

# Is there another people? Populism, radical democracy and immanent critique

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## Abstract

This article explores the possibility of a notion of left-wing populism that is conceptually opposed to the identitarian logic of embodiment that characterises right-populist interpellations of ‘the people’. In the first part, I will demonstrate, that in Laclau’s constructivist approach, any populist embodiment of the people actually has a partial, subaltern and performative origin. On this basis, it becomes possible to distinguish between a radical-democratic version of the people that is self-reflexively aware of this origin and a regressive and reified one that ideologically betrays and negates its own subaltern tradition of democratic struggle by proclaiming to embody a positive, pre-established substance of ‘rooted’, ‘well-born’ community. In the second part of the article, I will focus on this self-negation as a starting point for an immanent critique of right-wing populism. Such an immanent critique is promising, because it could overcome the shortcomings of decisionism and moralism that limit the contemporary critique of right-wing populism. However, it remains still an open question how to defend and define a negativist truth of political community and subjectivation that is necessary for developing such a left-Hegelian critique of regressive and reified notions of ‘the people’.

## Keywords

civil society, democracy, embodiment, exclusion, immanent critique, negativity, performativity, populism, radical democracy, self-negation

Western democracies have been pushed into crisis by right-populist attacks on the universalism of human rights, the pluralism of deliberation, the constitutional system of representation and so on. While this diagnosis is widely beyond doubt, how to counter

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and reverse this tendency remains disputed. Liberal answers attempt to defend the Universalist normativity of modern democracy by trying to erect a cordon sanitaire that keeps racist and authoritarian voices away from politics, thus preserving the purity of the principles of the constitution. It is proclaimed that certain achievements of moral progress need to be immunised against shifting political conjunctures. Instead of being the content of lively democratic discussion, those norms and values are considered as defining the very core of democracy tout court that must therefore be stabilised through the installation of legal thresholds and restrictions (cf. Issacharoff 2017; Levitzky and Zibblatt 2018). Albeit justified from a normative point of view, this liberal position has two major shortcomings. First, by reducing the recent crisis of democracy to a challenge that is provoked by radical outsiders, it is heavily underestimated how strongly the right-populist notion of a people that is imagined in terms of origin and ethnical belonging is naively taken for granted in large sectors of society. This 'ethical' assumption is even reflected juridically through a conservative definition of the access to citizenship (this is at least the case in countries where *jus sanguinis* is – more or less – the primary rule, like in Germany). Thus, the liberal equation of democracy and human rights conceals that the legitimating values of 'our democracy' are heavily contested, and that nationalist pre-suppositions have been able to survive under the cosmopolitan surface of post-fascism. Second, the liberal answer is not only naive and unpolitical but also risks to enforce Universalist norms in an authoritarian manner that is openly in tension with the modern promise of popular sovereignty. This is happening when human rights are conceived as external limits of democratic will-formation that need to be imposed by law, constitutional and international courts, moral and political education and so on. However, to proceed this way tragically verifies the right-populist narration of elitist expertocracy that deprives 'ordinary' people of their political and moral autonomy and that depicts them as irrational and unethical masses that must be coerced and civilised.

Radical-democratic approaches try to avoid the shortcomings of the liberal answer by acknowledging the fundamental contestedness of the basic principles of modern democracy and by pursuing the universalism of human rights as a political project that operates democratically from below (cf. Balibar 2004; Rancière 1999). Generally, in this tradition, Universalist frameworks of justice and participation don't need to be externally imposed to the exercise of popular sovereignty but stem internally from the latter, from the emergence of democratic subjectivities that are originally constituted against prevailing privileges (cf. Balibar 1994). It is also within this tradition of political theory that conceptions of a left populism have been developed and defended. Chantal Mouffe has argued prominently that the only feasible way of fighting against right populism and its dangers is to free the notion of 'the people' from its nationalist distortion and exclusivist definition and to recapture it in a left, open, pluralistic and inclusive way by shifting the central axis of antagonism. Instead of identifying foreigners, strangers and other minorities as the enemy of 'the people' that conversely defines the latter, the Schmittian distinction is applied to the inner divisions of established communities. Neoliberal capitalism, the corresponding forms of post-democratic politics, and the supporting oligarchic strata are now focused as the hegemonic complex against which a new collective will of 'the people' must be formed in order to defend the passion for democracy and to avoid that this passion is perverted by an authoritarian image of collective

autonomy (cf. Mouffe 2018, 2019, 6). From the standpoint of a consequently constructivist theory of hegemony (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985), ‘the people’ is construed as a contingent signifier that is neither bound to a certain sociological content – defined ethnically, culturally, economically and so on – nor confined to a specific ethico-political meaning. For sure, historically ‘the people’ was often conceptualised in a racist, repressive and totalitarian manner with disastrous effects. But according to Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière and others, there is also a genuinely different discourse of interpellating ‘the people’: the unruly, heterogeneous and bastardly people of the French Revolution, the *sans-culottes* of 1789, the multitudinous and subaltern mass of all those who raise their voices against colonial, economic and cultural elites, of all those who aren’t well-born, who have no recognised property of belonging, except the mere fact that they are part of an uncountable, unqualified ‘people’ (cf. Rancière 1999, 1–19). Following Mouffe, the meaning of ‘the people’ varies according to the discursive ‘chains of equivalence’ that are politically constructed (cf. Mouffe 2019, 62–64). All what’s crucial for radical politics today is to invest this work of construction, to formulate a vision of the people that is affectively able to reattach lost electorates to a left project of emancipation.

In this article, I will discuss the left-populist answer to the crisis of liberal democracy. The approach of a left populism has been questioned in many ways (cf. Arato and Cohen 2017; Fassin 2019), but especially two main problems are central for the debate:

