

Routledge Advances in European Politics

THE POPULIST RADICAL LEFT IN EUROPE

Edited by
Giorgos Katsambekis and
Alexandros Kioupkiolis



The Populist Radical Left in Europe

Building on a comprehensive theoretical framework that draws on discursive and ideational approaches to populism, this volume offers a comparative mapping of the Populist Radical Left in contemporary Europe. It explores the novel discursive, political and organisational features of several political actors, as well as the conditions of their emergence and success, while being alert to the role of relevant social movements.

Chapters feature case studies of the Greek party Syriza, the Spanish Podemos, the German Die Linke, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise, the Dutch Socialist Party and the Slovenian Levica. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of Labour in the UK and 'Momentum', the movement that supports him is also examined. A separate chapter is devoted to recent grassroots social movements that can be seen as instances of progressive populism, such as the 'squares movement' in Spain and Greece.

This book fills a crucial gap in the literature on radical left politics and populism in Europe, contributing to the rapidly burgeoning field of populism studies.

Giorgos Katsambekis is a Lecturer in European and International Politics at Loughborough University.

Alexandros Kioupkiolis is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Political Theory at Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Routledge Advances in European Politics

Dynamics of Political Change in Ireland

Making and Breaking a Divided Island

Edited by Niall Ó Dochartaigh, Katy Hayward and Elizabeth Meehan

European Enlargement across Rounds and Beyond Borders

Edited by Haakon A. Ikonomou, Aurélie Andry, and Rebekka Byberg

Uncovering the Territorial Dimension of European Union Cohesion Policy

Cohesion, Development, Impact Assessment, and Cooperation

Edited by Eduardo Medeiros

The Crisis of the European Union

Challenges, Analyses, Solutions

Edited by Andreas Grimm

Promoting National Priorities in EU Foreign Policy

Czech Republic and the EU

Tomáš Weiss

Italy from Crisis to Crisis

Political Economy, Security, and Society in the 21st Century

Matthew Evangelista

Lobbying Success in the European Union

The Role of Information and Frames

Daniel Rasch

Muslim Attitudes Towards the European Union

Bernd Schlipphak and Mujtaba Isani

The Populist Radical Left in Europe

Edited by Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/Routledge-Advances-in-European-Politics/book-series/AEP

The Populist Radical Left in Europe

**Edited by
Giorgos Katsambekis and
Alexandros Kioupkiolis**

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 selection and editorial matter, Giorgos Katsambekis and
Alexandros Kioupkiolis; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis to be
identified as the authors of the editorial matter, and of the authors for their
individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and
78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or
utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or
registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation
without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-74480-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-18082-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction: the Populist Radical Left in Europe	1
GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS AND ALEXANDROS KIOUPKIOULIS	
1 The Populist Radical Left in Greece: Syriza in opposition and in power	21
GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS	
2 Late modern adventures of leftist populism in Spain: the case of Podemos, 2014–2018	47
ALEXANDROS KIOUPKIOULIS	
3 Between populism and socialism: Slovenia's Left party	73
ALEN TOPLIŠEK	
4 Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: the manufacturing of populism	93
PHILIPPE MARLIÈRE	
5 The Dutch Socialist Party: from Maoist sect to Social Democratic mass party with a populist style	113
PAUL LUCARDIE AND GERRIT VOERMAN	
6 The German Left Party: a case of pragmatic populism	129
DAN HOUGH AND DAN KEITH	

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
7	Corbynism, populism and the re-shaping of left politics in contemporary Britain	145
	BICE MAIGUASHCA AND JONATHAN DEAN	
8	Populism 2.0: new movements towards progressive populism	168
	ALEXANDROS KIOUPKIOLIS	
9	Postscript: populism, the (radical) left and the challenges for future research	194
	YANNIS STAVRAKAKIS	
	<i>Index</i>	213

Illustrations

Figures

3.1	2011 elections (share of parliamentary seats for the Slovenian Left in per cent)	79
3.2	2014 elections (share of parliamentary seats for the Slovenian Left in per cent)	80

Tables

3.1	The Slovenian Left's key manifesto positions (United Left 2014)	83
5.1	Membership of Dutch Socialist Party 1973–2018	117
5.2	Dutch Socialist Party election results 1977–2017	125
6.1	The German PDS/Left Party's performances in national elections in Germany	131

Contributors

The editors

Giorgos Katsambekis is a lecturer in European and International Politics at Loughborough University. He has co-edited the volume *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* (Ashgate, 2014). His recent work has appeared in *The Political Quarterly*, *Constellations*, *European Political Science*, *Javnost–The Public*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Critical Discourse Studies* and *The Journal of Political Ideologies*.

