

Populist politics and the politics of “populism”: The radical right in Western Europe

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Abstract

Populism in Western Europe has been especially associated with the radical right. This chapter focuses on the role the concept of populism should play in our understanding of populist radical right (PRR) parties and on the role the signifier “populism” should play in assessing reactions to these parties by the press, other political actors, and academia. The authors challenge the prominent tendency to attach major importance to the PRR’s populism or even to reduce our understanding of the PRR as essentially or predominantly populist. Somewhat paradoxically, they argue that in order to better understand the nature, role and impact of populism in Western Europe, the concept of populism needs to play a less central part in analyses of populist parties. They also stress the need to reflect more on the performative effects of European discourses about populism—understood as a signifier—on the diagnoses of and strategies against the PRR.

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Introduction

Western European populism has received more than its fair share of academic and public attention. More so than in Southern Europe, Latin America or the rest of the world, populism in Western Europe has been largely associated with the radical right. Indeed, the renewed and growing academic focus on populism in Europe since the 1990s has been strongly related to the rise of populist radical right parties such as the French Front/Rassemblement National and the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs. Given the predominantly (radical) right character of populist politics in Western Europe, we focus in this chapter on the role the concept of populism should play in our understanding of populist radical right (PRR) parties and on the role the signifier “populism” should play in assessing reactions to these parties by the press, other political actors, and academia.

In order to better understand the nature, role and impact of populism in Western Europe, we argue—somewhat paradoxically perhaps—that the concept of populism must play a less central part in our analyses of populist parties (an argument we believe to hold true not only for the PRR but also for populist parties more generally). This argument goes against a rather prominent tendency to attach major importance to the PRR’s populism or even to reduce our understanding of the PRR as essentially or predominantly populist. To this first argument, we add a second argument, suggesting that we must simultaneously reflect more on the performative effects of discourses about populism, understood as a signifier, on diagnoses of and strategies against the PRR (see De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon 2018; Glynos and Mondon 2016; Stavrakakis et al. 2017b).

In making these two key arguments, we draw on and further develop a discourse-theoretical definition of populism that revolves around the discursive construction of an opposition between “the people”, on the one hand, and “the elite”, “establishment” or “power bloc”, on the other hand (Laclau 1977, 2005a; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Populists formulate demands in the name of “the people” and seek to interpellate citizens as members of “the people”, with “the people” being discursively constructed in opposition to an illegitimate “elite” that is said to not represent and not have at heart the interests of ordinary people. Such an approach to populism has become common in the analysis of the left-wing populisms of Latin America and, more recently, Southern Europe (e.g. Kioukiolis 2016; Laclau 1977, 2005a; Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), but has taken up a relatively marginal position in the analysis of the Western European PRR (exceptions include De Cleen 2013, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Kim 2017; Mondon 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017a), the latter having been dominated by the “thin ideology” or “ideational” approach to populism (Mudde 2004). More so than other approaches to populism, a discourse theoretical positioning allows us to clarify and contextualize the specific role populism plays in populist radical right politics in Western Europe. But it also draws attention to the role discourses about populism play, in terms of how the signifier populism acquires meaning in different discourses, and in terms of the effects that such discourses produce.

In the next section, we present our discourse-theoretical understanding of populism in more detail, distinguishing it from the dominant thin ideology (or ideational) framework as well as highlighting how it differs from certain elements of Laclau’s approach to populism. We then move on to an analysis of the Western European radical right’s articulation of populism with nativism, stressing how populism is used mainly in the service of a particular kind of exclusionary ethno-cultural nationalism. In the final section, we consider how analyses of the radical right in Western Europe that emphasize the PRR’s populist dimension have the rather perverse performative effect of legitimizing the radical right and of shifting the

political mainstream to the right. In the conclusion, we draw on our two arguments to formulate a number of broader reflections and questions that might guide future research on populism in Western Europe and beyond.

On Populism

Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a) and the wider discourse theory tradition, we approach populism first and foremost as a form of political reason, understood here to denote the formal pattern that characterizes populist discourses (see De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). When we approach populism in this way, 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).

From a formal point of view, populism revolves around the 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 De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Dyrberg 2003, 2006; Ostiguy 2009). While this opposition usually takes the form of “the people” versus “the elite”, populists rely on a range of labels to posit themselves as the representatives of the underdog against the powerful. They pit “the ordinary people”, “the little man”, “the common man”, “the man in the street” or even the working class as a large down-group against “the elite”, “the establishment”, “the political caste” or “the regime”.

Key to this formal approach to populism is the malleability of the concepts of “the people” and “the elite”: 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”, whom they claim are ignored, manipulated, mistreated and not properly represented by “the elite”, answers to such questions vary. Populist political parties and movements—whether (radical) right or left, agrarian, nationalist, democratic or authoritarian, progressive or conservative—construct “the people” according to their specific ideological outlook.

