

Forthcoming in *New Political Science*

Author: Lasse Thomassen

Title: Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation

Date of Publication Acceptance: 11 March 2019

Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation

Abstract

While best known today for his theories of discourse, hegemony and populism, Ernesto Laclau also has a distinctive theory of representation, which is developed in *On Populist Reason* in particular. Going beyond conventional conceptions of political representation, Laclau takes representation to be a general category and not just limited to formal political institutions, and he takes representation to be performative in that it also brings about what is represented. This paper examines the implications of this conceptualization of representation for Laclau's theory of populism. Laclau takes populism to be exemplary of his conception of representation because populism is a discourse that brings into being what it claims to represent: the people. This is important for current debates about populism and the crisis of democratic institutions, whether domestic or international. The aim here is to show how our conceptions of representation inform how we think about populism and liberal democracy, and specifically about populism as a threat to liberal democracy at the domestic or global level. I show this in the context of a reading of Jan-Werner Müller's influential critique of populism.

Keywords

Ernesto Laclau; Jan-Werner Müller; pluralism; populism; representation

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Frank Stengel, Lisa Disch, Allan Dreyer Hansen, Matheus Lock Santos, Dirk Nabers, David Watson and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier versions of the argument presented here.

Author

Lasse Thomassen

School of Politics & International Relations

Queen Mary, University of London

327 Mile End Road

London E14NS

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 207 882 6025

Email: l.thomassen@qmul.ac.uk

Author Biography

Lasse Thomassen is Reader in the School of Politics and International Relations. His current research focuses on the category of representation, new forms of radical politics, and deconstruction as method for political analysis. He is the author of, among others, *Deconstructing Habermas* (2007) and *British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation* (2017).

Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation

While better known for his theories of discourse, hegemony and populism, Ernesto Laclau also has a distinct theory of representation, which is developed in *On Populist Reason* in particular.¹ Laclau goes beyond conventional understandings of political representation in two ways: first, he does not limit representative politics to formal political institutions; and, second, he takes the act of representation to constitute – or construct – what is represented. In this article, I analyze the implications of thinking about representation in this way. I argue that Laclau provides us with an insightful theory of representation, but I also examine some of the limitations of it, suggesting ways of addressing those limitations. Laclau himself links his theory of representation to populism, and current debates about populism often link the emergence of populism to a crisis of representative institutions. Using Jan-Werner Müller’s recent influential work on populism, I show how Laclau’s theory of representation allows us to see what is at stake in current debates about populism and, especially, the liberal critique of populism as anti-pluralist. In these debates, the concept of “populism” is often ambiguous, the result being that it is difficult to distinguish populism from what is not populism, let alone distinguish between different types of populism. As Frank Stengel, David MacDonald and Dirk Nabers point out, this is particularly so in IR scholarship.² By analyzing Laclau’s and Müller’s theories of populism through the lens of representation, I hope to clarify some of the conceptual issues surrounding populism as well as what is at stake when different conceptions of populism and representation are brought into play.

¹ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

² Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, ‘Introduction: Analyzing the Nexus Between Populism and International Relations’, in Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers (eds), *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions* (London: Palgrave, 2019), pp. 2-3.

Representation and Populism

With his conception of representation, Laclau breaks with those who think of political representation in terms of the correspondence between principals' (citizens, constituencies, voters) interests and the agents acting on their behalf. When mediated through the proper political institutions, this relationship between represented and representatives can then be labelled democratic.³ Some, but not all, of this literature relies on a view of rational agents seeking to maximize their interests.⁴ Laclau rejects this model of rational man, but his theory of representation goes beyond that to reject any conception of political representation that takes representation as a matter of correspondence (or not) between a state of affairs and the representation of that state of affairs. In other words, we do not first have the interests of individuals or of the people and *then* a representation of those interests; rather, representation – whether by social activists or by formal representatives – is constitutive of what is represented.

Contemporary political theory of representation has seen two developments over the last two decades. There is, first, the so-called representative turn.⁵ Here, representation is placed at the heart of democracy and politics, and representation is not reduced to a matter of formal political institutions, whether domestic or international. So, for example, one might

³ For recent examples, see Jane Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation," *American Political Science Review* 97:4 (2003), pp. 515-28; and Andrew Rehfeld, "Towards a General Theory of Political Representation," *Journal of Politics* 68:1 (2006), pp. 1-21.

⁴ For instance, Navin Kartik, Richard Van Weelden, and Stephane Wolton, "Electoral Ambiguity and Political Representation," *American Journal of Political Science* 61: 4 (2017), pp. 958-70.

⁵ Nadia Urbinati and Mark E. Warren, "The Concept of Representation in Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), pp. 387-412; and Sofia Näsström, "Where is the Representative Turn Going?" *European Journal of Political Theory* 10:4 (2011), pp. 501-10.

think of Oxfam or U2's Bono as engaged in representative politics.⁶ The extension of the categories of democratic and political representation beyond formal institutions has been facilitated by a change in the unit of analysis from institutions, elections, officials, and so on, to "representative claims," to use Michael Saward's now influential terminology.⁷ Doing so takes us beyond those such as Jane Mansbridge and Andrew Rehfeld who – while gesturing beyond formal political institutions – want to retain the link between democratic representation and formal institutions.⁸

A second development in contemporary political theory of representation is what is sometimes referred to as a constructivist turn. Here, representation is taken, not as the reflection of already existing interests and identities, but as constitutive of those interests and identities.⁹ In Saward's terminology, a representative claim is a performative act that brings into being what it purports to represent.¹⁰ This idea is at the heart of Saward's and Lisa Disch's works, where they conceptualize political representation as "shape-shifting" (Saward) and "mobilizing" (Disch) constituencies.¹¹ Intellectually, Laclau is part of this constructivist turn, even if he published well before the turn, and even if few scholars working within the constructivist turn engage with his work.¹²

⁶ Laura Montanaro, *Who Elected Oxfam? A Democratic Defense of Self-Appointed Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 148-50.

