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Corbynism, Populism and the Re-shaping of Left Politics in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the relevance of 'populism' for understanding the movement surrounding UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Following a general mapping of the contours of Corbynism, we ask whether, from the point of view of a Laclau-inspired discursive approach, Corbynism can meaningfully be described as populist. We suggest that Corbynism can only accurately be described as populist if one were to stretch the meaning of populism so far as to render it virtually meaningless. Consequently, in the final part of the chapter, we offer a theoretical critique of the general trend towards 'conceptual overstretching' that one finds in the populism scholarship.

Introduction

The ascension of veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party in 2015 constitutes one of the more improbable chapters in recent British political history. Following a 20+ year period in which the Labour Party was widely perceived as complicit with the neoliberal turn in British politics, the election of an avowedly left-wing and anti-neoliberal leader caught many by surprise, leading to an outpouring of commentary and debate about the precise nature and character of Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader. One conspicuous feature of these extensive musings on Corbynism relates to the question of whether Corbyn is a 'populist,' and/or whether or not Corbynism can meaningfully be described as a populist politics. This debate about the 'populism question' in relation to Corbyn was given added impetus in December 2016 by the revelation that Labour Party strategists were planning on re-launching Corbyn as a 'left-wing populist' in 2017 (Stewart and Elgot 2017).

Against this backdrop, this chapter analyses the current trajectory of Corbyn and Corbynism in relation to current scholarly debates about the nature and scope of populism in general and left-wing populism in particular. In so doing, we also suggest than an engagement with Corbynism helps us raise a number of theoretical points about the strengths and limits of a 'Laclauian' approach to the analysis of populism. The chapter begins with a general mapping of the contours of Corbynism, outlining its core

features and characteristics (incidentally, we use the term 'Corbynism' to pinpoint its status as a political project, over and above Jeremy Corbyn the individual). The middle section of the chapter then asks whether, from the point of view of a Laclau-inspired discursive approach, Corbynism can meaningfully be described as populist. Here, we suggest that Corbynism can only accurately be described as 'populist' if one were to stretch the meaning of populism so far as to render it meaningless. Moreover, while there are some superficial similarities with the existing left-wing populisms of Southern Europe, the context and character of Corbynism are, we argue, significantly different.

In making this empirical argument, we also engage with a number of theoretical issues. In particular, we identify at least three different iterations of populism within Laclau-inspired discourse analysis: two, articulated by Laclau himself, in which he simultaneously equates populism with politics *writ large,* on the one hand, and more often than not with oppositional politics, on the other. A third approach, associated with a number of Laclau's followers, and responding to the need to operationalise the term, frames populism more narrowly as a radical politics organised around the nodal point of 'the people.'

In light of these tensions as well as some methodological issues, in the final part of the chapter, we caution against the general trend towards 'conceptual overstretching' that one finds in the extant populism scholarship. Going somewhat against the current vogue in the populist literature which suggests conceptually that less is better, we suggest that a more fruitful line of enquiry would be to frame populism as a thick, substantive mode of politics, rather than as a 'thin' ideology (as per Cas Mudde) or a set of 'minimal criteria' embodied by discursive utterances (as per Yannis Stavrakakis and several other Laclau-inspired authors). We conclude by offering some possible lines of theoretical enquiry that might enable the cultivation of a thicker – and, in our view, more robust – conception of populism. Overall, the aim of the paper is to contribute to conceptual debates about populism by offering a sympathetic critique of the Laclauian framework, as well as providing some preliminary analysis of Corbynism as an empirical phenomenon. The latter is particularly crucial given that, at the time of writing, there is little published academic work on Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader.

The Contours of Corbynism

First elected to parliament in 1983, Jeremy Corbyn had long been seen as a maverick outsider within his party, and within UK politics more generally. Known for his principled anti-neoliberal politics, opposition to the 2003 Iraq war, and support for a number of 'unfashionable' causes, Corbyn was, to put it mildly, an improbable candidate for the Labour Party leadership. Following his underwhelming performance at the 2015 General Election, previous leader Ed Miliband – widely associated with the party's 'soft

left' – stood down, opening up a leadership contest which ran over the summer of 2015 (Dorey and Denham 2016). The leadership election was notable in part for its use of a new system for electing the leader. In contrast to the earlier Electoral College system in which MPs yielded considerable sway, the new voting system introduced in 2014 consisted of a move to a 'one member one vote' approach. In this new system the role of MPs was reduced to gatekeepers, with prospective candidates requiring nominations from a minimum of 15% of the parliamentary party (Russell 2016). Furthermore, in an innovation intended to democratise and open up participation in the election, 'registered supporters' as well as full members could vote, on condition of paying a nominal fee and declaring support for the 'aims and values' of the party (Gilbert 2016).

Corbyn only secured his place on the ballot with minutes to spare, and was dependent on receiving a number of nominations from Labour MPs who didn't support him politically, but lent him their name in order to 'broaden the debate' (BBC News 2015). The other candidates included pro-Blair Liz Kendall, centrist Yvette Cooper and early favourite Andy Burnham (who politically was in the same mould as Ed Miliband). As Corbyn's initially rather muted campaign gained momentum during the summer, he rapidly transitioned from rank outsider to firm favourite, and as such few were surprised when he emerged victorious, winning 59.5% of the first round vote (49.6% among members, 84% among registered supporters) (Rowena Mason 2015).

His early months as Labour leader saw him struggling to maintain the energy of his leadership campaign while also managing a parliamentary party that was overwhelmingly hostile to his politics. These challenges came to a head when he faced a leadership challenge as early as summer 2016 from 'soft-left' rival Owen Smith. Although Corbyn decisively saw off Smith's bid for power, he remained burdened, at least until the June 2017 election where the Labour Party did unexpectedly well, with poor opinion poll ratings (for both Labour as a whole and Corbyn as an individual), a recalcitrant parliamentary party, a largely hostile mainstream media, and a perception (including among some supporters) that he has been unwilling or unable to be as bold in his opposition to the Conservatives as many would like (in relation to, for example, the NHS crisis and the government's handling of Brexit). Garnering 40% of the vote on Election Day (higher than Ed Miliband in 2015 and indeed Tony Blair in 2005), however, and thereby eliminating Theresa May's majority, seems to have settled the nerves of many previously hostile Labour MPs, and has certainly made his leadership of the Party unassailable for the foreseeable future.