Certainly, this minimal definition revolving around the people-elite distinction is shared by both the thin ideology approach and the discourse-theoretical approach, and allows both approaches to cover a variety of populisms. The main difference is that the thin ideology definition treats the people-elite distinction and the claim that politics should represent the “will of the people” as the central idea or belief that guides populist politics, whereas the discourse-theoretical approach focuses instead on how populists discursively construct the opposition between “the people” and “the elite”, how they construct “the people” and “the will of the people”, and how they present themselves as legitimate representatives of “the people”. Distancing ourselves from an ideology approach implies a stronger recognition of the strategic dimensions of populism, but whilst we share with Weyland a concern with the political-strategic dimensions of populism, our approach attaches central importance to discourse rather than “deeds” (2017, 61), and does not reduce populism to strategy, not least because the constructed character of demands and identities cannot all be reduced to conscious and intentional actions by political agents. Still, key to our understanding of populism, including its strategic dimension, is how populists contribute to the construction of “the people” and to the construction of grievances—sometimes specific, sometimes inchoate—as concrete political demands of the people.

In order to better capture populism's strategic dimension, it is important to stress that populism is not only a form of political reason, a formal discursive logic: it is also a political logic. Logics, in discourse theory, are "constructed and named by the analyst" to help identify and understand the "rules or grammar of [a] practice under study" (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 136). Political logic is a term used by Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2001) in order to emphasize its difference from what they call a social logic. In appealing to social logics, they aim to capture the relatively stable patterns, rules or norms manifest in practices or regimes of practice. Typically, these are understood as "natural", in the sense that they are taken for granted, internalized and uncontested. The operation of political logics, on the other hand, often becomes clear in times of crisis when "things are not quite right", revealing, even for a brief moment, how what appears to be natural can be otherwise. This "visibility of contingency" is central to understanding the role and function of political logics. Political logics are thus understood to be processes that seek to maintain or disrupt settled norms. When we approach populist discourses in terms of political logics the question becomes: how do populist politics interpellate subjects, how do they construct demands, how do they contest existing regimes, or how do they reinforce existing power relations (see Glynos 2008, 278). Similar questions, we will argue at the end of this chapter, can be asked about anti-populist discourses.

To construct their "people" and appeal to a 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 something positive they have in common—all these different groups do not have the same interests—but the fact or the impression that they are all frustrated and threatened by "the elite", "establishment" or "power bloc" (see Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Populists simultaneously stimulate and reinforce dissatisfaction with "the elite", thus drawing on and contributing to a sense of "crisis" (see Moffitt 2015, 2016; Stanley 2008, 98). In doing so, they present themselves as legitimate representatives of "the people", in contrast to an illegitimate "elite". Our approach differs here from an orthodox Laclauian approach in that we stress more explicitly how populist politics do not merely bring existing frustrated demands together in a chain of equivalence against an "administrative system" or "power bloc" (Laclau 2005b, 37, 38, 40; see also Mouffe 2018), but instead co-construct such demands (along with crisis and the frustration with "the elite").

Whilst Laclau has also insisted on the specifically vertical, powerless-versus-powerful axis of populism (Laclau speaks of the "power bloc", the power-versus-people polarity (2005b, 40), or the power-versus-underdog polarity (2005b, 38)), our definition of populism differs from that found in Laclau's later work, in which populism becomes synonymous with politics more generally (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Populism, according to Laclau (2005a, 67), is the "the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such", because it revolves very strongly around the logic of equivalence, dividing the social into two opposing camps; see Thomassen 2016, 16)—a mechanism distinguished from forms of "government" or "administration" that operate according to the logic of difference (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xiii). This conceptualization of populism as politics par excellence leads to a strong overlap between the concepts of politics, hegemony and populism (see Ardit 2007, 225; Beasley-Murray 2003; Stavrakakis 2004, 263). Instead of identifying populism only by the degree of division or antagonism and by the number of elements that are brought together in the equivalential chain (Howarth 2015, 15 in Thomassen 2016, 16), we treat it also as a particular kind of politics. Its specificity lies in the centrality of the down/up opposition between people and elite, which is one particular way of

dividing the social into two camps (see also Laclau 2005b, 38, 40). Populism is thus characterized by a particular way of constructing a chain of equivalence, rather than by the operation of the logic of equivalence per se.

On the Strategic Aspects of the Radical Right's Populism

Populism in Western Europe has been most prominently associated with the radical right. As examples such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (Unsubmissive France), the Dutch Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party) and the German Die Linke (The Left) indicate, left-wing parties and movements using populism have had some degree of success in Western Europe as well. But their success and impact pales in comparison to the likes of the French Front National/Rassemblement National (FN/RN), the Belgian Vlaams Belang (VB),¹ the Italian Lega, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid of Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom, PVV), the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the German Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) amongst others.

While the shift to populism as a dominant concept in the study of the populist radical right is partly an academic and media fad, there is no denying that it was a crucial development in the history of the radical right. Something did change when originally explicitly elitist parties attempted to appeal to new electorates by presenting themselves as the voice of ordinary people (Mény and Surel 2000, 2002; Mondon 2013; Mudde 2004, 2007; Rydgren 2005). Rydgren (2005) considers populism to be one of the two elements of the new "master frame" adopted by the radical right as a response to the profound delegitimation of the radical right's anti-democratic and racist politics after the Second World War, the other crucial development being the move from biological towards "cultural racism" (that speaks of incompatible cultures and ethnic backgrounds, rather than "races") and towards ethnopluralism (away from outright racist hierarchization of "races" towards the defence of the specificity of different cultures and ethnic groups against multiculturalism and ethnic diversity)—later increasingly focused on a rejection of Islam. The FN was the first to have success with this combination of populism and cultural racism in the 1980s and '90s, and this new master frame was later adopted with more, or less, success by many radical right political actors across much of Western Europe.

