Reconciling Populism & Liberal Democratic Pluralism

An inquiry into why populism is not logically opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism

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Abstract

Populism is by many considered as anti-pluralist and therefore as directly opposed to liberal democratic principles. The populist defence of the people, allegedly unified in their will, seems to be inherently at odds with the liberal democratic core value of pluralism aimed at politically embedding various interests. In this thesis, I question whether populism is necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. I build on the assumption that the populist logic is highly adaptive and can appear in combination with an extensive range of ideologies. Therefore, in contrast to the 'populism is anti-pluralism' view, populism can be ideologically in favour of pluralism and the populist defence of a collective will can rest on the demands of a heterogeneously constructed people. Even though such a form of left populism is still considered anti-pluralist by some, I argue it is not logically opposed to liberal democratic pluralism.

Introduction

Populism has become an increasingly relevant topic within the academic debate. There is still a lot of controversy regarding the definition of populism and there is no consensus on whether we should fear its consequences. While there is a general belief that populists may at best address flaws within the political system and succeed in mobilizing unrepresented citizens, they are mainly understood as doing more harm than good to the principles of liberal democracy.

Populist parties like Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland have fostered the predominant view in which populism is regarded as anti-pluralist and therefore anti-liberal democratic. After those parties reached power, changes were made to the to the liberal democratic constitution (Panov, 2020). The position of minorities is now threatened as institutions like judicial independence and the separation of powers were diminished as obstacles to the direct rule of the 'unified' people. While Fidesz and PiS can be classified anti-pluralist by virtue of their nationalist ideology, it seems that logic of populism alone is enough for a populist party to be labelled anti-pluralist and anti-liberal democratic, regardless its of ideological objectives.

The emergence of populist parties like Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece, sparked a new debate on whether populism is merely to been as a threat to liberal democracies. They are generally regarded as populist parties because they mobilize 'the people' as opposed to the austerity politics of the establishment, promising to give power back to the people (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019). They distinguish themselves however in that the people they defend is a pluralistic one, and not a homogeneous one that shares one nationality or has one common interest (Mouffe, 2018). Their populist leaders were inspired by the ideas of Ernesto Laclau

(2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018), who defend populism as a strategy to enhance pluralism in liberal democracies. While this seems an impossible project when the logic of populism is indeed anti-pluralist, it is becoming increasingly relevant to re-evaluate the relation between populism and the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism. The widespread 'populism is anti-pluralism' view might lead to the unnecessary exclusion of populists and their voters in the name of protecting the principles of liberal democracy.

Within this thesis I will ask the following question: is populism necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism? I will argue that populism is not necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. My arguments rest largely on the assumption that the populist logic should be separated from the more substantive ideology it appears in combination with. Therefore, populism can appear in combination with liberal ideologies and populists can argue in favour of liberal democratic pluralism. In order to demonstrate this outcome, I begin with a short characterization of the concepts of populism and liberal democratic pluralism. I subsequently explain the 'populism is anti-pluralism' view through the widely accepted theories of Cas Mudde and Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016). Against this framework, I argue that populism should be more broadly defined in order to display that the populist defence of a collective will does not necessarily rest on exclusive conceptions of the people and that it can be committed to pluralism. Lastly, by clarifying the logic of populism and the logic of liberal democracy, I argue against the position that maintains that populism would, even in this broader sense, be logically opposed to liberal democratic pluralism.

Defining Populism

Populism is a political phenomenon that shows itself in many, sometimes even mutually contradicting, ways. Following broadly agreed upon definitions, populism can be understood as a thin ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), a political logic (Laclau, 2005; Müller, 2016), a discourse (Laclau 2005; Mouffe; 2018) or a strategy (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018; Weyland, 2017) of a political party or movement that is often represented by a leader. A common denominator of these approaches lies in that populism is not in itself regarded as a substantive ideology but rather as a specific way of talking about or seeing the political world; a certain 'logic'. This always appears in combination with more content rich ideological positions such as nativism, liberalism or socialism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). When we talk about populism, we thus refer to a particular logic that can couple up with an extensive range of ideologies. While approaches slightly differ in how they address this logic, its core revolves around the antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The collective will of the

people is defended as a basis for restoring popular sovereignty, thereby claiming to give power back to the people.

We should not focus on one specific approach or emphasize one dimension of populism but we should rather construct an ideal type of populism that includes different dimensions in order to understand how populist parties can manifest themselves differently. Looking at populism as a discursive practice, it simplifies the political realm into a dichotomy. It constructs a 'we the people' as opposed to the ones who are currently in power as the 'oligarchs' or the 'corrupt elites' who undermine popular sovereignty (Laclau, 2005, p. 18). Discursively constructing the people as opposed to the elite can serve strategic goals. Chantal Mouffe (2018) as well as Ernesto Laclau (2005) emphasize that the discursive construction of a people helps to mobilize a front against the ones in power. It is specifically due to the vagueness of concepts such as 'the people' and 'the elite' that those serve strategic goals as empty signifiers; the meaning of those terms depends on how they are discursively used by populists in order to mobilize the people they want to mobilize (Laclau, 2005, p. 16). Besides being a discursive and strategic practice, populism entails a normative claim for restoring popular sovereignty; 'giving power back to the people', which can be referred to as a thin ideology. Thereby they maintain what could be called a Manichean worldview of the good people versus the evil elites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7).

