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On the Ambiguities of Laclauian Populist Leadership

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1 | Introduction

Looking at the political developments of the past few decades, it is interesting to observe two seemingly opposite types of political movements. On the one hand, we have those that are often referred to as leaderless or horizontal political movements, such as Zapatistas in Mexico and Occupy Wall Street in the United States. On the other hand, there are populist movements with a clear leader, for instance, Hungary's Viktor Orbán or Alexis Tsipras in Greece. It appears that the former pushes toward greater autonomy and agency for the individuals, whereas the latter moves toward further concentration of power in the leader. But it also seems that the latter has enjoyed greater success in terms of seizing power and materializing their political projects. Political theorists have weighed in on this conjuncture, each presenting arguments in favor of movements with or without a clear leader figure (Hardt and Negri 2004; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014; Mouffe 2018, 2022).

In such academic debates, populist leadership has been the focal point of arguments that denounce populism as normatively unfavorable. These arguments question the compatibility between liberal democratic regimes and populist movements and find the vertical relationship established between the populist leader and the mobilized citizens problematic. For instance, drawing on Western and Latin American cases, Jan Werner Müller argues that populist leaders make an anti-pluralist claim that “they and they alone represent the people,” which in turn renders their opposition as well as dissenting citizens as outcasts that do not need to be treated as equal citizens (Müller 2016: 101). In a similar vein, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens maintain that populism is “proto-totalitarian,” for it shares with totalitarianism “the fictitious image of the people-as-one” that is ultimately represented by the populist leader (Abts and Rummens 2007: 414). Furthermore, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri claim that populism features “constant lip service to the power of the people

but ultimate control and decision-making by a small clique of politicians” (2017: 23), suggesting that populist movements cannot offer anything more than a façade of democracy.

It is then no wonder that Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism—which has been a central reference point of populism theory in general as well as its left-populist strategic adaptation—has been criticized for the centrality that the leader occupies in the framework. Critics have pointed out that Laclau's formulation harbors authoritarianism or a cult of personality and is therefore questionable as a democratic force (Arato 2013; Arditi 2022; Ballacci 2017; De la Torre 2013, 2019; Peruzzotti 2019). Such concerns are also directed at Chantal Mouffe's proposed counteroffensive to right-wing populism which is based on Laclau's understanding of populism, leading some scholars to dismiss the left-populist strategy to be inappropriate for our current political situation (Cohen 2019; Fassin 2019). Furthermore, empirical examples, such as the case of Podemos, which featured a gradual concentration of power in the hands of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, seem to confirm that this uneasiness expressed by critics is not merely theoretical or speculative (Kioupkiolis 2016; Mazzolini and Borriello 2021; de Nadal 2021; Rendueles and Sola 2018).

These circumstances lead us to a set of questions. Is Laclau's theory of populist leadership indeed authoritarian? If not, why has his theory solicited these comments? And how could these comments be addressed from a Laclauian perspective, and what does such an exercise bring to the fore? In the face of these critiques and the questions that they raise, this article explores Laclau's theorizing of populist leadership in an immanent manner. That is, it seeks to (1) clarify the role played by the populist leader in his theory as well as their relationship with those being led and (2) identify the weaknesses of his account and the theoretical stumbling blocks that must be overcome in rectifying them. This approach would not only allow us to

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fathom the elements within Laclau's writings that are causing concern among his critics, but more importantly, would provide us with a starting point to rework these arguments in the future. In other words, by untangling his intricate theory of populist leadership, we will be able to move beyond the puzzling features of his arguments at the surface level and arrive at the true puzzle of his work. This is a crucial step to be taken before we seek to address these issues. Much like how a doctor diagnoses before considering possible treatments, we must make ourselves as clear as possible on the issues that haunt the theory before we attempt to rework it. Therefore, even though the current study does not solve any of the theoretical issues that it detects, this should not take away from its importance and necessity.

In this paper, I argue that Laclau's argument concerning populist leadership is theoretically consistent but contains ambiguities that ultimately lead to strategic issues. I show the salience of his arguments by working through his book, *On Populist Reason*, distilling his basic thesis and untangling some of the confusing claims he makes in his presentation. Thus, after offering an overview of Laclau's theory of populism, which would serve as the foundation for our ensuing discussion, I will unpack the way in which he conceptualized populist leadership as a necessary ingredient of collective subject formation that could take various forms by tracing his reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*. I will then turn to two confusing moments in his book, namely, his turn to Jacques Lacan and the case study of Peronism. In both instances, I present how his arguments made in connection with these topics create theoretical tensions with his arguments developed through his engagement with Freud, but also the way in which these apparent contradictions do not necessarily undermine his theory. Although this will lead us to maintain that Laclau's arguments are theoretically consistent, I contend that the ambiguities surrounding his account of populist leadership do lead to a strategic issue concerning the desirability of a populist mobilization. In particular, I suggest that Laclau's theoretical framework, at its current degree of development, is a questionable basis to support a left-populist strategy for progressive forces.

2 | What Is Laclauian Populism?

One's definition of populism necessarily influences the way one conceptualizes populist leadership. For this reason, one must start by clearly stating how they understand populism. In our immanent approach to Laclau, this means that we ought to begin by delineating the contours of Laclauian populism. Yet this is no simple task because one could rightfully say that populism has always been a central concern for Laclau, even when he was not explicitly addressing it. Given the richness of his oeuvre and the limited amount of space, we shall take his book-length study on the topic, *On Populist Reason*, as the guiding thread, supplementing it with concepts and presuppositions developed in other writings when necessary.