Whilst there is no doubt that populism is crucial to understanding parts of the contemporary radical right, we suggest there has been an overemphasis on this populist dimension. While this focus has intensified over the years, it is not a new phenomenon: starting from the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the notion of populism became increasingly dominant in academic analysis and public debate about radical right parties (see Ignazi 2003, 29; Jäger 2016; Zaslove 2008). There are two related problems with this. One is that the focus on populism has sometimes had the effect of deflecting attention away from what lies at the very heart of the ideology of the radical right in Europe: an exclusionary ethno-cultural nationalism, also labelled nativism (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2005, 2007, 2017) or even racism. A second problem is that, somewhat paradoxically, the intensive use of the term populism as a catch-all phrase for everything these parties stand for has not allowed for a proper appreciation of the crucial but precise and limited role played by populism in these parties' broader political projects.

Key to our argument is that, in contrast to much journalistic and political, as well as some academic, discussions of populism, we should never talk about populism alone. The concept of populism is never enough to understand or evaluate a particular political project (be it right-wing or left-wing). We are of course not the first to make this point (see for example Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2017; Stavrakakis et al.

2017a). The thin ideology approach to populism, especially, revolves around the idea that populism is attached to other “thicker” ideologies such as nationalism, socialism or ecologism (Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods 2017; Mudde 2004), and that these thick ideologies need to be taken into account when normatively evaluating populist politics (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 2013). As we explain in more detail later, we do have a different take on how to understand the way populism relates to nationalism, socialism etc. in that we do not treat populism as an ideology (at all, not even a thin one) but as a political logic—a way of appealing to people and of structuring a political project—that can be used to further very different political projects, ideologies and interests.

Following Mudde (2007), we believe it is useful to talk about populist radical right parties rather than radical right populist parties, or simply populist parties for example. This is because it is important to highlight that PRR parties are a particular and historically specific manifestation of an older and more encompassing radical right tradition. The term shows that there were (and are) radical right parties and movements that were (and are) not populist, that PRR parties are first and foremost radical right parties, but also that populism is vital to our understanding of this particular variant of the radical right.

To understand what is populist about populist radical right politics, we need to treat populism as a specific dimension of contemporary radical right politics. We also need to ask how it relates to the other core components of the European radical right’s politics, in particular their nativism and their rejection of multiculturalism and Islam. Discourse theory’s relational approach to meaning allows for a systematic theorization and analysis of how populism and nativism are combined. For example, it draws attention to how the populist signifiers “the people” and “the elite” (shared by all populist politics) acquire a specific meaning in PRR rhetoric (in comparison to other populist politics) precisely through that articulation with nativism. In contrast to the thin ideology approach and the common understanding of populism in media and politics—where populism is seen as having (largely negative) ideological effects that cut across the political spectrum—we focus on the use of populism by the radical right. Moving away from an “ideational” understanding of populism implies a move away from thinking about populism as the ideological basis for why populists do what they do. Our approach is therefore also more normatively neutral about populism per se, and focuses normative evaluations on other, ideologically more central elements of radical right politics, especially nativism. To be clear, our focus in this chapter on the articulation of populism and nativism—on how populism and nativism are intricately combined—should not be taken to mean that only nativism matters or that the PRR’s populism is only relevant in relation to its nativism. The radical right’s populism also needs to be considered in relation to its authoritarianism (e.g. presenting authoritarian demands for the death penalty or for stronger law and order as the will of the ordinary people) and its conservatism (e.g. presenting resistance to feminist demands as the will of the ordinary people).

Understanding the specific role of populism in radical right politics necessitates a clear conceptual distinction between populism and nationalism (and nativism as a specific kind of ethno-cultural and exclusive nationalism). Too often, they are treated as synonyms (see Stavrakakis et al. 2017a). Of course, such a confusion or conflation can be understood to have a range of sources. It can emerge from the often frequent empirical manifestation of associations explicitly made between populism and nationalism (whether in its exclusionary or non-exclusionary forms) beyond the radical right. It also emerges from the fact that both nationalism and populism entail claims to represent a “people”. Arguments that “the people” in populism refers to ethnos rather than demos (e.g. Akkerman 2003, 151), to both ethnos and demos (e.g. Jansen 2011; Taguieff 1998, 15), that populism is inherently exclusionary (e.g. Jagers and

Walgrave 2007) or that populism is fundamentally conservative and revolves around nostalgic references to a “heartland” (Taggart 2000) are strongly related to the fact that European scholars, journalists and commentators have long based their definitions of populism on the populist radical right (see Stavrakakis et al. 2017a).