I will use the term 'logic' to refer to the core of populism. This is not to follow already existing characterizations of populism as a particular logic, but rather because the term is neutral in that it can refer to populism in all its dimensions without prioritizing one over the other. Referring to populism as a particular logic instead of pinning it down as a specific ideology, meets the framework of many scholars who emphasize we should not be led by specific populist appearances in order to define the phenomenon (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). On the other hand, populism is always a reaction to something, and therefore it cannot be properly understood without looking into specific 'populisms.' In order to understand specific manifestations of populism, we should thus not focus merely on the populist logic but also on the ideology it interacts with and the context it is a reaction to (Finchelstein, 2017; Judis; 2016). Looking at populism in combination with different ideologies, a demarcation is often made between right-wing and left-wing populism (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Finchelstein. 2017; Judis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Right-wing populism is connected to nativism and conservatism, creating an idea of the true people as the national people or the original community that is threatened by diversity (Judis, 2016). Left-wing populism is rather seen as being connected to socialist stances, defending the 'common people' as opposed to the elite.

Defining Liberal Democratic Pluralism

Because populism is by some considered to be anti-liberal democratic due to its anti-pluralist logic, I will focus on the explanation of pluralism as the core of liberal democracies. This will provide a framework in order to assess whether populism is necessarily opposed liberal democratic pluralism.

What I call 'liberal democratic pluralism' takes three concepts together that are already on their own just as much contested as the concept of populism. Democracy, with its etymological roots in Greek, means 'power of the people' and is often understood as popular sovereignty through majority rule (Plattner, 2010; Mouffe, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Democracy as *merely* majority rule however, is according to some not worthy of its name. A properly functioning democracy requires at least minimal political rights like the freedom of speech and assembly in order for citizens to influence political decisions (Müller, 2016; Cohen, 2019). A widely accepted definition of democracy comes from Robert Dahl (2015). He states democracy requires that citizens have basic freedoms to exert influence on public decisions, their votes count equally and the scope for citizenship is broad and inclusive. This is an addition to what is still the key pillar: majority rule. Hence, even by Dahl's definition, democracy does not protect minorities against decisions made by the majority apart from the fact that their very basic democratic equality and inclusion are preserved. This is where a liberal democracy differs from a pure democratic logic as it involves the abridgement of majority rule in order to protect individuals and minorities.

Following William Galston (2018), the constitutive elements of a liberal democracy are popular sovereignty, democracy, constitutionalism and liberalism. The democratic logic secures popular sovereignty because the people are the source for legitimacy through majority rule. The liberal logic lies in securing a private sphere that is free from state interference and it integrates more rights and freedoms than merely the freedom to exert influence over public decisions. Therefore, it limits the range of majority rule. The constitution nails down institutional structures that legally limit the power the majority (representatives of the majority) has over others. This becomes effective through institutions like the rule of law, separation of powers, judicial independence and counter-majoritarian forces like judicial review. Liberal democracies thus have what we could call a dual nature; they maintain a balance between majority rule and the limitation thereof. But while its character is dual, it has proven to be a durable and attractive system because it minimizes citizens' dissatisfactions in seeking an optimal form of popular sovereignty without denying diversity among citizens (Plattner, 2010, p. 87).

‘Liberal democratic pluralism’ should be understood as lying exactly within the cooperation between the democratic and liberal logic. ‘Pluralism’ in a political context entails “a multiplicity or diversity of groups that exert influence within the polity” (Plattner, 2010, p. 89). It is thus about politically embedding the diversity in interests, identities and possibly cultures. The liberal democratic balance provides an institutionalized way to maintain a form of popular sovereignty without dismissing diversity and without infringing on the rights of minorities. While both sides of this balance are supposed to keep each other in check and this allows for the peaceful coexistence of citizens in the best scenario, the liberal democratic balance also knows different threats rising from dissatisfaction of the majority as well as minorities. Both a pure democratic logic of majority rule as well as a pure liberal logic of individual rights that dissolves into radical pluralism, are degenerations of the liberal democratic logic and threaten its coexistence (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 10; Plattner, 2010, p.).

The populist logic resembles a pure democratic logic of majority rule as it claims to restore popular sovereignty by representing only a part of the people. It is therefore seen as a threat to liberal democratic pluralism. This ‘populism is anti-pluralism’ view will be further explained within the next paragraph. Another potential threat to liberal democratic pluralism comes from the other side of the spectrum that appeals for more far-reaching or ‘radical’ pluralism. This is not so much part of liberalism’s ideology, but rather an extreme manifestation of the liberal logic of individual rights without reference to a common good and without agreement on certain fundamental principles at the basis of a state. This view can be grounded in the theory of moral value pluralism, which maintains there is a plurality of incompatible ways of living a good life (Wall, 2010). Radical pluralism would then entail that politics is to be reduced to struggles between particular interests instead of seeing the political community or democracy as a means for achieving a common good (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Plattner, 2010).