Let us begin with Laclau's assertion that populism is a political logic. "[B]y 'populism'", he writes, "we do not understand a *type* of movement—identifiable with either a special base or a particular

ideological orientation—but a *political logic*" (Laclau 2005a: 117, original emphasis). By logic, Laclau is referring to "the type of relations between entities" that enable "the actual operation of [a particular] system of rules" (Laclau 2000: 283). Understood in these terms, political logics in particular focuses on the institution, contestation, and transformation of this set of rules that govern the status quo, which Laclau refers to as the *grammar* of a practice (Laclau 2005a: 117; Glynos and Howarth 2007: 141–145). In other words, political logics are used to capture how rules and norms—the grammar—are created, challenged, defended, and altered. To illustrate, let us briefly consider the practice of voting in the United Kingdom. Voting in the United Kingdom currently has a distinct set of norms, including universal suffrage. These could be said to be the grammar of UK voting. Now, as political logics refer to entities that establish, contest, and modify the grammar of a practice, the political logics of voting could refer to, among other things, the historical struggles over voting rights by those such as the Chartists and suffragettes who, through their contestations, changed the rules of voting by successfully forcing the state to extend voting rights.

Populism is a political logic precisely because it produces a collective subject that is required to challenge the current set of rules and norms. Here it is important to note Laclau's commitment to anti-essentialism. Anti-essentialism in this context refers to the view that collective subjects do not have a fixed identity that is a priori determined, but rather acquire a contingent and non-fixed identity through social interactions. From this perspective, the formulation of the collective subject through populism should not be confused with the orthodox Marxist idea of a working class or a mere interest-based alliance. It differs from Marxism because Laclau denies the deterministic role played by the economy in the formulation of the working class as a collective subject (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). Rather, the working class—or any other collective subjectivity for that matter—is constituted strictly through political practices. This process is dissimilar to alliances that are formed based on shared interests—for instance when legislative bills are passed with bipartisan support—because Laclau believes that the identities of the particularities that come together must be altered by the process itself. In this sense, the formation of collective subjects is achieved through articulations, which are defined as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau and Mouffe 2014: 91). In sum, populism is a political logic that produces collective subjects through articulatory practices.

But how exactly does populism—understood as a process of constituting a collective subject—unfold? Given his interest in the formation of collective subjects, Laclau states that we must begin with a smaller unit of analysis, which he refers to as demands (Laclau 2005a: 73). Demands could be understood as any kind of dissatisfaction, which is directed toward the authority—such as the state or local government—to be resolved. In this sense, unemployment, damaged highways, and lack of accessible healthcare are all demands. Now, some of these demands could be met by the authorities: they could offer a reskilling scheme for the unemployed or fix the highways. However, Laclau claims that when the authorities do not respond to such demands,

people can begin to find other members of the community with similarly unsatisfied demands that are different in content (Laclau 2005a: 73). This accumulation of unsatisfied demands and the resemblance between them based on their unsatisfied status could be seen as the prerequisite for populism to take place.

When these conditions are met, they make possible two further intertwined developments that give a rudimentary consistency to the populist collective subject. First, there is the establishment of an equivalential chain (Laclau 2005a: 77–83). This can be understood as the forging of a relationship based on the shared formal status of each demand: their dissatisfaction. It is important to stress that the unsatisfied status is indeed the only thing that is shared among the demands that enter the chain of equivalence. All demands are heterogeneous to each other: that is, they do not have any necessary connection when it comes to their content. As W. E. B. Du Bois was well aware, there is no reason to presume that demands for racial parity would converge with those for fair working conditions, as it often does in contemporary progressivism (Du Bois 1995). Furthermore, the chain of equivalence does not dissolve difference. It only creates a fleeting relationship between heterogeneous demands. Second, an antagonistic separation is erected between this emerging collective subject and those in power (Laclau 2005a: 83–93). This antagonism arises due to the fact that demands are addressed to a certain other, for example, an authority. Their failure to meet these demands leads to a chasm between those who are unsatisfied—who are now in an equivalential relationship with each other—and those who keep them unsatisfied. Put differently, from the perspective of the unsatisfied, those who are barring the unsatisfied from satisfaction emerge as an enemy, whose overcoming would supposedly open the path toward satisfaction (Laclau and Mouffe 2014: 108–113; Žižek 2006: 555–557). This could be observed in slogans such as “Drain the Swamp” or “Que se vayan todos [They must all go],” which identify a certain group as responsible for their dissatisfaction and demand their removal. In this way, populism as a political logic produces an ensemble of demands that is in an antagonistic relationship with those in power.

Now, one might wonder whether we could say a collective subject only needs to form an equivalential chain based on their dissatisfaction and possess a shared antagonism toward some external other. Wouldn't that merely be an agglomeration of dissenters who are disappointed and furious with the authorities but incapable of political action, similar to what Hannah Arendt called a mob (Arendt 1976; Canovan 2002)? Although we do not know whether Laclau would have agreed with this Arendtian depiction of mobs, he certainly thought that these two developments were insufficient for a collective political subject to emerge. For him, there is a further development that must take place: “the unification of these various demands—whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of vague solidarity—into a stable system of signification” (Laclau 2005a: 74). In other words, without the forging of a collective identity, which works as an adhesive to secure the precarious connection initially established, there cannot be a collective subject. This is where the populist leader comes into the picture, to which we turn now.

3 | Laclau's Reading of Freud

In *On Populist Reason*, the argument concerning populist leadership and its function in the formation of a collective identity is initially developed through an extensive critical engagement with 19th-century crowd psychology. However, the key text for him is Freud's (2004) *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, which is the watershed that separates crowd psychology and his theory of populism. However, this decision by Laclau already makes us wonder if his critics are right to suggest that his concept of populist leadership tends toward authoritarianism. For, as Adorno notes, *Massenpsychologie* could be read as a text that describes “[t]he mechanisms of authoritarian identification” (1965: 419). Acknowledging the possibility of such a reading of *Massenpsychologie* leads us to the central question of this section: how does Laclau formulate the possibility of a non-authoritarian form of leadership while retaining Freud's penetrating insight on the ties that hold a group together?

