

# Critical Research on Populism: Nine Rules of Engagement

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(Accepted for publication in *Organization*)

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1350508418768053>

## Abstract

This article formulates precise questions and ‘rules of engagement’ designed to advance our understanding of the role populism can and should play in the present political conjuncture, with potentially significant implications for critical management and organization studies and beyond. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and others working within the post-Marxist discourse theory tradition, we defend a concept of populism understood as a form of reason that centres around a claim to represent ‘the people’, discursively constructed as an underdog in opposition to an illegitimate ‘elite’. A formal discursive approach to populism brings with it important advantages. For example, it establishes that a populist logic can be invoked to further very different political goals, from radical left to right, or from progressive to regressive. It sharpens too our grasp of important issues that are otherwise conflated and obfuscated. For instance, it helps us separate out the nativist and populist dimensions in the discourses of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Trump or the Front National (FN). Our approach to populism, however, also points to the need to engage with the rhetoric *about* populism, a largely ignored area of critical research. In approaching populism as signifier, not only as a concept, we stress the added need to focus on the uses of the term ‘populism’ itself: how it is invoked, by whom, and to what purpose and effect. This, we argue, requires that we pay more systematic attention to *anti*-populism and ‘populist hype’, and reflect upon academia’s own relation to populism and anti-populism.

## Key words

Populism, Anti-populism, Political Logic, Populist Hype, Discourse Theory, Laclau

Critical Management and Organization Studies (hereafter CMOS) can make a positive contribution to our understanding of the nature and impact of populist politics, but it is important not to underestimate the challenges facing CMOS scholars in making good such a contribution. The Call for Papers raises at least three kinds of question about how we can or should approach populism and associated phenomena, each of them pointing to both opportunities and challenges.

A first question concerns the category of populism itself. How productive is it for CMOS? What sorts of problems might it be usefully deployed to tackle? Perhaps the concept of populism can contribute to debates around institutional change and transformation (du Gay, 2008), or the character of leadership in organizations (Gabriel 2015, Nunes 2014), or resistance and counter-hegemonic strategy in organizational power dynamics (Spicer and Bohm, 2007). Or perhaps one might be interested in how populist tendencies evident in the political field have come to shape the agendas and rules in other domains, such as recruitment and governance practices in organizations like universities, or the policy making practices in, for example, migrant integration or health (Ostaijen and Scholten 2014; Speed and Mannion 2017). At the same time, however, it is crucial not to stretch the meaning of populism beyond what is analytically useful, and to avoid attributing an exaggerated significance to the populist elements of populist politics with the effect of downplaying the importance of other elements with which it is articulated (eg., nationalism, authoritarianism, class, etc.).

Second, should we understand populism to be necessarily normatively inflected, whether positively or negatively? Writing in 2008, Sarah Stookey (2008: 923) suggested that '[a]cknowledging the complicated relationship critical management studies has with populism and elitism is key to self-knowledge'. The opposition elitism/populism was invoked to caution against spending too much time playing the institutional game, shoring up our privileges as academics (aligned with 'elitism'), urging scholars instead to devote quality time developing the critical capacities and skills of students and the wider non-academic public to help give voice to the 'unheard' and to counteract tendencies of domination and oppression (aligned with 'populism'). Stookey's use of the term populism, of course, presupposes a particular understanding of the concept: '[p]opulism privileges the characteristics, interests, ideas and leadership of the majority while elitism reserves authority for those individuals and groups with special attributes, for that which is specifically *not* common' (2008: 922). This positive normative valence attributed to populism, however, contrasts with the predominantly negative way in which populism is and has been understood in political commentary and academic research. This is largely because populism has frequently been associated with the populist right, reflected also in the Call for Paper's titular reference to Brexit and Trump (Robinson and Bristow 2017). We thus need to be clear about the conditions under which populist phenomena become normatively inflected.

