


REVIEW ARTICLE

Resisting the ‘populist hype’: a feminist critique of a globalising concept

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to offer a feminist critique of populism, not as a distinct mode of politics, but as an analytical and political concept. As such, it seeks to redirect our attention away from populism, understood as a politics ‘out there’, towards the academic *theoretical debates* that have given this analytical term a new lease of life and propelled it beyond academic circles into the wider public discourse. In this context, the article develops two broad arguments. The first is that the two prevailing conceptions of populism are marred by anaemic conceptions of power, collective agency and subjectivity and, as such, are unable to present us with a convincing account of why this form of radical politics emerges in the first place, who its protagonists are, and how they come together in collective struggle. The second is that our current frenetic deployment of the term as a blanket descriptor for radical politics of all persuasions does not bode well for feminism *politically*. For both reasons, I conclude that feminists need to resist the current ‘populist hype’.

Keywords: Populism; Anti-Populism; Cas Mudde; Ernesto Laclau; Feminist Theory; Feminism; Left Politics; Left–Right Distinction

Introduction

In a transnational world ... feminists need detailed, historicized maps of the circuits of power.¹

... we should begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women ...²

Populism is not only incompatible with feminizing politics – it actually reinforces patriarchy. We need to transform the way left-wing politics is done.³

The purpose of this article is to offer a feminist critique of populism, not as a distinct mode of politics,⁴ but as an analytical and political concept. In other words, I want to redirect our

¹Caren Kaplan, ‘The politics of location as transnational feminist critical practice’, in Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 148.

²Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Anchor Books, 2014), p. 25.

³Laura Roth and Kate Shea Baird, ‘Left-wing populism and the feminization of politics’, *ROAR Magazine*, available at: {<https://roarmag.org/essays/left-populism-feminization-politics/>} accessed 7 June 2019.

⁴There is a small but growing feminist literature exploring the relationship between gender and various instantiations of so-called populist politics. See Cherry Miller, ‘Feminist politics and populism: Positioning gender in populism studies’, *Alusta*, available at: {<https://alusta.uta.fi/2019/01/21/feminist-politics-and-populism-positioning-gender-in-populism-studies/>}; Nancy Fraser, ‘Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: a choice that feminists should refuse’, *Nordic*

attention away from populism, understood as a politics ‘out there’, towards the academic theoretical debates that have given this analytical term a new lease of life and propelled it beyond academic circles into the wider public discourse.⁵ More concretely, my aims are twofold. First, I seek to critically interrogate how populism has been *conceptualised* in the literature. Which ontological assumptions sustain this particular understanding of politics, especially with respect to its notions of power, subjectivity, and collective agency? And what would a feminist engagement with these narratives look like? Second, I want to explore the *performative effects* of this term on our contemporary political discourse and political imagination. What work does this notion do with respect to how we evaluate different forms of radical or ‘insurgent’ politics and what are the consequences of this for feminism?

In response to these questions, I develop two broad arguments. In Part One, I identify the two prevailing conceptions of populism that dominate the field and then go on to offer a feminist critique of each narrative. More concretely, I argue that longstanding feminist insights into the workings of power, subjectivity, and collective agency – insights completely neglected in this literature – pose important challenges to prevailing academic *theorisations* of populism. In Part Two, I explore populism’s role as a political signifier and trace how it is being used, by whom, and to what effect. Here I claim that our current deployment of the term to describe most forms of oppositional or radical politics today does not bode well for feminists politically. This is because the ascendancy of populism as the *trope du jour* has been accompanied by an unacknowledged politicisation of academic scholarship, which encourages brash judgements and indignant outrage at any and all challenges to the centre ground of politics. In so doing, it narrows the landscape on which feminism can operate and thrive. I conclude that it is as a signifier, rather than as an analytical concept, that it does its most powerful work and that, as a result, feminists need to resist the ‘populist hype’.⁶

Before moving on to Part One, it is important to specify the tradition of feminism that I am speaking to and from in this article. By feminism, I am referring to a social movement that embodies a ‘shared principled commitment to challenging gender hierarchies’⁷ and that promises emancipation for all, as Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s evocative appeal, above, suggests.⁸ So while I acknowledge that feminism embodies an internally contested, multiperspective movement, here I am interested in drawing particularly on those scholars who have self-consciously sought to steer it towards a transformative, radical politics, that is, one that seeks to overturn systemic power relations of inequality and oppression.⁹ This includes a range of

Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, 24:4 (2016), pp. 281–4; Akwugo Emejulu, ‘Can the people be feminists? Analysing the fate of feminist justice claims in populist grassroots movements in the United States’, *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 3:2 (2011), pp. 123–51; Paloma Caravantes, ‘New versus old politics in Podemos: Feminization and masculinized party discourse’, *Men and Masculinities* (2018), available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1097184X18769350>}; Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo, ‘Populism and feminist politics: the cases of Finland and Spain’, *European Journal of Political Research* (2019), available at: {<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1475-6765.12333>}.

⁵For a helpful summary and overview of how populism is framed in the mainstream media, see Tim Bale, Stijn van Kessel, and Paul Taggart, ‘Thrown around with abandon? Popular understandings of populism as conveyed by the print media: a UK case study’, *Acta Politica*, 46:2 (2011), pp. 111–31.

⁶The notion of ‘populist hype’ is borrowed from Jason Glynos and Aurélien Mondon, ‘The Political Logic of the Populist Hype: The Case of Right-Wing Populism’s “Meteoric Rise” and Its Relations to the Status Quo’, *Populism Working Paper 4* (2016), available at: {https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/148981154/WP4_glynos_mondon_final_upload.pdf}.

⁷Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree, and Barbara Risman, ‘Constructing global feminism: Transnational advocacy networks and Russian women’s activism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26:4 (2001), pp. 1115–86.

⁸Although feminism has traditionally been associated with the liberation of women, increasingly its conception of social justice also speaks to class and racial inequalities as well as to gender stereotypes that constrain men. In this sense, feminism can be understood as an emancipatory project ‘for everyone’. See bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: South End Press, 2000).

⁹For a discussion of the different meanings of ‘radical’ and its relevance to feminism, see Catherine Eschle and Bice Maignushca, ‘Reclaiming feminist futures: Co-opted and progressive politics in a neoliberal age’, *Political Studies*, 62:3 (2014), pp. 634–51, 12–13.

diverse feminist theorists within the *critical theory* and *socialist tradition* as well as all those seeking to explore the challenges and possibilities of building and theorising an *intersectional, anti-racist, queer* feminism. To this extent, I sample from multiple feminisms in order to make my case.

Understood in this way, the feminist project seeks to undertake at least three political tasks, each of which require theoretical and empirical work. The first is the recognition and analysis of *injustice*, and, to this end, as Caren Kaplan points out, the production of detailed maps of the complex workings of power. While feminists do sometimes name and shame specific individuals or groups for their actions, their main goal is to identify and conceptualise the operations of structural relations of subordination that include, but can go beyond ‘patriarchy’, ‘racism’, and ‘heteronormativity’.¹⁰ Moreover, these generalised patterns of conscious and unconscious collective behaviour are usually understood as overlapping, thus demanding close attention to the ways in which, as political subjects, we are caught in multiple, intersecting systems of oppression.¹¹ Learning again from Adichie, a second vital task for feminism is that of envisioning, theorising, and putting into practice a more just *alternative future*. To this end, feminists have directed their energies into developing a range of utopian visions and a distinct approach to ethics.¹² In this way, feminist scholarship is unapologetically politicised and normative in orientation and, as such, sees itself as waging a struggle both *against* injustice and *for* a transformed world order. Finally, given this commitment to transformative individual and collective agency, feminism has had to grapple with the thorny issue of subjectivity and how to conceptualise it as a site of power *and* agency. Despite the ongoing disagreements between so-called ‘essentialists’ and ‘constructivists’, feminists have persisted in their efforts to develop generative, creative, and hermeneutical conceptions of subjectivity, which foreground the influence of a number of forces – from our unconscious selves to our emotions to our everyday experiences – and which enable us to see the possibility of resistance.¹³

I suggest that these three features, taken together, render the feminist project a crucial and vital instantiation of both *left politics* and *critical theorising*. This intuition draws on the ideas of Norberto Bobbio and Steven Lukes who argue that all left political projects strive to uphold the ‘emotive value of equality’¹⁴ by struggling against and seeking to rectify ‘unjustifiable but remedial inequalities’.¹⁵ In this context, Lukes specifically identifies feminism as a case in point. It also takes inspiration from the work of Stephen Leonard who argues that feminism must be understood as one instance of ‘critical theory in political practice’.¹⁶ It is as a critical theory that feminism has produced a prodigious body of scholarship over the years, which aims to

¹⁰Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), ch. 2.