1. First, it is not very clear how to distinguish left and right forms of populism conceptually from each other. Of course, there is an intuitive common sense that seems to be capable to identify what’s left and what’s right. But there is also a big grey area in between those clearly opposed poles where socialist demands for more economic justice obscurely merge with nationalist identities, xenophobic hierarchies of status, repressive protectionism, and structural anti-Semitism. There is a constant danger that left-populist movements smoothly amount to a superficially red-painted rebirth of nationalism that replaces the pain of subaltern struggles with the illusory proud of being an ‘ordinary German’ who is willing to fight for his inherited privileges (cf. Fassin 2018, 81–83; Slobodian and Callison 2019). Are conceptions of populism inherently totalitarian, identity-based and destructive, so that any attempt to construct emancipatory versions of populism is a contradiction in terms that ideologically disguises its regressive way of functioning, as liberal and left-Hegelian authors argue (cf. Arato 2013; Arato and Cohen 2019)? I want to reject this view in the first part of my article by showing that the negativistic, subaltern and constructivist character of leftist versions of populism conceptually differentiates the latter from its right-wing counterpart. The left-populist ‘people’ is decisively constituted as an entirely different political subjectivity that is diametrically opposed to any ‘rooted’ right-wing people.
2. In the second half of the article, I will discuss another point which remains largely undiscussed in Mouffe and Laclau’s work on populism: While there is a conceptual difference between left and right versions, how they politically relate to each other is still unexplored. Obviously they contradict each other both in terms of their core values and their way of constituting a collective subjectivity. But

how they politically confront each other has not yet been inquired more systematically. Mouffe tends to reduce this problem to a question of rhetoric that is persuasive enough for rearticulating those demands that are now still clustered by the political right (cf. Mouffe 2019, 75–78). However, this leads to the unsatisfying notion of two opposing projects of hegemony between which the involved actors have to decide beyond any rational form of conviction. For sure, there are many normative and political arguments against right-populist interpellations of ‘the people’, but those arguments risk remaining external to the immanent construction of the latter, thus not affecting and rebutting its own world view. In order to overcome this shortcoming, it is necessary to move from either moralism or decisionism to immanent critique. This gets possible by linking both sides, by demonstrating how left-populist notions of the people reveal a truth about political subjectivity that is ideologically veiled and betrayed by right-populist mystifications of identity. A glimpse of this thought is already present in Laclau’s reflections on the varieties of populism (cf. Laclau 2005, 196f, 208). Here we can find the following thesis: any racist, exclusivist or totalitarian closure of the people amounts to a self-negation of its own historical formation, and, we can possibly add, to a revocation of exactly the tradition and tendency of struggle that has historically emancipated in the very first place those who claim to be the people. I will elaborate and sharpen this promising notion of a self-negating people but also want to scrutinise what’s unclear about it: While the rational approach of immanent critique would be a very attractive option for dealing with right populism, it is not easy to combine Laclau’s radical-democratic assumption that ‘the political’ lacks any definitive normative or objective foundation with (cf. Laclau 2000; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 114–27, 134–48; Mouffe 2013, xif) the Hegelian idea of a political subject that ideologically misconceives, negates and betrays its own truth. It is possible to overcome this theoretical incompatibility? Can a critical criterion of rationality be inscribed into a radical-democratic framework? How has the latter to be modified in order to allow for this rationalisation?

## **I. Another people?**

Radical-democratic theorising of populism has become an object of general critique, both for analytical and normative reasons. The very thesis that there is at least potentially something like another kind of people that is not based on an exclusive and restrictive identity is forcefully rejected. Andrew Arato has accused Laclau’s conception of populism for irresponsibly promoting a paradigm of political thought that is inseparable from a totalitarian, even proto-fascist tendency (cf. Arato 2013, 156–58). From the perspective of a procedural theory of democracy, any claim of embodying the people inevitably sacrifices the plurality of civil society and thus suppresses the openness, contestedness and the permanent tentativeness and temporality of the general will on which modern democracy’s specific sense of political freedom rests (cf. Arato and Cohen 2017, 285–89). In the following, I’m going to argue that while Laclau’s notion of populism as the

embodiment of a people is certainly at odds with a purely procedural and institutionalist theory of democracy and civil society, he is nevertheless analytically right when he emphasises that any hegemony of a certain kind of procedural emptiness – also the deliberative, civil society-based one – is historically preconditioned by a concretely embodied emptiness of the universality of the people (section 1.1). All depends on how to understand the mode of embodiment that Laclau sees to be necessarily implied by the populist constitution of politics. I want to demonstrate that Laclau's reconstruction of constituting a people from below, from the negativity and minority of the plebs entails a notion of 'partial embodiment' (Laclau 2005, 166) that is structurally opposed to the repressive positivity of totalitarian embodiment that is typical for the right-populist phantasy (but a really effective one) of a racially or culturally established populous (section 1.2). By attaching systematically a negativist prefix to his constructivist account on populism he is able to differentiate between a totalitarian 'People' that reify its performative and subaltern becoming into a pseudo-objective identity of belonging from another, radical-democratic 'people' that is self-transparently aware of its constructivist and negativist formation. However, while latently critical, this distinction remains descriptive and observer-related in Laclau's account, thus still lacking the capacity to rationally confront the immanent perspective of right-populist subjectivities. Hence the tendency and limitation of a voluntarist and strategic attitude regarding radical politics (section 1.3).

### *1.1. Populist construction of civil society*

Before entering the discussion, we need to clarify the notion of populism in Laclau's account. For Laclau, populist movements tend to emerge whenever the institutionalised body politics is confronted with social demands which it cannot absorb and resolve through procedural means. In all those cases, the unsatisfied social demands assemble at the margin of 'the system' where they undergo a process of radicalisation: reformist requests are turned into revolutionary claims against the established modes and actors of politics (cf. Laclau 2005, 73f). Besides their disaffection and frustration, the radicalised demands have nothing in common except being radically opposed to a status quo that is experienced as particularistic, restrictive, as lacking the capacity of truly integrating the political community (cf. Laclau 2005, 19, 70, 96). These shared antagonistic experiences give rise to the creation of a 'chain of equivalence' in which the different unfulfilled demands are linked to each other (cf. Laclau 2005, 74, 77). Their linkage and commonality in turn is represented by an 'empty signifier' that points towards the embodiment of fullness or universality that is still denied and obstructed by the institutionalised body politics (cf. Laclau 2005, 71, 106). 'The people' is simply the name of this universality, of a fullness that is at the same time empty enough in order to encompass a wide and plural range of different demands. Fullness is only achieved through the construction of emptiness (cf. Laclau 2005, 96f, 98f). However, this emptiness is nothing purely abstract, not totally detached from historical concreteness, but empirically embodied by and within the specific antagonistic relation between 'the people' and those mechanism and forces it is polemically pitted against.