⁷ Saward, *The Representative Claim*; Michael Saward, "Shape-Shifting Representation," *American Political Science Review* 108:4 (2014), pp. 723-36.

⁸ Mansbridge, "Rethinking Representation;" and Rehfeld, "Towards a General Theory of Political Representation."

⁹ Lisa Disch, "The 'Constructivist Turn' in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?" *Constellations* 22:4 (2015), pp. 487-99; Lisa Disch, Mathijs van de Sande, and Nadia Urbinati, *The Constructivist Turn in Political Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); and Näsström, "Where is the Representative Turn Going?"

¹⁰ Saward, *The Representative Claim*.

¹¹ Saward, "Shape-Shifting Representation;" and Lisa Disch, "Towards a mobilization conception of political representation," *American Political Science Review* 105:1 (2011), pp. 100-14.

¹² For an exception, see Lisa Disch, "The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy," *Cultural Studies* 26:2-3 (2012), pp. 207-22.

In his earlier work, Laclau connected populism to a crisis of transformism, that is, the inability of a system to pacify resistance to it by transforming antagonisms into positions within the (liberal-democratic) system – in short, a crisis of representation.¹³ In his major work on populism, *On Populist Reason*, Laclau explicitly links representation to populism. He writes that “[t]he crisis of representation ... is at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst.”¹⁴ The idea is the same: the populist articulation of particular demands as the demands of “the people” is possible because they are not represented within the system as particular demands. He adds that the category of populism is the royal road to understanding not only “the nature and logic of the formation of collective identities” and “the ontological constitution of the political as such,” but also the category of representation.¹⁵ What populism and representation share, according to Laclau, is a performative dimension: a populist discourse constructs a people; and a representative claim does not simply reflect an already constituted state of affairs, but simultaneously constitutes it. Populist discourse is performative because the people does not exist independently of the claims to represent the people: “the construction of a ‘people’ would be impossible without the operation of mechanisms of representation.”¹⁶ The people is representational in this sense: it is an effect of representative claims. Where others, like Müller, interpret the representational character of the populist people in terms of manipulation, for Laclau it lays bare the anti-essentialist character of politics more generally. *All* politics is representational, and populism – properly understood – shows us that politics is about the representation, or construction, of identities and interests rather than their proper reflection in political institutions.

¹³ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: NLB, 1977).

¹⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ix, 67, 163.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

Critics of populism also connect representation and populism. Müller is a particularly influential voice in academic and popular debates about populism and democracy.¹⁷ Müller places populism within the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. For him, populism concerns the relationship between elites and the people: populism is a critique of (current) political elites and their inability to properly represent the people.¹⁸ At the same time, populists claim “that they, and they alone, represent the people.”¹⁹ The claim to represent the people is a form of identity politics, according to Müller: it is a claim about the moral character of the people, and it is a claim that represents, and thereby fixes, the limits of the people in a certain way that is “exclusionary” and anti-pluralist.²⁰ In this way, populism and representation are closely linked. Echoing political elites, public commentators and the mainstream media, Müller decries the dangers of the populist “peril:”

The danger to democracies today ... is populism – a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals (‘Let the people rule!’). The

¹⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, “‘The people Must be Extracted from Within the People:’ Reflections on Populism,” *Constellations* 21:4 (2014), pp. 483-93; Jan-Werner Müller, “Behind the New German Right,” *The New York Review of Books Online*, 14 April 2016, available online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/04/14/behind-new-german-right-afd/>; Jan-Werner Müller, “Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy,” *The Guardian*, 2 September 2016, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>; and Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017). For similar recent critiques of populism, see Paulina Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the People,” *Theory & Event* 20:1 (2017), pp. 92-9; William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), especially chapter 3; Fabio Wolkenstein, “Populism, Liberal Democracy and the Ethics of Peoplehood,” *European Journal of Political Theory* AOP November 20, 2016, DOI: 10.1177/1474885116677901.

¹⁸ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world [and] the end result is a form of politics that is blatantly antidemocratic.²¹

Although Müller writes here of “democracy,” it is clear from the context that he has in mind liberal democracy. Like Müller, others also see populism as a response to a crisis of the institutions of the liberal world order.²² This is what we see when leaders of the European Union represent populism as a threat to economic and political stability and to the ensemble of rights established at the level of the Union. Populism is seen as the response to the discrepancy between, on one hand, the promise of the liberal democratic institutions to mediate social and political conflicts and, on the other hand, the realities of globalization for big sectors of the population. The populism of “my people first” is here interpreted as a reaction to the failure of liberal democratic institutions to represent the people as opposed to the interests of political and economic elites. For Müller, who defends liberal democracy from a position on the Left, the problem is neoliberalism and technocracy, and the problem with populists is their failure to appreciate liberal democratic institutions and party competition as the framework for developing alternatives to neoliberalism and technocracy.²³

In the following, I analyze Laclau’s theory of representation in order to show how it contributes to our understanding of the category of political representation. While broadly in

²¹ Ibid., 11 and 6.