But this just begs the question: what conditions contributed to the emergence of Corbyn, an obvious outlier in the context of Labour Party politics? Space does not allow for an exhaustive account of Corbyn's rise, but a few points are worth making. In the UK

context, Corbyn's politics are aligned with what is sometimes rather lazily and inappropriately called the 'hard left' (Jackson 2016; Gilbert 2016), a strand of thinking associated with the late Tony Benn. Three features define this political orientation. Economically, Corbyn and his allies support a left Keynesianism which although historically influential in British social democratic politics became more marginal as the party drifted rightward from the 1980s onwards. Today this commitment translates into an anti-austerity position which has steadily gained some traction in the UK from 2010 onwards. On foreign policy, Corbyn and his allies have consistently advocated an anti-imperialist agenda which includes a call for nuclear disarmament, and support for the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, the Chavez regime in Venezuela, and the Palestinian struggle, among others, (Seymour 2016a). Finally, a key feature of Corbyn's politics is his emphasis on the need to democratise the Labour Party, viewing the party as insufficiently responsive to its members and grassroots activists. Given this worldview, it is not surprising that Corbyn has been able to galvanise support from a large swathe of hitherto alienated Labour members and supporters who have long felt that the Labour Party under Blair had abandoned them as well as any semblance of left politics understood as an egalitarian project (Seymour 2016a; Gilbert 2015).

The rise of Corbynism as a political project, however, must also be understood as a response to international forces. After all, it is hard to conceive of such a left project gaining traction in Britain in the absence of the global financial crisis that first erupted onto the scene in 2007. Not only did the worst global recession since the 1930's follow, but most governments in Europe, including the UK, decided to tackle it through a range of austerity measures including cutting public services, capping public sector pay and withdrawing public investment (Seymour 2014). These moves, in turn, generated hardship for millions and overt political resistance. It also laid the conditions for a reconfiguration of the left across Europe, as traditional left parties haemorrhaged support due to their inability or unwillingness to oppose austerity, on the one hand, and as new forms of anti-austerity left politics bubbled forth, on the other. The 'pasokification,' as this process is now dubbed (Harris 2016), of the social democratic left parties in Spain and Greece, for instance, ended the reign of the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party and Pasok and saw them replaced by Podemos and Syriza respectively. Describing the downfall of Pasok, Aditya Chakrabortty states 'it went from a mass movement to an arthritic bureaucracy in the pocket of a small, corrupt elite' (Chakraborrty 2015). Alongside austerity, corruption, nepotism and a general disinterest in understanding the needs of the people they represent, have also played a part in discrediting the established left. As three national organisers of Corbyn's campaign put it:

> There is an increasing sense, even – or perhaps especially – among people who are not overtly political, that the entire establishment is corrupt, immoral or even criminal, and unaccountable (Klug et al. 2016: 38).

Thus, while the UK hasn't witnessed the mass anti-austerity movements found in some other parts of Europe, it has experienced a mini resurgence of grassroots left politics in the wake of the economic crisis (Bailey 2014; Maiguashca et al. 2016), particularly in Scotland, where the 2014 independence referendum drew a significant percentage of the electorate into the orbit of grassroots left activism (Gilbert 2016). Despite the somewhat facile claims that activist support for Corbyn can be reduced to hard left 'entryism' (Seymour 2016b), particularly in relation to those who signed up as 'registered supporters' (Dorey and Denham 2016), it is true that the anti-austerity left has assumed an unprecedented profile in British politics. Furthermore, while the precise extent of this is debated, Corbyn's distance from mainstream politics, combined with his perceived accessibility and unshowy demeanour, meant he was able to pick up some support from the reservoir of disaffection with 'establishment' politics characteristic of contemporary Britain (Mair 2013).

Since winning the leadership, Corbyn has been able to count on a substantial movement of loyal supporters. To some extent, this is a relatively fluid community of left activists with the time and commitment to support Corbyn through online discussion and/or involvement in meetings and demonstrations. However, the pro-Corbyn movement takes a more formalised form via an ideologically heterogeneous network called Momentum, established by veteran Labour left campaigner Jon Lansman just after Corbyn's first leadership victory. Momentum is a national organisation aligned to Labour (but not, as yet, formally affiliated to it) which seeks to defend Corbyn and give voice to various shades of left politics in the UK. It has a National Co-ordinating Group which includes representatives from the different regions of the country as well as affiliated campaigns and organisations such as Labour CND and Welsh Labour Grassroots.

While, as indicated, the challenges facing Momentum (and the pro-Corbyn movement more generally) are legion, two are especially significant (and have important implications for our reflection on whether Corbynism is a 'populist' politics). Firstly, there remains a palpable uncertainty and even mistrust amongst Corbyn critics as to the aims and objectives of Momentum. Indeed, many continue to portray it not only as an extremist left-wing cadre of militant activists, but also as a 'fan club' or even a 'cult' (McTernan 2016; Blakey 2016) that has become obsessed with Corbyn. This charge is given some semblance of credence to the extent that many within the left of Labour have quite deep feelings of loyalty towards him (Dean 2017). In addition to seeing Momentum as messianic in nature, it has also been derided as undemocratic, power hungry and

authoritarian, seeking to stage a coup within the Labour Party. The recent media hysteria, spurred on by Tom Watson, the Deputy Leader, and others, around the alleged 'Unite-Momentum pact' to take control over Labour is a case in point (Helm & Hacillo 2017).