Laclau equates the populist constitution of ‘the people’ with the logic of the political as such (cf. Laclau 2015, 160–64).<sup>1</sup> While ‘politics’ designates the institutionalised and systemic working of sedimented social structures, ‘the political’ refers to all the inventive or interruptive practices that institutionalise those structures in the very first place (cf. Mouffe 2005, 8–34). The ‘political’ is construed as a field of construction where different and opposing projects of instituting society fight with each other beyond any possibility of a rational foundation respectively. ‘Aufhebung’ of the conflict in a Hegelian manner. Following this definition, it is not very plausible to identify ‘the political’ totally with the logic of populism, since the contestation of established politics through alternative projects of hegemony isn’t confined to the underdogs and subalterns. Politics is also contested from above, from elites that attempt (through the installation of technocratic regimes etc) to surmount the permanent shocks and troubles initiated by popular voices. However, in a more contextualised form, Laclau’s equation is quite convincing: Within the horizon of what Claude Lefort calls (following Tocqueville) the ‘democratic revolution’ (Tocqueville, quoted from Lefort 1988, 24, 183), ‘the people’ is generally considered as the political subject that legitimately questions and challenges given politics. In democracy, one could argue, ‘the political’ is normatively restricted to the former’s subject, to ‘the people’ (cf. Marchart 2005, 13–15) – and truly expressed by populist projects of embodying the latter.

Though, this is where dispute arises. Arato argues that in modern liberal democracy, every embodiment of political community must remain absent in order to allow the unconstrained flourishing of pluralist voices in civil society (cf. Arato 2013, 150–56). Democracy is here imagined as a totally open and procedural structure without any kind of substantial unity of the general will and strictly contrasted with ‘totalitarian’ notions of embodiment of the latter (cf. Arato 2013, 155–57). This conceptual demarcation is informed by Lefort’s theoretical reconstruction of the ‘democratic revolution’. Whereas in feudalism the divine fullness of community was incarnated by the king’s body, such ethico-political embodiment vanished with the advent of modernity. According to Lefort’s famous phrase, in democracy, the ‘place of power’ remains principally ‘empty’ and is only temporally occupied through shifting party coalitions and electoral majorities (cf. Lefort 1988, 17). From a radically procedural perspective, it is exactly this permanent possibility of questioning and revising form and content of community that’s crucial for democracy’s *kratos*, while re-embodying political community through ‘the people’ would again amount to an authoritarian repression of civil society’s open deliberation between different voices, opinions and perspectives and thus to a totalitarian eradication of democracy and its specific form of collective, but resolutely disembodied power (cf. Arato and Cohen 2017, 284–89; Johnston 2017, 41).

Laclau is totally aware of the Lefortian emphasis on the emptiness of democracy’s ‘place of power’. He also generally shares Lefort’s commitment to a liberal, pluralist and civil society-based constitution of democracy. However, he stresses that the procedural emptiness in which the deliberative and electoral will-formation takes place needs to be politically produced in the first place (cf. Laclau 2005, 164–71). The formalist frame of civil society and its communicative channels and fora have to be created, and this generation doesn’t happen in a purely juridical way, but through establishing historically a concrete universality of citizenry, a discursive space of contestation and civil agonism

in which equal citizens recognise each other and freely specify their common good (see also Taylor 1989, 2016). In other words: a meta-subject is necessary for realising the republican preconditions of democratic liberalism:

Emptiness, as far as that place [of power] is concerned, does not simply mean void; on the contrary, there is emptiness because that void points to the absent fullness of the community. Emptiness and fullness are, in fact, synonymous. But that fullness/emptiness can exist only embodied in a hegemonic force. This means that emptiness circulates between the place and its occupiers. They contaminate each other. So the logic of the King's two bodies has not disappeared in democratic society: it is simply not true that pure emptiness has replaced the immortal body of the King. This immortal body is revived by the hegemonic force. What has changed in democracy, as compared with the anciens regimes, is that in the latter that revival took place in only one body, while today it transmigrates through a variety of bodies. But the logic of embodiment continues to operate under democratic conditions and, under certain circumstances, it can acquire considerable stability. (Laclau 2005, 170).

Crucially, 'the people' embodies the very community that constitutes the space of civil society in the first place. In modernity, different projects of hegemony try to concretely institutionalise the emptiness of the 'place of power'. However, this doesn't mean that 'true' emptiness is placed above and abstracted from those attempts of concretisation. Instead, both level 'contaminate' each other, as Laclau says: the universalism respectively emptiness that is embodied by a people transcends the latter's concreteness, but this concreteness is nevertheless necessary for constructing that transcending universalism as a politically, life-worldly situated discourse. Otherwise universalism remains pure, but also unable to structure and organise the political realm.

## *1.2. Constituting the people from below*

For sure, to understand the constitution of a people as the concrete precondition of Universalist politics seems to be counter-intuitive if we take into account all the fascist and racist interpellations of 'the people' that are totally at odds with Universalist aspirations. Isn't any embodiment of political community through 'the people' tantamount to an exclusivist, xenophobic and anti-liberal framework of participation? Isn't the very idea of embodiment as such privileging homogenous, 'natural' and sovereign unities at the expense of heterogeneous, artificial, abnormal and fragmented elements? To talk about embodiment seems to presuppose that there is an already constituted, ontologically given whole that needs to be expressed by purifying it from all those alien moments that pollute its pristine essence. This is, at least, how Arato understands 'embodiment' when he constantly underlines its totalitarian character. For him, by embodying a purified essence, the people must be also 'extracted from within', that is, aggressively separated from those elements that doesn't attest its true and original spirit (cf. Arato 2013, 147, 156–60). However, in his theory of populism, Laclau uses a conception of 'partial embodiment' (Laclau 2005, 166) that precludes any totalitarian and essentialist temptation by starting from partiality instead of unity (a), negativity instead of positivity (b) and

performativity instead of objectivity (c) when approaching the constitution of ‘the people’<sup>2</sup>:

- (a) In Laclau, the construction of populist subjects doesn’t rely on the assumption of a given or lost unity of the people that could be affirmed or has to be restored (cf. Laclau 2005, 97f, 104, 108, 118, 163f). On the contrary, the populist embodiment is always directed against the traditionally existing community of the populous. Hence, ‘partial embodiment’ means embodiment from the perspective of partiality, from the particular view point of the plebs (cf. Laclau 2005, 115). Of course, the plebs, as a part, attempts to represent the whole, that is, to supplant the populous which is hitherto embodied by certain privileged groups or strata (cf. Laclau 2005, 81f, 83, 86, 93f, 107). But this also means that the populist process of embodying the whole is initially confronted with the experience of a prevailing and naturalised embodiment of unity that already exists against it; it is situated in a subaltern perspective of challenging established identities and therefore any presumption of being the natural incarnation of political community is thwarted from the very beginning.
- (b) In line with that subaltern partiality, the populist embodiment theorised by Laclau is inherently negative in character. This means that there is no reference to a positive substance that enables the proclamation of a homogenous people (cf. Laclau 2005, 98, 118, 163f). Instead, all what is initially present in the construction of the people is the ‘experience of a lack, a gap which has emerged in the harmonious continuity of the social’ (Laclau 2005, 85), a shared sense of ‘deficient being or failed unicity’ (Laclau 2005, 223). These negative experiences determine the body of the populist subject; nothing substantial, no shared culture, ethnicity or race is able to unite those who are socially excluded from those positive commonalities that actually only define the ‘respectable’ part of the populous. This body is thus also made out of another kind of flesh: it is not the healthy, strong, natural and organic flesh of pure being, but the unhealthy, maltreat, degenerated and chaotic one of a dingy creature that is excluded from the realm of recognised beings. Composed out of the negativity of ‘deficient being’, it is not the ‘superior’ body of a pure-blooded ‘Volksgemeinschaft’, but an ignoble body mixed out of deranged bitches and bastards.
- (c) The populist unity of the people is therefore thoroughly a construction, a product of performatively bringing about a community which doesn’t have any objectivity that precedes the process of counter-hegemonic articulation (cf. Laclau 2005, 97, 99, 102f, 163f, 183). Laclau highlights this aspect with his nominalist theory of naming: Instead of being a concept that represents a pregiven sociological content, ‘the people’ is just a name that inaugurates its own referent through the very act of naming (cf. Laclau 2005, 96–99, 102f, 118). Arato criticises this nominalist construction of ‘the people’ for being a voluntarist and even magic undertaking that heavily depends on the interpellating role of leadership (cf. Arato 2013, 158f, 162f). But the act of naming is neither the exclusive task of a single, superordinate, concretely personified and permanent leader (cf. Arato 2013, 60f, 100) – even though some speaking agency is always necessary



for uttering a name, but who speaks is up to changing constellations – nor is the pure will of giving a name sufficient for performatively creating a people. Quite the contrary, in order to name successfully a whole arrangement of discursive conditions must be met that make the recipients to accept a certain name as their own. This is probably the hardest work. However, it is important to emphasise that we are dealing not with objective conditions here, but discursively constructed one, thus no original essence is actualised by the name of the people.

For sure, the partial, negativist and performative people from below is still constituted antagonistically, that is, through excluding certain social, cultural and political elements from its own, new-invented universalism of subaltern citizenship. The movement of the *sans-culottes* in 1793, the Parisian communards from 1871 or the communist soviets after World War I – all of them were directed against certain groups that were depicted as the ‘enemy of the people’: feudal or bourgeois elites, monarchic, military or ecclesiastical authorities and so on. However, it would be misleading and a serious lack of historical differentiation to easily criticise this attempts of antagonistic constitution for being necessarily problematic from the ‘moral point of view’. Aristocrats or capitalists weren’t excluded from subaltern peoplehood simply due to their attachment to different values and world views or because they were of a different social, cultural or ethnical origin. They weren’t excluded in their capacity of concrete persons, but only inasmuch as they insisted on occupying a privileged position within society and political community. What’s excluded by and from the people from below is the very idea of privilege, exclusivity itself. This happens necessarily in order to establish an egalitarian universalism of mass democracy in which also persons from a bourgeois or aristocratic background can in principle participate, but in which the privileged position and status that has come along with this background is now longer accepted and recognised. In this sense, every egalitarian conception of community inevitably rests on some kind of moral–political exclusion.

### *1.3. Two peoples*

On the one hand, Laclau’s theory of populism reveals the embodiment of ‘the people’ as a performative construction from below that has to struggle against and smash positive identities of belonging instead of being objectively grounded in the latter. ‘Being the people’ means mere negativity, means being the plebeian, uncounted rest that hitherto remains factually excluded from the universal community of recognised and honourable political beings. The populist attempt of embodying a unity that is yet to come thus derives from the experience of heterogeneity, subalternity and from an own lack of valuable belonging. Populist embodiments of the people must therefore be conceptualised as negativistic counter-communities that are initiated from the ‘part of those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999, 11) and hence point according to the ‘reason’ (Laclau 2005) or ‘rationality’ (cf. Rancière 1999, 43–60) of their own political foundation towards a further opening vis-à-vis heterogeneity, strangeness, subalternity. By reconstructing the formation of populist subjects this way, Laclau is effectively subverting totalitarian phantasm of embodiment that pretend to rely on a positive, quasi-theological

and naturalised fullness of community that could be purified and exempted from the open play of political differences, diversities and conflicts. In Laclau's theory, populist subjects are a contingent construction within the realm of 'the political', thus nothing that could be referred back to any kind of ethnical or ethical essence.

On the other hand, Laclau's theory of populism captures the whole range of populist subjectivities, thus also including fascist or proto-fascist constructions of the people (cf. Laclau 2005, 173–222). He offers first of all a descriptive approach that reconstructs the coming about of political subjects from the perspective of the observer while it remains at first sight unclear how do discriminate normatively between different versions of populist construction. Since even right-populist movements can principally be described as sub-altern constructions of identity, antagonistically directed against elites and their regimes, it is 'on Laclau's ground [. . .] impossible to normatively distinguish' them from those who express Universalist aspirations, as Arato holds (cf. Arato 2013, 165f). He argues, that according to Laclau's conception of 'floating signifier' (Laclau 2005, 133, 134), the name of 'the people' is constantly traveling between opposing political camps, from the right to the left and back again, whereas the only way of politically influencing this movement is 'rhetorical and emotional success', because any notion of rationality beyond persuasion would be missing in Laclau (cf. Arato 2013, 165f). While I will argue in a minute against this objection by demonstrating that Laclau is implicitly employing a rational criterion of normative distinction when he discusses different 'varieties of populism', it is nevertheless important to stress that the deficit of rationality mentioned by Arato definitely occurs in another prominent accounts, namely in Mouffe's essay *For a Left Populism*.

Mouffe doesn't systematically distinguish between left populism and prevailing authoritarian alternatives. Her 'radical investment' (Laclau 2005, 71) into the contested definition of the 'floating signifier': 'the people' operates mainly by shifting the line of antagonism thematically: anti-capitalistic instead of anti-migrant issues should be pushed to the fore; struggles for economic justice, gender equality, ecological protection and an entirely vague deepening of the value and effect of citizenship must replace xenophobic obsessions (cf. Mouffe 2019, 64–67, 79f, 84). For sure, in terms of political content, Mouffe's proposal might be perfectly right, but there is, besides referring to contingent contents of counter-hegemonic 'chains of equivalences' (Mouffe 2019, 63), no argument that helps us to understand why right and left populisms are systematically opposed to each other and thus differ typologically, and why the latter has to be preferred due to the rationality of its *immanent* construction and self-understanding. Instead of investigating into possible reasons that could establish, defend and promote this conceptual distinction, a strategic and voluntarist perspective on rhetorically creating new affects of identification dominates Mouffe's attention. Thus, she intervenes into a field of floating affects in order to refract them in an emancipatory manner (cf. Mouffe 2019, 72–78). However, by doing so, her strategic, non-normative, resp. non-moralistic attitude also blurs the central line of distinction between the ethico-political alternatives that are really at stake here:

But a left populist strategy cannot ignore the strong libidinal investment at work in national – or regional – forms of identification and it would be very risky to abandon this terrain to right-wing populism. This does not mean following its example in promoting closed and

defensive forms of nationalism, but instead offering another outlet for those affects, mobilising them around a patriotic identification with the best and more egalitarian aspects of the national tradition. (Mouffe 2019, 71)

However, by mobilising *established* affects of national belonging, Mouffe's project is already based on those 'positive' identities that consequently legitimate and motivate the very authoritarian and xenophobic logic of privilege and exclusion which characterise those right-populist projects it was originally pitted against. She is already on the wrong track when she reproduces and reaffirms those affects: Regardless how strong the egalitarian implications of the nation are, they are deduced from the phantasm of ethnical (or some other kind of already established, 'rooted', well-born and thus verified) community and therefore principally reserved for its members. This is what the modern nation is about: inferring membership and participation from some organic or in some other sense positively given community that is reproduced by means of natural or cultural inheritance, modelled along the lines of an expanded family tree (cf. Fichte 1807; Miller 1997, 1–27; Walzer 1983, 35–42). We are already on the terrain of right populism, because the 'nation' exactly signifies a notion of political subjectivity that mystifies the subaltern/partial, negativist and performative–constructive character of its own becoming. Recognising this character instead and constantly avoiding its mystification is the very aspect that could really discriminate a left-wing, self-transparent and emancipatory 'people' from a right-wing, ideological and regressive 'People' that represses pluralism and heterogeneity in the name of a totalitarian and predefined essence.

Latently, this distinction is already present in Laclau's theory of populism. He therefore overcomes the shortcoming of a superficial and content-based definition of left populism and the limits of a purely rhetorical strategy of intervention that completely bypasses the level of rationality. For him, a proper populist subject is contrasted to an improper one according to how it conceives itself. When discussing 'authoritarian populism' he writes:

What happens, however, if the 'people' is conceived as an a priori homogeneous entity postulated from a centre of power which, instead of being the social precipitate of an equivalential interaction of democratic demands, *is seen as determining an identical substance that any demand expresses?* [...] The 'people' can still be conceived as a radical force opposed to the existing status quo, but it is no longer an underdog: the essential heterogeneity which is the basis of any populist identity has been surrendered and replaced by a homogeneous unity. That is what happened in Turkey, and it explains why Kemalism might have been a radical, ruptural discourse, but it was never populist. (Laclau 2005, 208)

In Laclau, the conception of populism in a full sense seemingly applies only to those political subjectivities that self-transparently recognise their subaltern, heterogeneous and performative construction. For him, the very fact that Kemalism 'replaces' the heterogeneity of 'the people' with the semblance of national homogeneity amounts to being not really populist at all.<sup>3</sup> The difference that's crucial here is not heterogeneity versus homogeneity, subalternity versus positive substance. All populist subjectivities are heterogeneous and initially motivated by an outsider-perspective. In some sense, the

'people' is always opposed to a regime of power that remains exclusive vis-à-vis certain demands. What matters here is being collectively aware of this negativity and to take into view the complex construction that has preceded popular unity. In short, for Laclau, the self-reflexive knowledge of how 'the people' emerges historically is an eminent aspect of being truly a populist subject. By introducing implicitly the second-order criterion of self-reflexivity and self-transparency into the definition of populism, it gets possible to evaluate and criticise empirical manifestations of populism not according to external arguments and contingent notions of what's a good political content, but according to an immanent yardstick: Has the populist subject in question an adequate understanding of its own historical becoming and social composition, or is the latter misconceived or concealed by mystifying notions of community, unity and belonging? Asking this question has directly a normative dimension, since misconceiving its own performative coming about leads to a reified notion of identity that negates and betrays its own and actual reason of being. Thus, we can distinguish a pathological 'People' that undermines the emancipatory discourse of including inferior masses into the realm of power and that therefore also negates the very historical foundation of popular sovereignty, from a self-reflexive and non-reified 'people' that recognises, affirms, reinforces and therefore tends to deepen the logic of subaltern universalism.

## **2. Self-negating people?**

The notion of self-negation allows moving from a decisionist and rhetorical intervention to a mode of immanent critique when it comes about dealing with the challenge of right-wing populism. It is now focused the rationality of political subjectivation, the way how 'the people' relates epistemically to its practical formation. Though, when white under classes claim to be the original, rooted and well-born people, they not only obscure ideologically the process of subaltern subjectivation that turned them into the people in the very first place. At the same time, also the normative reasons are rejected and radically reversed that were at play when popular sovereignty was revolutionary enforced vis-à-vis elitist government: the logic of inclusion of 'those who have no part' (Rancière 1999, 11), who a merely human beings, who are an unqualified element of 'the people', is supplanted by a nationalist paradigm of privilege according to which the modern inclusion of the masses of ignoble ancestry would have actually to be revoked. When members of the white working class whose social ancestors were originally not considered to be part of the recognised populous, but casted as dangerous outcasts and offsprings of an inferior race (cf. Balibar 1991, 207–209), argue for a nationalist closure of the people and thereby re-actualise the exclusivist logic of privilege, they employ a restrictive paradigm of participation that tentatively negates their own membership in political community. Every emancipatory claim of modern mass democracy that could prevent the latter from being re-reduced to elitist government is implicitly extinguished whenever the privilege of national belonging and the tradition of natural heritage is declared to be the 'ethical' foundation of the people. By making participation generally dependent on historically interchangeable social criteria for good, responsible and reliable citizenship (wealth, education, ethnical belonging), there is ultimately no normative argument at hand that could repel their own exclusion. This notion of a (neo-)racist

self-negation of the people is clearly articulated and radicalised by Christoph Menke. In his short essay *Zurück zu Hannah Arendt*, he criticises a purely humanitarian and juridical conception of human rights that is just externally confronted with the principle of collective autonomy. He argues that as long as the human rights of refugees aren't interpreted as a right to participate politically, they remain ultimately powerless (cf. Menke 2016, 54–58). However, by rejecting this political dimension of human rights, by excluding the refugee from the demos, the latter also negates itself. According to Menke, the exclusive people violates the very principles of belonging and participation that constitute community as a real, true, proper community:

The No that the community shouts to the refugee – you aren't a participant, because you are not a part of us – is actually a No that the community expresses vis-a-vis itself. [...] By denying to the refugee participation, the community denies the latter to its own members. The real injustice is not that we deny to the refugee something that we have. [...] Rather, the injustice toward the refugee is only the flipside of, or identical with [...] the injustice toward ourself. [...] Community's justice vis-a-vis the refugee is not a justice vis-a-vis the alien, but vis-a-vis itself. Real justice would require that we establish a social relation in which we are truly participants [...]. (Menke 2016, 57; my own translation)<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Menke postulates a normative essence of community as such that is hard to defend. He speaks about a truth of community to which the latter must live up in order to realise its inner condition. However, this truth is essential mainly for modern and democratic communities that are constituted by Universalist norms. It is their historically specific rationale of participation and belonging which is violated by exclusive definitions of the people, and this violation in turn leads to a revocation of the whole foundation of community and membership. Within this historical context, we seem to have, if we follow Menke, all what we need for immanent critique. Firstly, there is the notion of a social subject that is self-reflectively related to its own essence or truth; Menke explicitly takes the first-person resp. participant perspective when he addresses the self-relation of the subject while Laclau merely describes what's going on when populist subjects conceive or misconceive themselves without discussing what conceiving or misconceiving themselves means from the actor's perspective, especially in normative terms. Secondly, Menke presupposes that there is really something like a universal truth, logic or rationale of political subjectivation that is beyond contestation and could thus serve as a baseline for criticising all those notions and discourses that miss or disclaim this truth.

Thus, Menke presumably still employs the classical Hegelian philosophy of history and the opportunity of immanent critique that is implied by it. According to this view, social and political community is a historical manifestation of reason. The subject of this manifestation is considered as a conscious entity which realises itself as a unified and autonomous community during the process of manifestation. Ultimately, the subject of this historical progress is universal humanity, but the latter is not always already there, but the performative result of struggles and conflicts that have their starting point in experiences of negativity, heteronomy, of a lack of unity and autonomy that teleologically point towards their own overcoming and thus intrinsically aspire universality. Against this backdrop, closing political community in the name of a positive substance

of belonging that restricts legitimate membership amounts to a betrayal of the negativistic truth of the formation of political community according to which the latter's universalism is defined from a subaltern perspective. Thus, also the actual normative foundation of community is ultimately revoked and eradicated.

In Laclau, there is also the truth of subalternity, negativity and performativity that constitutes populist subjectivities. Against this backdrop, populist self-conceptions can be epistemically and normatively evaluated. From a radical-democratic point of view, it is indeed possible to critically assess whether they take into account their contingent and negativist nature and are due to this awareness cultivating a pluralist and inclusive ethos of political belonging, or whether they misconceive the fact of not relying on a positive substance and foundation, of being in the first place merely the result of subaltern construction and therefore (due to this self-misunderstanding) promote some kind of in-group fundamentalism, based on seemingly natural, well-anchored identities (cf. Critchley 2004; Glynos 2001). However, in Laclau, the truth of construction is relativised by the constructed: In his post-foundationalist account, there is actually nothing like an essence of political subjectivity that is independent from its discursive representation (cf. Laclau 2005, 98f, 109f). Populist subjects are constituted in the name of the people, but the latter doesn't signify any objective content or teleological determination of an already existing or at least somehow prefigured subject that historically unfolds and realises itself (cf. Laclau 2005, 126f, 146). At least, Laclau doesn't think that political subjects are easily able to pierce through the surface of discursive articulation in order to rediscover their pre-discursive truth, a rational sense of universality according to which the populist rhetoric of the concrete universality of 'the people' could be judged. For him, there is no ethical subject rooted in nature that could serve as the ontological foundation for populist politics. But there is – at least at first sight – also no ethical subject rooted in reason that could serve as a philosophical baseline for the historical *Bildungsgeschichte* of 'the people'. Such an assumption of a rational and singular subject that realises itself in history through overcoming its original negativity (or subalternity) is paradigmatically totally at odds with Laclau's radical Post-Hegelianism (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 114–27, 134–48; Mouffe 2013, xif). In his framework, the semblance itself constitutes the subjectivity and reality of the actors, and when a nationalist discourse was successful in establishing an essentialist notion of the people, it is very difficult to demonstrate why the latter is mystifying and normatively self-defeating. What's a self-misunderstanding and self-negation from the perspective of scientific observation that is aware of the fact of the subaltern coming about of the populist subject can on the other hand function as a very solid and effective evidence in terms of sedimented nationalist practices of political subjectivation. As a consequence, the radical-democratic critique of fundamentalist and identitarian notions of the people remains external vis-a-vis the latter. It is unable to shatter their assumed foundation because according to Laclau, the discursive reproduction of political subjectivities doesn't practically depend on realising and recognising its post-foundational truth (cf. Laclau 1996, 77).

Ideology becomes true. This radical-democratic insight is missing in Menke's opposition between the normative truth of community and its distortion or perversion. Theoretically situated in a left-Hegelian tradition, he seems to assume that some version of

practical rationality serves as a solid groundwork for a dialectical unfolding of history. The universalism of community might have been betrayed, ignored, violated; community is dirempted from its constituting concept, but it is possible and in the long run also necessary to return to this concept, to reconcile with its telos, to get rid of ideological mystification through critical reflection. In contrast to that, Laclau's deconstruction of objectivity has shattered all notions of a rational foundation that encompasses society as a totality. Hegelian totality is cracked into a plurality of different attempts to institute an ethico-political foundation for social life (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 122–27, 134–48; Laclau 2000). Insofar, community's refusal of universalism doesn't amount to a complete eradication of its own foundation, because there has been already another normative basis discursively created on which community can be build: the 'nation' that is perceived not as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), but as a natural complex of belonging that distributes social shares among its members according to cultural or ethnical criteria. The self-negating people is reaffirmed and reconstituted within another framework that seems to be fully sated with unquestionable positivity. The immanent crisis of community, to which Menke refers, is 'luckily' avoided through openly embracing particularistic identities as the 'normal' way to constitute and organise 'the people'.