²² For instance, Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, “The Liberal Order Is Rigged,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:3 (2017), 36-44; Francis Fukuyama and Robert Muggah, “Populism Is Poisoning the Global Liberal Order,” *The Globe and Mail*, 29 January 2018, available online at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/populism-is-poisoning-the-global-liberal-order/article37777370/>; G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018), pp. 7-23; and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Will the Liberal Order Survive?” *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017), pp. 10-16.

²³ Similarly, Christopher Bickerton, “Populism and Technocracy: Opposites or Complements?” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20:2 (2017), pp. 186-206; Daniele Carami, “Will Vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government,” *American Political Science Review* 111:1 (2017), pp. 54-67.

agreement with Laclau's approach, I also identify its limitations and show how they might be addressed. I then connect Laclau's theory of representation to populism. Laclau and Müller share a view of the people as representational, but they draw very different conclusions from this. Müller thinks of the populist representation of the people as the imposition, from above, of a particular image of the people onto the pluralism of society. For Laclau, representation is not unidirectional, and so the success of any representation of the people depends on the uptake by society. What is more, to say that the people is representational is to acknowledge that it will always be heterogeneous and divided. While this is no guarantee against homogenizing representations of the people, Laclau's theory of representation helps explain what defenders of liberal democracy, such as Müller, find perilous about populism as well as showing the limitations of their critique of populism.

Laclau's Theory of Representation

Laclau's theory of representation breaks with conventional approaches in two ways: first, representation is a general category; and, second, representation is constitutive of what is represented, whether it is the interests of the people or the identities of social groups.

Laclau's background is in Marxism, and so I start from how he moves beyond more traditional Marxist conceptions of representation. One can link this back to his formative years on the Argentinian Left in the 1950s and 1960s: the liberal oligarchies in Latin America taught him the importance of mass movements and that representation is more than formal institutions, but he also rejected the orthodox Marxist view that reduces politics to the representation of the true interests of the working class.

From Representation to Articulation, and Back

Laclau first became more widely known outside Marxist circles with his and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985. That book contains two conceptions of representation, one of which they reject. There is, first, "the model of representation" they find in Marxist thought. According to this model, representation, and specifically political representation, is "a bare stage on which characters constituted beyond them – the classes – wage their struggle."²⁴ Representation is conceived as a surface reflecting an underlying essence: the class character of contemporary capitalist society. Nothing happens in representation, which is nothing but a transparent medium and is wholly governed by underlying logics of History. If representation distorts the underlying class contradictions of capitalist society, it can be explained as the cunning of capitalism. "In this way," Laclau and Mouffe conclude, "all concrete problems concerning the practice of representation are simply eliminated."²⁵ This is so because "the practice of representation" is reduced to a secondary and derivative status. One finds this in various forms, but perhaps the crudest form is the formulation of the base-superstructure model in Marx's "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where the superstructures are both distinguished from and reduced to the economic base with its logics of the mode of production.²⁶

This model of representation is not limited to Marxism, and it exists whenever the world is divided into two levels: representation and what is represented, for instance a portrait and the person portrayed, human rights institutions and human dignity, or ideology and the mode of production. The level of representation is at once distinguished from and reduced to what is represented. The process of representation is unidirectional: not only does the level of

²⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 65.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 5-10.

representation not affect the represented, but representation can be reduced to a reflection of the represented, even if the representation is distorted. According to this view of representation, there is no reason to study representation in its own right, only as the true or false reflection of something else, that is, as a symptom. Like so many other post-structuralists, Laclau and Mouffe reject this model of representation.²⁷

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe oppose to this model of representation what they call articulation, which refers to “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”²⁸ Articulation is performative; it does not merely reflect but constitutes what is articulated. On this view, collective identities are “not the expression of a common underlying essence but the result of political construction and struggle.”²⁹ Articulation is not a level of the social, distinct from, and reduced to, some underlying logic; instead, articulation is the terrain in which the social is constituted.

When Laclau and Mouffe speak of hegemony, it is as an articulatory practice. Hegemony, or hegemonic articulation, articulates identities in a new way. This is what hegemony and counter-hegemony are about: the dis-articulation and re-articulation of identities. The social is not taken as a given social fact but is constituted through articulatory practices. Articulation is neither distinct from nor reduced to the social; it is constitutive of the social, what Laclau and Mouffe also refer to as discourse.³⁰ When Laclau and Mouffe refer to the social or to discourse, they often refer to social identities, but discourse also refers to interests, norms, institutions, economic “laws,” and so forth. The turn from representation

²⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Ethics and Representation: From Kant to Post-Structuralism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

²⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 105.

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

³⁰ Ibid., 105. Note that, whether we are talking about representation or discourse, they are material. Ibid., 107-9; and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” *New Left Review* 166 (1987), pp. 86-9.

to articulation is not a simple rejection of representation, however. Rather, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* makes a critique of a traditional model of representation and goes on, in the rest of the book, to treat representation as articulation: as performative and constitutive and as a general category.³¹

Laclau and Mouffe's engagement with the category of representation thus mirrors their engagement with the category of hegemony. They deconstruct the Marxist model of representation and then argue that representation is a general category. For them, the conception of representation as performative and constitutive is not simply another conception of representation, but a general theory of how representation works.³² The argument is similar to the deconstructive argument Laclau and Mouffe make about the category of hegemony, which they argue is not a secondary category, but general and constitutive. As I will show below, Laclau makes a similar argument about populism, which he argues shows something general about politics, namely that all politics is representational.