¹¹Kimberley Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics’, *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1:8 (1989); Patricia Hill Collins, ‘It’s all in the family: Intersections of gender, race and nation’, *Hypatia*, 13:3 (1998), pp. 62–82; Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Intersectionality and feminist politics’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13:3 (2006), pp. 193–209.

¹²See, for example, Erin McKenna, *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2001); Kimberley Hutchings, ‘Towards a feminist international ethics’, *Review of International Studies*, 26:5 (2000), pp. 111–30; and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹³See Diana Fuss, ‘The “risk” of essence’, in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (eds), *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 250–1; Susan Heckman, ‘Reconstituting the subject’, *Hypatia*, 6:2 (1991), pp. 44–63; Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist Theory and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

¹⁴Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 67.

¹⁵Steven Lukes, ‘Epilogue: the grand dichotomy of the twentieth century’, in Terrence Ball and Richard Bellamy (eds), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 602–26.

¹⁶Stephen Leonard, *Critical Theory in Political Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). For a feminist defence of the claim that feminism, as a political project, speaks to and from a left politics and, as such, embodies a form of critical theorising, see Catherine Eschle and Bice Manguashca, ‘Rethinking globalised resistance: Feminist activism and critical theorising in IR’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:2 (2007), pp. 284–301 and Eschle and Manguashca, ‘Reclaiming feminist futures’.

make sense of and hold to account not only its own movement, but that of other social movements also rallying against perceived injustices in the name of a fairer world. To this extent, feminism offers us a vast repertoire of concepts, insights, and arguments about the ‘why’, ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘how’ of radical politics. As we shall see below, the neglect of this rich, multivalent theoretical tradition serves to impoverish current efforts to understand and conceptualise the nature and origins of populism.

Mapping populism as a concept and its feminist discontents

The study of populism today is being undertaken, almost exclusively, by two groups of scholars: political scientists, particularly comparativists, and political theorists.¹⁷ IR scholars have shown less enthusiasm to enter the fray, although there are signs that this might be changing. A plethora of articles have been published in recent years on regional populisms,¹⁸ especially in the context of Latin America,¹⁹ and there is a growing interest in exploring the impact of right-wing movements, often conflated with populism, and their impact on foreign policy²⁰ and the international liberal order more broadly.²¹ In addition, the notion of ‘transnational populism’ is gaining some attention, although this has been mainly pursued by non-IR scholars and remains under studied.²² Although not yet observable in IR discourse, there has been a meteoric rise in the use of the term populism as a blanket descriptor for radical or ‘insurgent’ politics of all persuasions. This trend has become particularly pronounced since the 2008 financial crisis,²³ and marks not only contemporary academic scholarship,²⁴ but also all forms of media coverage of the current state of politics.²⁵ In this context, it is unsurprising that Cambridge University Press deemed

¹⁷See Paul K. Jones, ‘Insights from the infamous: Recovering the social-theoretical first phase of populism studies’, *European Journal of Social Theory* (2018), available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1368431018772507>}. Most of the Special Issues on populism, thus far, have been in the field of Political Science (for example, *International Political Science Review*, 38:4 (2017) or *Comparative Political Studies*, 51:13 (2018)) or in Political Theory (for example, *Constellations*, 21:4 (2014)).

¹⁸See, for example, Shabnam Holliday, ‘Populism, the international and methodological nationalism: Global order and the Iran-Israel nexus’, *Political Studies*, available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0032321718817476>} and Vedi Hadiz and Angelos Chrysosgelos, ‘Populism in world politics: a comparative cross regional perspective’, *International Political Science Review*, 38:4 (2017), pp. 399–411.

¹⁹For a Latin American focus, see Robert Muggah and Brian Winter, ‘Is populism making a comeback in Latin America?’, *Foreign Policy* (23 October 2017); Shannon O’Neil, ‘Latin America’s populist hangover’, *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2016).

²⁰Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, ‘The impact of populist radical right parties on foreign policy’, *European Political Science Review*, 7:4 (2015), pp. 525–46.

²¹John Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 7–23.

²²For one effort to distinguish between ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ populism, see Benjamin Moffitt, ‘Transnational populism?: Representative claims, media and the difficulty of constructing a transnational people’, *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, 24:4 (2017), pp. 409–25. See also Frank Stengel, David MacDonald, and Dirk Nabers (eds), *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter and Transnational Dimensions* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

²³Cas Mudde, ‘How populism became the concept that defines our age’, *The Guardian* (22 November 2018), available at: {https://www.wrdtp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Mudde-How-populism-became-the-concept-that-defines-our-age_-_Cas-Mudde_-_World-news_-_The-Guardian.pdf} accessed 11 July 2019.

²⁴For a critical discussion of the way that ‘populism’ is now being adopted ‘willy-nilly’, as Frank puts it, in academic analyses to explain all contemporary challenges to liberal democracy, see Jason Frank, ‘Populism is not the problem’, *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum* (15 August 2018), available at: {<https://bostonreview.net/politics/jason-frank-populism-not-the-problem>} accessed 7 July 2019 and Philippe Marlière, ‘The demophobes and the great fear of populism’, *Open Democracy* (4 June 2013), available at: {<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/demophobes-and-great-fear-of-populism/>} accessed 7 July 2019.

²⁵*The Guardian* newspaper, for instance, has given the concept unprecedented attention initiating ‘The New Populism’ series in 2018, which combines academic articles by key thinkers on the subject (Cas Mudde is now a regular contributor to the paper) with simple quizzes that readers can take to find out if they too are populists! See, for instance, Peter Baker, ‘We the people: the battle to define populism’, *The Guardian* (10 January 2019), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jan/10/we-the-people-the-battle-to-define-populism?CMP=share_btn_link} accessed 11 July 2019 and

‘populism’ to be word of the year in 2017, stating that it is a phenomenon that is both ‘truly local and truly global’.²⁶

In this part of the article I critically interrogate, from a feminist theoretical perspective, the two prevailing definitions of populism shaping our understanding of this putative phenomenon. In so doing, I aim to make the case that, whichever definition one chooses to draw on, these two incompatible, yet intertwined narratives, are both marred by anaemic conceptions of power, collective agency, and subjectivity. As such, neither story is able to present us with a convincing account of why this form of radical politics emerges in the first place, who its protagonists are, and how they come together in collective struggle.

Two tales of populism

It is the work of Cas Mudde that – often alongside his co-author Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser – constitutes the most widely cited body of texts on contemporary populism within political science with a long list of scholars from different scholarly backgrounds following his lead.²⁷ For Mudde, and others belonging to what I shall dub the ‘ideational camp’, populism must be understood as a ‘thin ideology’. His oft-quoted definition reads as follows:

populism is best defined as a thin-centered 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 general* (general will) of the people.²⁸

In these terms, populism must be understood as a ‘mental map’, accompanied by particular discourses, through which people come to understand the world and articulate their grievances and aspirations.²⁹ The specific content of this ideology stems from a political determination and moral judgement that the well-being of ‘the people’ is being trammled by the special interests of a ‘corrupt elite’. To this extent, it embodies a binary politics of confrontation, one in which a singular ‘us’ faces down a ‘them’. In this context, the key protagonists in this story of righteous rebellion, and upon which the construction of the ‘us’ depends, are a malleable, but angry group of people, waiting to be led, and an enterprising, charismatic leader willing to take on the job.