A third set of questions concerns our role as critical researchers and educators. Of course critical self-reflection is a trademark feature of CMOS scholarship, whether by drawing out the critical potential of poststructuralism (O'Doherty and Willmott 2001; Contu and Willmott 2005), or by exploring the critical potential of subversion and performativity (Bloom and White 2016; Spicer et al. 2016; Banerjee and Fleming 2016), or by reflecting on the role of the academic as a public intellectual and 'intellectual activist' (Dallyn et al., 2015; Contu 2017). The idea here, however, is to push us to reflect more directly on the context within which we as critical scholars make use of the term 'populism'. What definitions of populism do we use and why? In using the term, to what extent do we

accept the agendas and moods regarding populism prevalent in politics, the media, and academia, whether negative or positive? Do we perhaps inadvertently feed what could be called a ‘populist hype’? CMOS should thus not only become aware of the ways it might contribute, or avoid contributing, to that hype, but should also deploy its analytical and critical gaze more systematically to the logics underlying the hype about populism in politics, media, and academia.

In what follows we put forward nine rules of engagement to facilitate analytically sharp, critical, and self-reflexive work on populism and related phenomena in CMOS and beyond.

## 1. Populism is a Concept *and* a Signifier

If populism is a concept, then it should be judged by its usefulness in capturing a relevant (populist) aspect of social reality. This forms the basis for a first group of rules of engagement, concerned with the analytical precision of the concept and with the often overlooked limits of its explanatory potential (rules 2 to 5). But this is not enough. We must also turn our attention towards how the term is used, by whom and why, and with what performative effects. From this point of view, ‘populism’ is understood as a signifier, acquiring different meanings and normative inflections depending on the context within which it appears. The study of discursive patterns linked to the signifier populism is just as important and interesting as is the effort to establish an analytically productive concept of populism. The shift of emphasis from concept to signifier informs a number of rules of engagement concerned with the study of anti-populist rhetoric and ‘populist hype’ and the need for critical (self-)reflection about how and why academics come to characterize a phenomenon in populist terms (rules 6 to 9).

## 2. Populism is Political, and it has a Logic

Looking at populism as a concept, we argue that its status should be understood to be political through and through, whilst also possessing a logic – a distinctive set of formal discursive qualities. This goes against two common tendencies in how populism is approached, namely, to treat populism as a *symptomatic effect* of socio-economic and socio-cultural changes, or as an *ideology*.

It is often assumed that socio-economic changes (such as economic globalisation, the shift to a service economy, or economic downturns) and socio-cultural changes (such as increased cultural diversity and permissiveness) create grievances, discontent and crises that populist political actors capitalize on. The ‘losers of globalisation (or modernisation)’ thesis (e.g. Betz, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008) is perhaps the most prominent expression of such a position. It has been deployed to explain the success of European populist radical right parties since the 1990s, and more recently to analyse (in hindsight) Donald Trump’s election in 2016 and the Brexit decision that same year. In this view, a socio-economic or socio-cultural state of affairs serves as the objective cause of a populist politics. Over forty years ago already, however, Sartori (1990[1968]) criticised the ‘objectivist bias’ of the ‘sociology of politics’ which sought to explain politics by ‘going beyond politics’ (Sartori, 1968: 181-182 cited in Mudde 2007: 4; see also Arendt 1958: 7; Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 114-115). Whilst socio-economic and socio-cultural developments are crucial in explaining the evolution and success or failure of populist (and other) political projects, populist politics cannot be reduced to a *symptomatic effect* of extra-political developments.<sup>1</sup> To start with, developments such as neo-liberal globalisation are not

outside politics, but are themselves partly the result of, and partly constituted by, political choices. More importantly, such developments do not *automatically* translate into particular political outcomes: they are given particular meaning and salience in discourses, depending on the political goals and ideologies of the actors in question. And the same goes for ‘the people’ populists claim to represent, ‘the elite’ they criticise as illegitimate, and ‘the crises’ to which they claim to respond. All these elements are not ‘given’ or ‘natural’, whether in terms of our selection of them as worthy of attention, or in terms of content. Populist politics do not only actively appeal to ‘the people’, ‘the elite’ and ‘the crises’. They also actively interpret each of these elements, articulating them with specific understandings of particular social, economic, and cultural aspects of a conjuncture. All these interpretations, both separately and together, are contestable and thus any temporary stability in those constructions must be understood to be the product of a discursive struggle that is political through and through.