Towards a Systematic Theory of Representation as Performative

In his later work, Laclau developed a more systematic theory of representation as performative and constitutive.³³ Populism and the construction of a people are, for Laclau, the paradigmatic example of representation as performative and constitutive:

³¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 58, 119, 121.

³² Laclau and Mouffe's argument mirrors that of Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

³³ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 85, 87, 97-100; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 157-64; Ernesto Laclau, "Reply," *Cultural Studies* 26: 2-3 (2012), pp. 391-4. Critically, see Bickerton, "Populism and Technocracy: Opposites or Complements?;" Disch, "The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy."

Constructing a ‘people’ is not simply the application to a particular case of a general theory of representation which could be formalized at a more abstract level; it is, on the contrary, a *paradigmatic* case, because it is *the* one which reveals representation for what it is: the primary terrain of constitution of social objectivity.³⁴

Laclau’s theory of populism emerges from a critique of the way in which Marxist theory has relegated populism to a secondary status in much the same way as hegemony and representation. Laclau’s work can be understood as an attempt to understand populism through a revision of Marxist categories in the first instance and, later, as a generalization of the logic of populism as a general logic of hegemony and politics. For Laclau, “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.”³⁵ This is so because populism reveals representation as the terrain in which identities – here, the people – are constituted.

Whereas the representation of classes is treated by Marxist theory as the reflection of already existing interests, the representation of the people becomes a paradigmatic case of the representation of an entity – “the people” – which is brought into being by invoking it. For Laclau, populism – and any discourse in which the construction of a people is central, for instance fascism – are phenomena that Marxist theory cannot account for, and which Marxist practice has difficulties dealing with, because Marxist theory and practice takes representation to be the reflection of already constituted interests. These interests are missing in the case of the people, which is not real in the same way that classes are taken to be real, and so populism becomes a form of misrepresentation: it papers over class antagonism through the false promise of a shared interest of the people. By doing so, populism functions

³⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

ideologically to direct attention away from the class nature capitalism. In the context of debates about populism, it is the constitutive character of representation that makes Marxists and liberals wary of populist representations of the people. For Marxists, populists manipulate the working class into thinking they are first and foremost part of the people and divided from the working class in other countries; for liberals, populists manipulate citizens to think that they are divided into a “true” people and a “corrupt” one, and that they are not all in the same boat defined by liberal democratic institutions. Laclau agrees with Marxists about the antagonistic nature of politics, but he disagrees with them on the nature of antagonism; he disagrees with liberals because he thinks that they do not acknowledge the inherently antagonistic nature of politics and society.

With Laclau we get a general theory of representation as performative. However, I would like to address three closely connected issues with Laclau’s theory of representation. They concern (a) what is beyond representation, (b) the plasticity of representation, and (b) the sovereignty of the representative. All of these issues are important for how we understand populism and the representation of the people.

(a) For Laclau, there is nothing beyond representation, or, to be precise, there is no being that is extra-representational. Laclau and Mouffe distinguish between the being and the existence of something.³⁶ The being of something – for instance, “this computer” or “the British state” – has a being for us insofar as it is part of a meaningful practice, what they call discourse. The distinction is introduced in response to those who argued that, for Laclau and Mouffe, everything is discourse. The distinction posits something beyond discourse, namely “existence”, for instance an earthquake. However, the distinction gets Laclau and Mouffe embroiled in a problem they sought to avoid by rejecting the notion of something extra-

³⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 82-4; see also Thomas Decreus, “Beyond Representation? A Critique of the Concept of the Referent,” *Representation* 49: 1 (2013), pp. 33-43.

representational: either the distinction posits some presence beyond representation, namely the category of existence and the distinction between being and existence; or, if the category and the distinction are themselves representational, the representational is extended to what was supposedly beyond representation. It is more than a philosophical problem, however. For instance, one might think of “the people” as the being of the existence of “flesh and blood individuals.” However, this would be to reintroduce a hierarchical distinction between a primary reality (flesh and blood individuals) and a secondary and derived representation (the people), and we would be back with the model of representation that Laclau and Mouffe rejected.³⁷

The solution to this problem in Laclau’s theory of hegemony is to think of representation not as articulation of meanings out of the blue, but as re-articulation of already existing meanings. There is always something beyond any particular representation, namely already existing representations, which are being re-represented and, as such, rearticulated. Representation always takes place in a terrain that is partly sedimented, “citing” existing identities and structures. To say that representation is performative, and that it “constructs” what it represents, does not mean that representation constructs what is represented *ex nihilo*. Rather, representation re-presents already existing meanings, practices and structures. Here we can think of Derrida’s work on the performative, where the performative is interpreted as iteration, that is, as re-articulation or re-representation. What is more, the performative representation gets its force from citing representations of, for instance, the people that are already taken as authoritative.³⁸

³⁷ Lasse Thomassen, *British Multiculturalism and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 33-6.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988); Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, “The Uses of Equality,” in Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (eds), *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 329-44.