Notwithstanding these accusations, it is clear from the primary research we have undertaken that the campaign around Corbyn has a very different conception of what they are trying to do which includes, on the one hand, offering support to Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, especially in the context of a sometimes recalcitrant PLP (Parliamentary Labour Party) and, on the other, agitating for broader social change in the name of social justice. To this extent, Momentum sees itself as dual facing: internally, it strives to defend Corbyn's agenda and, in so doing, democratise the Labour Party and externally, to build a liberal-left social movement that can reach out to and engage with the wider public. As one key national Momentum organiser put it:

> I think that Momentum is […] trying to build a sort of grassroots network of people, groups, who are seeking to make society better, and I think that […] part of the purpose […] is to help The Labour Party now that it has Jeremy as leader of The Labour Party. Trying to help The Labour Party to become a more open, more democratic, more participatory, more member-led […] organisation with wider appeal, so that it can be [an] electoral force […] (interview with Momentum activist, London, 19/04/16)

In sum, there are two dominant narratives surrounding the meaning and nature of Corbynism: one, upheld by Momentum activists and his wider supporters, which sees it as a broad democratic, social justice network, and the other, proffered by some within the PLP and the media, which denounces it as a fanatical cult of personality that will eventually destroy Labour Party (Blakey 2016). Overturning this latter representation and convincing their opponents and the media that they are committed to strengthening Labour as a political force has proved a substantial challenge for a besieged and under-resourced network of activists.

A second key challenge that faces Momentum – mirroring that described by Alexandros Kioupkiolis in his analysis of Podemos (Kioupkiolis 2016) – concerns an internal tension within the movement between what could be called 'vertical' and 'horizontal' strands of political organising. While claims of hard-left entryism are clearly overblown (Seymour 2016), a form of traditional left politics rooted in trade unionism and advocated by older, self-identified Marxists certainly exists within the Corbyn movement. More hierarchical, and defined by formal organisational structures, roles and mechanisms of accountability, this politics is more comfortable with distinct lines of representation embodied by a

delegate model of democracy. Explaining what trade union politics can bring to Momentum, one self-identified Marxist trade unionist told us:

> I think what the trade union experience can bring is about democracy. I think we have […] very strong structures […] you know, accountability, the idea that people can't just say 'I'm now representing this.' You […] have to be elected into positions and then you're accountable to the people who elected you and so on (interview with Trade Union activist, London 18/06/16).

A competing strand within the movement is more 'horizontalist' in orientation, younger in demographics, and bears the influence of the 2010-11 student movement, Occupy and the southern European anti-austerity movements. Activists within this constituency tends to valorise social media as a means of communication and eschews more formalised organisational structures. Intellectually, it looks more to Deleuze, Laclau, feminism or the theorists of automated 'post-capitalism' (Paul Mason 2015; Williams & Srnicek 2015) than traditional Marxism. Momentum HQ as well as its founder Jon Lansman align themselves more with the second strand (Elgot 2017). Indeed, the dispute between these two tendencies became so bitter that there were question-marks over Momentum's survival in late 2016, although the recent election 'success' of the Labour Party has tempered these tensions with some left commentators even hailing the horizontalist approach, and its savvy deployment on social media, as one of the reasons why Corbyn did so much better than expected in the recent election (Gilbert 2017).

To conclude this section: there is no doubt that Corbyn's ascension to the role of Labour leader was as unexpected as it was welcome for many on the British left who had found themselves marginal to UK politics for a long time. Corbyn's two leadership victories mean that unapologetically anti-austerity and anti-neoliberal politics has taken on a renewed visibility in mainstream UK politics. Having defied expectations at the ballot box, his position as leader is, for now, untouchable, and there is broad public support for reigning in austerity. Whether this momentum can be translated into a victory at the next general election (whenever that is!) remains to be seen. What is not in doubt is that the radical left has more visibility and impact in British politics now than at any time in the past thirty years.

Is Corbynism a Populist Politics?

> With the rise of Jeremy Corbyn a mutant strain of populism has become an integral part of British politics (Gray 2017).

Having outlined the key features of Corbynism, in this section we turn to the question of whether Corbynism is a form of populism and, therefore, whether it makes sense to claim that left-wing populism has a presence in British politics. If one turns to contemporary political pundits for an evaluation, one could be forgiven for thinking that Corbynism embodies a specifically British iteration of left-wing populism. Indeed, a number of commentators have characterised Corbynism as 'populist,' with Julian Baggini in *The Guardian* going so far as to suggest that Corbyn's politics is 'populism in its purest form' (Baggini 2016). To be fair, both Labour strategists and Momentum activists have muddied the waters on this question as well with a Guardian piece stating that Corbyn was going to be relaunched as a 'left-wing populist' (Stewart & Elgot 2016), and even Momentum founder Jon Lansman announcing in an interview with us that 'Momentum and the Corbyn phenomenon is… evidentially populist' on the grounds that it features 'mass rallies, you know, ten thousand people in the streets of Liverpool [listening to] Jeremy. That is populism, it is, how can you not think of it as that?' (Jon Lansman, interview, 24/11/16).

These bold claims notwithstanding, it is our argument that Corybnism cannot in any meaningful way be characterised as an instance of populist politics. In order to defend this claim and explore the reasons for it, we take up the Laclau-inspired discursive approach to populism. In the ensuing analysis we hope to not only explain why Corbynism cannot usefully be depicted as populist, but to also raise a number of critical questions about limits of a discursive approach to this phenomenon, and indeed of the populism scholarship more generally. In so doing, our first observation is that the 'Essex School' approach to populism (so named on account of Ernesto Laclau's long term affiliation with the University of Essex) is not a tightly unified body of work. Indeed, we discern three slightly different iterations of populism within the Essex School – two put forward by Laclau himself and one developed by advocates of his approach – which in turn have rather different implications for our analysis of Corbynism.

We will start with the work of Laclau which includes his now classic 2005 book entitled *On Populist Reason.* For Laclau, 'populism' does not refer to any specific substantive attributes of a politics, such as the actors involved, the claims made, the ideology, or the sociological conditions that give rise to it. Instead, Laclau defines populism as a *political logic*. In general terms, a 'political logic' refers to the 'institution, de-institution and/or contestation of the social' (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 142). Importantly, political logics are *formal* insofar as they have no *necessary* content: this claim is in turn a product of the Essex School's rejection of essentialist accounts of political mobilisation such as, for instance, traditional Marxism, with its *a priori* privileging of class struggle (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). More specifically, populism comes into being when a series of hitherto unmet demands are articulated together into what Laclau refers to as a counter-

hegemonic 'chain of equivalence' (Laclau 2004), afforded a semblance of unity in two ways: firstly by the production of 'empty signifiers,' privileged names, concepts or ideals that give a populist formation coherence (see Laclau 1996) and secondly, by the oppositional nature of the equivalential chain, i.e., its being constructed around a common enemy.

