Chapter 1

The populist political logic and the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’

Benjamin De Cleen

Aiming to provide some theoretical context to this edited volume on Imagining the Peoples of Europe, this chapter argues that a discourse-theoretical definition of populism as a political logic is the best basis for discursive analyses of populist politics. In identifying what makes populist politics across the political spectrum populist, the chapter strongly builds on Laclau’s work. But it more explicitly limits populism to a particular political logic that revolves around the claim to represent ‘the people’, discursively constructed through a down/up opposition between the people-as-underdog and ‘the elite’ as a small and illegitimately powerful group that is argued not to satisfy the needs and demands of the people. This definition also emphasizes how populism constructs not only ‘the people’ but also ‘the elite’, and how it presents certain demands as the will of the people. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the proposed definition’s implications for the empirical analysis of populist politics across the political spectrum, suggesting that we need to analyze the ways in which populists construct the down/up opposition between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ as well as how this opposition is articulated with other elements of populists’ particular programs and strategies.

Keywords: populism, discourse theory, political logic, Laclau, articulation

Introduction: Populism and the discursive construction of ‘the people’

As the title of this volume, Imagining the Peoples of Europe, suggests, populist politics revolve around the construction of ‘the people’. The best way to grasp this process, I argue in this chapter, is by approaching populism as a particular discursive political logic – as a particular way of formulating political demands in the name of ‘the people’ and of interpellating citizens as members of ‘the people’. The construction of ‘the people’ has been the central concern of the discourse-theoretical
approach to populism (Laclau 1977, 2005a, 2005b; Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017), rather more so than in for example conceptualisations of populism as a communication style (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007) or as a thin ideology (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) that are dominant in mainstream political science and communication research.

My argument starts from a discussion of how the discourse-theoretical perspective provides a solution to two major limitations in debates on populism. A first section looks at how the discursively constructed character of ‘the people’ has been and continues to be ignored or under-theorised in much academic work on populism, and largely overlooked in journalism and political rhetoric. A second section deals with definitional issues: the inability to cover the diversity of populisms across the political spectrum (from Podemos to the Front/Rassemblement National, and from Chávez to Trump) and the inability to distinguish populism from other concepts (nationalism, for example, as illustrated recently by debates on Brexit and Trump).

The definition proposed in this article is strongly inspired by Laclau’s conceptualisation of populism in Politics and ideology in Marxist theory (1977) and in On Populist Reason (2005). But it also takes into account some of the criticisms of Laclau’s work, which has focused mainly on two related issues: conceptual imprecision (the concept of populism is too close to the concepts of hegemony and politics) and insufficient empirical applicability (the concept is too broad to be empirically useful) (Arditi 2007; Beasley-Murray 2006, 2010; Moffit and Tormey 2014: 384; Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2012: 7; Stanley 2008: 97; Stavrakakis 2004).

Building on the discussion of limitations of other approaches and considering criticisms of the discourse-theoretical approach, section three proposes a somewhat refined discourse-theoretical definition of populism. The article goes along with Laclau’s main conceptual move: to define populism as a political logic that can be used to formulate potentially any demand, defend or contest any political project, ideology or regime. At the same time, as against the tendency in Laclau’s later work to treat populism as the political logic, this chapter, in line with Laclau’s earlier work, stresses explicitly that populism is characterised by a particular political logic. This revolves around the claim to represent ‘the people’, discursively constructed through an antagonistic pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ along a down/up axis, with ‘the people’ as a large powerless group and ‘the elite’ as a small and illegitimately powerful group that frustrates the elite’s legitimate demands (see also De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018; Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

This chapter does not attempt to formulate a new definition of populism, but to add to the precision of the discourse-theoretical conceptualisation of populism,
and to its empirical applicability. To this end, in the last sections of the chapter I formulate some reflections on how the definition of populism as a political logic can inform concrete discursive analyses of a broad variety of populist politics through the analysis of the discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and of how the populist logic is articulated with other elements of populists’ particular programs and strategies. In this manner the chapter contributes to the growing academic consensus on a precise and empirically applicable concept of populism, whilst stressing the advantages of a more thoroughly socially-constructionist perspective than is common in non-discursive approaches.

**Ignoring the populist construction of ‘the people’**

In *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory*, Laclau (1977: 10) identified two main barriers to the development of concepts that allow us to understand the specificity of particular forms of politics in a discourse theoretical way: “the connotative articulation of concepts at the level of common sense discourse and their rationalist articulation into essential paradigms”. In other words: a lack of conceptual precision and a lack of constructivism; two issues that have indeed marked work on populism. To identify and overcome them, I follow what Howarth has called a strategy of ‘formalisation’. This strategy consists of four related sub-strategies. *Reactivation* and *deconstruction* make concepts that are defined in an essentialist fashion compatible with discourse theoretical constructivist ontology. Moreover, *abstraction* and *commensuration* formalize concepts to a level where they can cover the variety of different but ‘commensurate’ empirical phenomena that operate according to the same formal logic (Howarth 2005: 327; Glynos and Howarth 2007). By dealing with the category of populism in this way it becomes possible to understand what makes both left-wing and right-wing populist politics populist.