(b) A related point concerns the plasticity of representation. To explain how a discourse comes into being, Laclau and Mouffe distinguished between moments and elements. A discourse is made of up moments, which are “differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse.” Elements refer to “any difference that is not discursively articulated,” and, because meaning is discursive, elements must be devoid of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105). Laclau’s style of writing is often to assert a strong distinction only to qualify it later, either explicitly or implicitly. This is also the case here when Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 106-7, 110, 113) later point out that there are no pure moments and no pure elements. Pure moments would be fixed as part of a fixed structure, and it would be impossible to dis-articulate them from their current articulation. Pure elements would not have any being and would not even be noise, as noise is already discursively articulated (as noise). Put differently, we are always somewhere between elements and moments. To use Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985, 113) phrase, any signifier is more or less “floating” and can be articulated in new ways, but no signifier is completely free-floating. Representation takes place in this partly sedimented, partly floating terrain. whether the result of a representative claim is to reproduce existing meanings or to change them, representation starts from and is limited by existing representations.

(c) When discussing representation and populism, Laclau makes a distinction between concept and name.³⁹ While a concept is meant to reflect an essence in a transparent way, a name performatively constitutes what is named; in Laclau’s words, “the name becomes the ground of” what is named.⁴⁰ We have here the opposition between the traditional conception of representation where, in the case of the concept, the concept and the essence it represents

³⁹ Laclau in Butler and Laclau, “The Uses of Equality,” pp. 342-4; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 100-10.

⁴⁰ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 100; see also *ibid.*, 108.

are united in a homology; and, in the case of the name, representation is performative and fully plastic.

What Laclau does not address is the fact that naming as a pure performative assumes a sovereign subject – the namer – who can shape the world at his will (and this image of the sovereign subject is usually gendered). However, this subject can only be constituted as sovereign and as capable of naming through a process of recognition, which makes the subject dependent on other subjects and on structures within society – and, so, less than fully sovereign. What is more, naming only works insofar as it draws on existing names and norms, and insofar as it is recognized by others as an act of naming.⁴¹ Pure naming, if it were possible, would be a kind of private language that would not resonate with others. Naming always takes place within an already partly sedimented terrain that limits what can meaningfully be named in one way or another. This is the challenge facing left-wing populists in Europe where “populism” and speaking in the name of “the people” are usually associated with right-wing populism and even fascism. As a result, even the left-populist Podemos, which is inspired by Laclau’s theory of populism, have avoided representing themselves as populist.⁴²

While always performative, representation cannot be reduced to a sovereign act of naming. There is a tendency in Laclau to suggest that the populist leader constructs the people in this way,⁴³ but, as he notes elsewhere, naming is always a form of re-naming.⁴⁴ This is important for populism. Any name must be recognized, or taken up, by an audience, who can talk back in the name of the name, for instance in the name of “the people.”⁴⁵ Through

⁴¹ Derrida, *Limited Inc.*

⁴² Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: In the Name of the People* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016), pp. 125-7.

⁴³ For instance, Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 182-3.

⁴⁴ Laclau in Butler and Laclau, “The Uses of Equality,” p. 344.

⁴⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 108; Disch, “The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy,” p. 219.

repetition, the name of the people becomes a subject position that, while partly determined through the populist leader's articulation of it, can function as the basis for resistance and re-articulation. Even if popular is not the same as populist, the populist representation of the people must be popular in this sense that it must resonate with an audience, including those who are interpellated by the representation of the people. The populist leader or movement that singlehandedly manipulates the people in their own image is a fiction. Although Andrew Arato may be wrong to reduce Laclau's theory of representation and populism to a one-way relationship, Laclau often veers in this direction.⁴⁶ But if understood in the way I have suggested here, representation – populist or not – cannot be reduced to a one-way performative relationship, where a representative claim creates the represented out of the blue as if it were fully plastic.

Representing the People: Equivalence, Empty Signifiers and Pluralism

For Laclau, the people is an effect of populist discourse, and the people is representational in the sense that populism is not a reflection of an already existing people. The mechanism for the representation of a people is that different particular demands are articulated into a chain of equivalence. The equivalence is established negatively through a shared antagonistic opposition to the establishment, and positively through an empty signifier – for instance, a leader – representing the chain as a whole. The people, then, is a chain of equivalence, where the links between the different demands are contingent, and where the equivalence is not identity because the differences between the demands are not entirely cancelled out. The empty signifier is only tendentially empty because it is at once one among other signifiers (or

⁴⁶ Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism," *Social Research* 80:1 (2013), pp. 161-2.

demands) in the chain and represents the chain as a whole. The links between different parts of the people and the link between the empty signifier and the chain are representational: they are contingent, and they constitute the people in one way or another.⁴⁷

While contingent, the representation of the people is not accidental, but shaped and limited by existing meanings. Given that representation takes place in an already partly sedimented discursive terrain, some signifiers will be more likely than others to become representative of the people. The people – and the empty signifier representing it – is not necessarily gendered or racialized as suggested by Naomi Schor and Benjamin McKean.⁴⁸ This does not exclude an analysis of how, over time, the people has become associated with, for example, white, European males. It is precisely when we take the elevation of a particular signifier to play the role of empty signifier as *contingent* that such an empirical and historical analysis becomes possible and necessary. Thus, one might ask how emptiness has come to be associated with whiteness and masculinity, whereas non-whiteness and femininity have become associated with particularity and difference. And one might ask, how this plays out in different representations of the people, of who belongs to the people, and who does not.