Alexandros Kioupkiolis is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Political Theory at Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece. His research interests are focused on radical democracy, the commons, social movements and the philosophy of freedom. He is directing an ERC COG project on these topics (Heteropolitics, 2017–2020) and has published numerous relevant books and papers, including the monograph *Freedom after the critique of foundations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and the collective volume *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* (Ashgate, 2014). His new monograph is entitled *The Common and Counter-hegemonic Politics* (forthcoming, Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

The contributors

Jonathan Dean is Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Leeds. His specialisms include gender, political theory and left-wing politics. He has recently published articles in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Social Movement Studies*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Contemporary British History* and *Capital and Class* (the latter co-authored with Dan Keith and Bice Maiguashca).

Dan Hough is a Professor of Politics at the University of Sussex. He studied at the universities of Newcastle upon Tyne and Leipzig before getting his PhD from the University of Birmingham (2000). He has published widely on German politics and political corruption and he's a co-author (with Simon Green and Alister Miskimmon) of *The Politics of the New Germany* (Routledge, 2018).

Dan Keith is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of York. He completed his PhD at the Sussex European Institute at the University of Sussex (2011). He recently co-edited (with Luke March) *Europe's Radical Left: From Marginality to the Mainstream?* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

Paul Lucardie (1946) obtained his PhD at Queen's University (Kingston, Canada). Since 1979, he has been affiliated with the Documentation Centre on Dutch Political Parties (DNPP) at the University of Groningen. In 2011 he published together with Gerrit Voerman *Populisten in de polder* (Amsterdam: Boom), a history of populism in the Netherlands. In 2013 he published *All Power to the People! Democratic Extremism in Theory and Practice* (Routledge).

Bice Maiguashca is a Senior Lecturer of Politics at Exeter University whose current research interests include radical political theory, feminist activism, left-wing politics and populism. Her most recent journal publications include: 'Pulling Together in a Crisis? Anarchism, Feminism and the Limits of Left-wing Convergence in Austerity Britain', (co-authored with Jonathan Dean and Dan Keith), *Capital and Class*; 'They're Talkin' Bout Revolution', Feminism, Anarchism and the Politics of Social Change in the Global Justice Movement, *Feminist Review* and 'Reclaiming Feminist Futures: Co-opted and Progressive Politics in a Neoliberal Age' (with Catherine Eschle), *Political Studies*.

Philippe Marlière is a Professor of French and European Politics at University College London. He holds a PhD in Social and Political Studies from the European University Institute (Florence), and he was awarded the Marcel Liebman Chair in Political Science by the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in 2007. He was a Research Fellow at the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, 1989–1993). He researches mainly on social democratic parties, the French left and the French republican ideology.

Yannis Stavrakakis studied political science in Athens and discourse analysis at Essex and is currently Professor of Political Discourse Analysis at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He is the author of *Lacan and the Political* (Routledge, 1999) and *The Lacanian Left* (SUNY Press, 2007) and co-editor of *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (Manchester University Press, 2000). He has been Principal Investigator of the international project POPULISMUS, researching populist discourse and democracy: www.populismus.gr.

Alen Toplišek is an early career researcher at Queen Mary University of London. His current research analyses the crisis of liberal democracy and the various responses to it, both institutional and extra-institutional. A robust interdisciplinary approach weaves through his work, combining critical insights from political theory, sociology and political economy.

Gerrit Voerman (1957) studied history at the University of Groningen. He is Director of the Documentation Centre Dutch Political Parties (DNPP) and

Professor of Development and Functioning of the Dutch and European Party System at the University of Groningen. He published widely on Dutch political parties (party history, organisation, identity, membership, candidate selection, relations with Europarties, etc.). He is currently working on a book on the Dutch Socialist Party.