This first section reactivates and deconstructs prevailing accounts of populism. It lays bare some of the deterministic and essentialist presuppositions underlying common approaches to populism and discusses how these prevent the full recognition of populism’s political character. Populism is often seen as a particular relation between some political actor and ‘the people’ (e.g. populism as the aim to appeal to ‘the people’) or as a particular set of ideas about what the role of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in politics should be (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser; Müller 2016). Lacking a social-constructivist perspective, such approaches tend to assume that the category ‘the people’ exists and has a meaning prior to its signification in (populist or anti-populist or other kinds of) discourse, or at least do not explicitly theorise populism’s role in discursively constructing ‘the people’. There are a number of manifestations of this problem.
Populist as popular and the reification of ‘the people’

Populism is often understood as a type of politics that appeals to, or attempts to appeal to the people. In journalism and political rhetoric, populism frequently functions as a derogatory term to criticise the conscious aim to appeal to the people (see Taguieff 1998). Quite some academic usage of the concept is not that far from this negative common sense meaning (Jansen 2011: 77). One element here is populism’s perceived opportunism or demagogy. The term populism is then used to criticise for example the aim to please the people by lowering taxes right before elections, by making promises to the people that cannot be held, or by promising ‘easy’ solutions for ‘complex’ problems. This denunciation of opportunism is part of a broader view of populism as a questionable form of politics. Populist politics is criticized for its emotional (as opposed to rational), simplistic (as opposed to complex), antagonistic (as opposed to reasonable and consensual), and anti-intellectualist message and style that is aimed at the underbelly of the people (rather than their brains) (Mudde 2004: 542; Taguieff 1998: 7).

Beyond the fact that such a definition overstretches the notion of populism (see the following section) and the sometimes simplistic and elitist view of ‘the masses’ as irrational and easily manipulated by populist leaders, a third, ontological, issue is most relevant at this point in the argument. Definitions of populism as opportunistic politics take ‘the people’, its tastes and preferences to exist independently of (populist) politics. The preferences of ‘the people’ exist and populists merely appeal to them. This leads to a lack of attention for the agency of populist political actors in shaping and influencing the preferences of ‘the people’. Moreover, the category of ‘the people’ itself is taken to exist outside of the discourses speaking of and to ‘the people’. However, as Bourdieu (1990: 150) has argued: “the ‘people’ or the ‘popular’ [...] is first of all one of the things at stake in the struggle between intellectuals”. The signifiers ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’ do not have meaning outside of the discourses that speak of ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’. Populist discourses as well as discourses that criticise populism, then, are not merely different opinions about how politics should relate to ‘the people’, but construct the meaning of the signifiers ‘the people’ and ‘the popular’, and also of ‘populism’ (on the recurring features of anti-populist discourse see Stavrakakis 2014, 2017).

The populist electorate and the disregard for populist agency

The lack of attention for the construction of ‘the people’ by populists also becomes apparent in some authors’ focus on voters and sociological explanations rather than on populists’ politics. Some even define populism on the basis of the ‘popular’ character of the electorate of populist parties (e.g. Di Tella 1965; Jansen...
2011; Roberts 1995). However, it does not seem very useful to treat all parties with a ‘popular’ electorate as populist, independently of the content or form of their political action.

Even when parties are treated as populist on the basis of their politics, there has been a strong tendency to explain their electoral success on the basis of the sociology of their voters or of broader socio-economic and socio-cultural developments. Insight into the motives and profile of the electorate of populist parties and into the broader sociological context is crucial to explain populist parties’ success, but it does not contribute much to the understanding of populist politics itself. Indeed, quite some accounts explain the electoral success of populist politics – and particularly their success with ‘popular’ sectors of the population – with reference to processes independent of populist politics. The structuralist Marxist and modernisation approaches that made up the first wave of scholarship about Latin American populism in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, treated populist politics as a mere consequence of (socio-)economic processes (e.g. Di Tella 1965; Germani 1978; see Weyland 2001: 5–6). The rise of populist radical right parties in Europe also spawned a very considerable number of analyses of the social, economic, and cultural developments underlying their electoral success with the people suffering from these developments (e.g. Betz and Immerfall 1998; Ignazi 1992; Kitschelt with McGann 1995; Norris 2005). These accounts treat populist radical right parties’ success as the result of and reaction to phenomena such as post-industrialisation, immigration, globalisation, and detraditionalisation (e.g. Kitschelt 2002) as well as political scandals and corruption (Fieschi and Heywood 2004). From this perspective, populist politicians have done little more than capitalise on an existing sense of crisis, identity loss, dissatisfaction, insecurity, and lack of trust in political institutions among parts of the population that were caused by processes independent of populist politics (Weyland 2001: 5). Almost fifty years ago, Sartori (1968: 1981–1982 cited in Mudde 2007: 4) criticised the ‘objectivist bias’ of the ‘sociology of politics’ not only for its focus on ‘the consumer’ to the detriment of attention for ‘the producer’ but also for attempting to explain politics by ‘going beyond politics’ (see also Glynos and Howarth 2007: 114–115). Macro socioeconomic and sociocultural processes are paramount in explaining the rise of certain types of parties, but these processes do not simply generate political outcomes by themselves. The notion of a marginalised mass whose interests are not taken into account by the ruling political elite, for example, only becomes politically relevant if a political movement or party manages to appeal to this group as marginalised and to present itself as the representative of that group. Moreover, this is not an appeal to ‘the people’ as an already-existing objective category of people that is affected by certain conditions. Instead, the interpellation of people as members of ‘the people’ constructs ‘the people’.
The nature of populism

There are many different approaches to populism, but only a few of them really put the discursive construction of ‘the people’ center stage. Populism has been defined as an ideology or doctrine (MacRae 1969); as a thin ideology – a more limited set of ideas about how to evaluate ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ and about what role the people and the elite should play in politics (Canovan 2002; Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 2017; Stanley 2008); as a communication style or type of rhetoric that speaks about or appeals to ‘the people’ (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Kazin 1995); as a type of movement or mobilisation (Minogue 1969; Germany 1978); as a form of organisation or a leadership style (de la Torre 1998; Di Tella 1965; Roberts 2006); as a strategy (Ware 2002; Weyland 2001); or as a combination of several of the above, as when populism is defined as a syndrome (Wiles 1969). Whilst ‘the people’ plays a central role in most of these definitions, some of them take for granted that ‘the people’ exists and none of them really theorise how populists actively construct ‘the people’.