### **3. Reconstructing the nationalist self-negation of the plebeian people**

However, even though the realm of the political is ultimately beyond a unifying foundation and thus two (or more) completely diametral constructions of the people are absolutely opposed to each other, one doesn't necessarily return to a situation where only decisionism or moral reasons are at hand in order to react to the challenge of right-wing populism. Rather, it is possible to critical address the latter's immanent tendency by reconstructing the historical transmutation that brought about the reified right-wing 'People'. Thus, instead of merely politically confronting the nationalist 'People' with a reflexive, left-wing people in a voluntaristic manner, we can critically reconstruct the historical development that has brought about the former as a history of self-negation of certain radical-democratic qualities and intentions that constituted the populist meaning of the people in the very first place. According to my general thesis, we are able to overcome the unresolvable opposition of two political world views and populist self-understandings in the here and now by revisiting and problematising the process of becoming that has led to the emergence of the reified 'People'. This 'People' is not simply an alternative possibility of populist subjectivation but self-contradictorily inasmuch – and this is the central assumption – as historically, the people's formation as a political subject always (even in nationalist cases) starts from some underdog-position and therefore has a subaltern and negativist *raison d'être* in relation to which the nationalist tendency appears as ideological betrayal with regressive normative consequences.

But this self-negation gets only visible when we take a diachronic perspective, when we trace and track the process of populist subjectivation: The very ethico-political ambivalence of the meaning of 'the people' seems to indicate that there is a specific dynamic or passage that has lead time and again to a transmutation of one people into the other one, of the subaltern, negativist and performative 'people' into an already unified,

established and recognised, positivist and essentialist ‘People’. The first task of critically confronting the reified, ‘rooted People’ is to understand this transmutation. Can this shift be described as a structural history of a failure of a subaltern, sans-sculottian counter-hegemony of the plebeian people? Can this shift be interpreted as a reactionary revocation or resolution of the emancipatory demands of this people? Is the conformist integration of the plebs into the traditional populous and its particularist paradigm of privilege to be considered as a conservative substitution of a radical-democratic project of participation and of a subaltern foundation of community that has failed due to its inability to fully democratise social power, to overcome the capitalist frame of democracy? And does the self-negation of the people persist even if its members are formally integrated into a national and privileged sphere of citizenship? Is the conformist integration of the plebs into the populous tantamount to a hierarchised form of participation that reproduces exclusion and subalternity within and through the commonality of citizenship?

To reflect upon the shift from one people into another one along such questions already transcends the limitations of a norm-free descriptions of changing discursive settings and strategies of hegemonic articulation. In order to critically address this shift and to affect it immanently, a different, more demanding inquiry is necessary that grasps the history of modern democracy philosophically as a regressive development of popular sovereignty. Schematically speaking, such a theoretical reconstruction of the development of modern democracy, that is informed by a negativist refraction of Hegelian philosophy of history, proceeds as follows:

- (a) It starts from the assumption that the ‘democratic revolution’ (Tocqueville, quoted from Lefort 1988, 24, 183) at the dawn of modernity was motivated by a radical-democratic project of collective autonomy according to which any spheres, aspects and dimensions of social life should be subjected to democratic contestation and modelling (cf. Marchart 2015), to a restless democratisation that leaves no pre-political precondition of political community (authority, wealth, origin) untouched; to erase any pre-political, natural precondition means to define participation and community entirely from the perspective of those who possess no special qualification for participation, who are only part of an undifferentiated mass, humanity, concretised as ‘the people’ (cf. Rancière 1999, 8f).
- (b) After locating the radical-democratic starting point of the modern aspiration of collective autonomy, it is possible to show how this project came into crisis, because it was blocked by seemingly natural powers that persisted democratisation and reintroduced elitist components into the self-understanding of modern democracy while in line with this exempting large sphere of social life from the claim of collective autonomy; Proletarian and plebeian classes remained effectively and often also explicitly excluded from equal participation in political community, because the exemption of ‘bourgeois society’ from democracy amounted to a bourgeois restriction and distortion of popular sovereignty.
- (c) However, this is not where the story ends. It is important to understand how this crisis and frustration of radical democracy was concretely sublated. There was a certain resolution of this crisis that was organised around the notion of the



nation. The nation was invented and imagined as a new home, a new, extended family in which hitherto excluded, subaltern groups could ‘naturally’ or ‘fatefully’ take part (cf. Anderson 1983, 141–44). As a subversive political subject, working class was juridically excluded from politics and object of rigid repression. But this subalternity had been overcome with the rise of nationalism and the shared, war-like experience of ‘Schicksals- und Blutsgemeinschaft’ in which true citizenship found its solid foundation.

- (d) At this point, it is important to grasp the deeply ambivalent character of this process of nationalist inclusion. What is on one hand the resolution of the crisis and historical inability of radical democracy (and hence indicates progress) is at the very same time the self-negation of its original longing for equal participation. The functional equivalent for radical democracy – the national democracy of a ‘rooted’ people – not only betrays its subaltern history, but also sacrifices the unrestricted insistence on ‘participatory parity’ (Fraser 2003, 31) that leaves no authorities, no superiority of status and no semblance of the givenness of the social world, that comes along with it, unchallenged. This regression seems to have conceptual reasons. The very paradigm of the family that is implied by the notion of the nation (cf. Walzer 1983, 35–42) already entails a premise of natural inequality: A family connects its members to each other in an unequal and paternalistic way; they relate to each other as caring fathers, devoted mothers, immature, but nevertheless appended children; Understood in terms of organic belonging, family is a community of unequals in which the common ‘We’ is structured at least implicitly in a hierarchical manner (cf. Hegel 1991 [1821], §§ 174f), thus always leaving open the possibility of exclusion or subjugation (of the ‘black sheep’, ignoble, immature under classes) *within* the realm of inclusion. This structure of unequal commonality must still reconstructed theoretically. Empirically, it is indicated time and again, when political representatives speak about ‘ordinary people’ that need to be satisfied and pacified by paternalistically suppling them with sufficient jobs, security, and a sense of being heard, of being considered by elites, instead of really taking part in the endeavour of collective autonomy themselves.

Again, it is necessary to stress that the theoretical reconstruction of modern democracy’s regression I have just roughly sketched surely is in tension with Laclau’s post-foundational framework. Laclau’s observation of a self-negation that is implied by a reified notion of ‘the people’ is strongly radicalised here. According to this perspective, the non-transparency and reification in regard to the constitution of ‘the people’ is tantamount to an invalidation and revocation of the very attempt of political subjectivity. However, this is not true for political subjectivity as such. The radical constructivism of Laclau’s post-foundationalism has a kernel of truth inasmuch as the discursive self-misinterpretation can practically become the very historical basis and content of the self itself. Accordingly, it is not very helpful to locate objective interests and to hold that they are in danger due to the self-negation of the people just described (cf. Adorno 2019, 28f, 51f): For sure, the interest in egalitarian participation has been betrayed by the nationalist transmutation of ‘the people’, but it has also been more or less successfully supplanted

by a new interest in homogeneity, security, authoritarian synthesis and parochial solidarity. The emancipatory rigour of radical democracy seems to be quite outdated today, at least if we talk about the self-understanding of right-populist actors.