Although we cannot say a priori which identities are excluded from, and marginalized within, the people, we can say that there will always be exclusion and marginalization. There is first the antagonistic other – the establishment, for instance – which is excluded from the people. There is also what Laclau refers to as heterogeneity, namely identities that fit neither within the people nor on the other side of the antagonistic frontier.⁴⁹ Within the chain of equivalence – that is, within the people – there is also heterogeneity because of the differences between different parts of the chain and between the empty signifier and parts of

⁴⁷ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, chapters 4 and 5.

⁴⁸ Naomi Schor, “French Feminism is a Universalism,” *differences* 7:1 (1995), pp. 15-47; and Benjamin L. McKean, “Toward an Inclusive Populism? On the Role of Race and Difference in Laclau’s Politics,” *Political Theory* 44:6 (2016), pp. 797-820.

⁴⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, chapter 5.

the chain. At the same time, some demands or identities are better represented by the empty signifier than others, and so the latter are marginalized. We end up with a people that is internally pluralist and fuzzy around the edges, but also a people that is striated and from which some will be excluded. For Laclau, there is no way to construct a people that is not marked by power relations and exclusion. At the same time, dis-articulation and re-articulation is always possible because the moments of the people – to use Laclau and Mouffe’s terms from above – are never completely fixed. Not only are the different parts of the people partly floating, but so is the identity of the people.⁵⁰

In sum, for Laclau, the people is representational: the people does not exist, and so it must be represented in order to come into being. The representative claims constituting the people are only successful insofar as they draw on existing representations of the people and insofar as they are taken up by other agents; representation may be performative, but it is not an act of pure naming, as if such a thing were possible. Finally, there is no people without exclusion, but nor is there a people whose identity and limits can be fixed once and for all; the identity of the people is inherently floating, even if not always to the same degree.

The People Does Not Exist

To show the implications of Laclau’s theory of representation, I turn to Jan-Werner Müller’s critique of populism.⁵¹ Müller defends liberal democracy against populism and draws upon, among others, Jürgen Habermas and Claude Lefort. Müller’s examples of populism are

⁵⁰ Benjamin McKean overlooks this ineradicable heterogeneity and reduces equivalence to sameness, leading him to think that Laclau argues that populism equals homogenization in both theory and practice. McKean, “Toward an Inclusive Populism?” On the heterogeneity of the people, see also Lisa Disch, “Minnesota and the ‘Populism’ of Political Opposition,” *Theory & Event* 3:2 (1999); and Ochoa Espejo, “Populism and the People.”

⁵¹ Müller, “The people Must be Extracted from Within the People;” and Müller, *What Is Populism?*

usually right-wing, authoritarian forms of populism, but he is also concerned with populism as a strategy for the Left in the current conjuncture of neoliberal technocracy.⁵² I bring Laclau and Müller into conversation around the nature and role of populist representations of the people. I will show how looking at populism through Laclau's theory of representation helps explain what defenders of liberal democracy, such as Müller, find perilous about populism as well as showing the limitations of their critique of populism.

On this Laclau and Müller agree, at least at first sight: the people does not exist, and therefore it needs to be represented. In Müller's words:

democratic representation ... is not about a mechanical reproduction of objectively given interests and identities; rather, the latter are dynamically formed in the process of politicians (as well as civil society, friends, neighbors, etc.) making political offers of representation and citizens then responding in one way or another.⁵³

Laclau and Müller differ on how the people can be represented democratically. According to Müller, "populists claim that they, and *only they*, represent the people."⁵⁴ Not only that, but populists claim to transparently represent the will of the people, and that the people is "morally pure and fully unified."⁵⁵ Whereas Laclau believes that the populist people is

⁵² This much is also clear from Müller's comments on Laclau's work. Müller, "The people Must be Extracted from Within the People," pp. 483-4, 491, 493 n31; and Müller, *What Is Populism?*, pp. 69, 98. Müller does not comment on Chantal Mouffe's recent work on populism where she follows Laclau's definition of populism, but it is clear that he would be equally critical of her position. See Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁵³ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 107.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

heterogeneous and contestable, Müller concludes that “[t]he core claim of populism is ... a moralized form of antipluralism.”⁵⁶

Müller characterizes the populist representation of the people as “fictional,”⁵⁷ an “illusion,”⁵⁸ and a “fantasy.”⁵⁹ The populist representation of the people is “symbolic,”⁶⁰ and this is opposed to the representation of the people through “existing democratic procedures.”⁶¹ This is the crux of the matter. Müller is not saying that it is illegitimate to represent the people. In fact, for him, democracy consists of the competition between contestable representative claims, including claims to represent the people.⁶² However, those claims only take on a “proper democratic form” insofar as they are mediated by the right institutions;⁶³ this mediation prevents the moral and political closure that populism aims at, according to Müller. Those institutions are the institutions of liberal/constitutional democracy, what Müller also calls intermediate institutions, following Nadia Urbinati.⁶⁴ Here the demise of the political party is singled out because political parties institutionalize the competition between representative claims.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁷ Müller, ““The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,”” pp. 485, 487, 491; Müller, *What Is Populism?*, pp. 20, 27.

⁵⁸ Müller, ““The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,”” p. 491; Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Müller, ““The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,”” p. 491.