Preface

This volume is a product of friendship and several years of close collaboration. In a way, it is a ‘sequel’ to the first volume we edited together some years ago, entitled *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* (Ashgate 2014/Routledge 2016). Then, we were trying to put our theoretical tools and notions to the test, in a bid to understand the novel character of a series of social movements that shook the world. From the Spanish *indignados* to Occupy Wall Street in the United States, it was indeed a time that it was ‘kicking off everywhere’, as the journalist Paul Mason put it. As usually happens, in historically dense and unpredictable times, history is moving so fast that reality might go beyond what you consider an innovative and thought-provoking hypothesis. In our first volume, we tried to draw bridges between the theoretical and political traditions of hegemony and autonomy, verticality and horizontality. By the time that the book was out, we could clearly see the multiple links of horizontal movements with vertical political organisations, political parties but also political leaders. Podemos grew in the wake of the Spanish *indignados*, Syriza was radically transformed by the Greek *aganaktismenoi*, the Slovenian protests of 2012–2013 gave rise to a new left party, and, a bit later on, Occupy Wall Street left its imprint on the campaign of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic primaries in 2016.

The idea for a volume on Europe’s Populist Radical Left came in the aftermath of Syriza’s victory in Greece in 2015, at a time that Podemos was also set to do really well in the Spanish election. It was a time that a new populist left seemed able to trigger radical change in Europe, or at least in part of it. As we started to gauge the prospects of Podemos and Syriza, we realised that even though populist left parties have been around in Europe for quite a while, the relevant literature was severely underdeveloped. We discussed the idea of a book that would include a series of parties, movements and political figures which are often labelled as populist left with colleagues, and we soon ended up with a book plan. In Routledge, we were welcomed by a familiar face, the same Editor we had worked with for our previous book, Rob Sorsby. Rob and his Editorial Assistant, Claire Maloney, were extremely helpful and supportive throughout the production process.

In November 2016, we met with most of the contributors to this volume for a much broader discussion on ‘Europe’s new radical Left in times of crisis’ that

was generously funded by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung's office in Greece. We are grateful to Eftychia Kotini and Electra Alexandropoulou, in particular, for their kindness and support in organising this Workshop as well as to the School of Political Sciences of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for hosting us. We also want to thank our colleagues in the POPULISMUS project (www.populismus.gr/), which has been a crucial platform for developing our thinking around the populist phenomenon from 2014 onwards.

Giorgos would like to thank the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at Loughborough University, which he joined in November 2017, for providing a stimulating environment and giving him the necessary research time that was needed to work on this volume.

Alexandros is grateful to ERC and the Fulbright Foundation in Greece for their funding, which facilitated work on his two chapters contained in the present volume.

Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupkiolis
Loughborough and Thessaloniki

Introduction

The Populist Radical Left in Europe

Giorgos Katsambekis and Alexandros Kioupiolis

Populism and the recent crisis

The economic crisis in Europe in recent years has brought renewed intensity to the debate over the crisis of democracy and the capacity of representative institutions to effectively empower citizens, upholding the democratic promise for ‘popular sovereignty’ (Crouch 2016; Mouffe 2013; Tormey 2015). A significant part of this debate revolves around what has been described as a ‘populist challenge’ to democratic and liberal Europe (Kriesi 2014; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Martinelli 2016; Mueller 2016). Indeed, during the recent years of crisis and austerity, there has been an unprecedented rise of populist politics throughout the continent, mainly through political parties, but also through social movements as well as prominent leaders and media personas. Populists of various kinds and orientations have risen to prominence by claiming to better represent the marginalised and frustrated people, against political elites that have become self-serving and unresponsive, alienating themselves from the popular classes and their anxieties.

However, if the debate over European populism was, until recently, mostly targeted at the right end of the political spectrum, the picture has now significantly changed with the emergence of prominent populist actors that belong to the left or the radical left. In particular, after the European elections of 2014, political parties such as Syriza (Coalition of Radical Left) in Greece and Podemos (We Can) in Spain have attracted unprecedented attention in both the international press and in academic discussion. These parties rapidly expanded their electoral appeal and brought about major realignments in their countries, thereby challenging the hegemony of established centre-left parties (see Kioupiolis and Katsambekis 2018). Syriza’s success was more impressive, as the party was catapulted to power in early 2015 and has managed to stay in office, despite severe setbacks and impasses, backed up by a smaller right-wing populist party, the Independent Greeks (ANEL) (Aslanidis and Kaltwasser 2016; Katsambekis 2017). Podemos, on the other hand, flirted with the possibility of entering government after the general election of December 2015. It has since established itself as a major player in the Spanish political system (Agustín and Briziarelli 2018). Interestingly, the breakthrough of these radical leftist parties

would be hard to imagine without their close, indeed organic, links to grassroots social movements such as the *Indignados* in Spain and the *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece. The latter movements have also been depicted by commentators and researchers as populist (Gerbaudo 2017; Aslanidis 2016; Della Porta 2015; Prentoulis and Thomassen 2014).