In *Massenpsychologie*, Freud attempts to work out the nature of the social ties that sustain groups with leaders, such as the army and the church. Although we lack the space to fully portray this dense piece of work, we can get a rudimentary sense of Freud's contribution to the study of groups by focusing on two aspects that distinguish his reflections from those of 19th-century crowd theorists such as Gustave Le Bon. First, Freud's theorizing focused on the links that sustain a group, which for him were of a libidinal nature. In reading Le Bon's account of crowds, Freud remarks that Le Bon neglects the fact that “if the individuals in the mass are bound together to form an entity, there must presumably be something binding them together” (Freud 2004: 21). This binding force, for Freud, naturally is libido or Eros: “But to what force could such an achievement be better ascribed to than to Eros, which holds the whole world together?” (Freud 2004: 43). Second, Freud gave greater weight to the leader of the mass as a key to understanding the nature of masses (Freud 2004: 27). According to him, Le Bon's understanding of leaders is more or less derived from an assumption that a group of humans, as well as animals, have an instinctive drive to subject themselves to authority (Freud 2004: 27). This in turn renders Le Bon's account unable to detail the precise role that these leaders play in maintaining the group. Thus, Freud takes the army and the church—two groups with a clear sense of leadership—as the guiding examples in his study. Combining these two points, we could say that Freud's main goal in *Massenpsychologie* was to fathom the nature of the libidinal ties that keep the group together as well as the place of leaders in this web of libidinal ties.

Laclau's thoughts on populist leadership share with Freud the idea that the leader plays an indispensable role in forging the social ties that hold the group together. As we saw at the end of the previous section, Laclau conceived it necessary for a group to have some kind of link that gives them a stronger attachment than mere solidarity based on shared dissatisfaction. At this point, Laclau turns to Freud's account of the libidinal ties that structure the group. Freud observes two kinds of libidinal ties that structure a group (Freud 2004: 47). On the one hand, we have those that are established between the leader and each individual that constitute the group. In simple terms, this relationship could be conceived as one in which the follower idealizes the leader. On the

other hand, we have those who are forged among the followers. This process could be conceived as one in which those being led identify with each other. The basis of this identification, Freud speculates, is to be found “in the manner of their attachment to the leader” (2004: 60). Bringing together these two types of libidinal ties within a group, we can say that for Freud as well as Laclau, a group is held together by the idealization of the leader and the identifications based on this common idealization of the leader.

At this point, Laclau acknowledges that strictly following Freud’s formula would result in the populist leader necessarily becoming a narcissistic and authoritarian ruler since the leader is placed in a strictly hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis the led as a result of their idealization (Laclau 2005a: 56; Hook 2018: 126–129). To avoid this, he reinterprets Freud’s arguments by focusing on the notion of organization. The notion of organization, which Freud borrowed from William McDougall and reappropriated to fit his own framework, appears rather sporadically in *Massenpsychologie*. McDougall distinguished organized masses from mob-like masses that were often studied by crowd theorists. Organized masses are marked by their temporal and structural stability, which in turn meant that they did not feature the stereotypical debasement of individual intellect and morality that was one of the key features that defined mob-like masses. Freud employs this distinction and argues that individuals lose their intellectual and moral characteristics when they join an unorganized mass (Freud 2004: 37). Following this, he proclaims that “[t]he task consists in conferring upon the mass the very qualities that once characterized the individual and that, so far as the individual is concerned, formation of the mass effaced” (Freud 2004: 37). Organization, then, is a means to make the members of the group, as well as the group as a whole, recover the qualities that were once possessed by individuals prior to participating in the group. Utilizing this notion of organization, Laclau posits that the hierarchical form of leadership and organization are two impossible ends of a spectrum on which various potential forms of leadership could be located: “the fully organized group and the *purely* narcissistic leader are simply the *reductio ad absurdum*—that is, impossible—extremes of a continuum” (Laclau 2005a: 58, original emphasis). In other words, any group is constituted to some extent through an authoritarian identification with the leader, and to some degree through organization; and the balance between these two modes of group constitution results in some groups being more vertical and authoritarian, and others more horizontal and democratic.

Laclau attempts to substantiate his rereading of Freud’s arguments by returning to Freud’s text and pointing out a passage in which Freud, perhaps unintentionally, preannounces the plausibility of his interpretation. Freud writes:

Often the leader need only possess the typical properties of such individuals in a particularly pure and well-defined form and give an impression of greater strength and libidinal freedom; the need for a powerful head will then do the rest, investing the leader with the superior might to which he would perhaps not normally be entitled. (Freud 2004: 84–85)

For Laclau, this portion of Freud’s argument is different from the previous authoritarian account of leaders because it presents an alternative relationship between the leader and the led. The leader in this instance “possess[es] the typical properties” of those being led “in a particularly pure and well-defined form.” This leads Laclau to three crucial insights that uncover the theoretical—but not empirical—possibility of a non-authoritarian form of leadership within Freud’s framework (Laclau 2005a: 59). Firstly, those who are led are not simply united based on their love for the leader. Instead, they also share some common features that are particularly evident in the leader. Secondly, since the leader and the led share these common features, they are no longer in a simple relationship of idealization but one that is also marked by identification. Finally, since the leader is supposed to bear these common features, they cannot be purely despotic, for failure to demonstrate these common qualities would undermine the leader’s authority that emanates from the very fact that they possess these common qualities. At this point, it is crucial to note that these three consequences could all be connected to the notion of organization that Laclau perceived as the opposite of purely authoritarian identifications with the leader. For this non-authoritarian form of leadership to be possible, there is a logical necessity that each individual must not be reduced to a subject whose only feature is the love for their idealized leader, since this is the hallmark of strictly authoritarian leadership. Instead, they must possess some other quality that becomes the shared quality between the leader and the led. Thus, it is precisely through the process of organization, which retains and recovers the qualities that were possessed before forming a group, that everyone being led does not simply idealize the leader.