This populist logic of articulation, as outlined by Laclau, of necessity entails the construction of a 'people': this need not mean that political actors mobilise under the signifier 'the people,' but it does mean populism entails the (always contingent and precarious) construction of a 'people' in the more general sense of a politicised collectivity with shared affective commitments (Laclau 2005; Howarth 2008). Furthermore, this construction of a 'people' via the equivalential articulation of demands, consists in the heightening of antagonism and what Laclau calls the 'dichotomisation of the social space' into two opposed camps (Laclau 2004: 38). Populism, for Laclau, is therefore aligned with notions of rupture and antagonism. Indeed, he argues that 'a crisis of representation is at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst' (Laclau 2005: 137). As such, populism, in the hands of the Essex School, is by definition a bottom-up process, driven largely by diverse forms of grassroots mobilisation and held together and given voice by a charismatic leader.

But here we come to an ambiguity in Laclau's work, for in some instances, populism – as explained above – is projected as a *specific* mode of politics, *i.e*. as 'one possibility of politics among others' (Arditi 2010: 491). In this sense then, populism is cast as an *oppositional* politics, a politics of the 'underdog,' that seeks to challenge the prevailing 'logic of difference' and the hegemonic institutionalised model of politics that it sustains. At other moments, however, Laclau offers us the image of 'politics as populism' (Arditi 2010: 491) in which populism is presented as 'the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such' (Laclau 2005: 67). He goes on to say that 'by "populism" we do not understand a *type* of movement […] but a *political logic*' (Laclau 2005: 117) and that 'populist reason […] amounts […] to political reason *tout court*' (Laclau 2005: 225). From this angle, populism becomes equated with the political writ large. In other words, it could be argued that Laclau vacillates between an ontological and ontic conception of populism.[i]

So where does this (or these) Laclauian notion(s) of populism leave us when trying to think about the nature of Corbynism? Well, if we start with the ontological conception of populism*, i.e.,* it is a fundamental aspect of all politics, then it is applicable by definition, but arguably since it would also apply to all and every other manifestation of political contestation, it is not clear what we gain by characterising it as such. If we shift to his more substantive, ontic conception of populism, i.e., as specific mode of oppositional

politics, then it also applies, but only at the most general level of analysis. So, for instance, it is true that Corbynism did emerge out of a crisis of representation within the Labour Party and that under Corbyn there is now a clear antagonistic, ideological divide between the Labour leadership and the Conservatives, with Corbyn's oppositional stance captured in the controversial slogan used by Labour in the 2016 local elections: 'Elections are about taking sides, Labour is on yours.' Furthermore, it could be claimed that the discourse of Corbynism is held together by a number of key nodal points including 'for the many' (as per the 2017 election manifesto), 'equality,' 'fairness', 'anti-austerity', and Corbyn's emphasis on cultivating a 'kinder politics.' But suggesting that radical or oppositional movements emerge from a crisis of representation and that they reflect an antagonism of some sort seems to be stating the obvious.

In sum, the problem is that whatever notion of populism one applies, it seems to tell us very little about the *specificity* of either Corbynism as a movement or populism as a distinct mode of politics. For even if we prefer to mobilise the ontic conception of populism understood as a manifestation of counter-hegemony, we are still left with the challenge that *all* oppositional or radical politics must be conceived as populist in nature. As such, the 'finding' that Corbynism is indeed an instance of left populism from within the Laclauian schema says less about the features of Corbynism, and more about the difficulty of distinguishing 'populism' from 'non-populism' within Laclau's approach.

This tension is implicitly acknowledged in a more recent strand of literature, composed by the work of several European scholars who are seeking to operationalise Laclau's notion of populism in order to analyse 'actually existing populisms' in contemporary Southern Europe. More concretely, motivated in part by Laclau's commitment to the potentiality of populism to revitalise a radical democratic (left) politics, Yannis Stavrakakis and his colleagues in the POPULISMUS project based at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, including Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis, have powerfully argued against the widespread tendency in European political science to present populism as a threat to democracy. This scholarly effort has been given further impetus by the fact that a number of left populist politicians have explicitly drawn on and mobilised Laclauian concepts in their political thinking/discourses and campaigns (Howarth 2015).

Whilst they draw their basic ontological reference points from Laclau, this team of authors argue that a politics is populist when it meets two 'minimal,' 'operational criteria': first, that it is articulated around the nodal point of 'the people' (as opposed to, say, 'the nation') and second, that it entails the antagonistic divide of society into two camps (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014: 123; Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 4). In so doing, Stavrakakis and his colleagues significantly reduce the scope of populism, at least

compared to Laclau's conception, explicitly advocating the need for a parsimonious definition when doing empirical comparative research (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 5). Rather than being inscribed in the ontological constitution of the political as such, for Stavrakakis et al. populism is confidently presented as one specific *type* of (counter-hegemonic) politics: any political formation that doesn't mobilise under the banner of 'the people' (or an equivalent unifying signifier such as the 'non-privileged,' 'the many' or 'the marginalized') and that does not rally against an 'elite' (the establishment, power bloc) falls outside the conceptual boundaries of populism. Dropping what they see as the 'moralizing' and 'homogenzing' elements built into the prevailing definition of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013), Stavrakakis et al. defend a discourse analysis approach which seeks to investigate whether the 'people,' for instance, is actually mobilised as an *empty* signifier – rather than one laden down by references to race or nation, and therefore unable to integrate heterogeneous identities – and whether it really functions as a nodal point in the chain of signification or is just a peripheral reference. On the basis of this kind of investigation, they argue, it is possible to distinguish not only between populism and manifestations of nationalism and extreme right wing politics, including Le Pen in France and Wilders in Holland, but also between left and right wing populisms (Stavrakakis et al. 2017).