The liberal democratic principles of legitimacy however, require both the recognition of diversity as well as a form of unity through consensus and (limited) majority rule. A merely value neutral conception of politics might result in disintegration and its lack of fundamental principles also allows for strongly illiberal or anti-pluralist conceptions to win over politics (Plattner, 2010, p. 90). A liberal democracy may by contrast enforce certain limits to pluralism in order to protect pluralism in the form of liberal and institutional protections, which can be referred to as a form of restricted state neutrality (Wall, 2010). While the relevance of this tension will become more clear throughout this thesis, it is important to make an analytical distinction between liberal democratic pluralism and radical pluralism. This will provide a basis

for the argument that while the populist logic is directly opposed to this idea of radical pluralism, it might not be logically opposed to liberal democratic pluralism.

The 'Populism is Anti-Pluralism' view

Looking at populism and liberal democratic pluralism in the way the concepts have been defined, there is undeniably a tension between politics being an expression of 'a people' that is somehow unified, and the distribution of power between different groups with different interests. Through this reasoning, academics have argued that populism is inherently opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism (Müller, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Galston 2018; Cohen, 2019). In the next paragraph, I argue by contrast that the relationship between populism and liberal democratic pluralism cannot be fully assessed by virtue of the populist logic alone, but one should look at the way the populist logic interacts with certain ideologies. A position that is best explained by juxtaposing it to the approaches of Cas Mudde and Christóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) and Jan-Werner Müller (2016) who have established widely accepted definitions of populism as a thin ideology and a particular logic, respectively.

Both approaches maintain that populism is directly opposed to pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7; Müller, 2016, p. 16). Central to these understandings of populism is the exclusive conception of the people in combination with a claim for restoring popular sovereignty that opposes populism to pluralism. These general approaches however, fail to answer how the populist logic interacts with different ideologies (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Who do populists construct as 'the people'? And what do 'the people' want? When we inquire into how the populist logic would interact in combination with a more liberal and pluralism oriented ideology, it becomes questionable whether the ideological features they ascribe to it should be defining properties of populism. In order to get a basic understanding of the 'populism is anti-pluralism' view, I will first set out some of its important features.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as follows within their ideational approach:

> A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people. (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6)

This definition displays a thin set of ideas that populism consists of. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that those ideas cannot stand alone and always appear in combination with more content rich ideologies. In this sense, the approach is very much similar to the approach sketched in the beginning of this thesis, looking at populism as a particular logic. However, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser emphasize the ideological dimension of populism by extracting a thin ideology from the way populists speak, opposing it to pluralism regardless of its more 'thick' ideology.

In order to understand the equation they make between populism and anti-pluralism, it is important to stress certain elements within their definition. First, they emphasize that populists conceive the people as homogeneous (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 47). The populist conception of the people is a fictional representation of reality and it emphasizes a shared identity within in a group regardless of whether this exists. Populists often use nationality or class to create a sense of homogeneity and demarcate 'the real people'. Secondly, populists claim there exists a 'general will' of the people and argue that this is the sole basis for popular sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). The belief is then that politics guided by this general will is the ultimate form of self-government in which citizens are only bound by the rules they created themselves. Thirdly, populists make a moral distinction between the corrupt elites who do not follow the common interest of the people and the pure people as the only legitimate source for power (Mudde & Rovia Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7).

Taking these elements together, populists claim to defend the general will of the people, being the sole ground for legitimacy and they construct 'the real people' as an exclusive and homogeneous group. In doing so, populists deny the legitimacy of opponents and view them as enemies of popular sovereignty. Pluralism, by contrast, is about diversity "seen as a strength rather than a weakness" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 7). The populist focus on a general will overrides differences and denies diversity, especially when this general will is not formed through political participation and it is based on the interests of only a homogeneous part of the population. Therefore, populism's thin ideology is opposed to pluralism, according to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p 7).

A similar understanding of populism as anti-pluralism comes from Jan-Werner Müller (2016). He disconnects populism from specific ideologies and refers to populism as a particular logic: "a way of perceiving the political world" (Müller, 2016, p. 15). According to Müller, populism is anti-pluralist in that populists claim that they are the true representatives of the people and therefore the sole basis of legitimacy. Their conception of the people is fictional, it rests on the idea that the specific homogeneous and unified part of the people they represent is

the true people. Müller emphasizes the *moralist* position of populists because they regard opposition to the general will as immoral, and its *holist* position resting in the belief that the people should be represented a whole (Müller, 2016, p. 15).

