Corbyn's Labour and the Populism Question

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It has become a truism to say populism is on the rise. Indeed, populism has become so ubiquitous in discussions of contemporary politics that the *Guardian* saw fit to declare it their "word of the year" at the end of 2016.[1] From the perspective of British left politics, a number of commentators have argued that the reconfiguration of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership constitutes a "populist turn", and that Corbyn's success can thus be contextualised within a broader turn to left-wing populism in Europe and the US.

In what follows, we interrogate the argument that Corbyn's Labour has taken a populist turn, and seek to draw out some broader implications of this discussion for how we understand contemporary radical politics more generally. Our arguments and conclusions may strike some as controversial. After an initial summary of existing scholarship on populism, we suggest that the revitalisation of grassroots left politics under Corbyn's leadership should not be read as evidence of a populist turn. What is more, we cast doubt on the usefulness of "populism" as a descriptor for recent forms of anti-establishment politics and suggest that academics, journalists and commentators should approach the term with more reflexivity and caution.

Jeremy Corbyn the Populist?

Within the academic study of politics, "populism" has become very much the *mot du jour*. A number of high profile political scientists have suggested that the rise of populism *against* mainstream liberal democracy has become one of the key features of contemporary politics. On the right, Trump, UKIP, Geert Wilders, Le Pen stand as exemplars, while from the left Podemos, Syriza and the now receding Latin American "Pink Tide" have all been cited as instances of a global populist wave.[2]

Given that populism can, it seems, assert itself on either side of the political spectrum, it comes as little surprise that numerous commentators have sought to cast Corbynism as a populist politics. Julian Baggini in the *Guardian* even ventured to suggest that Corbyn's politics is 'populism in its purest form'.[3] His populism, he argued, is 'based on the absoluteness of the "democratic mandate" given by Labour members and supporters, which renders null and void any dissent from Labour's "elites" in Westminster or Brussels'. More recently, John Gray in the *New Statesman,* after noting that Corbyn's politics has 'more than a little in common' with Trumpism, asserted that distinctive to Corbyn's populism is that it is 'populism for the middle classes, serving the material and psychological needs of the relatively affluent and the well-heeled'.[4]

Framings of Corbyn as a "populist", however, have not only come from his critics. In a post-election article for *The Independent*, left-wing academic Peter Bloom argued that Corbyn and his supporters have provided a vision of an inclusive populism: 'they have', Bloom noted, 'given traditionally marginalised groups such as young people, non-whites and the poor a renewed voice for shaping the country's present and future'.[5] This positive depiction of Corbyn as "populist" from a left-wing perspective is given further credence by the revelation that Corbyn's team itself sought to "re-launch" Jeremy Corbyn as a left-wing populist in early 2017, a move which arguably paid dividends following Labour's better than expected performance in June.

But is it accurate to characterise Corbynism as populist, and what might be at stake in such a depiction? For us, this is not merely a question of semantics: whether Corbynism is populist or not has, we shall argue, important implications for how one understands the internal dynamics and broader political significance of the Labour Party's current incarnation.

What is Populism?

To meaningfully evaluate characterisations of Corbyn as "populist", we need to have a more precise sense of what we mean by this term. Although it has become a platitude to say that populism is a highly contested concept, it is incorrect to the extent that two schools of thought now dominate the discussion and, of late, their points of overlap have overshadowed their differences. The first school of thought – popular in comparative politics – considers populism to be an *ideology.* This view is most famously defended by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, who casts populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', characterised by the belief that society is, fundamentally, divided into two antagonistic camps: the people and the elite. For Mudde, populist politics presents the people as morally pure and the elite as corrupt. For the populist, an effective politics is one that expresses and gives voice to the will of the (pure) people.[6] As a *thin* ideology, however, to become a fully-fledged politics, populism needs to attach itself to more established, "thick" ideologies such as nationalism or socialism, resulting in the emergence of right-wing populist nationalisms such as UKIP, or left-wing populisms in the mould of Podemos.