While theorising the conditions that give rise to this radical politics has not been the focus of this body of literature, much of the commentary takes for granted several key factors including the entrenchment of neoliberalism and the economic disenfranchisement of vast swathes of people; the tyranny of political consensus and the pull of ‘centrism’ that has stifled political debate along with all voices of dissent;³⁰ and, perhaps most prominently, the changing political preferences/concerns of citizens, which includes the increased salience of cultural identity in an era of

Matthijs Rooduijn, ‘Why is populism suddenly all the rage?’, *The Guardian* (20 November 2018), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/world/political-science/2018/nov/20/why-is-populism-suddenly-so-sexy-the-reasons-are-many>}.

²⁶<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/populism-revealed-as-2017-word-of-the-year-by-cambridge-university-press>}.
²⁷See, for example, Takis Pappas and Hans Kriesi, ‘Populism in Europe during crisis: an introduction’, in Takis Pappas and Hans Kriesi (eds), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (Colchester: European Consortium for Political Research Press, 2015); Luke March, ‘From vanguard of the proletariat to vox populi: Left-wing populism as a “shadow” of contemporary socialism’, *SAIS Review*, 27:1 (2007), pp. 63–7; Stijn van Kessel, *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015); and Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). In the case of the latter, Mudde’s definition is expanded to include ‘political style’.

Notwithstanding this interesting effort to finesse the notion of populism, Moffitt’s account assumes that populism functions as an ideology in the first instance and then subsequently, as a performance.
²⁸Cas Mudde, ‘The populist zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2005), pp. 541–63 (p. 543).
²⁹Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’, in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent, and Marc Stears (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 7.
³⁰Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, ‘Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 51:13 (2018), pp. 1667–93.

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³⁰Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, ‘Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 51:13 (2018), pp. 1667–93.

material security.³¹ Taken together, these processes have produced fertile ground for an ‘uncompromising’ politics, which, once in power, has the potential to morph into a politics of illiberalism. As Mudde explains,

The main bad is that populism is a monist and moralist ideology, which denies the existence of divisions of interests and opinions within ‘the people’ and rejects the legitimacy of political opponents.³²

Although Cas Mudde has been the dominant influence on the study of populism, the work of the late Ernesto Laclau has also been influential, especially among political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Francisco Panizza, Yannis Stavrakakis, and Giorgos Katsambekis all working within his framework.³³ If political scientists conceive the genus of populism to be an ideology and, thereby treat it as an *ontic* force, Laclau, and his allies, see it as a logic that constitutes the *ontological* fabric of the political.³⁴ As Laclau puts it,

the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly formal one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation – the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independently of the actual contents that are being articulated ... ‘populism’ is an ontological and not an ontic category.³⁵

This logic is triggered in the context of a crisis of representation in which a series of unmet ‘demands’ are articulated together into what Laclau refers to as a counterhegemonic ‘chain of equivalence’. This temporary, precarious coalition is afforded a semblance of unity first by the production of ‘empty signifiers’ (that is, the names of popular leaders or the ideals that they are aspiring to) that serve to gather and unite these hitherto disparate demands and second, by its opposition to a common enemy or established order.³⁶ Thus, in a similar vein to the ideational approach, populism is understood as dyadic form of politics that has at its heart, a deep antagonism that cuts the social field into two irreconcilable camps. As Laclau states, ‘There is no populism without the discursive construction of an enemy: the ancient regime, the oligarchy, the Establishment or whatever.’³⁷

In terms of the subject of populism, as opposed to the Muddeian camp, for whom the emergence of populism presupposes an already existing constituency of people, for Laclau, it is only *through* and by means of discursive relations and the rhetorical devices mobilised by populist leaders, that ‘the people’ can be constituted as a popular subject in the first place.³⁸ In other words,

³¹Interview with Cas Mudde on the root causes of populism available at: {<http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/interview-cas-mudde-causes-populism-european-union/>}.

³²Cas Mudde, ‘The Problem with Populism’, available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/17/problem-populism-syriza-podemos-dark-side-europe/>}.

³³Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Populism in power: Syriza’s challenge to Europe’, *Juncture*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 273–80; Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, ‘Left-wing populism in the European periphery’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19:2 (2014), pp. 119–42.

³⁴In other words, for Laclau treating populism as a *sui generis* form of radical politics ‘out there’ is to misconstrue its fundamental nature because all politics is marked by this binary discursive logic. It is the essential feature of the political. By contrast, for Mudde, and those who follow him, populism is a *distinct type* of radical politics that can be characterised in terms of specific, fixed features and that can be compared to other forms that are not populist.

³⁵Ernesto Laclau, ‘Populism: What’s in a name?’, in Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, pp. 32–49 (p. 44).

³⁶Laclau, ‘Populism’, p. 37.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁸Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why constructing a people is the main task of radical politics’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32:4 (2006), pp. 646–80.

the ‘us’, along with their identity and interests, is brought into being through the ‘creative acts’ of a charismatic leader who inspires his followers to ‘affectively invest’ in his words and deeds.³⁹ As a discursive strategy and mode of identification, populism becomes an active, potentially transformative social force. While this process of democratic reinvention is contingent, unpredictable, and potentially hazardous – chains of equivalence can be articulated in defence of a politics for the left or the right – for Laclau it remains the blood of democratic life as institutionalised hegemony and populist counterhegemonies lock horns in the battle over and for ‘the people’.

Populism as a radical politics? A feminist rebuttal

Before presenting my feminist critique of these two perspectives, it is important to note that each embody two very different modes of theorising and offer starkly contrasting evaluations of populism as a political force. So while the Muddean camp is committed to the construction of parsimonious definitions, hypothesis testing, and comparative empirical analyses, those in the Laclauian camp seek to defend and contribute to a highly abstract, formal theory of the political. For this reason, Muddeans tend to treat populism as an empirical phenomenon that can and must be mapped and measured; Laclauians, instead, prefer to draw on empirical case studies as illustrative examples of the applicability and/or normative relevance of their theorising.⁴⁰ A second distinction worthy of mention, is that Muddeans have largely (but not exclusively) chosen to focus on and critically appraise radical right movements/parties as their exemplar of populism⁴¹ with Laclauians opting to explore and defend left-wing movements/parties (particularly in Latin America and southern Europe) as the ‘genuine’ embodiment of populism.⁴² Of course, their contrasting political evaluations of populism, at least in part, reflect their empirical focus, a point I will return to later in the article. Finally, it should be acknowledged that in the heat of debate, both Mudde and Laclau have been interpreted in ways that may not always be faithful to the original intent of their work. For this reason, my critique will address both the ontological and conceptual baggage that I think necessarily comes along with these two narratives of populism (certainly made more explicit in the case of the Laclauian camp) as well as with the way in which they have been ‘taken up’ and adapted to make substantive claims about the nature and significance of populism.

Despite these deep differences, both of these approaches to populism disappoint from a feminist theoretical perspective. For, as we shall see, with respect to the work of the ideational camp, the underlying story of emergence that feeds into this body of literature not only reifies and dichotomises politics in unhelpful ways, it also completely neglects the role of structural power

³⁹Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 101.

⁴⁰For examples of the former trend, see Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove, ‘How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 47:9 (2013), pp. 1324–53; Matthijs Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels, ‘Measuring populism: Comparing two methods of content analysis’, *West European Politics*, 34:6 (2011), pp. 1272–83; Kirk Hawkins, Ryan E. Carlin, Levente Littvay, and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser (eds), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), chs 1, 4, 5, 7. For examples of the latter, see Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018); Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: In the Name of the People* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2016), chs 10, 11, 12, 13; Alexandros Kioukiolis, ‘Podemos: the ambiguous promises of left-wing populism in contemporary Spain’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21:2 (2016), pp. 99–120; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, ‘Left-wing populism in the European periphery’, pp. 119–42.