While Müller's analysis of populism is not much different from that of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, he reaches a different conclusion on the relation between populism and democracy. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that populism is not undemocratic as democracy is nothing more than a "a combination between popular sovereignty and majority rule" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 80). Hence, they argue that populists can constitute a form of 'illiberal democracy.' In practice, this entails that populists in power might harm (only) those institutions that are in their way of implementing the general will. This has been shown by quite some examples. Right populists in power, like Victor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński but also left populists like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales have implemented constitutional changes or diminished the separation of powers in favour of implementing 'the general will' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Müller argues it is wrong to assume that political rights like the protection of minorities and freedom of speech and assembly are a part of liberalism and not necessary for democracy. Müller regards them as "constitutive of democracy as such" and therefore populism would pose an inherent threat to democracy (Müller 2016, p. 31).

These leading positions of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller on the relation between populism, pluralism and (liberal) democracy, follow from their general characterization of populism without reference to how it interacts with certain ideologies. When we consider populism's ideological adaptiveness however, populists can also position themselves in favour of pluralism and liberal democratic principles. I argue in contrast to the aforementioned positions that such a form of populism can revolve around the collective will of a heterogeneously constructed people. This provides the basis for seeing populism as not directly opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. I consider this form populism mainly as a conceptual possibility. But while it is a conceptual project, the current existence of left populist parties shows that the question is becoming increasingly relevant. The Spanish left populist party Podemos and the Greek party SYRIZA are for example very much aimed at the realization of the ideas of Chantal Mouffe (2018) and Ernesto Laclau (2005), to whom I will turn later, on left populism (Valdivielso Navarro, 2017). Their ideas provide a basis for redefining populism in a manner that it is not necessarily opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism.

Populist commitments to pluralism

Arguments for the thesis that populism is not necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism, rest for a large part on the way populism is defined and on the possibility that liberal manifestations of populism, which I will classify as 'left populism', can exist. I refer to this as 'left populism' because it is generally seen as less exclusive than its right-wing variant. Right-wing populism is considered "triadic", because the people is not only defended against the elite, but also horizontally against a non-native or a 'non-original' part of the population (Judis, 2016, p. 15). Left-wing populism is by contrast considered "dyadic" as it merely opposes the 'common people' to the establishment and does not have a nativist or xenophobic component (Judis, 2016, Finchelstein, 2017).

Some oppose the idea that left-wing populism would be less exclusive than right-wing manifestations (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The conceptualization of 'the people' as either based on ethnicity or class would be an inherently exclusive conception of the people, regardless of whether populists explicitly oppose a part of the population. When you combine such a conception of the people with the claim that popular sovereignty should be restored by following their general will, populists could threaten the protection of minorities once they reach power. It seems rather limited however, to reduce populism to its socialist left-wing and its nativist right-wing variants. What if we consider the theoretical possibility a more liberal form of left populism, ideologically in favour of pluralism?

This first leads us to questioning why and how populists, who are seen as illiberal and even undemocratic, would direct themselves towards the goal of pluralism. The 'why' can be explained by looking at populism in reaction to certain shortcomings of a political status quo. Populism is usually understood as a reaction to the concentration of power within an elite centre, or at least it claims it is (Galston, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The concentration of power can be seen as a deformation of liberal democracies as liberal democracies are supposed to guarantee pluralism through the dispersion of power between people with diverse interests (Galston, 2018, p. 14). Populism is directly opposed to forms of elitism, claiming to give power back to the people because their demands have not been responded to. Unfortunately, populists often commit themselves to the same mistake, governing on the assumption that there exists a shared interest of the people and thereby concentrating power (Galston, 2018, p. 14; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 7). Yet, it is exactly from such a context that we can also consider a form of populism aimed at restoring the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism as the demand of 'the people.'

Contemporary populism in Western Europe for example, is predominantly understood as an opposition to a context in which neoliberalism has attained a hegemonic status (Judis 2016; Galston, 2018; Mouffe, 2018). This has formed elite centres in which the political right as well as well as the political left regulate through a consensus that is focused on the free market economy (Mouffe, 2018, p. 17). Both the populist party SYRIZA as well as Podemos form a reaction against the neoliberal austerity politics within their countries. But instead of focusing on one common interest of the people, they emphasize the heterogeneity of the people and argue for the inclusion of diverse identities (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019). This possibility in itself already seems to weaken the idea that populism is necessarily opposed to pluralism.

The most important premise in arguing that populism can indeed adapt to a liberal and pluralism oriented ideology and is still to be regarded as populism, lies in that populism is not necessarily connected to specific ideological content (Laclau, 2005; Müller, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). A populist commitment to pluralism could pair up with more egalitarian, socialist, or liberalist stances, but the important consideration is the possibility that populism can be fully supportive of, and can be aimed at enhancing liberal democratic rights and institutions that guarantee pluralism. While the populist logic has been framed as being necessarily opposed to pluralism because it constructs an exclusive picture of 'the true people' that is to be represented, we need to look at how the populist logic would interact with a pluralism oriented ideology. This shows, I argue, that the previously given definitions of populism by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser and Müller were still too thick to grasp populism's adaptivity to different ideological positions.