Populists’ role in discursively constructing ‘the people’, and the strategic (rather than ideological) dimension of this process, is much more fully recognised in conceptualizations of populism as a discourse or discursive political logic (Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Panizza 2005a; Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014) and in accounts of populism as a political style that ‘performs’ the people, which have also been partly inspired by Laclau’s work (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2015, 2016).

Definitional issues

Before turning to a thoroughly social-constructivist definition of populism as a political logic, a second set of more purely definitional problems with existing approaches to populism needs to be considered. Two related problems have long stood in the way of a clear definition that can serve as a firm basis for empirical analysis: (a) the inability to cover the diversity of populisms, (b) the failure to distinguish populism from other concepts.

Laclau’s work has been central to the resolution of these problems, even if in his later work he also expanded his definition in such a way that it became difficult to distinguish populism from the concepts of politics and hegemony. In the discourse-theoretical strategy of formalisation, abstraction and commensuration are aimed at developing formal definitions that are able to distinguish a concept from related concepts as well as to move away from the particularities of a certain manifestation and to remove traces of particularity that hinder the application of a concept to a variety of or comparable phenomena (Howarth 2005: 327; Laclau
1977: 10–12). Dissatisfaction with imprecise definitions of populism also underlies a significant and still growing body of conceptual work outside of the discourse-theoretical tradition. This includes the abovementioned ‘minimal’ definition of populism as a ‘thin’ ideology as well as a number of other efforts (e.g. Jansen 2011; Kögl 2010; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Weyland 2001).

Covering varieties of populism

First, the term populism is often used as a (critical) label for a certain group of parties and political leaders – usually located on the outskirts of the political spectrum, both on the Left and on the Right. Whilst it is among such parties that we can find the clearest examples of populist politics, using the term populism to refer to a certain family or families of parties risks losing sight of the populism outside of parties and movements that call themselves (which is rare) or are called (which is common) populist. The focus on the categorization of parties (typical of mainstream political science), in such cases, goes to the detriment of grasping the similarities across parties.

Second, definitions of populism have struggled with covering the diversity of the politics of the parties, movements and leaders that are considered populist by most. Despite the absence of a full consensus on what makes them populist, there is little discussion about the populism of a ‘core’ group of populists. This list includes the Russian Narodniki and the American People’s Party of the late 19th and early 20th century, the Latin American populism of the 1960s and 1970s, the European populist radical right of the last twenty to thirty years, and, and a more recent wave of left-wing populism in Latin America (e.g. Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia) and in Europe (e.g. the Greek SYRIZA, and the Spanish Podemos). (There is much more debate about the populist character of, for example, the neoliberal Latin American ‘neo-populism’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nazism and Italian Fascism, and the politics of right-wing leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi and Viktor Orbán, but also Margaret Thatcher and Nicolas Sarkozy). These main ‘waves’ of populism exhibit substantial differences that have not been easy to come to terms with (Taguieff 1998). Perhaps the main reason for this has been the historicist (Panizza 2005a: 2) approach of much of the literature until at least the early 2000s: focus was on the in-depth analysis of one specific case or one ‘wave’ of populism, rather than on comparative analysis and theoretical development of the notion of populism.

The main cause of this problem has been the empirico-inductive attempt to arrive at a definition of the concept of populism based on the analysis of concrete instances of (what is considered) populism. Further developing earlier (1977) work on populism, Laclau (2005b: 42) wrote that:
Most of the attempts at defining populism have tried to locate what is specific to it in a particular ontic content and, as a result, they have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an ‘intuition’ which cannot be translated into any conceptual content.

One problem is circularity: definitions start from selected cases that are assumed to be populist on the basis of an intuition (i.e. an implicit definition), and then make claims about populism as a more general phenomenon from the analysis of these specific cases, thus proving their own intuition (Laclau 1977: 145). Furthermore, such a definition needs to be continually adapted to the characteristics of the chosen cases. Every time a new party or movement that is intuitively identified as populist makes its appearance and diverges from the definition, the definition needs to change (Jansen 2011: 78; Laclau 2005b: 42; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 7; Panizza 2005a: 2–3).

These difficulties led some authors to give up on a general definition of populism and to opt for a typology or taxonomy instead. A prominent example is Canovan’s earlier (1981, 1982) work which concludes that it is impossible to arrive at a definition that covers all forms of populism. Instead, she argues, we need a typology that allows for the analysis of populism’s different manifestations. She argues that different populisms – she distinguishes agrarian populism and political populism, each with a number of subtypes – are different “sorts of things, and not directly comparable at all” (Canovan 1981: 298; 1982: 544–552). A typology of populisms is relevant and insightful, but a definition of populism needs first and foremost to make clear why all of these types of populisms are treated as populist. Otherwise, why speak of (different types of) populism in the first place? (Mudde 2000: 215; Panizza 2005a: 2–3).