⁶⁰ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, pp. 27, 34, 39. There is no direct reference here to Hannah Pitkin’s account of symbolic representation, but Müller’s argument is similar to Pitkin’s. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), chapter 5. For Laclau on Pitkin, see Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 159-63; for critiques of Laclau’s reading of Pitkin, see Arato, “Political Theology and Populism,” pp. 160-2; and Disch, “The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy.”

⁶¹ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 27.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 68-71.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 68.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 35-7. Nadia Urbinati, “A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies.” *Constellations* 22:4 (2015), pp. 477-86.

⁶⁵ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, pp. 78-9. Similarly, Carami, “Will Vs. Reason.”

Symbolic representations of the people are opposed to “empirical” ones.⁶⁶ “Empirical” here refers to “the people in its empirical entirety” and “the actual input and continuous influence by citizens divided amongst themselves.”⁶⁷ In the case of empirical claims, the people speaks through liberal democratic institutions; in the case of symbolic claims, the people is spoken for, and constructed by, the populist leader.⁶⁸ In the first case, we have pluralism, in the second case, monism. The difference is that, in the second case, representation is one-way: from populist leader to the people. This is why, for Müller, populist representative claims are manipulative. Therefore, although empirical representative claims are given legitimacy through electoral competition, even when populists win elections, they do not have “automatic democratic legitimacy,” because the populist representation is inherently manipulative.⁶⁹

By contrast, Müller’s “people of individuals” is constituted as the people by the liberal democratic institutions, for instance by citizenship and voting rights as well as by institutional limits on what are legitimate representative claims.⁷⁰ However, institutions are not transparent media for the expression of what Müller calls “the people in its empirical entirety;” the “empirical” people must first be identified as the people, and this is the “symbolic” dimension of representation. Any set of institutions will express – represent – an image of who belongs and how they belong. Müller almost concedes the point when he writes that he “has tacitly taken for granted the existence of an *actual people* as an empirically verifiable number.”⁷¹ He has indeed, but he insists that the populist answer to the boundary problem – the question of who belongs, and who does not belong, to the people – “is based

⁶⁶ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 39.

⁶⁷ Müller, “The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,” pp. 485, 487.

⁶⁸ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁷¹ Müller, “The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,” p. 491.

on a fiction.”⁷² Yet, there is no solution to the boundary problem that is not based on a “fiction,” because the people does not exist other than as representations of it. If the people is representational, it is constituted in the terrain of representation, whether through representative claims by a populist leader or through the representative claims sedimented in liberal democratic institutions. The people is symbolic and fictional, but not as opposed to an actual people that exists elsewhere; there is no empirical people independently of a symbolic people. We cannot go back to the view of representation that divides the world into two levels: an empirical people and a symbolic people. This is why Laclau argues that democracy is always representative: the demos of democracy cannot rule in an unmediated way, and it only exists as an effect of representations of it, whether by populists or by liberal democratic institutions. There is no demos – neither as a collection of individuals nor as substantive community – that can speak in an unmediated way. Müller is right when he writes that the populist claim to directly represent the people is always mediated by the particularity of the leader.⁷³ But this extends to any representation of the people, including the institutions framing the competition between representations of the people. There is no unmediated people.

The mediation – that is, representation – of the people does not amount to a one-way relationship where a populist movement or a political institution fixes the limits of the people once and for all. The “symbolic” constitution of the people can always be contested. This is so because, as argued above, the representative claim about the people depends for its effect on being taken up, and so people can talk back in the name of the representative claim: “that’s not *our* people,” “*we* are also part of the people,” and so on. Representation is the terrain of democracy, and so we can think of democracy as a regime where different

⁷² Ibid., p. 491.

⁷³ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 37.

representations – for instance, representations of the people – struggle for hegemony. And for Laclau, it is important to multiply the sites of representation of the people, a point very much in line with Müller.⁷⁴

Pluralist Populism?

One of the most contentious issues surrounding populism today is its relationship to pluralism. As I have shown, for Laclau, populism is always pluralist, but also always exclusionary. This is important in the context of a distinction Laclau makes between internal (populist) and external (ethno-populist) frontiers of the people.⁷⁵ Whereas populism always divides the people from within (for instance, “we are the 99%”) and is always pluralist, “[t]here is no possibility of pluralism for ethno-populism,” which Laclau does not count as populism proper.⁷⁶ Ethno-populism corresponds to Müller’s populism of “we are the 100%,” that is, “we are the whole people.”⁷⁷ While it is not entirely clear from Laclau’s text whether “ethno-populism” is a variant of populism or something entirely different, he gives as examples the nationalisms of the former Yugoslavia.

Laclau’s populist people is not *one*. The unity of the people never arrives, and there is no people without exclusion, and so any representation of the people is haunted by, and can be questioned in the name of, the gap between the people and the particular representation of it. This must also apply to what Laclau calls ethno-populism: given the constitutive character of representation, *no* discourse – including an ethno-populist one – asserting a homogeneous people will be successful in realizing homogeneity, and the claim to closure and wholeness

⁷⁴ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 99.

⁷⁵ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 196-8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁷⁷ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 20.

will always be just that: a claim. This sort of claim can still have profound effects when the link between a charismatic leader and the people becomes so sedimented that dissenters are persecuted in the name of the people. Laclau uses Mugabe in Zimbabwe as an example of this, where populism turns into authoritarianism, and he opposes Mugabe to Nyerere in Tanzania. In the case of Mugabe, the vertical relationship between the leader/regime completely trumps the horizontal relations among the heterogeneous parts of the people, and so “we can no longer speak of populism.”⁷⁸ In the case of Nyerere, “a democratic balance” between verticality and horizontality ensured that agonistic struggles between different representations of the people could take place.⁷⁹ The point remains that there is nothing in Laclau’s theory that predetermines an anti-pluralist populism, but nor is there anything that precludes more homogeneous and exclusionary representations of the people. The question of what kind of populism we have in front of us is a context-specific political question in need of empirical analysis.

