratic transformation "of the existing hegemonic order without destroying liberal-democratic institutions" is possible (Ibid.: 36). Additionally, the populist constitution, in her model, is agonist and not fully antagonistic. She proclaims that the Left's "recognition that the 'friend/enemy' model of politics is incompatible with pluralist democracy and that liberal democracy is not an enemy to be destroyed is to be applauded" (Ibid.: 36-37). The enemy is rendered adversary because a Schmittian formulation – and since she does not explicitly say it, I'm likely making an unjustifiable inference – would either necessarily or with a higher degree of propensity lead to left-authoritarianism. To resist the charge of being illiberal, Mouffe's Left populist project is confined within predetermined parameters of possibility. To prevent a complete authoritarian or revolutionary move, Left populism, Mouffe implies, needs to be curtailed within the liberal democratic institutional framework.

Her position thus diverges from Laclau in this fundamental sense. She too remains more or less committed to liberal democracy. Though the content of Mouffe's desire for 'radicalizing' liberal democracy[10] is not very different from Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen's ambition to 'democratize' liberal democracy through pluralist popular mobilizations that take procedural norms of democracy seriously (Arato/Cohen 2021: 180-201). The crucial difference is precisely that for Mouffe only populism realizes the expectation of radicalizing democracy (Mouffe, 2018: 85).

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10   She calls it "radical Reform" as opposed to revolution and simple reform

4. Conclusion

Even though many scholars agree that the contemporary rise of populism breeds and grows under experiences of de-democratization, crisis of democracy, or post-democracy, the scholars disagree fundamentally on populism's consequences for democracy. Populism is viewed by some as a pathology of democracy, which is a revealing symptom of the problems of liberal democracy, or by some as a legitimate response to undemocratic or crisis conditions but which, when in power, is ultimately dangerous to democracy, and finally by some as the necessary and appropriate modality to counter the crises of liberal democracy. The normativity of their arguments follow, not necessarily from empirical study of cases, but are already contained in the conceptualization and basic assumptions about liberal democracy.

In dealing with this problem of populism, those critical of it essentially speak in favor of liberal democracy, calling for better procedures, or particularizing politics, or engaging with populism to neutralize it. Those ambivalent to it, are also ambivalent about the form of liberal democracy, and as such see in populism both democratic and authoritarian possibilities. Those in favor of populism, in particular Mouffe and Laclau, view populism as the only means to achieve radical democracy, because liberal democracy is too deficient and unresponsive to democratic demands. Part of the variability in definitions, theories and approaches to populism germinates from different normative considerations and attachments to liberal democracy.

Though there is no final definition of populism, and the concept is essentially contested, the terrain of contestation goes beyond the descriptive domain and necessarily enters the normative realm. Debates about better definitions for the sake of clarity, or better operationalizations for empirical research, can belie the fact the concept carries within it already its normativity. This is contingent on the specific combination of assumptions about liberal democracy contained in the conceptualization of populism. As I suggested above, we can infer three axioms of normativity which can be summarized as follows:

Conceptual Aspect	Theoretical Supposition	Likely Normative Conclusion
Separability of Form and Content of Liberal Democracy	Affirms Separability	Populism is democratic
	Negates Separability	Populism is anti-democratic
Crisis or deficits of liberal democracy	Presence of crisis and deficits	Populism is democratic
	Absence of crisis and deficits	Populism is anti-democratic
Phase of Populism	Conceived as movement	Populism is democratic
	Conceived as government	Populism is anti-democratic

This heuristic interpretive schema seeks to facilitate comparative theoretical analysis and foster a critical understanding of the conceptuality of populism. Most theorizations of populism, despite claims of positivism, empirical rigor, comprehensiveness are normative in their conceptuality and are intelligible within a liberal democratic paradigm. Populism as a contested political concept marks out a contested horizon of expectations. These expectations are prescribed by the presuppositions entailed in conceptualizations of populism – they are not derived from empirical scientific examinations based on objective conceptualizations. Demythologizing populism studies, to refer to Yannis Stavrakakis' plea (2017b), requires reckoning with latent normativity of the conceptual moves a thinker makes. My schema is an attempt to aid in this demythologizing the empirical and positivist claims about political concepts.

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