It is because of the adaptive nature of populism that what constitutes 'the people' and 'the elite,' is different within each populist manifestation and depends on the ideology it is connected to (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue that in the case of right-wing populism for instance, "it is the nativism and not the populism that is at the basis of the exclusion" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 83). The ideological content of populism thus shapes what type of exclusion the construction of the people entails.

Following Ernesto Laclau (2005) and the idea that populism is highly adaptive to its ideological content, it can be argued that 'the people' and 'the elite,' the core concepts of the populist logic, are empty signifiers. This entails that the meaning of those concepts depends on how they are discursively constructed in a specific manifestation of populism. Similarly, terms like 'democracy' and 'popular sovereignty' have contested meanings and can be used in different ways to bind people together around shared goals, drawing up a bloc against the ones in power. It is specifically due to the vagueness of such terms that populists can use them to

simplify the political realm and create a dichotomy between the people as the source of popular sovereignty and the elite.

Following this approach, there is no reason that the populist logic; defending the demands of the people against those in power would necessarily rest on exclusive conceptions on who the people are. Laclau points to an equivalential relation at the basis of the construction of the people. This relation of equivalence entails that there are similarities; equivalences, between certain claims and requests that different citizens have (Laclau, 2005, p. 73). He explains this through the example of neighbours in an industrial city of a third world country who are experiencing problems with water, health and housing as a result of agrarian migrants settling in their city (Laclau, 2005, p. 73). The neighbours could have different requests and they do not necessarily form a unity based on shared identities. It is rather when their demands remain unsatisfied that there arises a relation of equivalence between them. The relation of equivalence can be enforced through certain discourses, emphasizing similarities they would otherwise not have noticed. This results in a form of unity through their unsatisfied demands, on which those citizens can rely when they want to oppose to the institutional system that has become a shared enemy.

Chantal Mouffe (2018) follows Laclau in the idea that 'the people' is an empty signifier and has no strict meaning besides its constructed definition through discourse (Mouffe, 2018). The bonds that create the possibility to unite and mobilize against power are what Mouffe refers to as a "chain of equivalence" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 43). This chain of equivalence is not an utterance of a priori exclusive social categories but it is rather anti-essentialist; a heterogeneous group of citizens can be mobilized as the people around similar but different demands. 'The people' could therefore be constructed around different struggles citizens might have with for instance sexism, discrimination or the environment, and their demands can be equivalential in a broader claim for equality, democracy and pluralism. Through these demands a 'we' is created against a 'they;' the (neoliberal) elites who are failing to respond to the demands of citizens. It is through this logic that the populist appeal to the people can be better understood in its adaptive nature because it explains that the context it reacts to and the ideas it interacts with are at the very basis of every populist movement or party.

The populist logic can appear in combination with nationalist and xenophobic demands, constructing the people as the national people, because this shared identity is important within their claims. It can however similarly revolve around a discourse that respects pluralism and minority rights, relying on the (chain of equivalence between the) demands of a heterogeneously constructed people. Recognizing the possibility of this more far reaching

adaptiveness means that we have to accept a thinner definition of the populist logic without including claims that the people is necessarily conceived as pure and homogeneous, and of which their general will represents the people as a whole. A broader definition comes down to the discursive construction of a collective will of 'the people' against 'the elite', in which the people are mobilized around the claim to restore popular sovereignty that the elites have allegedly taken. For a right-wing populist, popular sovereignty is reserved and restricted for nationals. Popular sovereignty for a left-wing populist could by contrast entail the appeal to widen it as they do not rely on 'the people' as an exclusive social category.

The left populist paradox

Broadening the scope of the definition of populism helps to more effectively reflect its adaptive anatomy and therefore explain the different forms in which it can appear. It displays that ideology is a much more important element in assessing what populists are opposed to and what they aim at doing once in power. But does such a broad definition render it an analytically unhelpful concept? And is it enough to argue that populism is not opposed to liberal democratic pluralism? While some might argue that a broad definition does not capture what populism is truly about, others have argued that even a more thin understanding of the populist logic is still inherently opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism.

Müller (2016) argues that opposing populism to pluralism through certain anti-pluralist features is necessary in order to demarcate populist from non-populist phenomena. He states that populists must in order to be truly populist, construct the people as homogenous, morally pure, unified in its will and as the only true people that is to be represented (Müller, 2016, p. 16). But what does this say about parties like SYRIZA and Podemos, which seem to be committed to pluralism and egalitarianism rather than exclusion? Müller remains vague about this topic, and merely presents the condition that "if left-wing populism really means populism in the sense defined and defended in this book, it is clearly dangerous" (Müller, 2016, p. 50). This might imply that he does not regard SYRIZA and Podemos as being populist, which would be difficult to reconcile with a common-sense understanding of populism. Those parties show typically populist traits in a discursive, strategic as well as normative sense (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019). Their leaders construct 'the people' as a front against the elites, and they aim at restoring popular sovereignty by gaining power.