Now that we have a sense of the theoretical maneuvers that Laclau makes with respect to *Massenpsychologie*, we are in the position to triangulate—since he never explicitly substantiated—what he means by authoritarian and democratic forms of leadership. One way to understand it is through vertical identifications qua idealizations and horizontal identifications. Thus, the group would experience authoritarian leadership when it is predominantly sustained by vertical identifications and democratic leadership when horizontal identifications proliferate. While this is undoubtedly correct, focusing on the vector of identifications does not get us far, as it fails to highlight the qualitative difference that exists between these two modes of identifications. Following Thomàs Zicman de Barros, we can say that vertical identifications enter a fantasmatic relationship with the leader, whereas in horizontal identifications, there is a sublimated one instead (Zicman de Barros 2022). The difference between the two is aptly captured by Yannis Stavrakakis when he writes that “[s]ublimation recognizes lack and the centrality of the real instead of attempting its ‘impossible’ elimination as identification with an ideal does” (Stavrakakis 1999: 132). In short, vertical identification retains a belief in fullness, contrary to horizontal identification, which is aware of the lack that prevents fullness.

This leads us to another way to characterize the spectrum that spans from authoritarian to democratic leadership, or from the purely narcissistic leader to full organization: we can say that it is organized around the degree of accountability that could be expected from the leader. The possibility of such an interpretation is most evident in the third consequence that Laclau identifies

with Freud's alternative account concerning leaders, in which they share some qualities with their followers. To reiterate, Laclau argues that the fact that the leader is accepted as the leader based on shared qualities means that the leader would have to continue to present these qualities in order to maintain their authority. Following this, we can say that when the followers have a long list of shared qualities, the leader has less space to operate freely without regard to what their followers think and want.¹ In these cases, the people are in a more democratic relationship because they have greater influence over the leader and are able to hold them accountable by having the option to withdraw their support once they conceive their leader to be moving away from the shared qualities, at least in an abstract sense, for it is certainly possible for leaders to have certain protections, much like how in most democracies the general public cannot legally remove the head of the state once they assume office. Furthermore, these followers are aware that the leader may not be a full incarnation of their shared qualities, since such a belief would eliminate the possibility of revoking their support. If so, the flip side, that is, those cases in which the leader exercises power almost unbound by their followers, could be considered to be instances of authoritarian leadership. This relationship is authoritarian precisely because the leader enjoys their status as the authority based on the very fact that they are loved by their followers as the guarantor of fullness, meaning that there is no room for contestation with regard to the content of the leader's decisions. We can think about how certain political figures seem to enjoy nearly unlimited support from their followers, who are more than ready to deny any unfavorable press coverage as fake news: "The more they try to attack him, the more we love him" (Catanese 2016).

To summarize this section, Laclau reconceptualizes Freud's model of leadership through a rigorous reexamination of his text in order to extrapolate the possibility of non-authoritarian forms of leadership that nonetheless function as the converging point of identifications that structure and sustain a group. This was done by giving greater theoretical weight to the concept of organization, which was already contained in Freud's writings. Through his engagement with Freud, Laclau arrives at an understanding of populist leadership (1) that functions as a source of unity that keeps the group together and (2) that could take authoritarian or non-authoritarian forms depending on the context, or more precisely, the balance between idealization and identification that operate in the group.

4 | Laclau's "Return to Freud"

The previous section delineated Laclau's engagement with Freud's *Massenpsychologie*. Interestingly, despite taking Freud as his springboard, Laclau notes that his book "should not be conceived as a 'Freudian' venture" (Laclau 2005a: 63–64). However, this does not mean that Freud is abandoned once and for all. In fact, one can observe that he makes a "return to Freud" in a crucial moment in his subsequent argument, namely, when he discusses the Lacan-inspired notion of "name of the leader" as a nodal point that produces and sustains unity. Here, Laclau announces his agreement with Freud that "the symbolic unification of the group around an *individuality* ... is inherent to

the formation of a 'people'" (Laclau 2005a:100, emphasis added). But doesn't this statement invoke a certain regression from his reading of *Massenpsychologie*? Put simply, it seems that the possibility of democratic leadership that he previously developed is cast aside and the narcissistic and authoritarian leader regains its centrality, albeit now emptied into a name. How can this apparent shift be grasped?

Laclau's "return to Freud" occurs right after he mentions the concept of the "name of the leader" (Laclau 2005a: 100), which has a resemblance to the Lacanian concept, Name-of-the-Father. In the Lacanian tradition, Name-of-the-Father refers to "the signifier representing authority and order," which imposes the framework in which one experiences reality (Stavrakakis 2007: 174). This concept is closely related to another Lacanian concept, the *point de capiton*, which is "the word to which 'things' themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity" (Žižek 2008: 105). The *point de capiton* has been crucial to Laclau's theoretical framework, for it allows him to conceptualize how identities are partially fixed despite their ultimate unfixity (Laclau and Mouffe 2014: 99). Put simply, one acquires an identity by being connected to a signifier that acts as the *point de capiton*, but this connection is only contingent and non-necessary, and therefore could be dissolved. However, what is important for our discussion is not just the conceptual point that Laclau draws from Lacan, but also the way in which Lacan reworked the classical Oedipal structure. As Bruce Fink notes, Lacan's shift toward Name-of-the-Father makes evident that the function played by the father in the Oedipus complex is "not inescapably tied to either biological or de facto fathers" (Fink 1995: 56). In a similar manner, "name of the leader" suggests that the function attributed by Laclau to the concept need not be fulfilled by an actual leader (see Nunes 2021: 247–256).