In stressing the profoundly political work done by populist politicians, we draw on the work of Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a) and others working within the discourse theoretical tradition that affirm the ‘primacy of the political’ (see Panizza, 2005; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). But even if we affirm the *status* of populism as political, we can still ask whether the concept of populism has any distinctive features comprising its conceptual morphology. In offering an affirmative response to this question, Laclau refers to a populist *reason*, understood here to denote the *formal pattern* that characterises populist discourses. Consequently this conceptualization of populism goes against the tendency to see populism as a set of ideas about politics and society: the focus shifts from the ‘contents’ of populism – *what* are the demands formulated by populist actors, what is their ideology – to *how* it articulates ‘those contents – whatever those contents are’ (Laclau, 2005b: 33).

The question becomes: what is specific about how populists formulate their demands and interpellate citizens? In a first move, we can say that populism entails the presence of an antagonistic relation between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. In spatial or orientational terms, populism is structured around a vertical down/up axis that refers to power, status and hierarchical position (see Dyrberg, 2003, 2006; Ostiguy, 2009; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). However, while the antagonism is most commonly expressed in terms of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, populists can rely on a wide range of labels to posit themselves as the representatives of the underdog (the ‘down-group’) against the powerful (the ‘up-group’). Common constructions often pit ‘the ordinary people’, ‘the little man’, ‘the common man’, ‘the man in the street’ as the down-group against an up-group: ‘the establishment’, ‘the political caste’ or ‘the regime’.<sup>2</sup>

In a second move, however, we can say that the concept of populism also entails a reference to an equivalential process. To construct their ‘people’ and appeal to a (more or less broad) range of interests and concerns, populists bring together different societal demands and identities in what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) call a ‘chain of equivalence’. What gathers these different demands and identities together in such a chain – what makes them ‘equivalent’ – is not simply something positive they have in common – all these different groups do not necessarily have the same interests – but the fact or the impression that they are all frustrated and endangered by ‘the elite’ (see Laclau, 2005a, 2005b, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Constructing such a chain of equivalence thus always involves a double movement wherein one equivalence of elements constructs a people, while another constructs an elite.

Our formal understanding of the concept of populism certainly shares some affinities with the ‘thin ideology’ approach to populism, now rather dominant in mainstream political science and political communications research (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). The ‘thin ideology’ approach also centres on the people/elite antagonism but it still treats populism as a belief system (however ‘thin’) that underlies the actions of political agents. In contrast, we reject the idea that populism comprises *concrete populist beliefs* underpinning associated political projects. We suggest instead that populist politics embody an articulatory pattern – a *formal reason* or *logic* – whose elements (grievances, demands, identities, etc.) can have as their source any number of ideologies. One key advantage of moving away from an ideological understanding of populism toward a formal understanding of the concept of populism is that it allows us to highlight more clearly the crucial *strategic* dimensions of populism. Parties and movements can turn to populism as a strategy to acquire power, but do not necessarily remain (equally) populist once in power.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. There are Many Things that Populism is Not

If populism has a logic or ‘reason’ formally organized around the claim to represent ‘the people’, and equivalentially constructed through its opposition to an illegitimate ‘elite’, it becomes obvious that (i) not every political project will feature this logic; and (ii) where this logic does feature, it will do so to a smaller or greater degree. There is thus a long list of things commonly associated with populism that populism is *not*. For example:

- **A ‘popular style’** of talking, acting or looking like ‘ordinary people’. While this can certainly be part of a populist strategy (Moffitt 2016), populists do not *have* to act in ‘popular’ ways to appeal to ‘the people’. And countless politicians with a ‘popular style’ are not populists because their politics lack the opposition towards ‘the elite’.
- **Demagoguery or opportunism**. Not all populists are demagogues or opportunists, and demagogues and opportunists are not all populists (cf. Mudde, 2004: 542).
- **A synonym for political outsider**. Not every political project claiming to be an alternative to traditional parties, or promising to do things differently is populist. Newly elected French president Emmanuel Macron, for example, was sometimes called a ‘populist’ during the 2017 electoral campaign and indeed accepted the label himself, insofar as that meant ‘talking to the people’ without going through traditional parties. However, while this played an important part in his political strategy, Macron could hardly be described as a populist since his claim to be an alternative to traditional parties was not built around the systematic construction of ‘the ordinary people’ against ‘the elite’.
- **A synonym for the radical right**. Some radical right parties are populist, but not all. Radical right parties can be elitist, as many were in the past (e.g. the Front National, the Vlaams Belang) (Mondon, 2013; Mudde, 2007). But even clearly populist radical right parties are much more than merely populist, with exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism much more central to their political project than populism (see Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2017; see rule 4)
- **Nationalism**. Many populists are nationalists, but many are not. And many nationalists are populists, but many are not. Also, whilst both populism and nationalism appeal to ‘the people’, this means something very different in populism than it does in nationalism (De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017).
- **Authoritarianism**, in the sense of anti-democratic or anti-pluralist politics. The logic of populism can be found in certain authoritarian politics, but not all populist politics are authoritarian, and not all authoritarian politics are populist.

#### 4. Populist Politics are not Reducible to Populist Reason: Populist elements are always articulated with non-populist elements.

Populist reason is always only one ingredient of a populist politics, and this means that a populist politics cannot be properly understood in isolation from the other characteristics of that political project. We should therefore be very cautious about the implications we draw from the popular observation that ‘we live in populist times’. We should guard against temptations to explain the events of our ‘populist times’ only through the prism of populist reason.

Populists on the left and the right interpret complex socio-economic and socio-cultural processes as favouring ‘the elite’ and going against the interests of ‘the people’, but they focus on different processes and evaluate them differently. They imbue ‘the people’ with very different needs and identities, and criticise the elite for very different, even opposite, reasons. Who exactly belongs to ‘the people’ and who does not? What are the interests of ‘the people’? Who belongs to ‘the elite’? Why is ‘the elite’ considered illegitimate? Whilst all populists call on a ‘people’ who are ignored, manipulated, mistreated and not properly represented by ‘the elite’, answers to such questions vary enormously. Populist political parties and movements – whether (radical) right or left, agrarian, nationalist, democratic or authoritarian, progressive or conservative – construct the opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ according to their specific ideological outlook (Mény and Surel 2000: 177-222). For this reason we should also avoid treating voters for different populist parties and their motivations for voting as homogeneous (cf. Rooduijn, 2017).

‘Articulation’ is a key category in discourse theory that can help draw out this aspect of a populist politics (Laclau 1990: 35; Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105, 113-114; Glynos and Howarth 2007: Chapter 6). Much more so than has been the case in studies of populism so far, a discourse-theoretical approach implies that if we are to understand the diversity of ‘really existing’ populist politics we need to look very carefully and systematically at how populism is *articulated* with a diverse range of other elements: nationalism, racism, conservatism, socialism, neoliberalism, etc. Moreover, when studying how populism is articulated with ideological elements, we need to look at the architecture of populist politics, and ask where populism and those other elements are located: at the core or at the periphery (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017)? Take Podemos and the Front National (FN), for example. The claim that both are populist parties may be true, but without further elaboration such a claim is unhelpful and misleading as it ignores the ideology promoted through their respective populisms and the context in which their populisms came to serve a purpose. For FN, populism is intimately linked with nationalism and xenophobia, and their conception of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ derives from this. The meaning of the people and the elite in populist radical right politics largely derives from their exclusionary nationalism, with ‘the people’ being a subgroup of the ethnically defined nation, and the elite being criticised primarily for going against the interests of that nation. While there is some overlap across FN and Podemos regarding criticisms of the elite (eg., corruption charges), there are also important divergences. More importantly, however, Podemos articulates a more inclusive understanding of ‘the people’ and their demands than does FN, largely by drawing on a distinct and distinctive set of sources: social democracy, radical left movements, feminism, and other progressive politics.<sup>5</sup>