Before Syriza and Podemos, it was Jean-Luc Mélenchon's candidacy for the French presidential election of 2012 and the Left Front (Front de Gauche), the electoral alliance built to support him, that had acted as a point of reference for the European Populist Radical Left and its ability to take on both its radical right counterpart and the established forces of the centre (Marlière 2013). In other words, populist actors of the left have been increasingly successful in recent years not only in Europe's periphery, but also at its very core. This is what the case of Mélenchon and his new electoral alliance, France Insoumise (Unbowed France), further illustrates (Marlière 2017; also Marlière, Chapter 4, this volume).

Indeed, the picture seems to confirm Luke March, who concluded his analysis back in 2007 with the assertion that '[l]eft populism is here to stay' (March 2007: 75). However, a decade later, it seems that we have entered a wholly new phase. Then, the success of Populist Radical Left parties consisted mostly of establishing themselves as viable opposition 'players' with parliamentary representation, as institutional expressions of anti-globalisation and anti-neoliberal sentiments. Today, such parties seem able to channel broader popular frustrations over the management of the economic crisis by mainstream political forces and they are effectively contending for or even seizing power.¹

Undoubtedly, then, the conditions of emergence and the novel characteristics of these new populist parties and social movements of the left, their differences with their counterparts on the right and their relation to political power constitute a timely focus for political research and, indeed, for any scholar interested in the puzzling issue of populism and its relation to democratic institutions.

In this endeavour, we need to keep in mind that left and radical left populism did not suddenly burst forth in Europe's political scene with parties such as Syriza and Podemos or politicians such as Mélenchon. March, in his seminal study of the radical left, which covers the period between 1990 and 2011, had listed over twenty parties which qualify as either 'populist socialist' or 'social populist' (March 2011: 140, 146). Most of these parties fell short of the prominence achieved by their right-wing contenders at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Front National (FN) in France, the archetype of radical right populism, had its breakthrough in the 1980s. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) under Jörg Haider came second in the 1999 legislative election and made it into government. And Pim Fortuyn's personalist party (List Pim Fortuyn/LPF) shook the Dutch political scene in 2002 and also made it into a short-lived coalition government after the assassination of its leader. Although the Populist Radical Right seemed like a somewhat coherent political block on the rise, the Populist Radical Left had only scarce successes, which did not seem to relate to each other.

The recent economic crisis and the ensuing Great Recession impacted heavily on party politics throughout Europe, especially so in the countries of the European periphery which were most severely hit by unemployment and austerity (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). It is within this context that certain populist actors of the left gained unprecedented momentum. Quite interestingly, some of the already established parties of the Populist Radical Left, most notably the Left (Die Linke) in Germany, and the Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij/SP) in the Netherlands (see March 2011), did not manage to capitalise on the crisis and growing social discontent. This means that we are not dealing with a general success story for the populist left in Europe during the years of crisis (see also March and Keith 2016). However, there is definitely a renewed interest in the particular character and the prospects of a distinct populist group within the radical left party family (March 2011), or at least in key populist elements of their discourse and strategy (March and Keith 2016: 2–3).

That said, we are not treating the Populist Radical Left as a party family in itself. Rather, given the recent developments and the lack of research into specific characteristics of this perceived subgroup, we pursue a comparative mapping and portrayal of the parties, leaders and movements that have been perceived as populist. Our aspiration is to furnish a point of reference for scholars interested in left-wing populism, or populism in general, and to spur further empirical and comparative studies in this field. To put it in other words, we start out from the assumption that there are certain significant affinities among those actors, in terms of discourse, ideology and strategy. Hence, we delve into the specific attributes of each of them with a view to better understanding the importance of populism for their politics and dynamic. We hold, indeed, that some of the parties, movements and political figures studied here will fit better into most definitions of populism, whereas others might only manifest some of the relevant criteria. Some might exhibit populist characteristics more consistently, whereas others might be closer to mainstream social democracy, only strategically and occasionally making populist appeals.