⁴¹One of Cas Mudde’s early works on populism was his book *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). He continues to research radical right-wing politics with his latest book *The Far Right in America* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁴²Members of this camp have explicitly argued that populism, understood in Laclauian terms, can only meaningfully refer to left-wing movements, given that right-wing movements mobilise ‘the nation’, rather than ‘the people’, as its central empty signifier. For a defence of this position, see Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Nikos Nikisianos, Alexandros Kioukiolis, and Thomas Siomos, ‘Extreme right-wing populism in Europe: Revisiting a reified association’, *Critical Discourse Studies*, 14:4 (2017), pp. 420–39.

relations. Adding to these limitations, I will also draw out the ways in which the ‘who’ of populism is personalised, individualised, and essentialised in a framework that ultimately depoliticises political agency. Running along similar lines, my critical interrogation of the Laclauian camp will first foreground its tendency to erase gender, race, and class – both as a power relation and an embedded and embodied identity – from view and then go on to highlight how this post-Marxist notion of radical politics is freighted with an overly restrictive conception of subjectivity and misses crucial sites and enactments of politicisation.

Populism as an ideology: the reification and personalisation of politics

As noted earlier, those in the ideational camp tend to locate the origins of populism, either explicitly or implicitly, in a framework that first separates out economic grievances from cultural ones and then extrapolates from each a discrete form of politics, that is, ‘materialist’ politics, on the one hand, and ‘identity’ politics, on the other. The most well known advocates of this thesis are Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart who claim that today we are witnessing a global ‘cultural backlash’ by predominantly older white men who fear that their identity is being undermined and their societal position devalued.⁴³ As Norris and Inglehart put it, ‘the orthogonal pull of cultural politics generates tensions and divisions within mainstream parties allowing new opportunities for populist leaders to mobilize electoral support’.⁴⁴

Despite very recent efforts to nuance the distinction between ‘economic anxiety’ and ‘cultural backlash’ and their role in exacerbating populism,⁴⁵ it remains a central, if implicit, reference point in this narrative.⁴⁶ For instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser characterise European populism as a ‘post-material phenomenon, based first and foremost on identity’ while Latin American populism is depicted as an expression of ‘materialist politics’.⁴⁷ Others have followed suit with Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel associating right-wing populist parties with strong ‘cultural’ positions (for example, anti-immigration) and those on the left with ‘socioeconomic’ ones.⁴⁸ The upshot is that populism is parsed and reified into two distinct forms, which, in turn, can be traced back to specific types of grievances.

These explanations as to the causes of populism raise a number of feminist concerns. The first obvious worry relates to the rather easy and widespread reliance on the well-worn binary between economic disadvantage vs cultural stigmatisation. There is a long line of feminists who refuse the analytical utility and conceptual coherence of these kinds of ‘false antitheses’,⁴⁹ arguing instead that feminists should challenge the ‘decoupling of cultural politics from social politics both

⁴³Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, ‘The true clash of civilisations’, *Foreign Policy*, 135 (2003), pp. 62–70.

⁴⁴Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, ‘Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: the Economic Have Nots and Cultural Backlash’ (2016), available at: {https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2818659} accessed 12 July 2019.

⁴⁵See Mudde and Kaltwasser, ‘Studying populism in comparative perspective’, pp. 1667–93.

⁴⁶Michael Cox, ‘Understanding the Global Rise of Populism’, *LSE!deas* blog (2018), available at: {<http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/research/updates/populismhttp://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/research/updates/populism>}; Fareed Zakaria, ‘Populism on the march: Why the West is in trouble’, *Foreign Affairs* (2016), available at: {<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2016-10-17/populism-march>}.

⁴⁷Cas Mudde and Cristobal R. Kaltwasser, ‘Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America’, *Government and Opposition*, 48:2 (2013), pp. 147–74 (p. 167).

⁴⁸Steven Van Hauwaert and Stijn van Kessel, ‘Beyond protest and discontent: a cross-national analysis of the effect of populist attitudes and issue positions on populist party support’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 57 (2018), pp. 68–92.

⁴⁹Nancy Fraser, ‘From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a “post-socialist” age’, *New Left Review*, 212 (1995), pp. 68–93; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca, ‘Theorising feminist organising in and against neoliberalism: Beyond co-optation and resistance?’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1:1–2 (2018), pp. 223–39.

politically and intellectually'.⁵⁰ Separating out the cultural from the economic prevents us from grasping the ways in which these two realms are mutually constituted and reproduce identities that cut across both.

A related and even more problematic issue, however, is the fact this narrative completely ignores the role of structural power relations in generating the grievances that allegedly lead to populist upsurges. So, for example, even when gender is explicitly addressed in the literature, it is treated as a measurable variable, reproduced and instantiated either by a country's national culture or the state's reigning ideology or both. Safely contained in these two ideational realms, Mudde and Kaltwasser conclude their article exploring the relationship between gender and populism with the claim that, at most, gender is *secondary* to the anti-elite struggle and that populism per se (minus the influence of its host ideology and the national culture in which it takes hold) appears gender neutral in both theory and practice.⁵¹ In a totalising politics of 'us' vs 'them' there is no space or incentive to inquire into the internal conflicts or hierarchies that shape each camp or the way that gender might differentially impact on the lives of women and men in material ways as lived experience.

Moving from the 'why' to the 'who' of populism, the ideational camp relies on highly individualised, essentialised, and gendered portrayals of its main protagonists. So, although a charismatic leader is not a requirement according to Mudde's definition of populism,⁵² much of this literature assumes the presence of one, with his or her speeches and 'political style' constituting key components of the empirical subject matter to be studied.⁵³ While there are variations in the story, it is on this aspect of populism that we find the most obviously gendered script. Whether he is presented as a rational, instrumental 'action man' or a messianic like figure, populism is usually depicted as a politics that is ushered into being by a swaggering figurehead full of bravado, bluster, and self-belief. Capturing the single-mindedness and strategically driven nature of populist leaders, Benjamin Moffitt tells us that 'Populists do not display ambivalence towards democracy as much as *opportunism*: they are usually quite clear and passionate about the kind of democracy they favour – the kind that will allow them to get in power or, if they are already in power, allow them to stay in power.'⁵⁴ For others, the leader is construed as Manichean in nature, animated solely by the moral certainty of their quest.⁵⁵ Either way, populism is *conceived of* as a radical politics that is driven forward by a one-dimensional man (or woman) whose success is dependent on a highly gendered performance of leadership.⁵⁶

While feminist notions of leadership may be varied, the idea of a 'strongman', whatever gender, poses a problem with its attendant hyper masculinist imagery and inherent assumptions about what constitutes strength, coherence, competence, and good decision-making. This is not to say that feminists do not recognise the gendered nature of social activism, in general, and of movement leadership, in particular. Over the last decade, feminists have produced reams of work deconstructing the various modes of 'hegemonic masculinity' that emerge within

⁵⁰Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Post-Socialist Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 5.

⁵¹Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, 'Vox populi or vox masculine? Populism and gender in northern Europe and South America', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49:1–2 (2015), pp. 16–36 (p. 35).

⁵²See Mudde and Kaltwasser, 'Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism', p. 154.

⁵³For a discussion of leadership in the context of the theory and practice of populism, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, 'Populism and political leadership', in R. A. W. Rhodes and Paul 't Hart (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); see also Roger Eatwell, 'Charisma and the radical right', in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) or Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, who argues that the leader should be the focus of any study of populism because it is the leader who ultimately 'does' or 'performs' populism (p. 52).

⁵⁴Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 150.

⁵⁵Jans-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), p. 39, emphasis added.