Mudde, who similarly argues that populism needs to be demarcated from non-populist phenomena by its anti-pluralist features, does in fact classify those political parties as populist (Mudde, 2013; Mudde 2015b). He states that they incorporate exactly the same reasoning and

dangers as right-wing populism. Based on their depiction of the people and the elite, Mudde argues they are no better than right-wing populists and exclusion will inevitably become a part of their politics (Mudde, 2015b). However, he admits that empirically these left populist parties have not yet acted upon exclusion (Mudde, 2015b).

These difficulties in judging and classifying liberal manifestations of left populism, makes those narrow approaches less analytically helpful than they claim to be. It is more effective to accept a broader definition of populism instead, and stress the interaction between more or less present discursive, strategic and thin ideological dimensions, recognizing the more far-reaching adaptability of the use of 'the people.' Such an ideal-typical and anti-essentialist definition has become accepted by a broad range of theorists on populism (Laclau, 2005; Abts & Rummens, 2007, Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis 2018; Cohen, 2019; Mouffe, 2018). But even from this line of thought, criticism has been raised to the idea that the populist logic can be reconciled with liberal democratic pluralism (Cohen, 2019; Abts & Rummens, 2007; Rummens, 2009). This criticism is mainly directed towards the theory of Chantal Mouffe (2018), as she defends the normative position in favour of left populism, prescribing populism as a strategy to enhance pluralism while leaving liberal democratic principles intact.

Many of Mouffe's critics might be right in questioning whether populism should be pursued as the correct solution (Benhabib, 2019; Cohen, 2019; Longo, 2018). However, such remarks do not problematize this project to contest the necessary connection between populism and anti-liberal democratic pluralism that is made within a large part of the literature on populism. In this more conceptual sense, Mouffe's theory provides an example of how populists can construct and defend the people without necessarily harming liberal democratic pluralism. Valuable criticism against such a conceptual reconciliation of populism and liberal democracy has been raised by Jean Cohen (2019) as well as by Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2007). They argue that while the people can be constructed heterogeneously and populists might maintain to be in favour of liberal democratic principles, it is still opposed to its principles in practice due to its anti-pluralist logic.

According to Cohen, the anti-pluralist logic lies within the construction of the people (Cohen, 2019). Even when the construction of the people does not represent homogeneous social categories, populists always defend a 'we' against a 'they' and inevitably exclude a part of the population that is not allied with the left populist ideology. Cohen argues that the defence of the collective will of a certain part of the population as the basis for popular sovereignty is opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism (Cohen, 2019, p. 395). While Mouffe's conceptualization of liberal democracy entails that a demarcated understanding of

‘the people’ is necessary to have a political order, Cohen and Abts and Rummens argue that any form of such populist politics is directly opposed to what the logic of liberal democracies should be (Cohen, 2019; Abts & Rummens, 2007).

Their arguments are best understood in opposition to Mouffe’s approach on liberal democracy, which she has partly adopted from the controversial theory of Carl Schmitt (2001). According to Mouffe, liberalism and democracy, the two constitutive elements of liberal democracies, are conceptually irreconcilable (Mouffe, 2018; Mouffe, 2005). She follows Schmitt in that the ‘democratic pillar’ revolves around popular sovereignty through majority rule, which inevitably entails exclusion through the demarcation of ‘the demos,’ or in other words: the people that will govern (Mouffe, 2018, p. 16). However, Mouffe departs from Schmitt’s totalitarian implications in arguing that this democratic logic can and should coexist with the liberal logic of individual rights, the rule of law and separation of powers (Mouffe, 2018, p. 16). This liberal logic protects against the forms of exclusion that are a result of the democratic practice of determining ‘the people.’ Seen in this light, a left populist party in power redefines the demos and is an instance of pure democracy. At the same time, she argues a populist party can ideologically endorse the liberal democratic principles of legitimacy (Mouffe, 2018, p. 36).

Mouffe has been critiqued for her minimal understanding of democracy (Rummens, 2007; Müller, 2016; Cohen, 2019; Benhabib; 2019). This criticism mainly stems from the view on liberal democracy that considers the logic of democracy and the liberal logic of rights as co-original, meaning that they presuppose each other instead of being two irreconcilable concepts. There is no democracy if not based on rights, and there are no rights if not based on democracy (Benhabib, 2019). Abts and Rummens explain what this co-originality thesis entails through the theory of Claude Lefort (1988) (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Following Lefort, the logic of (liberal) democracy lies in that the locus of power remains empty. This stands in direct contrast to a situation in which power over the people as a unity is embodied by one person. There is no embodiment of power in liberal democracies, but rather people that temporarily occupy public office and of which their position can be contested through democratic and electoral processes.