Rationale, scope and themes

In this context, this volume stages a comprehensive yet flexible theoretical framework for elucidating populism, and offers a thorough empirical assessment of key actors of the Populist Radical Left in contemporary Europe, both as a movement and as parties, filling a gap in the relevant literature. We zoom in on contemporary developments. Our main objective is to flesh out the novel discursive, political, strategic and organisational features, as well as the conditions of emergence and success of several political forces that have been subsumed under the ‘populist-radical left’ rubric. We also seek to account for their impact on democratic and representative institutions. The chapters of the volume feature case studies of the Greek Syriza, the Spanish Podemos, the German Left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise, the Dutch SP and the Slovenian Left (Levica). We have also included a chapter on what we hold to be a borderline case: Jeremy Corbyn’s

leadership of the Labour Party in the UK and ‘Momentum’, the movement that has supported his campaign, in one word: *corbynism*.² The rationale behind the selection of these cases is spelt out towards the end of this introduction. The volume also devotes a separate chapter to recent grassroots social movements that can be seen as instances of progressive or left-wing populism, such as the ‘squares movement’ in Spain and Greece. Our intent is to shed light on a rarely investigated aspect of populist politics: populist social movements, protests and different configurations of the collective subject of populist politics (see Aslanidis 2016).

We considered this inclusion quite apt and pertinent, not only in analytical but also in political terms. A close interaction or even organic relationship with such movements seems to be one of the key characteristics that singles out newer parties of the populist left. Equally crucially, populist movements seem to stretch the practical and theoretical imagination of populist politics. They bring out possibilities of empowering democratic populism, which may challenge and remedy the standard flaws of populism in both its left-wing and its right-wing versions, that is authoritarianism, centralisation, homogenisation and the adulation of the Leader. Indeed, a ‘people’s populism’ seems to resurrect inaugural forms of progressive populism in the nineteenth century, such as the Russian *Narodniki* and the US ‘People’s Party’. At any rate, such a ‘return to the origins’ could only be mythical and could not help being a betrayal. What matters for us is that such movements seem to enact a popular politics that fosters a radical egalitarian empowerment for our times (Gerbaudo 2017; Grattan 2016). And contemporary ‘people’s populism’, with its embrace of horizontality, participation, equality and diversity, embodies the search for such an empowerment in inspiring ways.

However, the present volume explores mainly how a variety of parties related to the populist left or radical left have managed to capitalise on the crisis and popular mobilisations to consolidate their power, whereas others have not performed equally well. The varying trajectories and degrees of ‘radicalisation’ or ‘moderation’ of these parties, their relation to representative institutions, their programmatic positions on socio-economic and cultural issues, as well as their stances towards the European Union and international or transnational collaboration are explored in detail, taking into account the peculiarities of the political systems in which they are situated. The public discourse of keynote political actors receives particular attention in all these case studies.

Moreover, the contributors to this volume engage with the relationship of populism to government (see Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015), and enquire into the electoral dynamics of those parties and their varying strategies against mainstream political forces. The authors also probe the transformations that populist parties undergo when they are confronted with the possibility or the reality of government participation. Another issue that we tackle, in cases where such parties have exercised power or entered negotiations with a view to participating in a coalition government, is the way in which their populist message is, or is not, translated into government practice and concrete policies as well as whether this results in further moderation of their populism.

Gaining power or even simply entering power games in the formal political system raises sharp challenges for populist formations, straining them occasionally to breaking point. These challenges lie at the heart of our research questions in the present volume. First, (tendentially) empty signifiers, such as ‘hope’, ‘change’, ‘real democracy’ and ‘justice’, are a catalyst of populist mobilisation and unity, welding together heterogeneous social sectors and actors by appealing to all of them through their generality and their amenability to different interpretations by different people. However, once in power, a populist leadership must implement somewhat more specific policies, which will impute particular meanings to the ‘empty signifiers’ of the populist discourse. This reduces the generality and the vagueness of populist signifiers, and, thus, threatens to diminish their appeal to certain sectors of the population. To avoid this loss of popularity, populist leaders and policy-makers need, among other things, to come up with a diverse array of policies addressed to a variety of constituencies at the same time.