A related problem is that empirico-inductive definitions of populism tend to stay too close to the empirical instance they are based on; often because their primary aim is to capture the particular instance of populism in its entirety under the notion of populism. Problems arise when case-specific elements – the particularities and specific context of certain populist politics – are included in the general definition so that the definition does not hold for other cases (Abts 2004: 451–476). One example are the definitions that – based on particularly the US People’s Party and the populist radical right – argue that populism is inherently nativist (e.g. Akkerman 2003; Taguieff 1997), that it propagates a return to a heartland (e.g. Taggart 2000, 2002) or that populism is a revolt against modernity and against the idea of progress (e.g. Canovan 2004). Such definitions are problematic because as the list of parties usually included in the list of examples of populism shows, populism can be socialist, agrarian, racist, nationalist, fascist, democratic, authoritarian, progressive, conservative, egalitarian, and inegalitarian.
Chapter 1. The populist political logic

(Jansen 2011: 82; Taguieff 1997: 8–10). A broadly applicable concept of populism needs to be able to cover this variety.

**Identifying the distinct character of populism**

All the while, the concept of populism should be precise enough to distinguish populism from other concepts. The failure to distinguish populism from other concepts – such as nationalism, democracy, and demagogy – has mainly been due to an inappropriate level of abstraction in defining what role ‘the people’ plays in populism.

Definitions that are *insufficiently precise* in identifying what ‘the people’ means in and to populism stretch the concept beyond what is analytically useful (Abts 2004; Jansen 2011). An example is the definition of populism as a “communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 322). Another is the view of populism as an appeal to the masses – as when populism refers to catch-all parties or to catch-all politicians that attempt to appeal to the people as a whole, without the mediation of parties (e.g. Canovan 2004: 243, 2005; Taguieff 1998: 6). The derogatory use of the term to refer to opportunism or demagogy has also led to conceptual imprecision (Howarth 2008: 179–180; Mudde 2004: 542). Populism is also not the same as ‘popular’. The popular appeal of a movement or party does not in itself determine the *populist* character of those politics (see Canovan 2005). And whilst populist parties might commonly use ‘popular’ communication strategies and rhetorics (e.g. Blommaert 2004), so do most other parties. The populist character is best treated as more precise than these popular political styles and forms *per se*.

Whilst it is a central element of populist politics, the claim to *represent* ‘the people’ as such does not allow us to distinguish populism from democracy either. The ties between both concepts are crucial for an understanding of populism (and anti-populism), but populism and democracy should be carefully distinguished rather than treated as synonyms (as they are in some populist rhetoric) or as opposites (as they are in some critiques of populism), for both miss out on the complexities and ambiguities of the relation between the two (Jansen 2011: 76). Nationalist politics too revolve around the claim to *represent* ‘the people’ (as a nation). And populism and nationalism have often been closely related – for example in populist radical right politics and in Latin American left-wing populisms, but the two should be distinguished if we want to understand the specificities of populism (see De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

A different kind of overstretching of populism can be found in the recent work of Laclau (2005a, 2005b). He argues that "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as
such” (2005a: 67). Populism becomes a synonym for politics (which is itself closely linked to the concept of hegemony), and the question becomes how to distinguish the two (or three) concepts (Arditi 2007; Beasley-Murray 2006; Kögl 2010: 176; Moffit and Tormey 2014: 384; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 6; Stavrakakis 2004: 263).

Perhaps less obviously, insufficiently abstract definitions of populism also hamper the identification of the distinct character of populism. By including too many characteristics of particular populist politics in the definition of populism, it becomes impossible not only to cover the variety of populisms (see the previous section) but also to distinguish populism from other elements of those particular populist politics, and from concepts such as nationalism and socialism. The key to the problem, again, is usually the complexity of the notion of ‘the people’. ‘The people’ not only means different things across populisms, but can also have several meanings in one and the same populism (see Mény and Surel 2000: 177–222). The definitional problem arises when all those meanings of the signifier ‘the people’ are treated as populist. Examples are definitions of populism that include the people-as-class (e.g. de la Torre 1997) or that take (exclusionary) nationalism to be an integral element of populism (e.g. Akkerman 2003; Jansen 2011: 82; Taggart 2000; Taguieff 1997: 15).

Populism as a political logic

Let us now turn to the development of a discourse-theoretical definition that overcomes the limitations of the existing literature identified thus far. Following the work of Laclau and others within the discourse-theoretical tradition, my strategy for capturing how populism discursively constructs the category of ‘the people’ it claims to represent, for covering the variety of populism across the political spectrum and for clearly identifying the specificity of populism is to define populism as a political logic. This definition will differ slightly from certain aspects of Laclau’s definition. It is more explicitly limited to a particular form of politics, and therefore, hopefully, more easily applicable in empirical analyses of populist politics. And more so than Laclau’s it acknowledges explicitly the role of populism in fomenting frustrations among ‘the people’ and in constructing certain groups of agents as an illegitimate elite that does not represent the people.

By looking at populism through the prism of logics, our understanding of populism is formalized. The focus moves away from the precise contents of populism, to how populism formulates them. As Laclau (2005b: 33) has argued:

© 2019, John Benjamins Publishing Company
All rights reserved
Chapter 1. The populist political logic

A movement is not populist because in its ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are.