Returning to Corbynism in light of this latest rendition of populism, however, leads us to conclude that it still cannot be framed as a populist politics for two reasons. The first concerns the rhetorical strategies deployed by Corbyn and his supporters which, at least until now, have not mobilised signifiers such as 'the people' or the 'non-privileged' in a systematic way in order to construct a *unified subject* of representation. Promises to 'rule for the many, not the few' (a direct lift from Tony Blair's 1997 campaign slogan) notwithstanding, much of Corbynism as a project and a discourse has centred on the articulation of specific political *positions and values*, – 'anti-austerity,' 'equality,' 'fairness' and 'hope' – rather than on the merits or de-merits of particular political *agents*. In this context, although the 'British people' are occasionally appealed to in his election campaign speeches, the main interlocutor for Corbyn has been the Labour Party, its members and its prospective supporters (Atkins & Turnbull 2016). Similarly, Momentum activists speak to and about 'the movement' or the 'movement-party', the precise components of which remain ambiguous, but seem to encompass Labour Party members, trade unions, social justice activists and various other groups, individuals and campaigns located on the left (Bennister, Worth & Keith 2017: 14).

In this sense then, neither Corbyn nor his supporters are particularly interested in mobilising the notion of the 'people' as the appropriate subject of representation, apart from when they are in campaigning mode and need to reach out to voters. In fact, rather than seeing their task as solely one of improving representation, we found that many of

our interviewees talked instead in terms of fostering 'empowerment' and 'participation.' As national Momentum organisers, Klug, Rees and Schneider state:

> 'Corbyn's "new politics" is about political representatives using the platform of the state to empower popular forces.' As McDonnell has put it, Labour should 'work alongside [social movements], give them a parliamentary voice, give them a voice in government but, *more importantly*, assist them in the work that they do within the wide community.' Ultimately, it's about nurturing organisations that can help to democratise each strand of life – building social blocs into a majority that can support a Labour government to empower them (Klug et al. 2016: 43, emphasis added).

This interest in and commitment to encouraging active participation and the devolution of power can be explained in part by Corbyn's occasional overtures towards what we might call epistemological populism – i.e. a faith in the knowledge and ability of ordinary voters. At a speech in Tredegar he stated:

> All the great achievements that any of us have ever benefited from […] how we got the NHS, how we got council housing, how we got free education, how women got the right to vote, how we got the race relations act, all the great achievements did not come around from the smartness of my colleagues sitting around a table in the House of Commons, they came because of people on the ground everywhere […] marching, demanding (Corbyn 2015.)

This emphasis on the knowledge and vital social value of 'ordinary people' is confirmed by Hilary Wainwright, who recently told an audience at Queen Mary University that Corbyn believes that 'wisdom lies in the street' (Wainright 2017). While this deference to the common sense of people could potentially provide a platform for a populist politics revolving around an 'us' vs. 'them' logic, in Corbyn's hands it is used as a reason to listen to and support local activists who know what their communities need. Corbynism thus seeks to create space for and enable a pluralised, deliberative, cooperative and context specific approach to community building and policy formation that fits uncomfortably with the idea of an equivalential chain constructed to demarcate, galvanise and hold together an undifferentiated camp of 'underdogs.' In other words, there is little in the words and deeds of Corbyn, or his supporters, to suggest that they are seeking to unify or homogenise a core constituency and present them as a coherent social base for their politics.

A second, more important reason as to why we must be doubtful of the claims that Corbynism can be equated with populism, concerns the fact that, as alluded to above, it

does not consistently embody a politics of antagonism. While undoubtedly some of Corbyn's rhetoric is inflected with populist-sounding allusions to 'the elite' and 'the establishment', we should be wary of seeing such utterances as reflective of Corbyn's political project *in toto*. This is to say that, bar some exceptions, his discourse and that of his supporters as well as their practices do not serve to divide the social field into two irreconcilable camps, do not conjure up an irredeemable antagonist that must be vanquished and do not call upon the people as a collective actor to rally around them. This is evidenced by the fact that, rather surprisingly for a supposedly 'hard left' politics, Corbyn has so far refused to mobilise the rhetoric and images of class conflict as the basis of his politics (Gilbert 2016). Agreeing with Gilbert, Seymour states:

> It is striking that, thus far, Corbyn has pointedly refused to identify a class opponent in this way, instead sticking to the conventional Labour *modus operandi* of attacking 'The Tories.' This reticence in articulating a class division may be motivated by a prudent desire not to alienate possible business allies, or it may flow ineluctably from his 'politics of kindness' which seems to foreswear such rousing populism (Seymour 2016: 204).

Turning to the question of the enemy, as Seymour suggests, we have found that Corbynism, as a political project, is highly affirmative, utopian and proleptic in nature and cannot be characterised as a negative or *anti*-politics, understood as one which depends on an individual or collective antagonist. Leaving aside references to the '1%,' the 'few,' or the 'rich' and 'vested interests' (Left Foot Forward 2017), Corbyn does not routinely invoke images of a monolithic, intractable enemy, and when he does identify what he is against, it tends to take the form of Tory governments and their specific policies (e.g. Trident or benefit cuts) or, more abstractly, the injustice of extreme structural inequalities and the disenfranchisement and deprivation that it causes and sustains. Corbyn's triumphant flagship speech at the 2017 Labour Party conference, for instance, is structured around a division not between a 'people' and an 'elite' but between an out-of-touch, beleaguered Conservative Party, and a competent and flourishing Labour Party as a 'government in waiting', which is, as he puts it:

> Ready to tackle inequality, ready to rebuild our NHS, ready to give opportunity to young people, dignity and security to older people, ready to invest in our economy and meet the challenges of climate change and automation, ready to put peace and justice at the heart of foreign policy (Corbyn, 2017)

Our interviews with Momentum organisers bear this out, with activists saving their most trenchant criticisms not for an all-encompassing 'elite' or 'establishment' but, often, for

their own Labour Party and its centralised structures and its apparent disinterest in the people it is there to support and represent. As one activist put it,

> I think they've (Corbyn and McDonnell) brought a new kind of sense of morality to Westminster actually, and I think that's really important and I think that the Labour supporters […] probably do actually appreciate that they are starting to see a party that is working on its own identity and it's not trying to chase the median voter (interview with Momentum activist, 19/04/16).