Second, incorporation in the political system entails most often the institutionalisation or bureaucratisation of populist actors. Such institutionalisation seems to aggravate tendencies towards top-down direction, centralisation or even authoritarianism, and severs the links with social movements and grassroots participation. The consequences can be adverse for those populist politics that evince an aspiration to radical democratisation, to promoting egalitarianism, emancipation and popular participation. As Ernesto Laclau (2014: 9) argued, populist

hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...].

Overall, our ambition is to fill a gap in the literature on radical left politics in Europe, and to contribute thus to the rapidly burgeoning field of populism studies. Although there is much excellent research in the role of right-wing populism in Europe, existing publications scarcely scrutinise the particular character, the role, the importance and the prospects of its radical left counterpart. The present inquiry sets out, thus, to study leftist populism in present-day Europe, and it does so from the angle of discursive practices and ideas. Two dimensions of left-leaning populism stand out in the different studies of the volume: the internal organisation of left-wing populist parties and movements, and the often fatal tensions which beset progressive populism, notably the conflict between its egalitarian, horizontalist discourses, aspirations and mobilisations, on the one hand, and its vertical leadership and representation, on the other.

Heightened attention to these dimensions and intense engagement with them make distinct our critical take on populist politics from the broader paradigm of

discourse theory in which we are schooled. It is not that Laclau and Mouffe were unaware of the clashes between ‘hegemony’ and ‘autonomy’, which should be combined in radical democratic politics, or that they did not call for different forms of party organisation and democratic practice (see, e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 149–193). It is rather that they tend to underestimate the force and the depth of these conflicts, which stem from contending (horizontal vs. vertical) logics of political association and praxis. Hence, Laclau and Mouffe cherish progressive figures of *individual* leadership on the grounds that leaders can provide a glue that ties together heterogeneous people and can yield a surface of collective investment that mobilises the multitude. The well-attested ways in which such leadership impedes the ‘self-emancipation’ of the masses and erodes the soul of democratic egalitarianism, that is decision-making by each citizen on a footing of equality, are often eclipsed from view (see, e.g. Mouffe 2018: 70; Laclau 2005a: 100).

Before getting into the case studies of the volume, we first need to outline our common ground and to spell out some key notions. The remainder of this introduction is devoted to briefly unpacking the notion of populism. We locate the radical left in contemporary European politics. We explain where populism and the radical left meet, and, finally, we lay out the structure of the volume and the pivot of every chapter.

Defining populism

It has become a near compulsion of scholarly works on populism to acknowledge the essential contestability of the term as well as the potential contradictions and impasses in defining it (Mudde 2017: 27; Moffitt 2016: 11; Panizza 2005: 1). Rather than sharing the pessimism of many of our colleagues, we think that the time has come to display a more optimistic attitude vis-à-vis the definitional status of populism. Indeed, we submit that there is an emerging consensus on a common understanding of populism, especially if we consider approaches that prioritise the discursive, performative or ideational levels of analysis (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Stavrakakis 2017; Moffitt 2016; de la Torre 2015; Panizza 2005). Setting aside their technical differences, which derive from distinctive conceptual toolkits, at their core lies an idea of populism as a *distinct form of politics*, in terms of discourse, thin-centred ideology or communicative style, which calls on ‘the people’ and pits them against an unresponsive and alienated ‘elite’ or ‘establishment’. This emerging consensus was captured in a now classic article by Margaret Canovan, written around twenty years ago. She suggested that ‘[p]opulism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to “the people” against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society’ (Canovan 1999: 3). In the same article, Canovan further noted that ‘[populist movements] involve some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people’ (ibid.). To date, this has been the gist of most definitions of populism that have been advanced in both theoretically oriented and empirical studies of the phenomenon.

Contributors to this volume share Canovan's key intuition. They take their bearings mostly from the definitions of Cas Mudde and Ernesto Laclau (or variations of them, i.e. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008) to broach their cases, grasping populism as a predominantly discursive or ideological phenomenon. It is not the aim of this introduction to offer a detailed exegesis of either definition or to venture into a critique of the respective analytical frameworks. Rather, we will highlight their core elements and point to some possible 'blind spots' to help the reader better understand the underlying conceptual foundations of each analysis, but also to decide for themselves which framework reflects better their sense of populism. After all, we are confident that the rigorous analyses in each chapter furnish adequate information and detail, allowing thus for alternative readings which follow different theoretical-methodological tacks. Indeed, we intentionally gave our contributors the freedom to adopt whichever framework they preferred and even to put forth their criticisms (see, e.g. Miguashca and Dean's chapter), in a bid to embrace theoretical and methodological pluralism and to keep the door open for future discussions.