Assuming or implying that nativism is necessarily linked to populism hinders the latter’s application to other, non-nativist and non-exclusionary forms of populism. Even if most populisms have indeed been nationalist as well (be it an exclusionary or an inclusionary nationalism),² a clear understanding of any politics that is both nationalist and populist still relies on a clear conceptual distinction between the two. The key here is to clarify the different meanings of “the people” in populism and nationalism, and the different discursive structures in which “the people” acquires meaning. In contrast to populism’s vertical down/up distinction between the powerless people and an illegitimately powerful elite, nationalism revolves around the claim to represent the people-as-nation, envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition between the nation and its outgroups (De Cleen 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

To be clear, whilst the in/out distinction between the nation and its outsides and the link to a particular territory is crucial to any nationalism, nationalism is not necessarily exclusionary and nativist. There are very significant differences, for example, between Latin American left-wing anti-imperialist nationalisms that claim to speak for an ethnically diverse nation and the exclusionary nationalism of the radical right that limits its definition of the nation to an ethno-culturally defined nation.

The radical right’s nationalism is clearly exclusionary, and is combined with a concern with the defence of larger-scale territorially, racially, ethnically and/or culturally defined identities. These are discursively constructed through an in/out structure similar to nationalism, but on the scale of nations, continents, civilizations (cf. Huntington 1993, 1996) or cultures whose homogeneity is considered to be under threat. These identities thus became increasingly defined in cultural rather than biological terms. In Western Europe and, since the 2015 refugee crisis, also increasingly in Eastern Europe, this revolves most prominently around the defence of a cultural (rather than strictly religious) Christian (or even Judeo-Christian) European or Western “civilization” against Islam (see Brubaker 2017; Mondon and Winter 2017).

To ensure a clear distinction, we suggest it is best to understand the relationship between populism and nativism in populist radical right politics with reference to the notion of articulation. In discourse theory, with its focus on how meaning is produced through relational structures, the concept of articulation is of central importance. It refers to the practice of bringing together discursive elements in a particular way to construct a more or less original structure of meaning. Whilst any political practice draws upon, reproduces (and excludes) existing discursive elements, the space for agency lies in the selection of such elements. This is because articulations presuppose contingent relations of “no necessary correspondence” (Laclau 1990, 35) and this means that the process of articulation can radically change the meaning of whatever is being articulated (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105, 113–114).

Apart from highlighting the combinatory contingency of the radical right’s populism and nativism (see Taggart 2017, 252; Rydgren 2017), the notion of articulation urges us to ask the following questions: How does the articulation of populism and nativism shape the meaning of the central populist and nationalist signifiers? How do populism’s vertical down/up and nativism’s horizontal in/out axes become

intertwined? And, looking at the architecture of PRR politics, where are populism and nativism located respectively? Which one is most central to radical right discourse? Does the articulation of populism and nativism impact on each other to the same extent? Or does one overdetermine the other? (See De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; De Cleen 2017.)

It is only by paying attention to the specificity of this populism-nativism articulation that we can fully grasp the PRR's use of the signifier "the people". In some slogans and demands, "the people" only refers to the nation. An example is the VB's longtime rally cry "Eigen Volk Eerst" (Our Own People First), itself an adaptation of the FN's "Les Français d'Abord" (The French First) and used in the campaign for the 2018 elections by the Italian Lega in their slogan "Prima gli italiani!" (First the Italians!). But these parties also take advantage of the multilayered meaning of the notion of "the people" in their own language (das Volk, het volk, le peuple, the people) (see Canovan 2005). UKIP's call to a "People's Army" to defeat the European Union and the British political establishment plays on this double meaning. And when Marine Le Pen claimed to speak "Au nom du peuple" (In the name of the people) in the 2017 presidential election campaign, this "people" referred both to the nation and to the ordinary people. This combination is what gives this slogan its strength: it interpellates people as members of the (ethno-culturally defined) nation, as members of the ordinary people and—crucially—as ordinary members of the "true" French nation who are ignored and betrayed by the elite who, they argue, care more about foreigners and refugees than about the "true" French.

In such slogans, and across PRR politics, the definition of "the people-as-underdog" and "the elite", and the positive inflection of the former and negative inflection of the latter, strongly depend on nativist principles, and not the other way around. To understand who "the people" is, what their demands are, who "the elite" is and in what ways "the elite" "betrays the people", we need to turn to the radical right's nativism. The centrality of nativism to the radical right project and the more strategic nature of populism in PRR politics becomes clear if we consider removing one of them from the equation. Without populism, the radical right project would likely be less electorally successful, but the nativist radical right project for society would remain relatively untouched (for the case of the FN, see Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015; Mondon 2015). On the other hand, without nativism the radical right's societal project would lose its core principles. Most importantly for us here, without nativism, the populist interpellation of "the people" and dismissal of "the elite" would become largely emptied of its specific meaning and ideological purpose.

In radical right rhetoric, the populist signifiers "people" and "elite" acquire meaning mainly through its articulation with nativism. This becomes clear in the way people-as-underdog is seen as a sub-group of the ethno-culturally defined nation. When PRR parties claim to speak for the people-as-underdog, they only refer to (what they consider to be) members of the nation and exclude all others. Migrants and their descendants (including those who are national citizens), who in socioeconomic terms might be close to the "ordinary people" they claim to speak for, are excluded from the category of the people-as-underdog (see Caiani and della Porta 2011; Laclau 2005a, 196–198; Mondon and Winter 2018). For the radical right, the originally empty populist concept of "the people" operates within limits clearly demarcated by a particular form of highly exclusionary and ethnic nationalism. That is, these parties do not extend "the people" beyond the limits of an ethno-culturally defined people-as-nation (Kim 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017a). For example, when PEGIDA3 demonstrators chanted "Wir sind das Volk" ("We are the people")⁴ in marches against the "Islamization of the West", this "Volk" has both a populist and an ethno-nationalist meaning, but the former is overdetermined by the latter: the populist category is a sub-group of the nativist category. It is only the ordinary nationals that are demonstrating.