Building on Laclau’s work, Glynos and Howarth developed the discourse-theoretical notion of logics in their *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. Logics, they argue, are “constructed and named by the analyst” in order to identify and understand the “rules or grammar of [a] practice” under study (2007: 136). To look at populism as a political logic means looking at how populism interpellates and mobilizes people, how this interpellation constructs subject positions people can identify with, and how populist politics are involved in the “construction, defence and naturalization of new frontiers” (Glynos 2008: 278).1

I will argue that populism is a political logic centred around the nodal points ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, in which the meaning of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is constructed through a down/up antagonism between ‘the people’ as a large powerless group and ‘the elite’ as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populism is a claim to represent ‘the people’ against a (some) illegitimate ‘elite’, and constructs its political demands as representing the will of ‘the people’ (see also De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 2019; De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018).

‘The people’ and ‘the elite’ as nodal points

As the word populism itself already suggests and as most accounts of populism acknowledge, ‘the people’ lies at the heart of populism. The difficulty with the notion of ‘the people’ as the basis for defining populism, it has been argued, is that ‘the people’ has a different meaning in different populisms and even within one and the same populism. Taggart (2000: 3), for example, contends that a commitment to ‘the people’ cannot be the basis for a definition of populism “because the people means fundamentally different things to different populists”. “The people’ does

---

1. Glynos and Howarth (2007; Glynos 2008: 278) distinguish between social, political, and fantasmatic logics, which respectively ‘roughly, […] offer answers to the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ questions. Social logics help the analyst to “characterise practices in a particular social domain” (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 15), for example the Apartheid regime or the practices in a capitalist workplace. They “help characterize practices by setting out the rules, norms, and self-understandings informing the practice” (Glynos 2008: 278). Political logics enable to grasp how these social practices and regimes of practices come into existence, are institutionalized, transformed, and contested. Finally, fantasmatic logics aide in identifying how the contingent nature of practices and regimes of practices is concealed or covered (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 15, 141–152). Populism as I define it in this chapter is first and foremost a political logic, but it also has a fantasmatic dimension. Populism is not a social logic, but can be linked up to different social logics.
indeed mean different things in different populisms, but this is only a problem if we want the definition of populism to cover the exact and entire meaning of ‘the people’ across diverse populisms. Such over-specific definitions of populism, I have argued, are indeed fraught with problems. Taking ‘the people’ as the centre of the definition is not a problem if populism is defined on a higher level of abstraction. At the same time, we have seen that the presence of the signifier ‘the people’ as such is insufficient to distinguish populism from other concepts. The task, therefore, is to find the appropriate level of abstraction.

Whilst in public debate vagueness and ambiguity about the meaning of populism still abounds, a growing academic consensus on the claim to represent ‘the people’ and criticism of ‘the elite’ as core characteristics of populism has developed. The populist political logic is characterised by the central role of the signifiers ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and by the particular role these signifiers play in populism. In discourse-theoretical terms, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ serve as the nodal points of populism. Nodal points – a notion that refers to Lacan’s ‘points de capiton’ – are “privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains” (Torfing 1999: 98) and in relation to which other signifiers acquire their meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 112).

The presence of the signifiers ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is not exclusive to populism, however. Populism is structured around a vertical, down/up axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical position (Dyrberg 2003: 8; 2006; Laclau 1977; Mény and Surel 2002: 12; Mudde 2007; Ostiguy 2009; Reinfeldt 2000). ‘The people’ is located on the down end of this axis as a large and powerless group, and ‘the elite’ is located on the up end as a small and powerful group. The nature of this power is often political, but can also refer to socio-economic and socio-cultural status. Populist rhetoric often refers to these positions or identities with the words ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ but also uses a range of other labels (‘ordinary people’, ‘common people’, etc. versus ‘the establishment’, ‘the caste’, and so on).

The presence of a down/up, people/elite opposition is still not in itself enough to speak of populism. Populism is at heart a claim to represent ‘the people’. Populists argue that a current illegitimate ‘elite’ does not represent ‘the people’, goes against their interests, and looks down on them, and promise to represent ‘the people’ (see Mény and Surel 2000: 12–13; Mudde 2004: 543; Reinfeldt 2000: 51). Populists interpellate citizens as members of the people-as-underdog, offering them the subject position of member of this people-as-underdog to identify with.

The construction of the ‘people’ through the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ along this vertical down/up axis distinguishes populism from other discourses and logics that are built around ‘the people’. Nationalist politics, for example, are structured around the claim to represent the people-as-nation, defined as a sovereign and distinct community with a particular
identity, tied to a particular territory and history, which is constructed through its opposition to (members of) other nations (for a detailed discussion of the conceptual relations between populism and nationalism see De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

Bringing the down/up relation into the definition avoids some of the ambiguity of Laclau’s later work on populism discussed above. Whereas Laclau does argue that populism is characterised by the “construction of political frontiers through the interpellation of the underdog” (Laclau 2005b: 44), he also treats populism as a synonym for politics more generally (Laclau 2005a: 67), so that any politics that revolves around the construction of a radical alternative to a current political regime becomes populist. The definition proposed here considers only politics that revolve around the construction of a political frontier along the down/up, powerless/powerful axis as populist. The construction of a political frontier between a nationally defined ‘people’ and its outsides, for example, is not in itself populist (see also De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

Indeed, for the concept of populism to work, it needs to focus only on the particular way of claiming to represent ‘the people’ as an underdog, discursively constructed against an illegitimate ‘elite’. We should keep out all the specificities of particular populist politics: their ideologies, the other signifiers they draw on (beyond ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’), who they consider to be ‘the elite’ and why they consider them as illegitimate. All this depends on the political programme the populists in question stand for, not on their populism per se. For example, left-wing populists have denounced ‘the elite’s’ neoliberalism, whilst radical right populists have castigated ‘the elite’ for its multiculturalism and globalism.