Ernesto Laclau and the discursive approach to populism

One of the most consistent endeavours to theoretically define and empirically assess populism comes from the Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau. Along with Canovan, they are arguably the two 'heavy-weights' of populism theory. More than forty years ago, in the last chapter of his book, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Laclau set forth his critique of sociological theories of modernisation, which were hegemonic at the time. These narratives construed populism as a result of the transition of Latin American societies from a traditional model to an industrial one. Following a different path, he held populism to be a discursive political phenomenon that is not bound to a specific sociological structure, particular social classes, a concrete ideology or a given programmatic agenda. What Laclau emphasised was that populism was a specific *logic of the political*, one way of doing politics among other possibilities. Indeed, he stressed that 'reference to "the people" occupies a central place in populism' (Laclau 1977: 165), and that such reference is always informed by an antagonistic view of society. This is his first stab at a definition of populism: 'Populism starts at the point where popular democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc' (Laclau 1977: 173).

This early work was still heavy with Marxist jargon and debatable normative assumptions, such as the claim that the 'highest forms of populism can only be socialist' (Laclau 1977: 196–197). But its theoretical innovations have proved remarkably lasting in time. Laclau further refined his theorisation around thirty years later, in his book *On populist reason*. Advancing a formal-structural conception of populism, he stressed that '[...] a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever

those contents are' (Laclau 2005a: 33). This logic can be summarised in the following steps: (1) 'the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating "the people" from power' (Laclau 2005a: 74); (2) the creation of a *chain of equivalence* among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by those in power (an unresponsive 'elite' or 'establishment'); and (3) the representation of 'the people' of populism as excluded and underprivileged *plebs*, which claim to be the legitimate community of the people and the democratic sovereign (Laclau 2005a: 81, 94, 98).

The merits of operationalising Laclau's theory for empirical and comparative research in populist parties and movements have already been appreciated in depth, particularly by members of the POPULISMUS project (Stavrakakis *et al.* 2017; Stavrakakis 2017; Katsambekis 2016; Kioupkiolis 2016; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Scholars inspired by Laclau's frame have construed populism on the basis of two 'minimal discursive criteria': (1) *people-centrism*, and (2) *anti-elitism* (Stavrakakis 2017). This rendition of populism helps to make Laclau's often abstract and complex theory more applicable to empirical analysis, but it also enables us to amend some of Laclau's problematic normative choices, namely the effective elision of populism with politics, which we find in his late work.

People-centrism refers to the primacy given to 'the people', who are constructed by way of linking a series of different subjects, groups and demands ('chains of equivalence' in the Laclauian jargon). The signifier 'the people' is most often deployed as the nodal point of populist discourse. But a popular sense of unity and collectivity can be also nurtured through use of equivalent signifiers, such as the '99 per cent', 'the many', etc. In this sense, people-centrism implies privileging a collective subject that is perceived as the democratic sovereign, and foregrounding the *name* of this subject. *Anti-elitism* implies the construction of a fundamental division within society between an 'us' and a 'them', which generates the conditions for antagonistic identification of 'the people' through their opposition to the named opponents. These are depicted as the 'elite', the 'establishment' or the 'oligarchy', which act against the people's interests and well-being.

One of the merits of the 'formal' discursive reading of populism is that it helps us avoid a priori assumptions about the specific contents and the ideological or programmatic features of populist actors. The way in which 'the people' of populism is construed, as well as the meaning that is imputed to the antagonistic divide between peoples and elites are central questions to investigate in our research in populist politics. Our answers to those questions will disclose the specific character of a populist project, its orientation and its possible effects on democratic and representative institutions. For example, if 'the people' are represented as an exclusive collective subject, united through references to a common ethnic origin, language, heritage and religion, and they are opposed not only to an 'establishment' but also to alien 'others' (such as immigrants, ethnic or religious minorities), then this is most probably a case of exclusivist, radical right populism, which will tend to undermine minority rights, nourish nativism

and promote intolerant attitudes (see Stavrakakis *et al.* 2017; Mudde 2007). On the contrary, if ‘the people’ are cast in terms of an open, inclusive and pluralist subject, confronting an unresponsive and repressive elite, then we are probably dealing with a progressive brand of populism. This may embody a force of democratic inclusion and participation, effectively enhancing democracy (see Mouffe 2018).