⁵⁶It is important to remember that this gendered description of leadership does not constitute an empirical finding, that is, it is *not* the result of inductive, comparative sociological-ethnographic research, but is rather built into the framing of what constitutes charismatic leadership in the context of populism.

social movements and foregrounding and conceptualising the gendered and racialised nature of political performances more generally.⁵⁷ As Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena Bassi suggest,

Certain patterns of masculinity in particular tend to attain hegemonic status as normalized and authoritative forms of conduct, shoring up the power and advantage of elite males and (hetero)patriarchal order more generally.⁵⁸

In terms of populism more specifically, Paloma Caravantes has highlighted the ‘homosocial’ political culture of Podemos⁵⁹ while Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo argue that what populism in Finland and Spain share is that they both represent ‘a political praxis that is imbued with hegemonic masculinity and confrontation’.⁶⁰ In this way, feminist critiques of populism, as a mode of politics, confirm the need to be attentive to the role that gendered political performances can play within all forms of radical politics, populism included. Importantly, however, feminists have also argued for some time now that we need to rethink and redescribe what we mean by leadership.⁶¹ To this end, they have argued for a range of alternative conceptions that understand this practice as a *means*, rather than an end, and as a non-individualistic, participatory, and dialogical collective *process*, which necessarily requires analysts to move beyond a narrow focus on the words and deeds of individual men or women.⁶² In this way, they reject the ideal-typical (masculine) conception of leadership that the literature on populism buys into and reproduces as the norm. In other words, feminist scholarship encourages us to not only challenge the gendered ways in which we study leadership, but also to question the gendered implications of conceptualising politics in terms of leaders and leadership in the first place.⁶³

Turning to the populist voter, we find an equally problematic narrative, which presents this subject as one marked by ‘biased beliefs’,⁶⁴ ‘latent populist attitudes’,⁶⁵ and stable preferences (for example, ‘nativism’, ‘close mindedness’), all seen as rooted in their psychological disposition. Substantively, populist revolts are often equated with ‘white working class men’⁶⁶ or ‘the left behinds’ and their collective refusal to accept cultural and socioeconomic change.⁶⁷ As mentioned earlier, populist voters are often assumed to be motivated by a cultural anxiety, which stems from

⁵⁷Lara Montesinos Coleman and Serena Bassi, ‘Deconstructing militant manhood’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13:2 (2011), pp. 204–24; Shirin Rai, ‘Political performance: a framework for analysing democratic politics’, *Political Studies*, 63:5 (2014), pp. 1179–97; Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004).

⁵⁸Montesinos Coleman and Bassi, ‘Deconstructing militant manhood’, p. 207.

⁵⁹Caravantes, ‘New vs old politics in Podemos’.

⁶⁰Kantola and Lombardo, ‘Populism and feminist politics’, p. 18.

⁶¹For an excellent, comprehensive overview of this effort, see Laura Sjoberg, ‘Feminism’, in Rhodes and Hart (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, available at: {<https://0-www-oxfordhandbooks-com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199653881.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199653881-e-004>}.

⁶²Jill Blackmore, ‘Disrupting notions of leadership from feminist postcolonial positions’, *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 13:1 (2010), pp. 1–6; Amanda Sinclair, *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007); Srilatha Batliwala, ‘Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud’ (2010), available at: {<https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/feminist-leadership-clearing-conceptual-cloud-srilatha-batliwala.pdf>}.that Liberates (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007).

⁶³Sjoberg, ‘Feminism’.

⁶⁴Takis Pappas, ‘Populist democracies: Post-authoritarian Greece and post-communist Hungary’, *Government and Opposition*, 49:1 (2014), pp. 1–23 (p. 8).

⁶⁵Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, ‘Beyond protest and discontent’, p. 70.

⁶⁶Aurélien Mondon and Aaron Winter, ‘Whiteness, populism and the racialisation of the working class in the United Kingdom and the United States’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (2018), available at: {<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1552440>}; see also Emejulu, ‘Can the people be feminists?’, pp. 123–51.

⁶⁷Aurélien Mondon, ‘Limiting democratic horizons to a nationalist reaction: Populism, the radical right and the working class’, *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, 24:4 (2017), pp. 355–74.

a fear that their identity and status are under threat.⁶⁸ Moreover, we are told that they are a ‘small c’ conservative lot to the extent that, unlike other ‘protest prone’ groups, they are marked by ‘their reactivity: they generally have to be mobilised by a populist actor, rather than taking the initiative themselves’.⁶⁹ In this way, the populist voter is constituted as close-minded, male, and passive, albeit politically menacing when feeling threatened.

There are several difficulties with this discourse. First, it reifies racial and cultural identities as explanatory variables in fostering populism and, in so doing, serves to displace the role that structural inequalities play, including the loss of *relative* privilege that some groups have experienced in recent years, in exacerbating our sense of grievance. Moreover, this narrative not only ‘white-washes’ the working class, it also judges them as culpable for the rise of populism (at least of the right-wing variety).⁷⁰ As we well know, both Trump’s victory and Brexit have been presented as the unfortunate outcome of a resentful, working-class politics by media commentators and academics alike in both countries. The fact that these working-class folk include women as well as people of all colours, ethnicities, and religions is not problematised in this literature nor can it be accounted for in this dyadic politics of ‘us’ vs ‘them’.⁷¹ This is, in part, because without homogenising the people it would be impossible to imagine how the *volonté générale* – central to Mudde’s definition, but completely under-theorised in the literature – is to be identified and acted upon. In this narrative we move in one unexplained step from atomised, annoyed citizens and their alleged individualised preferences to a unified, self-conscious movement acting in its own singular interest. How this movement is held together and what gives it energy and direction remains a mystery.

Populism as a logic: the abstraction and deradicalisation of radical politics

Although Laclau’s work is an explicit effort to repoliticise liberal democratic politics and to defend the idea that a radical politics can emerge from ‘popular subjects’ that are not reducible to class, his account is curiously even more devoid of any serious engagement with power, and its workings, than that of the ideational camp. Gender, race, and class are invisible in this story, at least at the theoretical level, both as an oppressive power relation, against which people resist, and as an entrenched identity that shapes how we perceive our friends and enemies and engage politically in the world.

As stated earlier, for Laclau populism emerges in the context of a ‘crisis of representation’ in which the legitimacy of the governing authority is put into doubt due to its failure to meet a series of demands. In this context, society is presented as a *decentred, non-deterministic, open* discursive field in which any and all demands can be politicised – whether they are or not depends on the articulatory skills of a leader and whether ‘the people’ come to ‘invest’ in their efforts.

This picture raises a number of questions from a feminist point of view. The first is that radical politics is translated into a politics of *demands*, which, in turn, find their origins in individualised grievances (which only later may become aggregated into chains of equivalence). What cannot be accounted for here is the way in which these demands, and their attendant grievances, are a response to perceived injustices and recalcitrant power relations that are enacted by, but go

⁶⁸See, for example, Zakaria, ‘Populism on the march’, pp. 13–15, or for a variation of this view, see Christopher Parker, Sebastian Mayer, and Nicole Buckley, ‘Left, right, but no in-between: Explaining American polarisation and post-factualism under President Trump’, in Lise Herman and James Muldoon (eds), *Trumping the Mainstream* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 112–30.

⁶⁹Cas Mudde, ‘The populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2005), p. 548.

⁷⁰For an interesting discussion of the construction of the ‘white working class’, primarily in the US context, see ‘Whitewashing the Working Class’ [six essays], *American Sociological Review*, available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1536504217714256>}.

⁷¹For a critical deconstruction of the implicit racist implications of this narrative, see Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Brexit, Trump and “methodological whiteness”: On the misrecognition of race and class’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 68:1 (2017), pp. 214–32.

beyond the state's reach and mandate. In other words, it is difficult to see how one might explore the role that class, gender, or race play in determining which demands gain traction and which do not. Certainly, the flux and flow of 'empty' or 'floating' signifiers cannot capture, let alone shift, these kinds of embedded practices and the ways they set the conditions of possibility for the articulation and taking up of specific demands.