**From ideology to political logic: The discursive construction of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’**

In highlighting the central role of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, the definition of the populist political logic resembles elements of, amongst others, the definition of populism as a “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004: 543; on Laclau as an inspiration for this definition, see Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 123). The academic debate continues, but now mainly revolves around important discussions on the nature of populism (ideology, strategy, political logic, see above) and, related to this, on how we should normatively evaluate populism’s relation to democracy (with ideological approaches to populism usually treating populism as inherently problematic and focusing on the dangers of populism for liberal democracy, and
discursive approaches being much more sympathetic to (left-wing) populism's democratic potentials).

What is most important here is that the move from ideology to discursive logics has a number of benefits for the empirical analysis of populist politics.

More so than other approaches, the political logic approach explicitly acknowledges that populism discursively constructs the categories ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. ‘The people’ is not an objective socio-economic or socio-cultural category, nor is it simply ‘everyone’, but, in populism, is a category that is constructed by opposing the underdog to ‘the elite’ that does not serve the interest of the people (Laclau 1977: 110–111, 2005b: 33; Panizza 2005b).

Laclau (2005a, 2005b) has argued that populism is governed by the logic of equivalence, referring here to a concept developed together with Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). In the logic of equivalence, chains of equivalence are created that articulate a diversity of demands and identities in the same political project by opposing them to another negative identity (or so-called constitutive outside). Such logics of equivalence link together a number of demands and identities, without, however, totally eliminating their differences: Chains of equivalence “can weaken, but not domesticate differences” (Laclau 2005a: 9). This is fundamental, for it means that without the constitutive outside, the chain of equivalence would disintegrate. It thus becomes clear that what allows populists to bring together under the label ‘the people’ a range of different groups of people with their different identities and demands is not something positive they have in common, but their shared opposition to the same outside, ‘the elite’. It is the argument that all of these different groups’ interests, identities, rights, and so on are threatened and not taken into account by that same ‘elite’ that allows populists to construct ‘the people’. The antagonistic relation between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is thus central to populism’s discursive construction of and claim to represent ‘the people’. It is this antagonism to ‘the elite’ that allows populists to bring together different groups, identities and demands in a chain of equivalence, and that gives a sense of coherence to that whole.

The ‘elite’ can refer to different groups: political elites are particularly common, but journalists, state institutions, supra-national institutions such as the EU, intellectuals, NGOs and business people can also be presented and criticized as ‘elite’ in populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2007: 65–69). It is important to stress here that, like ‘the people’, ‘the elite’ is not simply an objective sociological category, but rather a category that is discursively constructed and given a particular meaning in populist rhetoric. The discursive construction of ‘the elite’ has received much less attention in literature on populism than ‘the people’ (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 395). Indeed, the existence of ‘the elite’ has often been taken for granted, and the same goes for the demands that this elite supposedly opposes or
Chapter 1. The populist political logic

frustrates. This is the case even in discourse-theoretical approaches that explicitly stress the discursively constructed nature of ‘the people’. This has mainly been due to Laclau’s view of populism as bringing together (previously existing) political demands that are not met by the ‘power-bloc’. To Laclau, populist politics depend on the existence of a number of frustrated political demands. He sees a “crisis of representation” (Laclau 2005a: 39, cited in Moffitt 2015: 191) as a necessary context for the emergence of populist politics. However, as Moffitt (2015) and Stanley (2008: 97–98) have argued, as against Laclau’s position, populist politics do not merely mobilise on existing feelings of frustration with the ‘power-bloc’ (although this of course increases the likelihood of their success). Instead, they actively construct a sense of crisis (Moffitt 2015) and actively “stimulate or re-inforce dissatisfaction with ‘the elite’ for its (real and/or perceived) frustrating or endangering of a number of demands, interests or identities” (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 11). Again, the nature of this ‘crisis’, and who belongs to ‘the elite’ that is responsible for this crisis depends on the political programme of the populists in question. For the populist radical right most problems boil down to issues with Islam and immigration and the elite is castigated for betraying and going against the will of ‘the ordinary people’ by allowing or even stimulating immigration and the ‘Islamisation’ of Europe. For left-wing populists, the crisis is a crisis of capitalism and ‘the elite’s’ betrays ‘the people’ through its complicity with neoliberalism and its politics of austerity.

The move away from seeing populism as an ideology (i.e. as a set of ideas on the best way to organise society and/or on the ideal role of ‘people’ and ‘elite’ in politics) and towards how populists discursively construct and claim to represent ‘the people’, together with the more explicit focus on the way populists discursively construct ‘the elite’, allows for a more thorough exploration of the strategic dimensions of populist projects (see Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). The populist claim to represent the people structures populists’ attempts to become the new, and in their own eyes, legitimate power-holders (although they might not label this position ‘elite’). The populist claim to represent ‘the people’ and their interests should therefore not be confused with democratisation in the sense of decreasing the distance between ‘people’ and ‘elite’. Whilst populists indeed make use of the notion of democracy very often, populism does not necessarily demand the annihilation of the differentiation of ‘people’ and ‘elite’ as such, the redressing of power balances, but the removal/replacement of a current ‘elite’ in the name of ‘the people’.