**5. Populism is Neither Good nor Bad: Non-populist elements, and the way they are articulated with populist elements, are decisive when evaluating a populist party or movement.**

If populism can be deployed as part of different political projects with very different normative and ideological visions, our evaluation of a populist political project is best understood in relation to the normative and ideological aspects of the political project, not in relation to its populist aspects.

The idea that populism is a threat to democracy often results from the conflation of populism with nativism, xenophobia or racism. For (radical) right parties, the people are constructed against an elite, but also (and more importantly so) as a homogenous group based on ethno-cultural or racial traits. Political projects built on such exclusionary premises directly contest a liberal-democratic vision of society. However, this contestation of a liberal-democratic vision of society flows from the particular articulation of nativism with the logic of populism, not from populism itself.

Some scholars have argued that populists' claim to represent 'the people' and their criticism of 'the elite' are inherently anti-pluralist because of an implied homogenisation of 'the people' (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017). However, these criticisms ignore how the construction of 'the people' through the formation of a chain of equivalence does not necessarily imply that differences between the different elements of that chain disappear: populist politics do not have to eradicate the differences between the different groups and demands that are grouped under 'the people' (see Katsambekis 2016 on Syriza). The same can be said about the opposite pole, 'the elite'. Whilst populism can easily be used to simplify the political space into two opposing blocs, it is not always or necessarily the case that a critique of 'the elite' should take the form of a critique of elitism *as such*. A discourse theoretical perspective holds open the prospect of greater analytical complexity and nuance, as dictated by the empirical context. Moving away from an ideological understanding of populism (as a belief in a 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite') can help us see this more clearly.

However, a populist movement or party can be evaluated not only in relation to the (nationalist, socialist, ...) normative content of its political project. It can also be evaluated in relation to the *way* it pursues its normative vision and associated demands. Does it, for example, present itself as the necessary and *only* possible alternative to the current (illegitimate) elite? Has the relation between 'the people' and the leader or movement been reified in a way that attempts to make the contingent character of this relation invisible? Or does the movement (or its leader) present itself in a way that is compatible with a plural conception of the polity, as the best of a range of possible alternative representatives? The idea that the populist claim to represent 'the people' is inherently anti-pluralist (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017) ignores how populist parties and movements can be inclusionary in their normative vision *and* pluralist in the way they seek to achieve this normative vision.

**6. We Should Study Discourses *about* 'Populism' and their Performative Effects**

Whilst a massive amount of work has been produced on populist politics and on the concept of populism, there has been relatively little sustained analysis of discourses *about*

populism. Given the ubiquity of the term populism in political, journalistic and academic parlance such analyses are long overdue, not least because a lot of this discourse promotes an anti-populist stance. In line with the self-reflexive ethos of CMOS, we need to ask who speaks about populism – whether for or against – and in what ways? What meanings attach to the signifier ‘populism’ in different pro-and anti-populist discourses? Why do different actors – including academics – use ‘populism’ in the ways they do, and why has this term become so omnipresent? This set of questions marks a shift in the way we approach populism: from a concept used to analyse populist politics to a signifier the use and effects of which need to be analysed in their own right. This shift in perspective is indexed in the transition from one group of rules (1-5) to a different group of rules (6-9).