A rival school of thought, favoured among critical theorists, defines populism as a political *logic*, i.e. a particular way of constructing political relations. The key intellectual reference point here is the late Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau, particularly his 2005 work *On Populist Reason.*[7] Laclau's work generally stresses the importance of discourse, i.e. the ways in which struggles over meaning are central to politics. In *On Populist Reason* Laclau argued that populism emerges from a crisis of representation in which the legitimacy of dominant parties and institutions is called into question. In response, populist politics emerges when a series of anti-systemic demands are discursively linked together into a broad political project against a common enemy. Populist politics, for Laclau then, emerges when "politics as usual" breaks down and becomes

characterised by a heightened sense of antagonism sustained by a binary "us versus them"/"people versus elite" sensibility. In this context, a discursive appeal to "the people" (as opposed to, say, the "working class" or "the nation") becomes a distinguishing feature.[8]

A third, but much less examined, approach considers populism as primarily a set of *practices* (rather than a set of ideas or discourses). Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, for instance, understand populism to be a distinctive political style in which politicians signify proximity to "the people" through the adoption of rude or "non politically correct" forms of speech or comportment.[9] Margaret Canovan, on the other hand, argued in an influential 1999 article, that populism must be viewed in more expansive terms as a form of "redemptive" politics. For her, it is a social movement that draws hitherto apolitical people into politics, and claims legitimacy by appealing to "the people" in opposition to an unresponsive political elite.[10] Elsewhere, Robert Jansen argues that populism is a distinctive form of social mobilisation.[11] Finally, populism is, in journalistic commentary, often associated with charismatic leadership. Such a view is given its most famous scholarly defence in Kurt Weyland's analysis of populism in Latin America, which argued that populism is characterised by 'a personalistic leader [who] seeks or exercises government power through direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of followers'.[12]

There is considerable debate about the relative strengths and weaknesses of these differing portrayals of populism. Not having the space here to delve into these disputes, instead, we will briefly highlight three common themes that cut across these different perspectives. First, as the etymology of the word suggests, all schools of thought concur in their belief that some sort of rhetorical appeal to "the people" is central to all forms of populist politics, allowing though for variability in how "the people" are framed and understood. Second, all authors concur that populism is a politics of antagonism: it eschews consensus, tends towards polarisation and requires a collective or individual enemy to galvanise the troops. While for Mudde this conflict adopts the hue of a Manichaean confrontation in which a 'pure' people challenge a 'corrupt' elite, for Laclauians the conflict emerges in the context of unmet demands. Either way, we are presented with two unified blocs pitted against each other. Third, most scholarly work on populism places some stress on the role of a charismatic leader in galvanising this divisive politics. Any politics lacking *all* of these elements is unlikely to be populist in any meaningful sense.

Is Corbynism Populist?

So we can now finally turn to the question of whether Corbyn, and, perhaps by extension, the current incarnation of the British Labour Party, can meaningfully be described as populist. At first blush, it would seem that there is some evidence to suggest that Corbynism - i.e., the movement surrounding Corbyn, not just Corbyn the individual – does have populist inflections, vindicating the claims of Julian Baggini and others outlined above.

For one, in line with Canovan's notion of "redemptive" politics, Corbynism can quite plausibly be framed as a form of counter-hegemonic resistance to prevailing power structures, as well as the ideas and political elites that sustain them. After all, as is well known, Corbyn's ascendancy to the Labour leadership in 2015 was made possible, in part, by a wider backlash against what many saw as New Labour's complicity with neoliberalism. In contrast, Corbyn has sought to articulate a critique of inequality and the economic system that generates it, a sentiment encapsulated in his election campaign slogan 'for the many, not the few'. Such a commitment reflects Corbyn's and his supporters' faith in the capacity and creativity of ordinary people to positively shape their communities and, to this extent, reflects a belief in the participatory and utopian promises of democratic politics.

One could also emphasise the ways in which Corbyn as a political leader conducts himself in public. While his mode of rhetoric and comportment are at a distance from the classic populist model of leadership, his rapport with the "common man/woman", his "plain-speaking" style and his eschewal of some of the more stringent sartorial norms placed on politicians all serve to signify a degree of affinity with the wider public. The same could be said of his controversial (and now seemingly abandoned) strategy of crowd-sourcing questions for PMQs, a strategy akin to what some academics have called 'epistemological populism' (i.e. a politics that valorises the knowledge and experiences of ordinary citizens).[13] What is more, if one sees populism as a movement, strategy or form of mobilisation, then one could, without too great a conceptual leap, suggest that the large crowds, enthusiastic receptions and "oh Jeremy Corbyn" chants constitute a textbook example of populist mobilisation.

But this depiction of Corbynism as populist, we argue, is highly superficial. This is because none of the three key elements that recur in much of the populism literature – the centrality of "the people" as an organising political category, a heightened antagonism between two unified camps, and charismatic leadership – can be found in Corbyn's politics.