While Momentum activists also acknowledge and decry disparities in economic, social and political power, these sins are as likely to be attributed to the failure of social democracy, left politics and neoliberal capitalism as they are to the intentional actions of a specific class of people. To this extent, fighting against elites and the establishment means challenging not only specific power holders in all political parties, but also system-wide structures of power as well as taken for granted ways of doing politics. Talking to one leading Momentum activist, it was clear that 'anti-elitism' for her meant democratising all levels of governance and adopting non-hierarchical and participatory methods, rather than de-selecting any MPs or opposing a specific class of people (interview with Momentum activist, 19/04/16).

Finally, as already suggested, Corbyn – particularly prior to the 2017 General Election campaign – has struggled to build any semblance of 'political unity' out of the heterogeneous social base that affords him some support. Certainly, in our view, it would be premature to characterise Momentum, at this stage in its development, as a coherent or unified social movement. After all, we must recognise that, despite many of the activists' aspirations to build a wider social movement around a left vision of politics, Momentum has been under siege from its very inception and has had neither the time, nor political space nor resources to develop a common agenda, a shared identity and set of agreed strategies, defining features of a social movement. Rather, it can be seen as a national organisation which seeks to link together and co-ordinate, from the top down, a plethora of campaigns and local activisms. As one Momentum organiser put it, 'we're a sort of melting pot of different cultures and political priorities', a 'hybrid organisation that has many political constituents and each broad constituent brings with it its own political culture and style' (interview with Momentum activist, London 19/04/16).

In addition to being a broad church of diverse actors, it is important to recognise that Momentum, although fetishized in the media, does not exhaust the range of community campaigns and local organising that have emerged in support of Corbyn. These forms of activism include not only prominent national campaigns sponsored by the likes of UK Uncut, the People's Assembly, and left trade unions such as the Fire Brigades Union, all

of which have links to Momentum, but also far less visible activism in black and working class communities across the country such as Unite Community in Ellesmere Port and the #Grime4Corbyn campaign set up in London and Brighton in the context of the recent election (Charles, 2017). These local campaigns often see themselves as independent of Momentum and even at times in tension with it, given the dominance of middle class, white activists in Momentum HQ.

In sum, with no specified enemy, understood as 'the source of social negativity' (Laclau 2005: 38), and with support for Corbyn taking the form of a polycephalous, complex, internally riven set of social forces and, thereby, an as of yet disaggregated 'underdog,' it is hard to squeeze Corbynism into the us/them binaries offered up by Laclauian conception of populism.

But if Corbynism cannot be helpfully framed as populist, what do we think of the recent comparisons being made between Corbyn and other European left movements? Cat Overton, writing for Labour List, claimed in 2016 that it would be 'instructive and accurate' to 'place Corbynism within the context of the wave of leftist populist parties sweeping the European continent' (Overton, 2016). Although we agree that there are some similarities between Corbynism and the recent rise of Podemos and Syriza, it would be analytically unsound to overstate them for several reasons. First, both Greece and Spain experienced much deeper and more sustained organic crises than the UK over the last decade, providing scope for the rise of much more radical antagonisms within and reconfigurations of the political terrain. In this context, the rhetoric deployed by both Podemos and Syriza has been far more polarised and Manichean than that of Corbynism which offers up no equivalent to Podemos' indictment of *la casta*.

Moreover, both Podemos and Syriza emerged out of and sought to speak to a broad social movement which gained considerable support within civil society (Roberts 2017). It was the May 2011 occupations of *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece which provided Syriza with a potential social base from which to start to build a counter-narrative. These occupations ignited an incipient identification process by which particular demands of angry citizens began to coalesce and a sense of solidarity began to grow. As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis describe it:

> Indeed, Syriza was probably the only party to engage from the beginning with the protesters' demands and meet them on the streets. It is there that a chain of equivalence started to be formed between different groups and demands through a shared opposition towards European and Greek political structures, later to be interpellated by Syriza as representing the 'people' against 'them' (2014: 126).

Similarly, Podemos' emergence was built on the fortunes of the Indignados/15-M movements. As Flesher Fominaya explains:

> Without the existence of anti-austerity and pro-democracy (radical, alternative or reformist) social movements there would be no 15-M, and without the crisis and 15-M, there would be no Podemos (Flesher Fominaya 2014).

As we have seen, no equivalent national anti-austerity movement on the scale of those in Greece or Spain flourished in the UK.

Last but not least, both Podemos and Syriza have nurtured a form of charismatic leadership embodied by Iglesias and Tsipras that has not found any space in the context of Corbynism. Thus, although it is true that Corbyn has generated a degree of affection and adulation that has prompted some to call him a political 'rock star' (see Crace 2016), it is equally important to note that Corbyn's conception of leadership is a process oriented, collective one in which his assigned role is to be an 'enabler' and 'organiser,' that is, 'someone who can make space for people to do things that he cannot' (Seymour 2016: 206). In this way, Corbyn presents himself as a symbol of and a conduit for Labour's 'core values' (Bennister *et al,* 2017), rather than as a heroic agent standing above his followers. Interestingly, when asked about the possible similarities between Corbynism, Podemos and Syriza, a number of our interviewees expressed some doubts about the significance of the overlaps, arguing that while all three social forces can be seen as a response to the generalised breakdown in public trust in politicians – as one interviewee put it, Corbyn's new politics is 'of the same moment [but] not in the same tradition' (interview with Momentum national organiser, 19/04/16) – Corbynism was different to the extent that it was building on an already established tradition of left politics in the UK and that, in their view, it tended to be more a 'horizontal,' participatory and inclusive project than either its counterparts in Greece or Spain.

Populism Reconsidered

Zooming out, we want to end by offering some thoughts on the implications of the above analysis for the wider scholarship on populism. More concretely, we think that there are at least two broad lessons that we want to reflect on.