The relationship between populism and pluralism is important for current debates about left populism. For Laclau and for Mouffe, there is no doubt that left populism can be pluralist; for them, pluralism goes hand in hand with the contingent nature of identities and institutions.⁸⁰ Others, like Müller, are skeptical, while Fabio Wolkenstein argues that it is possible to combine populism and liberal pluralism under certain conditions.⁸¹ Others try to get around the problem of the relationship between populism and pluralism by distinguishing

⁷⁸ Laclau also uses the example of Atatürk, but in this case the emphasis is on the imposition of unity from above, which means that, for Laclau, we are not dealing with populism but instead a form of authoritarianism (*On Populist Reason*, pp. 208-14). Following the argument that representation can never be a one-way relationship, we would have to say two things, however: first, that this imposition of unity from above can never be total; but, second, that representation and populism will always involve *some* element of imposition from above.

⁷⁹ David Howarth, “An Interview with Ernesto Laclau,” in *Ernesto Laclau: Post-Marxism, Populism and Critique* (London: Routledge 2015), pp. 257-71, at p. 267.

⁸⁰ Similarly, Disch, “Minnesota and the ‘Populism’ of Political Opposition.” Ochoa Espejo (“Populism and the People”) criticizes Disch from a position close to that of Müller.

⁸¹ Wolkenstein, “Populism, Liberal Democracy and the Ethics of Peoplehood.”

between exclusive (roughly right-wing) and inclusive (roughly left-wing) populism. Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis do so from a Laclauian position; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser from a position similar to that of Müller.⁸² The risk is that “exclusive” and “inclusive” simply become redescriptions of what we think are “bad” and “good” populisms respectively. The same can be said about Laclau’s distinction between populism proper and ethno-populism. Following Laclau, *any* populism – and *any* political ideology or regime – will be exclusive to some extent. And, even if the closure and the homogenization are never complete, they are inherent risks of any political discourse, including populism in all its forms. We may be able to distinguish between more or less exclusive, but that distinction will be framed by a particular political discourse. A pluralist left populist government might criminalize homophobic behavior, for instance, thus limiting pluralism in the name of pluralism. In other words, we cannot dissociate the question of *how* exclusive a representation of the people is from *what* is being excluded. This suggests that populism in itself is not necessarily a threat to pluralism, but particular – populist or not – representations of the people may be.⁸³

Conclusion: The Populist Moment

⁸² Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, “Left-Wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19:2 (2014), pp. 119-42; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” *Government and Opposition* 48:2 (2013), pp. 147-74

⁸³ Stengel, MacDonald and Nabers, “Introduction,” p. 4. Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi use Müller’s definition of populism as anti-elite and anti-pluralist, but end up concluding that these two features have not had any significant effect on India’s foreign policy. “Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* AOP 3 December 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/ory010>, pp. 3-4, 15.

Laclau takes representation to be performative, and a populist discourse is a discourse that performatively constructs a people. Müller agrees that the people does not exist, but sees populism as a form of manipulation where a homogenous identity is forced on the pluralism of society. I have argued with and against Laclau that the populist claim to represent the people must be recognized in order to be effective. As a result, one can always speak back in the name of the people, and pluralism is inherent to populism – even if some forms of populism attempt to eradicate this pluralism.

Müller writes of populism that it “is something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril.”⁸⁴ With Laclau, I have argued that, insofar as it shows the representational character of the people of democracy, populism is indeed a permanent shadow of democracy. But it is a shadow that does not so much threaten democracy as disclose how it works. The risk of anti-pluralism associated with populism is not specific to populism, but a risk of any discourse, including democratic ones.

Where does that leave those who want popular mobilization, but not in the form of right-wing populism? Müller believes we are faced with a choice between, on one side, neoliberal technocracy or populism and, on the other side, a combination of liberal democracy and social-democracy. He proposes “democratic activism” as a way to ensure that the latter does not turn into the former.⁸⁵ Democratic activists claim that they too are part of the people, and he gives the Spanish *indignados* as an example. Müller wants to avoid a choice of either populist rupture or co-optation, and Müller interprets Laclau as offering a simplistic choice between populism and technocracy.⁸⁶ There is something to be said for this interpretation of Laclau who opposes the anti-institutionalism of populism to the

⁸⁴ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 11.

⁸⁵ Müller, ““The people Must be Extracted from Within the People,”” p. 491; Müller, *What Is Populism?*, pp. 70, 98.

⁸⁶ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, p. 69. See also Bickerton, “Populism and Technocracy.”

institutionalism of what he calls administration.⁸⁷ However, when it comes to the cases he discusses, Laclau is much more nuanced.⁸⁸ This leaves room for thinking about combinations of populist rupture and institutionalist politics, as well as combinations of activism and institutionalist politics, where representations of the people struggle for hegemony. It is a struggle for hegemony that takes place not just *within* liberal democratic institutions, but also shapes those very institutions.

⁸⁷ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 154; see also *ibid.*, 177-8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, chapters 7-8.