Populism and ‘crisis’

The formal take on populism laid out above dwells primarily on discursive practices, which comprise the performative dimension highlighted by Benjamin Moffitt (2016) and Pierre Ostiguy (2017). But the formal approach also accentuates the socio-political preconditions for successful populist projects: the moment of ‘crisis’ or ‘dislocation’, in the Laclauian jargon, which facilitates the formation of horizontal links between different groups and individuals (Stavrakakis *et al.* 2018). ‘[T]he emergence of populism’, Laclau noted back in the 1970s, ‘is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis’ (Laclau 1977: 175). Scholars have shown that the notion of crisis bears two distinct dimensions: an *objective* one, which refers to an external ‘shock’ or some sort of systemic failure that destabilises a given system; and a *subjective* one, which elevates such failures to ‘crisis’ through the discursive practices of specific political actors (Hay 1999; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2018). Hence, as Moffitt argues, crisis can be an integral element of populism. Populist actors produce their own narrative versions of the crisis, which serve to justify the diagnosis that mobilisation and immediate action are needed to ‘save the people’, and also lay the blame at the door of their opponents (Moffitt 2016: Chapter 7).

Again, the construction of the crisis is what may put apart right-wing from left-wing, or exclusionary from inclusionary variants of populism. The former usually portray it as a migration or security crisis, in which the cultural identity and security of natives is threatened by invading ‘others’ (e.g. ‘Islam’, refugees, etc.). Left-wing populisms most often locate the crisis in the socio-economic order (e.g. ‘neoliberalism’, globalised capitalism) and attribute it to the excessive power of intertwined political and economic elite groups, which profit at the expense of the majority of society. Kenneth Roberts’ work on ‘political crises of representation’ affords useful insights. Among the three scenarios that he describes, the one that bears on contemporary democracies mobilises the ‘cartel party’ hypothesis (Katz and Mair 2009) to suggest that populism – left and right – rises in response to a situation in which citizens do not feel adequately represented. In such circumstances, established mainstream parties have become too domineering and self-serving, too closely attached to the workings of the state and less sensitive to the people’s needs and aspirations (Roberts 2015). This fuels popular frustration and discontent, motivating social subjects to seek representation elsewhere.

Cas Mudde and the ideational approach to populism

Cas Mudde's 'ideational' approach was first introduced around fifteen years ago (Mudde 2004) and has been further elaborated through his collaboration with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). It has also been enriched through an ongoing dialogue with scholars who operate within the same paradigm but add different theoretical and methodological nuances (see Hawkins 2009; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017). This frame of thought bears commonalities but also important differences from Laclau-inspired discursive frames. To be sure, his rendition of populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' has now become the most popular and widely used among comparativists. It has been combined with both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis, and it has gained increased visibility among media pundits, journalists and think tanks. The broadly used definition reads as follows:

I define populism as *an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.*

(Mudde 2004: 543; italics in the original)

Mudde has introduced Giovanni Sartori's logic of the 'minimal definition' in the study of populism (Mudde 2007: 15–20), thus making a major contribution that has widely resonated in the field. This has facilitated, moreover, the proliferation of empirical and comparative studies that have moved beyond mere cases, paving the way for cross-regional comparative research (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). The key task of minimal definitions lies in finding the *lowest common denominator* between all manifestations of a given phenomenon (Rooduijn 2014). In our case, this means identifying the common core of every empirical manifestation of populism throughout history and across different regions. Hence, the aim is not to capture every possible characteristic that a populist actor exhibits, but to grasp the ones that are always there and can help to pin down the phenomenon in all possible contexts. Indeed, discursive scholars have embraced this logic of the minimal definition, acknowledging the importance of such an orientation (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014).

Researchers who follow Mudde's lead and work within the ideational paradigm agree on the centrality of three elements in the articulation of any populist movement or party: the *people*, the *elite* and the invocation of a *common will*. In this sense, what sets the ideational school apart from the discursive, but also the 'strategic' approach (Weyland 2017) is: (1) the construal of populism as an ideology (and thus as a belief system); (2) the thesis that what defines this ideology is a predominantly moral view of socio-political divisions; and (3) the argument that 'the people' and the 'elite' are constructed by populists as essentially homogeneous collective subjects.