Moreover, across Western Europe, PRR parties interpellate ordinary people primarily (but not exclusively) as an underdog using nativist arguments. For PRR parties, “ordinary people” are the prime victims of immigration, multicultural society and Islam. While the socio-economic dimension is often mentioned, particularly in relation to a fantasized white working class (Mondon 2017; Mondon and Winter 2018), it is used mainly to reinforce and promote nativist claims.

More often than not, the socio-economic problems of the PRR’s “people” are blamed on an Other (migrants or refugees) defined through an exclusionary ethnic nationalism. Since the 2015 refugee crisis, for example, on its social media channels the VB has regularly presented people with choices along the lines of “helping our own poor OR importing poverty”, with the image of a sad-looking white man juxtaposed to the image of a group of male asylum seekers standing in front of the federal Foreigners Office. Facebook users can vote for “helping our own poor” by clicking the like button (thumb up) or “importing refugees” by clicking the wow-button (smiley with open mouth)—unsurprisingly, on 2 November 2017, the result was 2009 likes and 22 wows. Other examples are “affordable water OR more immigration” and “affordable elderly homes OR more immigration”. Similarly, the FN/RN has always made national “preference” or “priority” a pillar of its politics, more recently linking it more directly to the welfare state, arguing that it was only natural to help “nationals” before extending generosity to others. While it remains more openly neoliberal in its approach, UKIP also made use of similar tropes during elections and the Brexit referendum, stoking fear of the impact of Eastern European and Turkish immigration on jobs for the British and on welfare.

The populist signifier “the elite” also acquires much of its meaning in PRR rhetoric through the articulation with exclusionary nationalism. There is of course a vertical power/hierarchy/status dimension to populism and a number of oft-recurring arguments about backroom politics, abuse of power, socio-economic and cultural distance from ordinary people, and a lack of interest in ordinary people’s lives that are shared by different populists, but the exact reasons for considering the elite illegitimate largely depend on the ideology with which populism—understood as a political logic—is articulated. In PRR politics, the main argument for calling the elite illegitimate is a nativist one (not a socio-economic one, as in left-wing populisms). One of the central claims of these parties has been that the political elite has put immigrants and minorities first and privileged their rights over that of real “nationals”. It is thus mainly its position on nativist issues such as immigration that makes the elite a traitor of the people qua ethno-nation, qua underdog. This argument is not limited to the political elite, but is also used to criticize artists, intellectuals, journalists and academics (see De Cleen 2016b; De Cleen and Naerland 2016; Holt and Haller 2017). Again, the socio-economic dimension plays a role here, but it is mainly used in the service of nativist stances.

The articulation between populism and nationalism also plays an important role in PRR parties’ demands for national sovereignty. In the case of some sub-state-nationalist PRR parties, populism is used to dismiss the country’s elite who stand in the way of the independent nation-state. For example, the Flemish VB has a long history of combining populism and nativism in a criticism of the Francophone Belgian elite and the “Belgicist” Flemish elite that supports the Belgian state (see De Cleen 2016a). More often, however, populism is used to defend national sovereignty against European integration (the populism-nativism combo has been far more resonant in this context than in the context of separatism). The Brexit campaign (which was not limited to UKIP or even to the right), for example, revolved largely around the construction by the Leave camp of an opposition between an anti-nationalist EU elite that threatens ordinary Britons on the one hand, and a demand for national independence that represents the will of ordinary people and would further their interests on the other. Here, the populist dimension is largely used in the service

of nationalist demands for sovereignty and against the EU (itself closely articulated in many European countries with a nativist rejection of migration). “Ordinary people” are presented as the main victims of European integration (for example of the free movement of labour), and pushing back European integration is presented as being in the interests of ordinary people, as in the Leave camp’s insistence that leaving the EU would add millions of pounds to the NHS budget.

Simultaneously, the figure of the Brussels elite, totally out of touch with the lives of ordinary people in the member states, plays a crucial role. Apart from the financial cost they represent, EU politicians and public servants alike are criticized for being in it for the money, as illustrated by the slogan “Stop the Brussels gravy train” used by UKIP during the Brexit campaign (the metaphor was also used by journalists and other opponents of the EU). Therefore, the articulation of populism and nationalism in Europe takes on a different shape when in opposition to EU decision-making, because the nation is here constructed in its entirety as the underdog (for example in negotiations with the EU). The Brexit slogan “take back control” for example, appeals to the British people-as-nation as an underdog.