Individual rights and the constitution guarantee the possibility of diversity. Popular sovereignty allows citizens, chosen by majority vote, to temporarily occupy power, including the authority over constitutional reform. This results in an interpretation of the liberal (constitutional) democratic logic as follows:

> Only the mutual interdependence of individual rights and the democratic construction of temporary interpretations of the will of the people allow for the realization of the *diversity-in-unity* which defines constitutional democracies. (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 413)

The locus of power in a liberal democracy is thus empty in the sense that it is only temporarily occupied. "Diversity-in-unity" entails there is both recognition of the idea that politics serves to strive for a common good (unity), as well as recognition that interests are diverse (diversity). Abts and Rummens argue that the populist or pure 'democratic' logic embodies the people as a "unity-in-itself" and closes the locus of power (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 414). What characterizes populism is then that it tries to embody the people as a whole, guided by one common interest. This pure democratic logic is not so much a part of liberal democracies, but rather a degeneration of it (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 414). The other pillar of liberal democracy, which represents the liberal tradition of individual rights, similarly forms a degeneration of the liberal democracies when it appears in its pure form. A pure logic of individual rights dissolves into a radical form of pluralism as there is no reference to democracy as a means for achieving a common good (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Liberal democracies thus generate pluralism within a certain middle ground between popular sovereignty and pure diversity.

When we look at liberalism and democracy as co-original, liberal forms of populism seem to entail a paradox, undermining what it stands for. Following Cohen and Abts and Rummens in their criticism, we might believe that however liberal a manifestation of populism claims to be, it still contradicts the ideal that the will of the people should only be temporarily interpreted and that the locus of power should remain open. Cohen argues that even liberal left populists in power will tend to reduce institutions that slow down the unmediated actualization of what they bring forward as the collective will (Cohen, 2019). The populist logic is therefore associated with a proto-totalitarian position rather than a democratic one, problematizing the thesis that populism and liberal democratic pluralism can reconciled.

Reconciling populism and liberal democratic pluralism

Following Cohen (2019), I argue that we should recognize the liberal and democratic logic as inextricably connected to each other, constitutive for what we today recognize as a properly functioning democracy. Hence, a properly functioning democracy, which equals a liberal democracy, is one in which popular sovereignty is grounded in rights and a constitution and the

other way around. The liberal democratic logic thus exists in the interaction between the traditions of popular sovereignty and individual rights, which combined guarantee the dispersion of power I refer to as 'liberal democratic pluralism.' At the same time, these are two separate traditions between which a tension exists when they appear in their pure form and into which liberal democracies can degenerate. In order to conclude whether populism is necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism, we need to assess the position of the populist logic towards the productive balance between liberalism and democracy, rather than towards two separate and irreconcilable pillars. While Cohen and Abts and Rummens oppose the logic of populism to liberal democratic pluralism on the basis that populism embodies the people as a unity and closes the locus of power, I argue that they overestimate the implications of the populist logic and underestimate the impact of its ideology in assessing this relation.

Not every populist party will entail a discursive, strategic as well as normative dimension of the populist logic as much as the other. When a populist party is in accordance with the ideal typical definition of the populist logic however, it constructs 'the people' around a collective will, claiming to restore popular sovereignty and thereby endorsing what would be a common good for the people. In such an understanding, a liberal left populist party occupies the empty place of power when it gets elected, aimed at realizing its interpretation of the common good (Abts & Rummens, 2007). Yet, it is not the occupation of power in itself that is seen as problematic, because this is needed to have a political order (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mouffe, 2011). It is rather when a particular majority claims to represent the people as a unity and when it diminishes the institutions that protect minorities, that it resembles a totalitarian logic and makes liberal democratic pluralism impossible. What is important then for the original liberal democratic logic to remain intact, is that the occupation of power is temporary, it can be contested and that individual liberty is preserved (Mouffe, 2011). Now, I argue that a left populist party that endorses liberal democratic pluralism as a common good can occupy the place of power no less temporarily than what is required to leave the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism intact.

It is a false dilemma to maintain that the endorsement of any common good by the state is in itself opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. Populism, by endorsing a common good for the people, is not so much directly opposed to liberal democratic pluralism, but it is rather opposed to a pure liberal logic of radical pluralism. Radical pluralism requires complete neutrality of the state and reduces politics to a "struggle between particular interests without reference to the common good" (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 9). The logic of a liberal democracy however, requires regulation through temporary interpretations of the common good

which is possible due to agreement on and regulation through certain fundamental principles that are a precondition for maintaining a pluralist democracy (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Plattner 2010). This is what has been referred to as the framework of 'diversity-in-unity'.

The ideology a specific form of populism is connected to, and the way it constructs the people, are very important in assessing the relation towards this liberal democratic framework that guarantees pluralism. When a populist party constructs a heterogeneous people that includes different social groups and identities, connected by a chain of equivalence in a demand for a pluralist democracy, it does not have to reduce the people and the collective will to a unity. The collective will can respect internal differences and, even more so, internal differences are themselves important equivalential links in the demand to enforce democratic processes towards pluralism. Instead of intending to harm the representative system because populists would uphold the idea that they establish a form of direct rule of the people as a unity, a form of left populism could rather be aimed at realizing a democratic system that is more responsive to all of its citizens as a common good (Mouffe, 2018). There are also no clear lines of exclusion in such an instance of populism that demarcate who are part of the people and who are not. In contrast to for instance a nativist conception of the people, the horizontal exclusion due to the construction of the people does not take place along the lines of identity. It would, next to opposing to the elite, rather exclude actors that pose a serious threat to its idea of a common good.