The first concerns what we see as the limits of a so called 'minimalist' definition of populism. Indeed, despite their very different ontological and conceptual starting points, the two dominant approaches to populism in the literature – the Muddean perspective and the Laclauian one reviewed here – both pursue 'thin' or parsimonious definitions of populism because they help to guide case selection and they aid in comparative research (Rooduijn 2014). Indeed, as indicated earlier, scholars working within the Laclauian

framework suggest that their two-part definition is less encumbered than that of Mudde's, whose oft-quoted definition reads as follows:

> populism is best defined as *a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté general *(general will) of the people* (Mudde, 2004: 543).

As can be seen, Mudde mobilises three core concepts – the 'pure people,' the 'corrupt elite', and the notion of 'general will' – and includes a normative dimension when capturing the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite in terms of pure vs. corrupt (Stanley 2008: 102). Shedding the notion of the general will (aka popular sovereignty) and what they see as a 'moralistic view,' and shifting the genus from *ideology* to *discourse*, the Laclauians claim to be better able to identify and clarify the role of populist signifiers and logics in diverging empirical cases.

What these two contrasting perspectives share, by reducing populism to its bare conceptual bones and locating it in discourse, is a tendency to mobilise populism as a 'descriptor' concept, that is, an episodic and generic feature potentially characteristic of all political actors and their lexicon (van Kessel 2014: 100). In this context, the task becomes one of identifying and measuring variations in the *extent* to which the language of elite politicians in different contexts can be described as populist (see, for example, Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011). As Stavrakakis et al. explain 'when examining various discourses, we are mostly concerned with highlighting a specific pattern of articulation, in distinguishing on that basis what is populist from what is not, but also what is less from what is more populist' (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 14).

In other words, for both Mudde and populist scholars working in the Laclauian tradition, populism is only one aspect of politics among many, and the question is to determine its relative weight compared to these other aspects. So, for instance, Laclauians attempting to distinguish right-wing politics from left-wing populism, will need to explore to what extent exclusionary nationalism or xenophobia shapes and delimits genuinely populist discourses. Or for those working in a Muddean framework and trying to distinguish between fully fledged populism and a case of mere opportunistic dabbling, it becomes important to examine the sheer number of references to the people vs. other discursive concepts or the nature of the political practices (democratic illiberalism) that support the populist rhetoric (see Pappas 2014; Mudde 2015).

One of the challenges that this approach runs into is that it lends itself to what van Kessel (2014: 105) has called – following Sartori – 'degreeism,' i.e. seeing populism as

(potentially) present everywhere, albeit to different degrees. This, in turn, gives rise to a number of questions that cannot be answered within the terms of either the Muddean or Laclauian framework: how do we know when we have moved from an incident of populist rhetoric to a fully-fledged populist politics? In other words, what is the tipping point and does it depend on how many times reference is made to key terminology (e.g. 'the people' or 'elite') or over how long a period a discourse is freighted with this language?

This conceptual problem becomes particularly acute in a political context where appeals to 'the people' appear to have become ubiquitous in a variety of European countries (Rooudijn & Pauwels 2011). Moreover, populism has become so overused in media and political commentary that the UK left-liberal broadsheet *The Guardian* declared it their 'word of the year' (Poole 2016). Given this frenzied deployment of the term in both journalistic and academic commentary, as political analysts we are left with two choices: either we accept that populism is a resurgent phenomenon that now expresses itself, albeit in different ways and to varying extents, in almost all political contexts *or* we go the other way, resist this universalising impulse and insist on a *thick* conception of populism, one which posits populism as a distinctive, *sui generis* mode of oppositional politics, which goes far beyond rhetorical appeals to 'the people' and/or a hated elite, regardless of whether these are conceived as central nodal points (Laclau) or as key elements in an ideology (Mudde). More substantively, we want to argue that populism has to be treated as a 'classifier' concept to identify 'a circumscribed universe of populist actors' (van Kessel 2014: 100), whose interactions and relationships represent an exceptional as well as enduring rendition of politics. This, in turn, has to be described in substantive sociological terms. In so doing, we want to make good on the implicit promise offered up in the existing scholarship that there is something significant, distinct and unusual about populism and that it is, therefore, worth of study and debate.

We do not have the space here to develop a fully-fledged conception of populism, but we want to suggest some potentially useful theoretical resources one could draw on in order to furnish a 'thicker' conception of populism. First, one possibility worth investigating is the claim that populism is a distinctive form of *affective* politics: i.e., what makes populism distinctive is not so much its rhetorical appeals to 'the people', but, as Margaret Canovan points out, the fact that populism exhibits a very particular, characteristic 'mood' (1999: 6). Specifying with greater precision the affective dynamics might therefore be a fruitful line of enquiry: recent work by Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2016) might be instructive here. Moreover, the work of Chantal Mouffe also pushes us in this direction (see Mouffe 2018).

Second, an emergent theme in the populism literature concerns the role of knowledge. Several times in this chapter we have alluded to the role of what some have called 'epistemological populism' (Gunter & Saurette 2011), and we think there might be mileage in affording populism greater specificity by framing populism as a response to what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls 'epistemic injustice,' i.e. the perception that certain forms of knowledge are overlooked or marginalised.

A final fruitful avenue of analysis concerns the role of popular culture. Given that populism is precisely a 'popular' politics, it is perhaps surprising that more analytical attention has not been paid to the role that popular culture plays in creating and sustaining populist politics. Further reflection on the populism/pop culture nexus is, we would suggest, a key task for populism scholarship. We do not, at this stage, claim to have definitive answers as to how some of the conceptual difficulties in existing populism scholarship can be overcome, but we do think these three issues – affect, knowledge and popular culture – might help pave the way towards a conception of populism that rigorously guards against the current tendency towards 'degreeism' and conceptual over-stretching.