This brings us to another closely related difficulty, which concerns the latent voluntarism that underpins its politics. In the end, all subjects of a democracy are seen to be the same to the extent that they are all free to enter the political fray on equal terms. Celebrating this 'lightness of being', Stavrakakis and Katsambekis opine:

Unlike the people of the extreme right, the people of the left is usually a plural, future oriented, inclusionary and active subject *unbound by ethnic, racial, sexual, gender* or other restrictions; a subject envisaged as acting on initiative and directly intervening in common matters, a subject that does not wait to be led or saved by anyone.⁷²

From this angle, it is impossible to see how some of us are marked by identities – often imposed on us by others – that *do bind* us and, at best, are very hard to rearticulate. For instance, as Benjamin McKean explains, Laclau's 'populist reason' is unable to accommodate the *non-contingent* role of 'racial resentment' in determining the modes of identification in which we invest.⁷³ In other words, Laclau's discursive field is far more 'socially uneven' and less open than he or his acolytes appear to recognise.

If Laclau's vision of populism is premised on an attenuated conception of power, it also withholds from us any conceptual tools to make sense of how and why we build relations of solidarity. Inspired by a Lacanian notion of subjectivity, we are told that individual identity as well as a sense of collective unity is achieved *only* in the face of difference, that is, a frontier beyond which exists an 'Other', that which I am not.⁷⁴ In this context, populism can only be an act of refusal, a mass politics of antagonism that serves to consolidate our own identity. As many feminists would point out, however, forging a radical politics, intent on transforming the world, requires a more complicated picture than this. As highlighted in the introduction, one needs an account of subjectivity and sociality that allows us to trace the social processes that foster group formation and serve to sustain collective agency in the face of the enemy. A theory of social identity premised on 'lack' and the yearning for 'completeness', abstracted from our embodied experiences and committed to opposing equivalence to difference is simply not adequate to this task.⁷⁵ As feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff explains it, identities must be understood as much more than the political *effects* of struggle and by prioritising a view 'from the outside in ... and never from the inside out', Laclau and Mouffe miss 'essential features ... that play an important role in the formulation of political positions and judgements'.⁷⁶ One of these essential features is the role played by our utopian aspirations. For nothing in this theory helps us to think about what populism, as a collective endeavour, is fighting *for* beyond a precarious concatenation of multiple demands that increasingly loses its substantive meaning the more inclusive (stretched) the equivalential chain becomes. Capturing this critique of Laclau's notion of populism, Donald Kingsbury states,

⁷²It is important to remember, as pointed out in fn. 41, that for these authors only left politics can be construed as really populist since right-wing movements construct themselves in the name of the 'nation' and not 'the people'. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 'Left-wing populism in the European periphery', emphasis added.

⁷³Benjamin McKean, 'Towards an inclusive populism? On the role of race and difference in Laclau's politics', *Political Theory*, 44:6 (2016), pp. 797–820.

⁷⁴Aletta Norval, 'Frontiers in question', *Filozofski Vestnik*, 18:2 (1997), pp. 51–75.

⁷⁵Nancy Fraser, 'Structuralism or pragmatics? On discourse theory and feminist politics', in *Justice Interruptus*, p. 159.

⁷⁶Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 75.

As a democratic strategy or logic, ... populism feeds on and reproduces a content-less approach to politics that valorizes electoral success over other principles and ideas.⁷⁷

The problem is that feminist conceptions of radical politics, in all their variety, encourage us to pay attention to this future-oriented, normative dimension of agency because it is crucial in understanding why movements emerge in the first place, how they enact their politics, and their potential impact. So while this normative feature of feminist politics has been formulated and defended in a range of diverse ways from a 'feminist ethos'⁷⁸ to a 'feminist utopian imagination'⁷⁹ and from an 'ethics of care'⁸⁰ to 'prefigurative' politics,⁸¹ what these efforts share is a conviction that the wished for ends of a struggle should shape the means.

And here we come to the rub because, in the end, the nature of the transformation envisioned by Laclau and enacted by 'populist reason' is simply incompatible with these feminist visions of justice. For while populism is ultimately about securing, widening, and radicalising democracy (read pluralising it); for feminists the struggle must move beyond calls for participation, representation, and the recognition of demands, important though they are, and encompass the quest to *both* overturn intractable relations of subordination/marginalisation and to build a world of social justice, in general, and 'gender justice', in particular.⁸² In pursuing this emancipatory vision, feminists would have to reject the binary logic of populism, that necessarily opposes equivalence to difference, and instead seek to defend *simultaneously* both a struggle for equality (universality) and a struggle for difference (particularity). In other words, unlike populism, feminism does not yearn for 'an impossible totality that unifies and homogenizes discrete demands'⁸³ preferring, like many other social movements striving for social justice, to build a world where unity can be built *out of, through, and alongside* difference. As McKean summarises,

a more inclusive populism will only be possible when difference and equality can be thought together and 'the people' can be represented without rendering them homogenous.⁸⁴

Finally, a feminist critique of populism would not be complete without pointing out that the form of politics invoked by Laclau's notion does not chime well with the complex *practices*, diverse *spaces*, and different *temporalities* of feminist activism. In contrast to the unified 'blocs' and phalanx formations that come to mind when reading Laclau's work and to the high speed discursive fluctuations that determine the battle lines, feminist practice presents us with a far more slow-burning, process-oriented, and multivalent mode of doing politics that cuts across the public/private divide. So while all the work done by advocates of this approach locates populism in the public sphere and take the state as its main interlocutor, feminist social movement scholars have long known that tracing the practices of radical politics, feminist or otherwise, requires much larger, more intricate maps, which include communities and homes as politicised spaces and which decentre the state, aware of the complex, ambivalent relationship that many

⁷⁷Donald Kingsbury, 'Populism as post-politics: Ernesto Laclau, hegemony and the limits of democracy', *Radical Philosophy Review* (2019), available at: {https://www.academia.edu/12176446/Populism_as_Post-Politics_Ernesto_Laclau_Hegemony_and_the_Limits_of_Democracy}.

⁷⁸See Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham Common* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995) and Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca, *Making Feminist Sense of the Global Justice Movement* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

⁷⁹McKenna, *The Task of Utopia*.

⁸⁰Fiona Robinson, 'Globalizing care: Ethics, feminist theory and IR', *Alternatives*, 22 (1997), pp. 113–33; Hutchings, 'Towards a feminist international ethics', pp. 111–30.

⁸¹Wini Breines, *Community and Organisation in the New Left 1962–68: The Great Refusal* (New York: Rutgers Press, 1989); Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

⁸²Eschle and Maiguashca, *Making Feminist Sense of the Global Justice Movement*, ch. 5.

⁸³Kingsbury, 'Populism as post-politics', pp. 5–6.

⁸⁴McKean, 'Towards an inclusive populism?', p. 816.

movements, including feminism, have with it.⁸⁵ Capturing the temporality of feminism militates against an exclusive focus on dramatic disjunctures and heroic acts of unification; requiring us instead to be attentive to the incremental, cumulative processes of self-transformation and collective consciousness raising that take place in the realm of *everyday* practices and that can lead, under certain conditions, to other ways of being in the world and doing politics.

Tracing populism as a political signifier and its feminist discontents

The charge of populism tells us at least as much about those making the charge as it does about their opponents, and in contemporary political contexts the inherent ambiguity of populism assumes clear polemical meaning when articulated from the embattled position of a once-hegemonic liberalism.⁸⁶

In this second part of the article, I want to shift into a different mode of analysis, which leaves theoretical critique behind and moves towards a critical reflection of the political consequences of elevating ‘populism’, as the trope *du jour*, to capture our contemporary political landscape. In other words, I want to explore the *performative effects* of this new political signifier on our political discourses, in general, and on the future fortunes of feminism, in particular. In doing so, I follow the intuitions of Jason Glynos and Aurélien Mondon when they suggest that the recent ‘populist turn’ represents not just an analytical move, but also a politicised one that serves to preempt and contain any line of critical questioning about the way liberal democracy works today and the possible alternatives to it.⁸⁷ What I cannot do here is engage with two small, but growing, bodies of literature, one that seeks to raise doubts about the analytical acuity of populism, as an operationalisable concept,⁸⁸ and the other about the dangers and opportunities that arise when movements *self-consciously* adopt populism as an identity and *modus vivendi*.⁸⁹ While sympathetic to the former strand of literature and interested in the latter, here I simply focus on the way the term is being mobilised by its liberal critics, whether accurately or not, and the implications of this deployment for the visibility and well-being of feminism, as one crucial instantiation of left politics.