But what exactly is the function played by the structural locus referred to as the name of the leader? To understand this, we must trace the sequence in which "the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader" (Laclau 2005a: 100). For Laclau, the movement from equivalential logic to singularity denotes the process in which the emerging collective subject moves beyond the initial vague sense of solidarity and gains a common identity that is represented by one of the demands. To illustrate this process, let us consider a hypothetical case in which there are three unsatisfied demands within a city that concern unemployment, soaring utility bills, and high crime rates. As we have already seen, given that there is no necessary connection between these demands, the only way in which these demands could identify with each other as part of the same struggle is by naming a common enemy. The enemy could, for instance, be the local authorities who are seemingly neglecting the basic needs of their citizens, such as a living wage, their access to basic infrastructures, and their safety; or immigrants, who are perceived to be crowding the job market, driving up the price for utilities by creating more demand, and turning to criminal activities. From here, one of the demands becomes the representative of this equivalential chain of these unsatisfied demands which is sustained by the common antagonism (Laclau 2005a: 95). Thus, for example, unemployment no longer only refers to the actual issues faced by those who are unemployed but also refers to the general discontent of citizens who feel

neglected and not treated appropriately as citizens; or the demand for safety not only demands safety as such but also denotes the xenophobic hostility against immigrants in general. In this way, the equivalential chain gains a common identity that is represented by one of the particular demands that compose the equivalential chain. In other words, they become a singularity, in the sense that they have moved beyond the state of a simple ensemble of demands and acquired a singular existence that is structured around the demand that represents the whole chain of equivalence.

There are three crucial aspects to be noted in this process, from the chain of equivalence to singularity. First, the demand that becomes the representative of the whole chain of equivalence undergoes a process of emptying, that is, a gradual erosion of its particular content. In our previous example, the demand for proper safety nets for unemployed workers slowly becomes less and less a demand for safety nets as such in order to take on the demand that is made by the equivalential chain as a whole, that is, a demand for a government that cares about its citizens. Second, simply pitting together these demands would not give us any sense of the enemy. It is only with an external discourse—the discourse of neglect or xenophobia in our examples—that we can forge a positive connection beyond the negative solidarity based on dissatisfaction. Finally, this process of identifying a representative and an enemy is nominal precisely because there is no way to a priori determine which one of these discourses accurately captures what exactly is at the root of these unsatisfied demands. It is precisely the moment we named the struggle as one driven by the discourse of neglect or xenophobia, that the positive connection between these demands is established and becomes intelligible.

Now, it was relatively easy in our example to find a discourse that captures the shared antagonism of the unsatisfied demands since we were only dealing with three demands that are played out in the same city. However, this would not be the case when there is a plethora of demands that are diverse in content, ranging from local to national issues. In these situations, there is greater difficulty in identifying a common enemy and a particular demand that represents the entire struggle. Hence, these instances could be conceived as those in which there is an utmost necessity for naming and emptying to constitute a collective identity. From here, Laclau claims that given that “the extreme form of singularity is an individuality” (Laclau 2005a: 100), the ultimate case of populism, in which the demands are extremely heterogeneous to each other, would be represented by the name of the leader. Although it is questionable whether extreme cases of populism must necessarily be represented by the name of the leader, we can see how a name could accommodate a radically heterogeneous set of demands by looking at the example of Donald Trump, whose name became the meeting point of xenophobic nationalism, cultural conservatism, Wall Street’s demand to accelerate financial neoliberalism as well as miners’ demand to be compensated for the jobs taken away by that very economic arrangement.

This sequence from the equivalential logic to singularity to individuality leads Laclau to declare himself to be in agreement with Freud: “the symbolic unification of the group around an *individuality*—and here I agree with Freud—is *inherent* to the

formation of a ‘people’” (Laclau 2005a: 100, emphasis added). However, there seems to be a theoretical tension here between his Lacan-inspired thoughts that bring him back to Freud and his reading of Freud that we saw in the previous section. Specifically, the emphasis on individuality appears to reintroduce the hierarchical conception of groups in which identification only occurs between the leader and the led. How can we make sense of this apparent regression?

In response, I contend that a careful reading of his arguments would reveal that Laclau’s thesis remains the same, namely, that leaders are a necessary element for collective subject formation, but the relationship between leaders and their followers could take various forms. The regression, then, is only apparent, caused by the fact that different parts of the argument are being developed depending on the psychoanalyst he took as his source of inspiration. In his engagement with Freud, Laclau was interested in showing how there is no necessary connection between the role played by leaders in forging a collective identity and their authoritarian relationship with their followers. When he turns to Lacan, the focal point is now on the necessity of a particularity—a leader or a demand—to become the representative of the ensemble of demands, in the process of uniting the heterogeneous demands that have converged into a chain of equivalence. These Freud-inspired and Lacan-inspired claims are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they fit in very well with Laclau’s argument that leadership in populist movements could take various forms, but cannot be eliminated entirely, for that would make it impossible to unite the different demands and forge a collective identity. By passing through Lacan, Laclau reinforces the ineradicability of the leadership function in the operation of the populist logic by elaborating on the way in which heterogeneous demands come together. Therefore, Laclau’s Lacan-inspired argument leads him to agree with Freud’s statement that “the nature of the mass is incomprehensible if we ignore the leader” (Freud 2004: 73), with the caveat that this leader need not always be the primal horde, as some readers of Freud conceive (Borch-Jacobsen 1991). The careful reconstruction of Laclau’s engagement with Freud and Lacan that I have been presenting up to this point should be more than enough to demonstrate that there is no contradiction between his reading of Freud and Lacan, and only a shift in emphasis.

However, what we must underscore at this point is Laclau’s predominant interest in the formal and structural dimensions of populism. To begin with, we have noted how the concept of “name of the leader” could be understood as Laclau’s attempt to move away from actual leaders and instead turn to the structural function—which we could refer to as leadership—that is required in order to constitute a collective subject (but see Arditi 2022: 53–56). Furthermore, we can understand Laclau’s engagement with Freud as one in which he formalizes Freud’s writings on the group by showing the non-necessary character of the authoritarian chief in relation to the social ties that sustain a group. In other words, we can read his reinterpretation of Freud as one in which he attempts to extract a more formalistic structure of groups that is applicable to groups beyond those with a clear leader, such as the church and army, by separating the symbolic function played by leaders in bringing together the group and the actual influence and power exerted by them as leaders. Such tendencies toward formalism are explicitly acknowledged by Laclau himself,

who states that “the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly *formal* one” (Laclau 2005b: 44; see also Stavrakakis 2004). What this shift means for our discussion is that Laclau has relatively little interest in what actual content—authoritarian or democratic leaders, or even abstract ideals for that matter—comes to exert the symbolic leadership required for a collective subject to emerge through the logic of populism or how such symbolic leadership could be prevented from turning into a dictatorial form of material leadership in which the followers become subject to the power of the leader. Although this does not take away anything from the fact that his claims are consistent, it does raise the question of whether his theory is sufficiently developed to guide left-wing politics. We shall return to these strategic dimensions later.