Turning to the first criteria, we find that "the people" is not a constituency that is regularly invoked by Corbyn as part of his rhetorical strategy. Indeed, after talking to a total of 80 left-wing activists, the majority of whom were supportive of his politics, we found that, as a political discourse, Corbynism centres more around 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, as others have also pointed out, has been the Labour Party, its members and its prospective supporters.[14] Similarly, Momentum activists speak to and about 'the movement' or the 'movement-party'[15], the precise components of which vary, but usually encompass Labour Party members, trade unions, social justice activists and various other groups, individuals and campaigns located on the left. In this sense then, neither Corbyn nor his supporters, apart from when they are in campaigning mode and need to reach out to voters, are

particularly interested in mobilising the notion of the 'people' as the appropriate subject of representation. In this way, Corbynism differs markedly from Podemos, for instance, which fully eschews the language of left and right, pitching *el pueblo* against *la casta* (a catch all term for political and economic elites).[16]

One possible rejoinder to this might be to say that the 2017 election campaign slogan – "for the many not the few" – implicitly evokes some idea of "the people" and is quintessentially populist in its casting of a people ("the many") against an elite ("the few"). However, there are two possible rebuttals to this. First, in populism proper (at least according to Cas Mudde and his followers) "the people" are framed as a unified entity with a *singular* collective will that requires expression at the level of formal politics. For Corbyn's supporters, by contrast, the "many" is precisely that, a *pluralistic* constituency marked by diversity and complexity rather than a singular collective will. Furthermore, we would argue that the language of the many and the few simply reflects a well-established left-wing idea: that the inequalities generated by the free market benefit a small privileged elite at the expense of a few. This in turn might suggest that *all* forms of left politics might seem superficially populist in that they are sustained by a critique of some sort of an elite (usually, but no means exclusively, framed as an all-too-powerful economic elite). And as political scientist Luke March has pointed out, "soft" appeals to "the people" against an "elite" are in fact ubiquitous in British politics, including on the left. However, March argues this phenomena should be referred to as *demoticisim*: that is, the frequent attempts by politicians to align themselves with ordinary voters, for instance by claiming that this or that policy is 'what the people want'. [17] But we should not confuse demoticism (i.e. politicians, sometimes including Corbyn, aligning themselves with ordinary voters through specific forms of speech or behaviour) with full-blown populism (in which "the people" becomes *the* central category).

With regard to the second recurrent theme in the populism literature – a heightened sense of antagonism amidst a 'crisis of representation' – there is equally little evidence to suggest that populism is running amok on the British left. This is because whatever else Corbynism represents, in our view, it cannot be reduced to a primarily negative politics sustained by the construction of an individual or collective enemy, morally corrupt or otherwise. After all, so far Corbyn has refused to evoke a class politics in which one class is pitted against another.[18] And leaving aside the odd reference to 'greedy bankers', he rarely conjures up images of a monolithic, intractable elite intentionally seeking to oppress the people. In fact when he does explicitly identify what he is against, it is more likely to take the form of past and present Tory governments and their concrete policies (such as tuition fees or benefit cuts) or more abstractly and importantly, the injustice of extreme structural inequalities and the disenfranchisement and deprivation that it causes and sustains. To this extent, Corbyn does not mobilise the friend/foe distinction, so crucial to all renditions of populism, as a catalyst for his politics, but focuses instead on patterns of collective behaviour – conscious and unconscious - that reproduce injustices and the choices we can make together to overturn them.

Finally, let us turn to the question of charismatic leadership. Here, some commentators have expressed concern that Corbyn's leadership – in keeping with the leader/led dynamics typical of populist politics – induces an uncritical, cult-like sensibility among his supporters.[19] However, we would argue that the strong affections that many Corbyn supporters feel towards Corbyn are best seen as a form of politicised fandom, rather than evidence of populism. Politicised fandom is characterised by a combination of strong feelings of attachment to a political figure alongside active, participatory membership of a fan community. Witness, for instance, the widespread use of Corbyn-themed memes, the existence of Jeremy Corbyn fan art, and his reception at Glastonbury with chants of "oh Jeremy Corbyn" to the tune of the riff from the White Stripes' *Seven Nation Army*.[20] But these instances of Corbyn fandom do not, in and of themselves, make Corbynism populist. For one, the active, participatory character of much 'Corbyn-mania' is at odds with the passivity often characteristic of citizens' support for populist politics and, second, for the reasons outlined above, Corbyn fandom is not sustained and legitimised through an appeal to the category of "the people". Thus, the interactions between Corbyn as leader and his supporters cannot in any meaningful way be described as populist.

In sum, to frame Corbynism as an instance of left-wing populism is to profoundly misread its core characteristics and/or to widen the category of populism so much that it becomes virtually meaningless. In the final section of this article we try to draw out some of the broader lessons from our discussion.

Populism: Handle with Care

Having hopefully debunked the argument that Corbynism is an instance of populism, further questions arise. If Corbynism is not populist, then what is it? And what are the broader implications of the populism question for the British left?