## 7. We Should Analyse Anti-populism as a Political Logic

Discourses about populism have by and large been negative, the term populism often invoked to criticise and delegitimise a range of political projects, from the radical right to the radical left. This has been the case in journalism (Bale et al., 2011; Herkman 2016), politics, and academia. We need therefore to scrutinise the logics of anti-populist discourse much more extensively than has been the case so far (but see, for example, Katsambekis, 2014; Taguieff, 1998; Stavrakakis et al., 2017, Stavrakakis 2017b).

There are at least two sets of issues worthy of further investigation. First, there is an important under-researched issue about how anti-populism relates to populism (cf. Stavrakakis 2017b). Second, some important exceptions notwithstanding, the political and ideological significance of anti-populist political rhetoric has yet to receive the kind of systematic treatment that the study of populist rhetoric has (see Glynos and Mondon, 2016; Stavrakakis, 2017a, 2017b; Jäger, 2016). We have seen how populism can be, and has been, used in a wide range of ways by a wide range of actors. The virtue of treating populism as a signifier, however, is that we can train our focus on the patterns of its usages and their impact, irrespective of whether these conform to one or another concept of populism. Insofar as the signifier populism or anti-populism is invoked in such a way as to defend, promote, or to denigrate a particular state of affairs or political programme, we can say that it becomes part of a *political logic*.<sup>6</sup>

Viewing anti-populism as a political logic encourages us to ask some important questions about the possible patterns and structures of anti-populist practices. What are the different recurring arguments deployed in the critique of populism? How are the criticisms of populism as undemocratic, as emotional, as opportunistic, as unrealistic, and so on related to each other? And what ideologies, values, and norms are being protected and advanced through anti-populist rhetoric? In approaching anti-populism as a political logic we aim to foreground how the use of the signifier ‘populism’ by politicians and the media (just as much as positive discourses about populism) can serve to contest – or preempt the contestation of – a wide range of norms linked, for example, to liberal democracy, ethno-cultural relations, and so on (Glynos and Mondon 2016).

Treating populism as a signifier – particularly in its negative incarnation of ‘anti-populism’ – also allows us to ask questions about its *appeal*. How does anti-populist rhetoric interpellate and ‘grip’ subjects? Where might the ‘enjoyment’ lie in criticizing or dismissing populist voters and sympathizers, or in identifying with anti-populist subject positions? Consider the vehement and widespread criticism of populism (for example in



the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum) as ‘unreasonable’, ‘utopian’, ‘irrational’, ‘uneducated’, not to say ‘stupid’. Could we perhaps explain some of this affective investment by appealing to the often secretly self-aggrandizing gesture of identifying oneself as ‘reasonable’ and ‘realistic’, ‘enlightened’, ‘educated’, and ‘smart’; or, indeed, as a member of ‘the elite’ against ‘the people’ or ‘the lower classes’?

## **8. We Should Study Populist Hype and its Effects**

The rise to prominence of ‘populism’ as a framework for understanding political reality seems to be more than simply the consequence of the rise of populist politics. We need to ask how the sustained growth of discourse *about* populism relates to the dynamics of public debate, media logics, and the functioning of the academic field (see rule 9).<sup>7</sup> A reference to ‘populist hype’ (Glynos and Mondon, 2016) opens up avenues for critical analysis of the effects of the signifier ‘populism’ becoming so widespread in the way that it has. The term ‘hype’ itself presupposes the huge outpouring of media, political and academic discourse on populism. Treating populist hype as a political logic, however, helps us focus our attention on the potential effects of this outpouring, in terms of both its volume and character. For example, such an outpouring of anti-populist discourse can lead to our attributing an exaggerated significance to populist phenomena or the populist dimension of populist politics (see Rydgren 2017 on the radical right). Related to this, we need to ask whether, rather than merely reflecting developments in the political field, such anti-populist outpouring has had the performative effect of consolidating the position of populist actors as the main opposition to the *status quo*, enabling them to punch way above their weight in terms of shaping the political agenda.<sup>8</sup>

## **9. We Should Reflect More on Academic Discourse About ‘Populism’**

As critical academics in CMOS and beyond we should not only study the logics of discourses about populism in media and politics, but also turn our attention to populism as a dominant signifier in academia.