5 | The Question of Peronism

Laclau has been consistent with his claim that the structural function played by the (name of the) populist leader is indispensable for a collective subject to emerge, but the relationship between the leader and the led does not need to be a strictly hierarchical and authoritarian relationship. This is the thesis that has been developed in the previous sections in response to the alleged authoritarianism of Laclau’s conception of populist leadership. However, it would be too soon to conclude that Laclau’s theory of populism is not entirely authoritarian, for it has not dealt with all of the ambiguities that his critics have found troubling. In other words, we have not addressed the question of Peronism. Peronism has been a constant reference point for Laclau’s theoretical reflections, and this is no different in the case of populism (Laclau 1990: 197–204; Munck 2019: 302). But this leads his critics to reformulate the authoritarian concern. They ask: if Peronism was authoritarian, and Laclau uses it as an empirical example of the populist logic, doesn’t that suggest that his theory tends toward authoritarianism? While this is not a particularly potent refutation, as it does not account for the fact that Peronism is only one of the empirical illustrations that Laclau employs to demonstrate the populist logic, we shall nonetheless engage with it as it leads directly to the ambiguity that lies within his theory of populist leadership.

In *On Populist Reason*, Peronism is presented as an empirical example in which the construction of the people via the populist logic ultimately fails. However, it is crucial to note that this failure occurred only because it was too successful: “it was its very success in constructing an almost unlimited chain of equivalences that led to the subversion of equivalence as such” (Laclau 2005a: 214). To understand this statement, we must refer to his narrative of Perón’s return from exile. Laclau states that following the 1955 coup d’état that led to his exile, Perón had to resort to unofficial means, such as personal correspondence, to exert political influence. This, however, was politically productive since it allowed the recipients to interpret Perón’s words somewhat freely, meaning that a diverse group of actors were able to identify with each other through their agreement with Perón despite their actual differences. In other words, Perón’s words underwent a radical process of emptying. This radical emptying of Perón’s words led to a situation in which various actors with diverse and perhaps even contradictory views were able to unite under the name of Perón. However, this assemblage of

heterogeneous actors united under Perón’s name did not last long following his return to Argentina in 1973. As the president of the nation, he had to make clear decisions that were no longer ambiguous enough to be favorably interpreted. Put differently, the process of emptying had to be reversed, as the name of Perón regained its particular content, expressed through his policies.² Consequently, the various factions that were united under Perón’s name disintegrated, ultimately leading to a fierce struggle for hegemony following Perón’s death in 1974 and a military coup in 1976. Based on this story of Perón that Laclau tells, we can say that (1) Laclau analyzes Peronism to be a case in which the populist logic was in full operation, and (2) its effectiveness in producing an expansive collective subject as well as its lack of stable ties that could sustain the group is both attributed to the fact that Perón’s name was the only link that kept the Peronist coalition together. Although the validity of his historical account that anchors the whole case study could be subjected to further scrutiny, let us accept this narrative for now, as it is beyond the scope of this study.

Now, even though Laclau never mentions it in his discussion, some scholars argue that Juan Perón was an authoritarian populist leader. Historian Luis Alberto Romero, in his influential work on 20th-century Argentina, claims that in Peronism, “all powers were concentrated in the hands of the executive,” creating a vertical structure that “combined the army’s traditions, in which leadership was a fundamental aspect of authority, and those of modern totalitarian regimes that undoubtedly had made an impression on Perón in their fascist versions” (Romero 2013: 110). For Carlos De la Torre, “Perón’s populism was democratizing in so far as it incorporated previously excluded masses into political life, [but] it had authoritarian traits” (2013: 8). Such authoritarian traits are visible in Perón’s own statements concerning masses and leaders:

A mass [una masa], generally, has no intrinsic value other than the power of reaction as a mass. Its power, its true power of reaction and action, is in the leaders [*los dirigentes*] that guide it. A mass gets its worth not from the number of men who form it, but from the quality of the men who lead [*coducen*] it, because the masses do not think, the masses feel and have more or less intuitive or organised reactions. (Perón 1952: 200–201 in Cornelissen 2019: 539)

While such characterizations may not be complete as they downplay the broader historical context, for instance, the role played by trade unions (see Adelman 1992), Peronism, when evaluated based on Laclau’s presentation of the phenomenon and his principle of differentiation between authoritarian and democratic forms of populism, turns out to be nothing else than a case of the former. This becomes evident if we juxtapose two statements made by Laclau. First, he notes that Peronism could be conceived as “the extreme situation in which love for the father is the *only* link between the brothers” (Laclau 2005a: 217, original emphasis). Second, when discussing the authoritarian end of the spectrum in Freud’s formulation concerning leaders and the mass, he states that, in such cases, “the ground of any identification would exclusively be the common love for the leader” (Laclau 2005a: 56). Juxtaposing these two statements, one

would naturally wonder whether this does not suggest that Laclau himself cannot but conceive Perón as an authoritarian leader.