Nevertheless, the Hegelian radicalisation of Laclau's self-negation-thesis seems to be much more convincing if we explicitly approach the matter from the perspective of the project of radical democracy that is guided by specific emancipatory demands. If we look from this angle and if we particularly concentrate on the process of transmutation of the meaning of the people, the self-negation becomes manifest *in actu*. That is, if we historically concretise form and content of democracy's subject and if we historically situate our analytical view within the process of transmutation, we can more plausibly trace the latter's self-negation. This amounts to a kind of situated and concretised philosophy of history in which the Hegelian notion of a subject that autonomously unfolds itself can be identified with radical democracy as a project of political subjectivation. At first sight, that seems to be a forced or arbitrary marriage of incompatible theoretical perspectives. However, the Hegelian and the radical-democratic subject have central commonalities that still have remained mostly unnoticed: From both perspectives, the subject and its truth is not always already there, but performs its origin through and in struggle; the self-transparency of the subject reveals nothing positive or substantial, but only the contestative nature of negativity and its longing for a universality yet to come; but besides not being grounded in a positive essence, there is nevertheless something like an essence, namely the political process of formation of subjectivity itself and the Universalist desires that propel this process (see from another angle Hetzel 2009). It is thus possible to overcome the limitations of Laclau's radical-democratic critique of right-wing populism through a Hegelian reconstruction of the process of political subjectivation without relapsing into essentialist assumptions that are at odds with post-foundational approaches.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up: it is possible to discriminate conceptually an emancipatory notion of the people from a reactionary, racist and reified one. Against wide-spread criticism of left-wing populism that depict the latter as only repeating the totalitarian logic of right-wing populism while superficially re-painting its surface, I have argued with reference to Laclau that there is potentially another people that is self-transparently aware of its partial, subaltern and performative way of construction and thus resists any temptation of totalitarian closure, racist restriction and reification. Insofar as actually any populist subject is politically constructed originally this way, it gets possible to criticise right-wing populism for negating this truth of construction that is instead authentically and transparently embodied by its radical-democratic counterpart. This is an important step forward, not only theoretically, but also in political terms. One can overcome moralistic and politicistic counter-strategies that either confront right-wing populism with norms that risk to remain external to its self-understanding and history or are deprived of any normative content at all and thus construe the confrontation between right- and left-populism as a situation of arbitrary decision. Instead, another counter-strategy gets available, namely an approach of immanent critique that addresses the self-

understanding of right-populist subjects by demonstrating that they are not aware of the subaltern origin and becoming of ‘the people’, that they negate their original outsider-perspective vis-à-vis the established identity of the populous and that they thus revoke the very normativity of subaltern universalism that constituted the people according to its modern, revolutionary understanding in the very first place. However, the strategy of immanent critique has to deal with the problem that the subaltern origin of ‘people’ was often successfully supplanted and overwritten by nationalist discourses that seemingly offer a new foundation for the collective autonomy of ‘the people’. Nevertheless, immanent critique remains a promising option inasmuch as one can reconstruct the *historical process* of the transmutation of one people into the other, reified one as tendency of regression, of a failure and a wrong and disadvantageous substitution of the ambitions of radical democracy, originally projected from the perspective of subalternity. The nationalist reification of the people that today seems to be a solid, ‘natural’ reality beyond doubt can maybe politically burst again if we return theoretically to the passages in history when this reification originally took place as an ideological reaction to a crisis of radical democracy and its promising pretensions. For sure, how to translate this theoretical critique into a political intervention remains beyond the limits of this article. However, at least one can identify the challenge: The political prospects of the critical project depend on the capacity to illuminate and discursively reframe the experiences and perceptions of right-populist subjects in a way that makes visible the subaltern truth of their own origin and the regressive self-negation of this very truth that they themselves are committing. The practical exercise of the critique thus doesn’t proceed by re-refracting the populist passion (just) through an alternative politics of affects, but by generating reflexive insights that are able to address the subjects’s distorted longing for collective autonomy.

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## Notes

1. On the pages just quoted Laclau identifies populism with ‘politics’. However, this is conceptually quite confusing within the tradition of radical democracy. Inasmuch as populism interrupts and radically challenges politics (defined as an already institutionalised structure), it manifests ‘the political’.
2. Laclau introduces the notion of ‘partial embodiment’ as follows: ‘Between total embodiment and total emptiness there is a graduation of situations involving partial embodiment. These partial embodiments are precisely the forms taken by hegemonic practices’ (Laclau 2005, 166). Here, in connection with ‘graduation’, ‘partial embodiment’ seems to mean embodiment ‘to a greater or lesser extend’. However, it is hard to make sense of such a gradualistic qualification when it comes about constituting the unity (and not a fraction) of ‘the people’. In what follows, I will interpret ‘partial’ as ‘partisan’, because this seems much more in line with Laclau’s *own* theory of populist construction of ‘the people’ that has a negativistic, subaltern and in that sense ‘partisan’ or ‘partial’ starting point, but nevertheless constitutively aspire to *fully* embody unity, not only ‘more or less’.

3. The same applies, according to Laclau, to cases of 'ethno-populism' where the internal frontier in a given society that originally had sparked the counter-hegemonic work of populist articulation was lost out of sight and replaced by the notion of an external frontier between a reconciled community and foreign groups. Here again, the awareness of the actual subaltern and performative becoming of the people is ideologically repressed and supplanted by the phantasm of a homogenous community that has been always already there and thus primarily need to fight against external and foreign elements (cf. Laclau 2005, 196f).
4. German original: 'Das Nein, das das Gemeinwesen dem Flüchtling entgegenruft – Du bist gar kein Anteil, den Du bist kein Teil von uns – ist daher in Wahrheit ein Nein des Gemeinwesens zu sich selbst. [...] Indem ein Gemeinwesen bestreitet, dass der Flüchtling ein Anteil ist, bestreitet es dies seinen eigenen Mitgliedern. Die Ungerechtigkeit gegenüber dem Flüchtling liegt nicht darin, dass wir ihm etwas abschlagen, was wir selbst haben [...]. [Vielmehr ist] die Ungerechtigkeit gegenüber dem Flüchtling nur die andere Seite, ja dasselbe [...] wie die Ungerechtigkeit uns selbst gegenüber. [...] Die Gerechtigkeit des Gemeinwesens gegenüber dem Flüchtling ist nicht die Gerechtigkeit gegenüber dem Anderen, sondern gegenüber sich selbst. Sie verlangt von uns, einen sozialen Zusammenhang zu schaffen, in dem es wahr ist, dass wir soziale Anteile sind [...]'.

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