The first, more obvious, performative effect of populism, as a political signifier, is the straightforward disciplinary power that labelling a particular instantiation of politics as populist has on our normative and intellectual assessment of it.⁹⁰ In this current climate, to characterise a politics as populist is equivalent to identifying it as potentially illiberal and dangerous. Or, as Jason Frank puts it, ‘the blanket accusation of populism polices the boundaries of “politics as usual” and the

⁸⁵See Karen Beckwith, Lee Ann Banaszak, and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Women’s Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸⁶Frank, ‘Populism is not the problem’.

⁸⁷Glynos and Mondon, ‘The Political Logic of the Populist Hype’. See also Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos, and Aurélien Mondon, ‘Critical research on populism: Nine rules of engagement’, *Organization* (2018), p. 3, available at: {<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1350508418768053>}.

⁸⁸For a substantive critique of conceptual over-reach, see Luke March, ‘Left and right populism compared: the British case’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:2 (2017), pp. 292–303 (p. 283); for a methodological critique, see Bruno Castanho Silva, Sebastian Jungkunz, Marc Helbling, and Levente Littvay, ‘An empirical comparison of seven populist attitudes scales’, *Political Research Quarterly* (2019), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919833176>}; for a critique of the applicability of populism to Corbyn’s politics, see Bice Maiguashca and Jonathan Dean, ‘“Lovely people, but utterly deluded”? British political science’s trouble with Corbynism’, *British Politics* (2019), available at: {<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41293-019-00124-5>}.

⁸⁹This literature focuses on the incredible influence that Laclau’s theory of populism has had on certain streams of left-wing politics in Spain (Podemos) and Greece (Syriza). See Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, ‘Left-wing populism in the European periphery’ and Alexandros Kioupiolis, ‘Late modern adventures of leftist populism in Spain’, in Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 47–72.

⁹⁰While both definitions explored here have gained media coverage, it is Mudde’s conception of populism that has gained the most prominence in media and political discourses.

parameters of legitimate and reasonable political speech'.⁹¹ The case of 'Corbynism' in the UK, often belittled in media and academic circles in Britain as a form of 'left-wing populism' is illustrative. The politics sustaining Corbyn's Labour Party cannot be meaningfully characterised as populist if either of the definitions that have been explored in this article are used as a benchmark. While I have defended this position elsewhere,⁹² what needs to be underlined here is that most of those who describe the Labour Party as currently pandering to a populist politics are seeking to dismiss or denigrate this latest upsurge of left-wing activism.

What should concern us as feminists, in this case, is not whether the label fits or not, but rather the fact that a new left politics, embracing a confluence of nascent strands of feminist, queer, and anti-racist activism, is being so quickly set aside as beyond the pale. Such slow-burning processes of progressive transformation, even if halting, are worth studying and possibly nurturing. Lambasting Corbynism as populist, *tout court*, as many commentators do, simply discourages this kind of nuanced, patient inquiry and bundles together in one homogenous blob a complex, hybrid entanglement of various strands of left activism, of which feminism plays an important part.⁹³ Similarly, both Podemos and Syriza have generated interesting and, in the case of Spain, powerful feminist forms of contestation. The fact that both continue to be shaped by masculine modes of political performance should not take away from these feminist efforts and simply labelling these parties as 'populist' makes us less inclined to look for them.⁹⁴

In addition to giving scholars and pundits the means of writing off certain forms of radical politics in which feminist are alive and well, albeit struggling for visibility and support, feminists will have to face up to a second challenge. With the ascendancy of 'populism' have come renewed appeals to jettison the seemingly anachronistic left-right distinction, political categories that, according to their detractors, reflect a naive nostalgia for the past. Populism, it now seems, trumps what Steven Lukes has called 'the grand dichotomy of the 20th century'.⁹⁵ There are three rationalities that play into this demand. The first of these is that in these troubled times we must rethink and reframe the sources of conflict and cleavage in our globalised world. So while *The Economist* talks of a struggle between 'open societies' and 'closed ones' and David Goodhart, a British journalist, insists that the new political frontier is really between the 'people from somewhere' and the 'people from anywhere',⁹⁶ Tony Blair prefers to fight populism by addressing the tensions created between 'globalisations losers' vs its 'winners'.⁹⁷ The fact that right-wing forces also endorse jettisoning the language of the left and right in favour of similar distinctions, such as that between 'globalists' and 'patriots', as Marie Le Pen puts it, does not seem to yet worry the liberal exponents of these newly fashioned binaries.⁹⁸

A second narrative that implicitly sustains the claim that the left-right distinction is now past its 'sell by date' is the view that the defining feature of populist movements is its populism, rather than the contents of its 'host' ideology. So academics such as John Judis, for instance, argue that left-wing populism is only different from right-wing populism to the extent that it does not attack

⁹¹Frank, 'Populism is not the problem'.

⁹²Bice Maiguashca and Jonathan Dean, 'Corbynism, populism and the re-shaping of left politics in contemporary Britain', in Katsambekis and Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Crisis-Hit Europe*.

⁹³Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashca, 'Gender, power and left politics: From feminisation to feministisation', *Politics and Gender*, 13:3 (2018) pp. 376–406.

⁹⁴I recognise that Podemos does self-identify with the label populism, which adds another layer of complexity to this story.

⁹⁵Lukes, 'Epilogue: the grand dichotomy of the 20th century'.

⁹⁶David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2017).

⁹⁷Barker, 'We the people'.

⁹⁸See Marta Lorimer, 'Ni droite, ni gauche, Français! Far right populism and the future of left/right politics', in Herman and Muldoon (eds), *Trumping the Mainstream*, pp. 145–63 and Rory Mulholland, 'Marie Le Pen promises revolution for France', *Telegraph* (5 February 2017), available at: {<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/05/marine-le-pen-promises-revolution-france-tells-rally-lyon-wind/>}.

‘out groups’⁹⁹ and Matthijs Rooduijn and Tjitske Akkerman suggest that the left and right ‘do not differ significantly from each other when it comes to their populism’.¹⁰⁰ In this context, while it is accepted that left-wing populism can be inclusionary and more often oriented to ‘hope’ rather than ‘fear’,¹⁰¹ it is nonetheless seen as a deviation from and a challenge to liberal representative government and, therefore, like right-wing populism, as a potential threat to democracy.

This brings us to the last rationality that feeds into this dismantling of the left–right divide: the view that tackling populism requires the re-energising and re-legitimising of the ‘centre ground’ of politics.¹⁰² In this way, the fundamental cleavage of our globalised world becomes that between populism (right or left matters little) and anti-populism understood as the forces of ‘moderation’ or what Nancy Fraser has recently called ‘progressive neoliberalism’.¹⁰³ In this clash, it is the right that has been elevated as the formidable bogeyman of the day,¹⁰⁴ with the left sidelined as a spent, ineffectual force. In this way, populism as a *signifier* actively serves to diminish the grip of left politics, trivialising its efforts, and when it does garner some public support, as in the case of Corbynism in Britain or Syriza in Greece, then demonising it.

Whatever the reason, this pull to the centre has serious consequences for feminism, understood as a project committed to the realisation of one historically significant strand of left politics. After all, any effort to dismantle the normative and conceptual edifice sustaining a left, egalitarian vision of social justice poses a direct threat to the theory and practice of feminism both in its current instantiations and as a collective utopian aspiration. While feminism has always had to struggle to find space within socialist/anarchist circles, it now faces yet another hostile frontier conjured up and reinforced by both the right and the liberal centre ground. To make matters worse, some on ‘the left’ have responded to this changing political terrain by closing ranks and blaming what they see as ‘identity politics’ (read feminism, queer politics, and movements like Black Lives Matter) for dividing and weakening the movement.¹⁰⁵ Clearly then, anti-populist discourses are now set to pose as much of a threat to feminism as populist ones.