If Peronism appears to have authoritarian propensities both empirically and theoretically, how could Laclau's theory of populism, which takes Peronism as a prime example, not be considered authoritarian? In response to this, we can say that authoritarian forms of leadership are very much a possibility within Laclau's theory, but not the only possibility. As we have seen, whether a group formed through the populist logic comes to have a democratic or authoritarian model of leadership depends on the balance between the idealizations and identifications that sustain the group. In this sense, Laclau's theorization maintains that a predominantly authoritarian form of leadership remains a latent possibility among the various forms of leadership that could be exercised in the populist collective subject. Therefore, pointing out that Peronism was authoritarian does not undermine his argument, because he clearly acknowledges the possibility. Of course, given the asymmetry in his empirical examples, it would have been particularly helpful if he offered a case in which the leader is in a democratic relationship with their followers. However, since the lack of empirical evidence does not necessarily compromise Laclau's theoretical argument concerning the *possibilities* of non-authoritarian leadership, we must still retain our thesis that his argument is consistent.

6 | Theoretical Ambiguities and Resulting Strategic Issues

With the previous section, we arrive at the core of the ambiguities of Laclauian populist leadership. It is the fact that his theory accommodates both authoritarian and democratic forms of leadership without contradicting itself. This means that it is rather pointless to ask whether his theory of populist leadership is authoritarian or not. The answer is always: *it could be, but not necessarily*. Instead, we must ask a different set of questions. Under what conditions does populist leadership turn authoritarian rather than democratic? What kind of populist leadership do the current societal conditions prompt? Yet, taking the most rudimentary steps toward a response to these questions will bring out the strategic issues of Laclauian populist leadership that stem from its ambiguity. In fact, we can say that it is the very impossibility of Laclau's current framework to answer these questions that will reveal the underdeveloped aspects of his account that subvert its strategic utility.

In response to the question regarding the conditions that lead to authoritarian or democratic forms of leadership, Laclau gives us a very abstract answer. He argues that we need to pay attention to the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal: when it increases, we have a more authoritarian relationship; when it decreases, we have a more democratic relationship (Laclau 2005a: 62–63). This claim is derived from his understanding of the process of group formation and becomes a little more intelligible when we attempt to grasp it in more explicitly psychoanalytical terms. On the one hand, idealization—the relationship between the leader and the led—could be understood as the leader being posited as the ego-ideal of the follower. On the other hand, identification—the relationship among the followers—occurs between the ego of these followers. Following this, we can map idealization on a

vertical axis and identification on a horizontal axis (Hook 2018: 128). Once this is done, the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal could be conceived as corresponding to the degree of verticality of the group.

The ambiguous and abstract nature of his response leads us to two further interrelated questions. To begin with, what does he mean by the ego and the ego-ideal? In psychoanalysis, these two notions have a somewhat clear definition given to them. But it is not obvious whether we can simply retain these understandings as being shared by Laclau. For instance, Laclau did not conceive his argument to be Freudian, noting that “[Freud’s] categories obviously require a structural reformulation if they are going to be useful as tools of socio-political analysis” (2005a: 63). This means that we need further clarification on what is meant by the ego and the ego-ideal in his own framework to grasp what exactly is meant by the distance between the two. Furthermore, we must also ask whether the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal is something that could be measured and altered. This query, in fact, cannot be even partially addressed without figuring out the first question, for it is impossible to discuss the possibility of measurement when we do not know the characteristics of the two points that mark the two ends of this object we want to consider. Furthermore, since we do not know much about these two points, nor the possibility of measuring the distance that exists between the two, we also lose the ability to put forward any persuasive account of the sociopolitical-economic factors that extend or reduce the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal. This is because whatever factors are present in a given state of leadership cannot be translated into a distance. This means that the most we can present is the correlation between societal factors and forms of populist leadership, but not its causation. This also means that we are left in the dark with regard to the ways in which we could modify the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal in order to pursue a certain form of leadership. It is then no wonder that he fails to elaborate on the notion of organization, which was crucial to the theoretical possibility of a non-authoritarian model of leadership, since organization precisely designates the process through which we can close the distance between the two psychoanalytic concepts.

Such theoretical ambiguities lead to an obvious issue. Specifically, without being able to specify how to measure the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal, nor the societal conditions and concrete practices that expand or shrink this distance, his theory tells us nothing about the way in which we could apply his insights to analyze populist movements and their background societal conditions with regard to the type of populist leadership they take, or the steps we can take to prevent authoritarian forms of leadership and move toward a more democratic form of leadership. To be sure, Laclau at least acknowledges the need to further elaborate on the conditions that alter the distance between the ego and the ego-ideal (Laclau 2005a: 62). But elaborating on this idea requires a significant amount of theoretical work that rigorously explores and expands on the ideas that Laclau only vaguely formulated.

Yet we might perhaps say that we need not be concerned with such details of the populist logic. After all, the populist logic is just one way of forming a collective subject; some societal conditions lead to the emergence of authoritarian leadership

and others to a more democratic leadership; and the populist logic simply concerns itself only with explaining the process in which the collective subject emerges, and not with giving any predictions about the kind of leadership that would emerge. Such a flamboyant attitude, although appealing, has serious issues that become evident when we turn to strategic considerations from a radical democratic perspective (Beasley-Murray 2010: 62–63). Put simply, given that we lack the means to say whether one populist movement would turn out to be more authoritarian or democratic, we also lose the grounds to favor populist mobilization on the basis that it would lead to a democratic future. In order to claim that populist politics could be used as a vehicle toward democracy, while also acknowledging that it could turn authoritarian depending on the form of identifications established between the leader and the led, one would need to supplement Laclau's work with an account of how we can prevent horizontal identifications from slipping into vertical idealizations, both at the theoretical level and more importantly at the practical level of political organization (see Kim et al. 2024; Nunes 2021; de Nadal 2021). Of course, one could still favor a populist strategy due to its efficiency in mobilizing people toward a certain political ideal. For instance, Chantal Mouffe, whose left-populist strategy could be characterized only as a reductive adaptation of Laclau's theory of populism, argues that left-populist parties “do badly when they abandon their previous left populist strategy” and cites this as a reason why “the left populist strategy is still relevant and should not be abandoned” (Mouffe 2022: 4–5). Although her claim concerning the relationship between the performance and strategy of leftist parties is of an empirical nature that could be scrutinized on that basis, what interests us is the underlying argument. For her, the populist strategy remains suitable for leftist parties because it is able to effectively mobilize people and materialize the demands that the movement envisions, not necessarily because it can offer a more democratic mode of political leadership.