Not a few academics have played an important role in furthering and legitimising anti-populist positions, whilst others have spoken out in favour of populist politics. This suggests we should be more reflexive and more explicit about our political positions as academics and intellectuals when we criticize or defend certain forms of populist politics (see also Stavrakakis, 2017b). But this observation also suggests that we could also transform the question of how definitions of populism are connected to these political positions (and how this has been taken up by media and politics) into an important area of research.

Beyond the negative or positive evaluation of populism, we also need to be aware of and study of the performative effects of the production of academic discourse about populism *per se*, including academia’s own role in hyping populism. Disagreement on the nature and normative evaluation of populism notwithstanding, the growing body of work on populism has largely converged on the centrality of populism in the current political conjuncture (an argument we have been hearing since the early 2000s at least). Whilst there is no doubt that populism is an important factor in contemporary politics and critical academics need to engage with pressing social issues and participate in public debate, we need to reflect carefully on whether populism is indeed as central as it is assumed to be, and whether all of what is labelled populism is actually such a pressing issue comparatively speaking (Mondon 2017). We need to look at how we might perhaps

be adopting – rather than critically engaging with – the largely anti-populist agenda and terms of debate set by journalists, politicians, and funding bodies (wherein ‘populism’ appears as the central signifier). In other words, we need to be careful not to get entangled in what Péter Csigó (2016) has called, making a parallel with financial speculation bubbles, a ‘neo-popular bubble’: a bubble made up of academics, journalists, politicians and other professional producers of discourse about ‘the people’ who ‘speculate’ on what it is ‘the people’ think and want, and about how they relate to politics, but who end up referring mainly to each other and inadvertently contributing to the negative effects of populist hype.

Our paper has sought to tackle two related but analytically distinct sets of critical questions addressed to ourselves as academics interested in the study of populist phenomena. One: Are populist politics as important as they are made out to be, and is the populist element of such populist politics really that crucial? Two: is treating populism as the primary or even only conceptual framework really the best way to study populist politics? In offering a negative reply to both sets of questions, our argument has been that this assessment should serve not as the end-point but as the starting point of a productive and critical inquiry that CMOS scholars, as well as scholars working in other fields, are well-placed to undertake. We have suggested that there are better and worse ways of developing a conceptual framework for the study of populist phenomena and this applies as much to the field of political studies as it does to CMOS. But we have also insisted on the need to treat populism as a signifier in order to give us greater distance from, and critical awareness of, associated ideas and logics, in terms of the content, manner and effects of such articulations. This shift of perspective forces us to confront a range of additional and rather tricky questions about, for example, how we should respond to requests from journalists, NGOs, and think tanks to speak about populism; or how we should respond to funding calls and publication opportunities linked to research on populism. This brief paper, we hope, has offered up some pointers about how we might respond to such questions in a precise, critical and self-reflexive manner, or, at least, about what kind of reflections might help us develop such a response.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This point obviously raises very important and potentially interesting issues regarding how to better theorize the relationship between the political and extra-political dimensions, or indeed the relationship between the discursive and extra-discursive dimensions of a practice. It is worth noting that there is a rich and rewarding literature that seeks to engage poststructuralism, discourse theory, and post-marxism on these sorts of questions from the point of view of other traditions, such as new materialism (Glynos 2012) and critical theory (Ryner 2006). Certainly, the relationship between the political and extra-political dimensions of practices has received more direct attention beyond what is offered to us in Laclau and Mouffe. The logics approach, as developed by Glynos and Howarth (2007) moves in precisely this direction.