The first question clearly requires a much more sustained discussion of Corbynism than is possible here but, in very simplistic terms, we would describe Corbynism as a hybrid of social forces including more established, well networked left-wing coalitions such as the People's Assembly and Stop the War Coalition, as well as the left of Parliamentary Labour Party, parts of the trade union movement, and younger, more decentralist "horizontalist" left politics emerging from the student and Occupy movements of 2010-11. As one Corbyn supporter 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 … style'.[21] The polycephalous nature of Corbynism calls into question glib characterisations of it as populist or indeed as a return to a kind of 1970s style "hard" leftism. While some might consider the multifaceted nature of Corbynism a weakness, we would argue that it significantly expands opportunities for creative alliance-building. The future success of the Labour Party under Corbyn's leadership will likely depend in part

on the capacity of MPs, party members and supporters to make full use of the different insights, experiences and perspectives that these different strands present.

But what might the broader implications of our analysis be for the British left? For one, we argue for the continued salience of the left/right distinction. The advent of populism as a dominant trope in political commentary and scholarship has led to renewed calls to set aside the apparently anachronistic left-right distinction in favour of allegedly more up to date, relevant cultural/psychological framings of political conflict. Tony Blair's newly launched Institute of Global Change, for instance, prefers to focus on the tension that grows between 'globalisation's losers' and its 'winners'. This taps into a common feature of media commentary on populism: its proclivity to invoke a 'theory of the twin extremes' whereby it is suggested that left and right populism have much in common. John Gray's stress on similarities between Trump and Corbyn noted at the start of this article is a case in point, as were the frequent claims that Sanders' and Trump's politics are two sides of the same (populist) coin.

At best, in our view, this reflects lazy and even disingenuous thinking: in the end, such arguments often seek to consolidate the political dominance of the centre by casting any challenge to "sensible", "moderate" politics as populist.[22] In a context where "populism" is most often deployed in a pejorative sense, those of us who want to defend a left politics should guard against the current fashion to de-legitimise all collective efforts to resist calls to the centre ground as either dangerously utopian and naïve, or a form of extremism. At worst, it potentially amounts to what Philippe Marlière calls "demophobia", that is, a fear of democratic movements contesting the status quo.[23] Such claims also simply do not withstand analytic scrutiny. As Luke March argues in an empirical study of left and right populism, 'the underlying ('host') ideology [i.e. where the populism is positioned on the left/right spectrum] is more important than populism per se in explaining left- and right-wing populisms' essence'.[24] Thus, in his view, crucial and fundamental differences between left and right politics remain, despite the popularity of the centrist mantra that they are barely distinguishable.

To conclude, the term populism does not tell us a great deal about the reconfiguration of the Labour left under Jeremy Corbyn. Against the current vogue for casting populism as *the* definitive trend of contemporary politics, we have three alternative suggestions. First, that we consider deploying other, conceptually weightier, terms – demoticism, socialism, politicised fandom, nationalism, or even fascism in some cases – to describe the specificity and significance of contemporary forms of politics, especially given that "populism" in the hands of the media and politicians has become a vacuous, catch all phrase that seems to refer to everything and nothing. Second, that obituaries of the left and right in the wake of populist insurgencies are premature: indeed, if anything the left/right distinction is, in the UK and elsewhere, taking on a new prominence as the limitations of centrist politics become increasingly apparent. Third, although we want to stop short of saying one should *never* make reference to populism, we do think it would pay dividends to be much more circumspect.

Only by handling "populism" with more care will we be able to understand the machinations of contemporary left politics in all their complexity.

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Notes

[1] See S. Poole. 'The Word: Populism'. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/dec/30/culture-that-defines-2016-critics-choose-art-literature. Accessed 02/07/17.
[2] See, for example, B. Moffitt (2016), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
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[15] J. White and L. Ypi (2016), 'Factions and Parties: The New Partisanship'. *Renewal* 24 (2), pp. 27-35.

[16] A. Kioupkiolis (2016), 'Podemos: the ambiguous promises of left-wing populism in contemporary Spain'. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21 (2), 99-120.

[17] See L. March (2017), 'Left and Right Populism Compared: The British Case'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19 (2), pp. 282-303, p.284.

[18] Gilbert, Jeremy (2015), 'Corbyn: What's a Leader Really For?' https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/jeremy-gilbert/corbyn-whats-leader-really-for. Accessed 04/07/17.

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[20] See J. Dean (2017), 'Politicising Fandom', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19 (2): 408-424.

[21] Interview with Momentum activist, London 19/04/16.

[22] See, for example, Y. Stavrakakis (2014), 'The Return of "the People": Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis', *Constellations*, 21(4): 505–517.

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