Conclusion

I would like to end this article with some reflections on what lessons might be drawn from the extant debate around populism in terms of the current state of theorising in the field, the position of feminist scholarship in this context, and, last but not least, the role of politicised scholarship in academia.

On the question of theorising, what is quite striking about the meteoric rise of populism as a concept, and the now booming literature surrounding it, is the frantic haste with which scholars have clambered after universal and empirically operationalisable (read minimalist) definitions of this putative phenomenon. This has been accompanied by equally urgent efforts to apply them to

⁹⁹John Judis, ‘Us vs. them: the birth of populism’, *The Guardian*, available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/13/birth-of-populism-donald-trump>}.

¹⁰⁰Matthijs Rooduijn and Tjitske Akkerman, ‘Flank attacks: Populism and left–right radicalism in western Europe’, *Party Politics*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 193–204.

¹⁰¹See Mudde and Kaltwasser, ‘Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism’ and Santiago Zabala on ‘The difference between left and right wing populism’, *Al-Jazeera* (17 January 2017), available at: {<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/01/difference-left-wing-populism-170112162814894.html>}.

¹⁰²This reaction is somewhat puzzling given that Mudde, the authoritative voice on populism, lists the tyranny of ‘centrism’ as one of the main causes of the populist upsurge.

¹⁰³Fraser, ‘Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism’, pp. 281–4. For an excellent analysis of the emergence and politics of the populist/anti-populist divide, see Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘“The return of the people”: Populism and anti-populism in the shadow of the European crisis’, *Constellations*, 21:4 (2014), pp. 505–15.

¹⁰⁴Remember that those working within the Muddean frame have paid far more attention to the right-wing populism than to its left counterpart.

¹⁰⁵Jonathan Dean, ‘Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?’, LSE blog, available at: {<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/whos-afraid-of-identity-politics/>}.

as wide a number of cases as possible and, thereby, pin down the impact and future trajectory of this new political force. One casualty of this mad rush to corner the field has been the act of careful, informed, reflexive theorising, one in which *both* deductive and inductive thinking are encouraged and which is open to revision. As a result, the debates and exchanges between these two opposing theoretical camps, although commendably generous and constructive in tone, are often marked by a mindless eclecticism that belies any understanding of their very real conceptual differences. While advocates of the ideational camp regularly reference the work of discourse theorists, as if they are all broadly part of the same project¹⁰⁶ – undisturbed by the fact that the ‘ideational’ definition cannot accommodate Laclau’s position – acolytes of Laclau return the favour by either adopting and/or defending Mudde’s definition of populism against other more explicitly polemical depictions of it.¹⁰⁷ This rather muddled approach to theory and its application has even been noticed by Mudde and Kaltwasser themselves who have recently made a polite plea for populism scholars to read and engage with each other’s work more diligently.¹⁰⁸ In sum, populism, as a concept, has been ushered into academic circles on a wave of positivism and an exclusive commitment to streamlined definitions and impactful, empirical, and policy-related research.¹⁰⁹ ‘Thicker’, historically and sociologically inflected, inductive forms of theorising, of the kind that feminists have argued for, do not seem to be part of the agenda.

Given this theoretical state of affairs, it is unsurprising that feminists have been relatively slow to jump on the bandwagon. Matters may not be helped by the fact that the field, at least at the moment, is rather male-dominated,¹¹⁰ possibly a function of its hitherto fascination with mapping the prowess and antics of far-right male leaders and the quantification and de-coding of their speeches. Feminists have not been entirely immune to the ‘populist hype’, however, and, as already mentioned, there is an incipient strand of feminist scholarship on the subject seeking to condemn its gendered political practices. But are we conceding too quickly to our colleagues by accepting, wholesale, their definitions, along with all their problematic conceptual baggage? And if so, what further theoretical and empirical research needs to be done to render populism a meaningful term, one that captures a form of distinct popular insurgency worthy of study and that can speak to existing feminist insights into the origins and workings of radical politics more generally? Of course, as we move forward in our efforts to navigate this perplexing political and intellectual terrain, we will have to remember that, despite producing swathes of rich

¹⁰⁶See, for example, Mudde and Kaltwasser, ‘Populism’.

¹⁰⁷Yannis Stavrakakis and Anton Jäger, ‘Accomplishments and limitations of the “new” mainstream in contemporary populism studies’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 547–65.

¹⁰⁸See Mudde and Kaltwasser, ‘Studying populism in comparative perspective’. As an example of this general lack of care and engagement, they point out that neither Brexit nor Trump’s victory in the US elections can meaningfully be conceptualised as a form of populism, at least not in their definitional terms. This has not prevented both events being framed as such by most academic, media, and political commentators.

¹⁰⁹While those in the Laclau camp cannot be described as empiricists/positivists in any fashion, they have tended to cede ground to their political science colleagues and have joined the search for minimal definitions that lend themselves to empirical analysis. In other words, in an effort to engage with their Muddean counterparts, many now implicitly treat populism as an ontic force, rather than a discursive logic. See Stavrakakis et al., ‘Extreme right-wing populism in Europe’ for an explicit effort in this direction.

¹¹⁰Evidence of the gendered nature of populism studies can be found in the table of contents of the recently published *Online Oxford Handbook of Populism* in which only six female contributors (one writing on the role of gender in populism) are featured out of a total of 38. Recognising and seeking to rectify the lack of visibility of women in the field, the ‘Women+on Populism Research’ Facebook group was set up in October 2018 as was an LSE blog advertising the work of female scholars on populism (equated on this site with far-right politics). See {<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2019/03/05/reading-list-10-recommended-reads-on-the-far-right-and-populism/>}. More anecdotally, my own experiences at numerous workshops and conferences on populism also suggest that female scholars, let alone feminist ones, are few and far between in this burgeoning field. For example, the ECPR Joint Sessions in Pisa in 2016 on the ‘Causes of Populism’, to which I was kindly invited, boasted 28 participants of which only four were women, with one being my co-author. Of course Margaret Canovan, Chantal Mouffe, and Nadia Urbinati, all political theorists, are three notable exceptions to this trend.

theoretical and empirical scholarship on every aspect of ‘the political’, radical and otherwise, over the last several decades, feminist scholarship remains ghettoised. For one depressing lesson drawn from this review of populism studies is that it appears to be immune to any feminist knowledge. To put it differently, after all these years, we are still talking to ourselves, even if our own feminist circles have become wider and more cross-disciplinary than ever.

Finally, if the conceptual challenge posed by populism is not enough, feminists also need to be alert to the politicised nature of this debate. For despite generalised calls to drop the left–right distinction, populism scholars continue to happily instantiate it through their debates about the good and bad of populism. After all, the majority of Laclauians openly celebrate the emancipatory potential of left-wing populism to liberate us from ‘the extremism of moderation’,¹¹¹ while many within the ideational camp choose to rally behind this moderate liberalism. Clearly, these different normative assessments reflect not just theoretical/methodological disagreements, but also political ones. While feminists have always acknowledged the politicised nature of knowledge production, including our own, this is not widely accepted in academia, where objective science remains the order of the day. Drawing attention to these tacit political commitments and debating them openly and honestly will not only deepen our analysis of the intended and unintended effects of radical politics, but may also encourage a degree of humility when we issue our pronouncements and predictions, knowing that our views are contestable and situated.

IR has yet to experience ‘populism fever’ and can afford to approach the subject with both curiosity and caution. There is no doubt that the radical insurgencies that are bubbling forth today provide potentially rich case studies for those of us interested in understanding and theorising the politics of collective action in the name of a radically transformed world. As we start our inquiries, however, we need to recognise that our current analytical toolbox is far from complete and that fortifying it requires us to be open to longstanding feminist insights into the origins and nature of radical politics.

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¹¹¹Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis, ‘Populism, anti-populism and European democracy: a view from the South’, *Open Democracy* (2013), available at: {<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/populism-anti-populism-and-european-democr/>} accessed 14 June 2019.