<sup>2</sup> It has been noted that the discursive construction of ‘the elite’ has received much less attention in the literature on populism than the discursive construction of ‘the people’ (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 395). In this view, the existence of ‘the elite’ and of the popular demands they oppose or frustrate have often been taken for granted. This is the case to some extent also in discourse-theoretical approaches inspired by Laclau that are otherwise quite keen to stress the discursively constructed character of identities (Moffitt 2015: 191). This critical observation however does not mean that such approaches cannot re-distribute their constructivist attention more equitably across the people and the elite. In this view, one can entirely embrace the point made by Moffitt (2015) and Stanley (2008: 97-98) that populist politics do not merely mobilise existing feelings of frustration with the ‘power-bloc’ (although this of course increases the likelihood of their success). Populists also actively construct a sense of crisis (Moffitt 2015) and “stimulate or reinforce dissatisfaction with ‘the elite’ for its (real and/or perceived) frustrating or endangering of a number of demands, interests or identities” (De Cleen and Stavarakakis 2017: 11). In doing so they present themselves as legitimate representatives of the people, in contrast to an illegitimate elite.

<sup>3</sup> Although we affirm the political status of populism, and the formal character of its conceptual morphology, our approach does nevertheless go against a tendency in Laclau’s later work to equate populism with politics (as opposed to administration). As he puts it, “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (2005a: 67). In contrast to this, and starting from the idea that the equation of populism and politics is not very useful analytically speaking (see Arditì 2007: 225; Beasley-Murray 2006; Stavarakakis 2004: 263) we highlight the significance of tracing the varied ways populists construct chains of equivalence around a down/up axis, particularly as regards the identities of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

<sup>4</sup> All this also means that populism is not a set of ideas about what democracy should look like (cf. Muller 2017), and that populists are not necessarily opposed to the elite *per se*, only to an illegitimate elite.

<sup>5</sup> One of the differences between left-wing and right-wing populisms seems to be that left-wing populisms bring together a wide range of different demands in a populist chain of equivalence (and indeed of organizations, groups, movements into a populist movement), whilst in (radical) right-wing populisms that revolve around an exclusionary nationalist core this chain of equivalence is much more determined and limited by this nationalist definition of ‘the people’ (and their claim to represent ‘the people’ is less frequently combined with an actual grouping of different organizations into a populist movement) (see Kim 2017, Stavarakakis et al. 2017). That is, although the radical right chain of equivalence also includes authoritarian demands (law and order, death penalty, ...) and socially conservative demands (anti-abortion,

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anti-‘gender ideology’), the most prominent articulated demands are nationalist (e.g. sovereignty of the nation, rejection of migration, rejection of multicultural policies, ...) and the set of demands that is grouped under ‘the people’ is limited by the fact that ‘the people’ is a sub-group of the nation.

<sup>6</sup> Logics, in discourse theory, are ‘constructed and named by the analyst’ to identify and understand the ‘rules or grammar of [a] practice under study’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 136). When we approach populism or anti-populism as a *political logic*, the question becomes: how does the invocation and articulation of the signifiers ‘populism’ or ‘anti-populism’ construct a position from which to defend, contest, or transform existing norms, regimes, and power relations (see Glynos, 2008: 278).

<sup>7</sup> Our appeal to media logics here aims to capture key aspects of a wide range of practices linked to journalistic norms, the political economy of media production and consumption, the use and transformation of associated technologies, and so on.

<sup>8</sup> Treating ‘populist hype’ as a political logic encourage a set of more concrete follow-up questions, including: How could UKIP, which received just over 7% of the registered vote in 2015 shape the agenda and impose their xenophobic approach to the EU? What role did labelling UKIP and Farage as ‘the voice of the people’ play here? What are the effects of lumping together under one populist umbrella movements on the left and the right with radically distinct normative visions and ways of doing politics? What does this make visible and what is removed from view – how and why? Do we not risk marginalizing more problematic dimensions of certain political projects by focusing on their populism? For example, in focusing on the success of populist politicians, other manifestations of discontent may recede from view, such as voting abstentions (cf. Mondon, 2017).