Populist-nationalist resistance to supranational politics can also be found on the left of course, most prominently in the resistance against neoliberal policies “imposed” by supra-national or foreign elites (in collaboration with national elites) and going against national sovereignty. On the left, populism and nationalism are combined most prominently in an attempt to resist neoliberal economic policies pushed “from above” (for example, by the EU) or by “the empire” (as in Latin American resistance to US-backed neoliberal policies). This is not to say that the nationalist dimension is merely used instrumentally by the left to defend its socio-economic positions, however; nationalism’s role goes well beyond that, also extending to the defence of national sovereignty and independence per se as well of the nation’s identity. Still, the latter is much more central to the right, where the antagonism is not at root one between opposing economic models but mainly revolves around the defence of the popular-national against multiculturalist and globalist policies imposed “from above” that threaten the identity, culture and economic interests of the nation. Even a party like the FN/RN, which has turned decisively away from neoliberal politics, continues to describe itself as pro-market.

Our focus on the articulation of populism and nativism in PRR politics has shown that nativism and populism play very different roles in PRR politics. Nativism is the ideological heart of the PRR, while populism is a political logic performed by the PRR first and foremost (but not exclusively) to legitimate exclusionary nationalist demands. It does so by presenting those nativist demands as expressions of what “the people” want and need, by discrediting those who stand in the way or threaten those nativist demands as an illegitimate and politically correct “elite” that attacks “the party of the people” or even “ordinary people” themselves. This articulation of populism and nativism has contributed to the reversal of the once relatively stable connection between the right and the (socio-economically defined) “elite” on the one hand and the left and “the people” on the other. This has been strongly connected to a broader shift from a politics that revolved mainly around economic redistribution to a post-material politics focused on identity (see Dyrberg 2003, 11; Yilmaz 2016), in which the PRR’s articulation of nativism and populism has played a central role. Populism has thus played and still plays a specific and secondary, but nonetheless major, role in Western European PRR politics. In the next—final—section we argue that to understand the full impact of this articulation and of the connection between the radical right and “the people”, we must look—beyond the PRR itself—at how the political mainstream has contributed to strengthening PRR parties’ claims that their nativism represents the interests and wishes of the ordinary people.

On the Performative Effects of the Signifier “Populism”

The previous section focused in large part on the strategic aspects of the use of populism as a way to formulate and legitimate the radical right’s demands, particularly nativist ones. That is only part of the picture, however, and its success and mainstreaming cannot be grasped by looking at the radical right alone. While the radical right adapted, so did the mainstream (Mondon 2013; Kallis 2013). As the media and politicians from governing parties criticized these parties, they nonetheless also increasingly embraced parts of the agenda set by the radical right and they placed concepts such as identity, immigration and Islam at the core of political discourse. As a result, the whole political landscape shifted, making previously unpalatable ideas acceptable and even unavoidable for governments and the media alike.

Some attention has already been given to the way mainstream parties have reacted to the PRR, with a focus mainly on how other parties have altered their programmes in response to the PRR (e.g. Bale et al. 2010; van Heerden et al. 2013; Zaslove 2004). Building on our discourse-theoretical approach, we want to draw attention to one particular aspect of mainstream responses to the PRR that has received little attention so far: the role played by the signifier “populism” itself in the process of mainstreaming the radical right and some of its stances. The rise and impact of PRR politics, we argue, cannot be grasped in isolation from how media, mainstream politics and academia have increasingly approached these parties from the perspective of populism, and from the meaning they attribute to the signifier populism (see Oudenampsen 2012).

We want to highlight the potential impact of particular discourses about populism, as distinct from the impact of particular populist politics (see Stavrakakis 2017a, 2017b), in Western Europe. In this section, we focus on the central role played by the signifier “populism” in journalists’, politicians’ and academics’ reaction to the rise of the PRR. In particular, we argue that their (mis)characterization of the radical right as simply or predominantly populist (rather than treating populism as one element of their politics) produces two seemingly contradictory effects—of both delegitimation and legitimation—whose highly intertwined character actually serves to bolster their position.

The signifier “populism” has by and large carried negative connotations, as the media, political actors and academics have attributed a range of related negative characteristics to it. The term has been used to criticize the purported opportunism and demagoguery of more or less radical contenders on the left as well as the right. This denunciation of opportunism is part of a broader view of populism as a questionable form of politics. Populist politics is criticized for its emotional (as opposed to rational), simplistic (as opposed to complex), antagonistic (as opposed to reasonable and consensus-oriented) and anti-intellectual message and style that is aimed at the heart and guts of the people (rather than their brains) (see Mudde 2004, 542; Taguieff 1998, 7). Following from this, it is common to read that populists, left and right, are a danger to democracy understood as liberal democracy. A more nuanced and refined version of this argument that populism threatens (liberal) democracy (and particularly pluralism) can also be found in academic assessments of populism that build on the idea that populism is a thin ideology that revolves around a belief in a “pure” and “homogeneous” people on the one hand, and a “corrupt” elite on the other hand, with populists claiming to represent the former (e.g. Abts and Rummens 2007; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 2013; Müller 2016). Specifically, in the context of the radical right, and strongly related to the characteristics of populism already mentioned, “populism” has also become synonymous with racism, xenophobia and ultra-nationalism (see the previous section).