Also, parties and movements can turn to populism as a strategy to acquire power, even when they were originally not populist, and they do not necessarily remain populist once they are in power. But populism can also play a role in the rhetoric of existing power-holders when they legitimise their power and delegitimise their opponents by juxtaposing themselves to an illegitimate ‘elite’.
from which they have taken it (and that wants it back) and/or a competing elite on some other level or in some other societal field (for example international political institutions, economic actors, or a media or cultural elite).

**The discursive analysis of populist politics**

The concept of a populist political logic captures what is characteristic of populism, and allows us to identify cases of populist politics. But only the starting point for the empirical analysis of concrete populisms. In this final section I want to give a few pointers as to how we can go from this definition of populism to the discursive analysis of concrete populist politics.

The discourse-theoretical definition has so far mainly been used in discourse-theoretical analysis of populist politics, but it could also strengthen other discourse analytical approaches. Critical discourse analysis, especially, has made important contributions to understanding how radical right, ultra-nationalist and racist discourse functions (among many examples see Krzyzanowski and Wodak 2009; Wodak 2015; Wodak et al. 2009). But it has tended to not consider the specifically populist dimension of populist radical right discourse in as much detail (see De Cleen 2017b). And it has paid little attention to left-wing populisms, the discursive study of which has been much more present in discourse-theoretical approaches, as exemplified by Laclau’s work on Argentina (Laclau 1977, 2005a) and more recently also by the work of Stavrakakis and his colleagues on Greece (e.g. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

*Constructing ‘the people’ versus the ‘elite’*

In analyzing populist politics, we need to study the “means and forms of realisation” (Wodak et al. 2009: 35) of the populist political logic. The question becomes how the populist political logic operates in practice. How do populist politics discursively construct ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’? How do they dismiss ‘the elite’? And how do they make their claims to represent ‘the people’?

The populist political logic becomes visible, most obviously, in how populist parties explicitly present themselves as the only true representatives of ‘the people’. They are the “party of the people” (as the Flemish Vlaams Belang identified itself), the party who speaks “au nom du peuple” (as the French Front National slogan for the 2017 elections stated). They label their voters as the “People’s Army” (a term used by Farage’s UK Independence Party in the run-up to the Brexit referendum). And they present themselves as one with the people through slogans such as “we are the people” (“Wir sind das Volk” is a common slogan during Pegida
demonstrations, and “Wij zijn het volk” was used by the Flemish Vlaams Belang). These claims to represent ‘the people’ go hand in hand with explicit arguments about how ‘the elite’ does not listen to the people’, how ‘the elite’ is ‘disconnected’ from ordinary people’s lives and interests. The Podemos slogan “Nunca más un país sin su gente” (Never again a country without its people) clearly illustrates this populist promise of putting an end to rule by an elite that does not represent ‘the people’.

In different languages, the term ‘the people’ is used. For example ‘le peuple’ (French), ‘das Volk’ (German), and ‘el pueblo’ (Spanish) are common in populist rhetoric. But less obviously political references to the mass of anonymous individuals that make up ‘the people’ have also been used. The Dutch ‘de mensen’ and the Spanish ‘gente’ (people) are examples here. The populist interpellation of the ‘down’, or ‘low’, powerless people becomes even more explicitly clear in terms such as ‘little people’ or ‘little men’, ‘ordinary people’ or ‘common people’ and ‘average man’ or ‘average Joe’.

A discourse analysis of populist politics also needs to be sensitive to other, more figurative manners, in which populists have constructed ‘the people’ as ordinary. Examples are terms such as ‘Joe six-pack’ (referring to a six-pack of beer, a symbol of blue-collar ordinariness in the US), ‘Jan met de pet’ (literally Jan with the cap, referring to ordinary working men in Dutch) or ‘the man (or woman) in the street’.

This category of people has been opposed to ‘the elite’, or ‘the establishment’, but also to ‘the caste’ (as in Podemos’ dismissal of ‘la casta’). These labels lump together different kinds of opponents under one banner, thus presenting them as one unified and powerful enemy of ‘the people’. More symbolic manners of pointing out the ‘high’ position of this powerful group and its disconnection from the ‘low’ include references to ‘the elite’ in its ‘ivory tower’, or to the well-off neighborhoods where they live, the kinds of houses they live in, and the kind of cafés and restaurants they visit. The Flemish Vlaams Belang for example has dismissed pop artists organizing a concert against the party by arguing that those “who only pass their times in lounge bars in the South [het Zuid, a gentrified area of Antwerp] and live in an expensive loft, will have little trouble from multicultural society” (see De Cleen 2009; De Cleen and Carpentier 2010).

Whilst language is key, there are also also other “means and ways of realisation” of the populist logic. The populist logic also functions through visual and audiovisual means, for example through the visual representation of ‘the people’ as ‘ordinary’ (via dress style, certain locations, etc.) and of ‘the elite’ as far removed from ordinary people’s lives. But a discourse-theoretical perspective also makes

---

2. “Wie enkel vertoeft in de loungebars op het Zuid en woont in een dure loft, zal weinig last hebben van de multiculturele samenleving” (VB website, In de media, 29.09.2006).
it possible to analyze the charismatic leadership style that has been prominent in many populist politics as an attempt by the populist leader to incarnate ‘the people’. And mass meetings can be seen as discursively constructing ‘the people’ by making ‘the people’ visible to themselves as well as to the broader public, whilst also showing the populist political actor’s connections to ‘the people’. Some populists also appeal to ‘the people’ by performing ‘the low’ through for example bad manners, coarse ways of speaking or other forms of ‘low’ behaviour (Moffitt 2016) – think Trump, for example. Such strategies of behaving in an ‘ordinary’ manner that sets populists apart from ‘the elite’ and stresses their similarity to ‘the people’ characterises many populists’ style. But the claim to represent ‘the people’ and be different than the current illegitimate elite, does not necessarily require ‘low’ behaviour. Whilst the two can and do often coincide, the populist claim to represent ‘the people’ does not require that the populists resemble ‘the people’. The analysis of populist politics also needs to carefully consider the broader strategies used by populists to pit ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ by continuously emphasizing problems and scandals, discursively constructing crises of which ‘ordinary people’ are the victim, for which ‘the elite’ is responsible, and to which the populists are the solution (see Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2015, 2016).