However, it is questionable whether efficient mobilization should be our only consideration when devising a strategy to take power, especially from a radical democratic perspective. As Hardt and Negri note:

We are not ones to shy away from the fact that in order to change the world we need to take power, and we have little sympathy with those who want to maintain their purity and keep their hands clean by refusing power. But we are equally aware that simply filling the existing offices of power with more honest, moral, or well-intentioned people, although better than the alternative, will never lead to the change we seek. (Hardt and Negri 2017: 69–70)

For them, taking power is not sufficient to bring about social change because that would only shuffle various societal actors from one place in the structure to another, keeping the oppressive structure itself intact. Rather, we must “take power, but differently,” that is, “to take power, not simply by occupying the existing offices of domination with better leaders, but instead by altering fundamentally the relationships that power designates and thus transforming power itself” (Hardt and Negri 2017: 69–71). Here, Hardt and Negri are pointing to a distinction

between the form and content of taking power. In short, they posit that it is not enough to fill the locus of power with a different content—something that aligns with radical democratic values—but we must strive to take power in a manner that profoundly alters the form of power. The above sequence by Hardt and Negri is germane despite their theoretical differences from Laclau and Mouffe because it makes us question whether efficiency in mobilizing the public, or more precisely efficiency within the current political system, ought to be our primary if not sole yardstick to compare strategic options. Simply put, it appears necessary to give some thought to how we take power, including the way in which we organize ourselves. Although this is not the place to give a definitive answer to the question of appropriate ways to devise a political strategy, one thing that could be said with certainty is that Laclau's theoretical insights are not fully developed enough to put forward populism as a form of politics that could, even theoretically, promise a more horizontally oriented and democratic future, due to its underdeveloped account of the distinction between democratic and authoritarian forms of leadership.

7 | Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that Laclau's theoretical considerations on populist leadership are coherent by illustrating how the various moments in which he seems to compromise his own account do not in fact undermine his argument. In particular, I have demonstrated that his account of populist leadership consists of two claims, namely, (1) leadership is a necessary element of the constitution of the collective subject through the populist logic, but (2) the relationship that is established between the leader and their followers could take various forms, some more authoritarian and others more democratic. This claim was in apparent contradiction with two other arguments that he made in his seminal book *On Populist Reason*, specifically his Lacan-inspired argument and his case study of Peronism, which in both cases made it possible to read his arguments to be tending toward an authoritarian form of leadership. For each instance, I showed that the theoretical tensions that one can observe in these moments could be resolved through a careful reading of his arguments, leading us to conclude that his account of populist leadership does not seem to have any theoretical inconsistencies, that is, contrary to what his critics claim, authoritarian leadership is a possible form of leadership within populism, but not the necessary outcome.

Although I maintain that there are no theoretical inconsistencies within Laclau's account of populist leadership, I also suggested how his theoretical ambiguities lead to strategic issues. In particular, we have seen that various aspects of his theory are not fully defined or adequately elaborated to have any bearing on empirical analysis. Put blatantly, Laclau's theory cannot give us any detailed account of the conditions in which populist leadership turns authoritarian or democratic. The implication of such deficiencies is clear: contrary to some scholars who consider Laclau's theory of populism to be strategically useful for progressive politics, we are not yet in the place to launch a left-populist response to right-wing populism. This strategic adaptation of Laclau's insights can only become possible once we work out the theoretical ambiguities that I have pointed out.

As stated in the introduction, this study should be conceived as a diagnostical study. The main aim was to bring to the fore the issues of Laclau's theory of populist leadership in order to facilitate a more productive and constructive discussion that could overcome some of these deficiencies. The limitations as well as the sense of the work that lies ahead of this study could be deduced from the decision to take this approach. The obvious limitation is that this study does not provide any remedies to the theoretical ambiguities it has highlighted. Indeed, these ambiguities may or may not be remedied. The first path for future research, then, is to theorize the ways in which these ambiguities could be worked through in order to render his framework apt for strategic applications. However, a more noteworthy limitation would be that this study may have proved the consistency—despite the ambiguity—of Laclau's theory but did not and does not claim to have proved its soundness. The theoretical cogency and empirical validity of his theory were not the focus of this study and therefore were not taken into consideration. But, of course, these things matter. This would then be the second direction that future research could take—or more precisely continue to take, as many studies have been devoted to this subject—which is hopefully made easier by my study that clarified some of the confusing elements of Laclau's theory. These two paths certainly do not exhaust the possible routes that could be taken beyond this study. Yet, none of these paths would be easy to navigate, given the complexity of Laclau's thoughts as well as populism as a political phenomenon. Let us hope that we are up to the task.

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Endnotes

¹ This in fact comes very close to Hardt and Negri's recent formulation of leadership, which attempts to reverse the top-down mobilization model and furnish the multitude—the ensemble of “ordinary” individuals—with the role of the strategist in charge of long-term decision-making, and the leaders with the role of the tactician tasked to plan short-term actions (Hardt and Negri 2017).

² This points to the qualitative difference that exists between active political leaders and deceased leaders which remains underdeveloped within Laclau's work. In the former, as in the case of Perón, the emptiness of the name of the leader is constrained by their political decisions, producing a tension between symbolic leadership and material leadership, whereas in the latter, the emptiness is determined through contestations over their incorporation into divergent chains of equivalence. Laclau's lack of engagement with this distinction is connected with Benjamin Ardit's critique that he does not examine “the objection of those who worry about the line between following a leader and the cult of personality” (Arditi 2022: 54).

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