This derogatory use of the label “populism”, and especially the focus on populism to the detriment of other dimensions of politics, has serious analytical limitations, but also has problematic normative consequences. The image that is produced is one of populism as an inherently dangerous thing, where left- and right-wing populist politics are seen as two sides of the same coin, presenting a similar threat to democracy. Not only does this delegitimize left-wing populist politics in the eyes of many, through association with the radical right, but it makes criticism of right-wing populism less severe. Indeed, in the context of the radical right specifically, a focus on populism rather than on nativism (and authoritarianism or even racism) has meant a shift in our attention away from their anti-democratic and reactionary ideological beliefs towards their (apparently) far less normatively problematic ultra-democratic populism (see Mondon 2013, 2015). The focus on populism makes their anti-elitism and critique of mainstream politics key, rather than their radical nativism and anti-immigrant attitudes (see Rydgren 2017). This already indicates that “populist” is not only a much weaker criticism than, say, “nativist”, “racist” or “xenophobe”, but also that approaching the radical right primarily through the prism of populism has also in fact had the perverse effect of legitimizing both radical right parties and radical right ideas.

From early on, the growing electoral success of the PRR was often interpreted by the mainstream as a sign of the “gap” between “the forgotten people” and “the political elite” (Canovan 1999). Mudde (2004, 562) remarked that “[i]n most countries, these debates started among the political elites, without any indication that the masses were much concerned about them”. Whilst we should of course also take into account the structural disconnections between mainstream parties and parts of the citizenry, this statement does raise the important question of whether the populism-focused reading of the radical right’s success did not precede or at least strengthen the PRR’s systematic adoption of actual populist strategies. This is a question that has received little or no attention so far (but see Collovald (2004) on the dangers of the misuses of populism in the French context; and Jäger (2016) about the “looping effect” of Taguieff’s (1984) approach to the FN as “national-populist” on the FN’s adoption of populist strategies).

It is also crucial to ask whether debates about the PRR as the result of a gap between “people” and “elite” in our democracies have not contributed to the delegitimation of mainstream politics as unable to connect to “the people” and to the legitimation of radical right parties and ideas as “popular”. The simplistic link created between radical right parties and populism has strengthened the PRR’s claim that they stand as the only alternative to the status quo, something extremely powerful in times of deep political distrust. This in turn shifts the frame within which PRR parties are discussed in the public arena from the evils associated traditionally with the radical right (racism, fascism, authoritarianism etc.) to something less threatening, even embodying some form of a democratic demand. While much of the mainstream discourse stands clearly in opposition to these parties, their misuse of populism inadvertently confirms the PRR’s claim that they are indeed “the representative of the people”, “the voice of the silent majority” (Mondon 2013, 2017).

It is thus no surprise that, as mainstream parties and the media have increasingly focused on the radical right as a symptom of a disconnection between people and elite, their ideas have been allowed to slip into the public realm. Already in 1984, French Socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius declared that “the FN [was] asking the right questions, but offering the wrong answers”. Such statements from mainstream politicians about the radical right have become increasingly common across Western Europe and are symptomatic of a process whereby radical right ideas find their way into the political mainstream through the belief that these “issues” are what “really” concern “the people” (but that the radical right’s solutions

are “too radical”). This was particularly clear during the EU referendum campaign in the UK, where immigration was posited as a prime concern following UKIP’s lead.

The use of the signifier “populism” has stimulated the acceptance and reproduction of the PRR’s articulation of populism and nativism in the political mainstream, especially through the acceptance across the political spectrum of the association of “the people” with resistance to migration and ethno-cultural diversity. In attempting to win back “the people” qua voters, mainstream politicians adopted the right-wing and especially nativist positions they had themselves helped construct as “popular”. The flipside was of course a declining belief that other themes—pertaining especially to the economic left-right cleavage—still appealed to “the people”, even in a context of the strong performance by some left-wing alternatives such as La France Insoumise’s in the 2017 presidential elections in France.

This shows how conceptual discussions about what populism actually is do have profound real-life political effects, in a looping way. “Populism” has tended to be understood as a way of appealing to “what the people want”, and the success of populist parties has been interpreted as the outcome of the opinions and preferences of “the people”. Oudenampsen (2012, 2013) has argued that the absence of a constructivist perspective in approaching populism has led to seeing the electoral successes of populist parties as simply a result of what people want, whilst ignoring the agency of PRR parties (and the reactions to PRR parties, we might add) in discursively constructing a particular understanding of the “people” (and of their political demands). In other words: despite, or indeed because, populism is used as a negative term to criticize demagoguery or “saying what the people want to hear”, it has too often been taken for granted that the PRR does actually represent “the people’s demands” and that their politics do actually mirror what “the people” want. Instead, we argue that we should consider the role played by populist political actors and their opponents in constructing (and reproducing) a certain definition of “the people” and a certain idea of what constitutes “popular demands”.