Following this logic, we can imagine that a left populist party could also act upon its endorsement of this common good. When a left populist party makes an appeal to widen popular sovereignty rather than restricting it for a specific homogeneous group, this might entail creating new and more direct forms of participation (Cohen, 2019; Mouffe, 2018). On the other hand, its politics might entail forms of exclusion, whether this is merely discursive or even electoral, towards illiberal political parties that threaten pluralism and democracy (Cohen, 2019; Mouffe, 2018). While this seems rather elitist, very few democratic theorists today are proponents of radical or far-reaching pluralism that does not entail any limits to pluralism (Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018, p. 448). Following Abts and Rummens, the logic of liberal democracies rather lies in the middle ground between radical pluralism and popular sovereignty, in which some form of exclusion or at least the protection of liberal values is inevitable to maintain liberal democratic pluralism (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

Abts and Rummens argue on this very basis that populists should be excluded from power because the populist logic would not respect the principle of "liberty and equality for all" as a precondition for liberal democracies (Abts & Rummens 2007, p. 18). Yet, we have now

explained the populist logic in a way that left populism can be aimed at securing pluralism through this exact framework. Mouffe, being a proponent what we could call 'liberal socialist populism', argues therefore that although everyone should be allowed to speak, the ones in power should pragmatically determine the limits of pluralism by these standards in order to eventually maintain a pluralist liberal democracy (Mouffe in Dryer Hansen & Sonnichsen, 2014, p. 269). It is therefore by virtue of its ideological position that a left populist party in power can be reconciled with the logic of liberal democracies, as it can enforce the very framework of 'diversity-in-unity' in response to a political status quo in which this framework has eroded. Left populists can enforce the fundamental principles of liberal democratic pluralism while its occupation power of remains temporary due to democratic processes and political contestation.

Besides prioritizing the impact of a certain ideology over the impact of the general logic of populism, there is another simple but not unimportant argument on why the very strict 'populism is anti-pluralism' view should be reconsidered. Not all populist parties or movements include the same normative dimension and their logic might change over time (Cohen, 2019; Mouffe; 2018; Abts & Rummens 2007; Laclau, 2005). Both Mouffe and Laclau have emphasized that the construction of a people mainly serves to mobilize a front against those in power (Mouffe, 2018; Laclau, 2005). Especially when the construction of the people does not rely on an already existing social category, it requires a discursive effort to mobilize diverse citizens around shared goals. From this perspective, the discursive use of 'the people' as a collective, 'popular sovereignty' as a shared goal but also 'the elite' as a shared enemy, could be merely strategic.

This discourse and strategy can be adopted to a greater or lesser extent by various political actors and it can also be dropped once electoral power has been achieved by winning over a majority (Arato & Cohen, 2017; Cohen; 2019). A populist party might also deliberately choose a path of moderation once it reaches power. It could eventually engage in "politics as usual" and therefore threaten in no sense the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism (Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 17). In order to determine whether a certain populist party does or does not pose a threat to liberal democratic pluralism, an analysis is thus not only required of the ideology it is connected to and the way it constructs the people, but one should also consider that there will always remain differences in the way populist parties manifest themselves.

Conclusion

Within this thesis I argued that due to the ideological adaptiveness of the populist logic, populism is not necessarily opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. Many theorists on populism have recognized that the populist logic is 'thin' in the sense that it can combine with and adapt to multiple ideologies. Yet, they have ascribed an ideological position to it that is necessarily anti-pluralist because populists defend the will of only a part of the population as if it were the common good for the people as a whole. This logic seems to be directly opposed to the logic of liberal democracies, which lies in the recognition of diverse interests and identities, allowing only temporary majorities to reach power while protecting the rights of individuals and minorities.

While some manifestations of populism might indeed be opposed to the liberal democratic commitment to pluralism due to certain ideological objectives, this is not a defining property of populism. The ideology populism interacts with and the status quo it reacts to, are crucial in assessing whether populism is opposed to liberal democratic pluralism. I argue that the populist construction of the people can rest on the collective demands of a heterogeneous group of people who defend pluralism and the institutions that protect it as a common good. While this is opposed to radical pluralism, it can be reconciled with the liberal democratic logic that requires basic principles at the basis of governing the population as a unity with the recognition of diversity as its centre.

This take on populism requires recognizing its far reaching adaptiveness and it might broaden the scope of phenomena that fall under the definition of populism. While some have questioned the analytical usefulness of such a broad scope of what populism entails, it can contribute to a more careful assessment of what left populist parties and movements are opposed to and how they might act once they acquire an electoral majority. It therefore provides a renewed framework for research into the actions and strategies of populist parties that are connected to more liberal ideas.

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