Articulation and the role of populism in populist politics

Next to the question of how populist parties and politicians construct the categories ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ and how they claim to be the representatives of ‘the people’ as against an illegitimate ‘elite’, we need to ask who belongs to ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, why the populist parties supposedly are the only ones representing ‘the people’, and why ‘the elite’ supposedly does not represent ‘the people’. Whilst partly similar across different kinds of populism, these questions take us beyond mechanisms that are shared by populist political actors across the political spectrum to the specificities of different strands of populist politics.

A starting point for the analysis of any populist politics is that it is never exhausted by the notion of populism – as is illustrated by terms such as nationalism, right-wing populism, left-wing populism, or populist radical right. Who belongs to ‘the people’ and who does not and why, and who belongs to ‘the elite’ and why this ‘elite’ does not represent ‘the people’ depends not on populism per se, but on the specific political program of the populists in question.

The key to understanding particular populist politics is therefore to ask how the populist political logic links up with the rest of the program and strategies of the populist political actor in question. The discourse-theoretical notion of articulation helps us to conceptualize these connections. Articulation, in discourse theory, refers to the practice of bringing together different elements in a discourse
so as to construct a particular structure of meaning. Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000: 3) point out that:

A political project will attempt to weave together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a certain way. [...] Discourse theory investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality.

So, in studying populist politics we need to ask: next to populism, what are the different ingredients of the populist politics in question? Which demands, identities are brought together in the populist chain of equivalence? Moreover, we need to ask exactly how the populist logic and these other ingredients are articulated. How are they brought together in a more or less coherent structure of meaning? How do they reinforce each other? Do these connections create tensions?

The notion of populism as a so-called ‘thin’ ideology that needs to be combined with ‘full’ ideologies also points in this direction (Mudde 2004, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Stanley 2008). The notion of articulation allows capturing this combination more precisely. It makes clear that combining populism with other elements is not a matter of addition. Articulation is defined as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). So, populism is not just added to socialism, or conservatism, or nationalism. Through the articulatory process (the elements of) each of these articulated discourses acquires a particular meaning. It is this process that explains why the populist ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ mean such different things in different populist politics. By looking at the articulation of populism with other discourses we also understand better why ‘the people’ can have such a complex and layered range of meanings in populist politics.

For example, European and American left-wing populists (e.g. SYRIZA, Podemos, Bernie Sanders) have constructed ‘the people’ by combining socialist demands for socio-economic equality and opposition to neoliberal policies imposed by unelected elites and by elected elites closely connected to them with demands for gender equality, environmental issues, and anti-racism. Through the articulation of populism with (amongst others) socialism, anti-racism, and gender equality, ‘the people’ becomes an inclusive term that also encompasses people of foreign descent. And ‘the people’ becomes an agent for progressive change. This is opposed to ‘the elite’, which is constructed as a conservative and neoliberal agent that stands in the way of social, ethnic and gender equality (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Borriello and Mazzolini, this volume). For the populist radical right in Europe, the US and elsewhere, by contrast, through the articulation of
populism with exclusionary nationalism and conservatism, ‘the people’ becomes an exclusive term that refers to a sub-group of an ethnic-culturally defined nation. The interests of this group, the argument goes, are betrayed by a ‘politically correct’ political, media, cultural and intellectual ‘elite’ (on the national and international level) that imposes multicultural society and globalization on a ‘people’ that does not want it, that has no respect for traditions, and refuses to properly respond to crime (see De Cleen 2013, 2016a, 2016b for a more detailed discussion of the role of populism in populist radical right politics). The very intricate articulation of populism and exclusionary nationalism in populist radical right rhetoric becomes most visible in the layered meaning of ‘the people’ in slogans such as “We are the people” or “In the name of the people”, with which these parties interpellate citizens as members of both the people-as-underdog and the people-as-nation. Moreover, to a large extent, the interpellation of citizens as a non-represented underdog builds on nativist arguments about ‘the elite’ not looking out for the interests of the native ‘ordinary people’.

Populism plays a crucial role in these left-wing and right-wing populist politics’ ability to successfully interpellate citizens. But if we want to grasp exactly what that role is, we need to be very precise about what we consider populism to be, and we need to consider exactly how populism is combined with other elements that are themselves not populist. Discursive analyses of populist politics need to study empirically how these connections are made in populist discourses. I hope this chapter has shown how treating populism as a particular political logic that is articulated with other elements of populists’ political programs can help us to consider the role of populism and its connections to the other dimensions of populist politics across the political spectrum.

Bibliography


© 2019, John Benjamins Publishing Company
All rights reserved


https://doi.org/10.1126/stanford/9780804796132.001.0001


https://doi.org/10.9783/978019012293784