Conclusion: An Agenda for Critical Research on Populism as Strategy and Signifier

In a context of sustained hype about populism in politics, the media and academia, particularly in Western Europe, we need to consider the impact of that very hype on party politics, the looping effect mentioned earlier, and whether at times the hype does not conceal more than it reveals. In recent years, we have seen increased attention being paid to the ideological uses of the notion of “populism” in anti-populist discourses (e.g. Katsambekis 2016; Stavrakakis 2017a, 2017b; Stavrakakis et al. 2017b). More broadly speaking, especially after yet another populist hype in the wake of the Trump election and Brexit, there is increasing concern about the exaggeration of the populist threat and the lack of attention paid to the much bigger threats to (liberal) democracy posed by radical right parties’ nativism and authoritarianism (and the radical right politics increasingly adopted by mainstream parties) (e.g. Akkerman 2017; Mondon 2017; Mondon and Winter 2018; Mudde 2017a, 2017b; Rydgren 2017).

We argue that the first step is to make a clear distinction between the populist logic and the different ideological projects within which populism is deployed. Yet this is not enough. We have come a long way in fine-tuning the concept of populism, but there is still much work left to do as far as the study of the nature and effects of the combination of populism with nativism and other ideologies goes. We have argued in this chapter that there are analytical benefits to a discourse-theoretical approach to populism in studying the way populism and nativism are combined. Such an approach, with its focus on articulation, allows for a more systematic analysis of the intricate connections between populism and nativism in PRR politics in Western Europe. But the focus on the articulation of populism and nationalism could also

encourage further analyses of other kinds of populist politics (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). For example, how do appeals to national sovereignty, national pride and perhaps even national identity intersect with populist appeals to the people-as-underdog in left-wing populist politics in Europe such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and La France Insoumise in France?

Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, the discourse-theoretical focus on how structures of meaning are constructed through processes of articulation is in some ways closer to Freeden's (1994) "morphological" approach to ideology than works drawing on a "thin ideology" definition of populism. The latter approach, whilst deriving its name from a concept originally coined by Freeden himself, has mainly been used in (comparative) mainstream political science research that has not always paid much attention to the intricacies of how populism is discursively combined with other elements, a concern central to Freeden's work on ideology (see also Freeden 2017 for a critical assessment of the idea of populism as a thin ideology).

A discourse-theoretical approach also draws more systematic attention to the performative effects of how we speak about populism. In this chapter, we have emphasized the importance of drawing a distinction between the strategic use of the populist logic and populism as a signifier. This distinction allows us to better bring into focus the analytical and normative questions we need to ask about populist politics, but also about the reactions to them, and the role played by academics in legitimizing, delegitimizing and hyping populism.

Ideological positions towards different kinds of populist politics on the left and the right, as Stavrakakis has suggested (2017a, 2017b), are one crucial element in understanding how academics have used the concept of populism. However, we also need to look beyond ideology if we want to understand the nature and effects of how academics (but also journalists, politicians and other kinds of intellectuals) speak about populism. The notion of a "hype" about populism (Glynos and Mondon 2016), for example, opens up questions about how and why the signifier populism became so omnipresent, not only because of ideologically motivated attacks on "populist" politics from mainstream political actors, journalists and academics, but also, perhaps, because of logics prevailing in the political-economic, journalistic and academic field and the ways they interact (see De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon 2018; Glynos and Mondon 2016)

Looking past ideology might also produce insights into how, beyond strong disagreements over the nature and normative evaluation of populism, discourses about populism have largely converged on the centrality of populism in our understanding of the current political moment (an argument that extends back to long before the "current" moment). As our analysis of discourses about the PRR in Western Europe has shown, anti-populist discourses can in fact contribute to legitimizing populist and radical right politics. But we also need to consider how, in defending certain forms of populist politics, we might also be following the (mainly anti-populist) agenda and terms of debate (with "populism" as the central signifier) set by journalists, politicians and funding bodies. That is, beyond ideological disagreements, we need to look critically at the nature of discourses about populism and their effects. What are we not seeing because of our focus on populism? Might we be sometimes caught up in what Péter Csizs (2016) has called (paralleling financial speculation bubbles) a "neo-popular speculative 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 strengthening "populism" as a dominant interpretive

framework? What are the effects of experts' and politicians' discourses about populism on citizens' political positions towards populist parties and towards political and other elites? How does expert discourse about populism contribute to the construction of populist "public opinion"? We also need to ask how and why populism became such an omnipresent term. Why is it that in our current constellation, populist politics and discourses about populism abound—and how do these two realities relate to each other, perhaps in less-straightforward (mirroring or ideological) ways than we might assume? These are important questions to which we do not have straight answers.

With this chapter, centred on Western Europe, we hope to have indicated some further avenues for research about populist politics and about populism as signifier, and some indications as to how such research could be conducted in a manner that takes into account the intricacies of populist politics, the dynamics of discourses about populism, and the connections between populist politics and discourses about populism.

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1 The Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) was renamed Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) after a legal conviction for racism in 2004 that endangered the Vlaams Blok's financing by the Belgian state.

2 Consider the classical, more capacious populisms of mid-century Latin America, for example.

3 *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* is a German radical right movement founded in Dresden in 2014, particularly visible during the height of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. PEGIDA also has smaller and far less successful chapters in a number of other Western European countries, including Belgium and France.

4 This slogan refers to the slogan used during demonstrations against the communist state in East Germany in the late 1980s. There too, 'Volk' had both a nationalist (the German people as a unified people) and a populist (the people as opposed to the communist state) meaning. 'Das Volk' was not an ethnically exclusive anti-migrant notion in this original context, however.