Moving from the debate over thin vs. thick definitions of populism, a second lesson that in our view emerges from our discussion of Corbynism as a potential form of left wing populism concerns the tendency of political commentators, scholars, and even populist politicians, such as Iglesias who claims that Podemos is beyond left-right (Iglesias 2015), to downgrade the significance of the right-left distinction when it comes to understanding how populism manifests itself and its potential consequences. So, for example, John Judis argues that left wing populism is only different from right wing populism to the extent that it does not attack 'out groups' (2016), while Matthijs Rooduijn and Tjitske Akkerman posit that radical left and right 'do not differ significantly from each other when it comes to their populism' (2017: 196). This neglect of the left-right distinction has been encouraged by media commentators and political pundits who overwhelmingly associate populism with a xenophobic, far-right politics (Economist 2014) and, as such, with a pathological 'politics of discontentment' (Baggini 2013). This, according to many, can only be tackled through a reinvigoration of 'moderate' or 'centre ground' politics (Fieschi 2013). In this context, while it may be acknowledged that left-wing populisms can be more inclusionary and more often oriented to 'hope' rather than 'fear', left-wing populism is nonetheless seen as a deviation from and a challenge to liberal representative government and, therefore, like all populisms, as a potential threat to democracy (Pappas 2014; Mudde 2015). Reflecting this generalised sentiment against all forms of populism, Counterpoint, a London based research consultancy, identified populism *tout court* as the 'top global risk' for 2014 (Counterpoint 2014).

Agreeing with Étienne Balibar's injunction that we should 'henceforth and forever […] stop using the category "populism" in a manner that bridges the chasm between left and right' (Balibar, 2017), we want to defend the recent efforts made by a few pioneering scholars to disaggregate and examine the discrete features of left populism. More concretely, we find the work of Stavrakakis et al. (2017) as well as that of Luke March (2017) to be particularly enlightening. In both cases, the authors argue that the content of the host ideology (socialism for March and nationalism for Stavrakakis) trumps the populist elements in each case, opening up the idea that in fact crucial differences do exist between different forms of right-wing politics (e.g. fascism from parliamentary right-wing parties) and also between right wing nationalism and inclusionary, egalitarian left wing populism. Moreover, they also, in different ways, disabuse us of the common assumption in the literature that mainstream centrist parties can be in any way considered populist, in the case of March, or that right-wing movements can be accurately be described as populist, in the case of Stavrakakis et al. In other words, the substantive conclusions of these two instructive texts explicitly challenge the picture that emerges from the 'descriptor' model of populism, i.e., that it is a feature of all types of politics and that it is a matter of degree. Indeed, for Stavrakakis et al., mobilising a Laclauian definition, one is left with the impression that only left-wing politics is amenable to populism, although not every form (e.g. the Greek Communist Party is offered up as a counter-example). Interestingly, March, drawing on Mudde's definition, comes to the exact opposite conclusion, at least in the UK context, arguing that 'there is a greater elective affinity between populism and the right' and that 'the British populist left are socialists first and populists second' (2017: 299).

This difference in conclusion is, of course, partly due to the working definitions of populism that they start with: while the former set of authors require the 'people' to be an *empty* signifier shorn of any references to national/ethnic identity and able to embody a diverse *unity* of constituent elements, the latter's use of the 'pure people' understood as a homogenous nation does permit calls for the protection of national community to constitute a populist discourse.

A second reason for this substantive difference in conclusions, in our view, however, takes us back to our earlier criticism of their shared methodological approach, which mobilises minimal criteria to dissect the language of prominent political actors. This, in turn, limits the search for populism to the frequency of a few select words/phrases/themes detected through coding exercises. To this extent, then, it is hard to know what to conclude about left wing politics and its relationship to populism, other than that it seems to depend on the contingent and strategic use of specific speech acts made by particular left political actors in concrete situations. Certainly, no durable social phenomenon comes into view through this method: rather, left-wing populism can only be

characterised in terms of a series of attitudes (e.g. internationalism, people centrism or egalitarianism), words ('the establishment') and policy issues (socio-economic). While this is a helpful start, we would argue that we now need to go beyond minimal definitions in search of a more theoretically rich toolkit to make sense of the kind of differences noted by these authors, as well as the possible similarities that left-wing populism may embody.

Concluding Reflections

This chapter has made two core arguments, one empirical, one theoretical. Empirically, we offered a preliminary mapping of the contours of Corbynism as a political project. We suggested that Corbynism constitutes a resurgence of an established tradition of left politics in the UK, one that combines an economic left Keynesianism with the active promotion of an anti-war stance internationally, and a commitment to greater democratisation within the Labour Party. However, that is not to say that Corbynism constitutes a 'throwback' to a distinctively '1980s' form of socialism, given the impact on Corbynism of the new, 'networked' movements associated with Occupy and the post-2010 student movements. In addition, we argued against the view – repeated a number of times in media commentary on Corbyn – that Corbynism constitutes a specifically British iteration of left-wing populism. While there are a number of superficial similarities between Corbynism and the established left-wing populisms in Southern Europe, Corbynism is, we would argue, a rather different beast. For one, Corbynite discourse contains only infrequent allusions to 'the people' as a political constituency, while a number of the arguments, practices and ideological influences on Corbynism put it at a distance from populism. Furthermore, the very different experiences of austerity in the UK and Greece/Spain also preclude glib comparisons across contexts.

Consequently, to make absolutely sure that we don't run the risk of fatuously claiming that Corbynism is a form of populism, we would do well, first, to be explicit in framing populism as a *classifier* rather than a *descriptor* concept and, second, to insist upon the need to develop a *thick* account of populism – mobilising a variety of sociological concepts. We realise that this pushes against the current vogue for 'thin' and/or 'minimal' definitions, but it is only once we have formulated a more robust, sociologically informed, theoretical conception of populism as an embodied and enacted mode of oppositional politics that, in our view, it can be transformed into an unambiguously fruitful, analytically instructive category for political analysis.

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[i] The ontic/ontological distinction was originally used by Heidegger, but is frequently deployed by Laclau and his followers. For Heidegger, the ontological refers to the general question of 'being,' i.e. the formal/abstract characteristics of all social and political configurations. The ontic, by contrast, refers to specific entities, i.e. the localised and contextual aspects of a sociopolitical configuration (Heidegger 1973: 28-35).