Towards a psychoanalytic theory of populist mobilization: reflecting on Laclau's engagement with social psychology and the theory of crowds

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Abstract: An overlooked aspect of Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism is his discussion of social psychology. In the opening chapters of *On Populist Reason*, Laclau engages with classic contributions to social psychology, such as Gustave Le Bon's and William McDougall's work on crowds and Freud's reflections on group psychology. Reconstructing this engagement is essential for a deeper understanding of Laclau's "mature" conception of populism and for addressing its limitations. From an ethical perspective, Laclau's engagement with social psychology provides a means to challenge the "denigration of the masses" that informed early studies of crowds and persists in contemporary critiques of populism. At the same time, these debates lay the groundwork for what may be described as a "psychoanalytic theory of populist mobilization" informed by Freud's ideas on identification in group psychology, where the leader serves as a focal point for an otherwise dispersed collective. Incorporating this psychoanalytic dimension offers a more solid grounding for Laclau's rather abstract theory, and a way to develop a more nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics of populist movements and their different outcomes.
Keywords: Populism; Laclau; social psychology; crowds; mobilization; identification

ᴱˢᴾ Hacia una teoría psicoanalítica de la movilización populista: reflexiones sobre el diálogo de Laclau con la psicología social y la teoría de las muchedumbres

Resumen: Un aspecto poco estudiado de la teoría del populismo de Ernesto Laclau es su análisis de la psicología social. En los primeros capítulos de *La razón populista*, Laclau aborda las contribuciones clásicas a la psicología social, como el trabajo de Gustave Le Bon y William McDougall sobre las muchedrumbres y las reflexiones de Freud sobre la psicología de grupos. Reconstruir este análisis es esencial para comprender mejor la concepción madura del populismo de Laclau y abordar sus limitaciones. Desde una perspectiva ética, el análisis de Laclau sobre la psicología social ofrece un medio para cuestionar la denigración de las masas que inspiró los primeros estudios sobre las muchedumbres y que persiste en las críticas contemporáneas al populismo. Al mismo tiempo, estos debates sientan las bases de lo que podría describirse como una teoría psicoanalítica de la movilización populista, inspirada en las ideas de Freud sobre la identificación en la psicología de grupos, donde el líder sirve como punto focal para un colectivo que, de otro modo, estaría disperso. La incorporación de esta dimensión psicoanalítica ofrece una base más sólida para la teoría bastante abstracta de Laclau y una manera de desarrollar una comprensión más matizada de la dinámica interna de los movimientos populistas y sus diferentes resultados.
Palabras clave: Populismo; Laclau; psicología social; muchedumbres; movilización; identificación

Summary: Populism as a logic of discourse and mobilization. Suggestion: the pathological view of the masses. Imitation: the horizontal power of coordination. The Freudian breakthrough: love and identification. Possibilities and limits of populist mobilization. Conclusion

Populism is often understood as a symbolic phenomenon: as either a particular ideology (Mudde, 2004), discourse or discursive logic (Laclau, 2005), rhetoric (Moffitt, 2016) or style (Kazin 2014) that involves an appeal to the people and against an elite. It is customarily argued that such a symbolic trait is an element shared across otherwise disparate movements, thus making them "populist". This symbolic approach to populism has provided scholars with a flexible framework to study the complex array of rhetorics and imageries associated with populist politics and identify some significant commonalities across otherwise very different phenomena. However, this emphasis on the cultural and symbolic aspects of populism –which is also visible in the theory of Ernesto Laclau, arguably the most influential theorist of populism –has led to overlooking other aspects of populism, and in particular, the nature of mobilization practices, namely the various forms of organized and strategic action concretely responsible for "gathering the people" and setting it in motion.

In recent years, some scholars have started developing precisely such a theory of "populist mobilization" (Aslanidis, 2024; Jansen, 2011) in order to mend this imbalance in the debate on populism. It is argued that by developing such a theory, we may be able to answer some practical and strategic questions that lie beyond the horizon of the symbolic analysis of populism. For example: How do populist movements practically activate their constituency? Which social and political conditions favor the rise of populist movements? Why are some of them more successful than others in winning popular consensus?

Due to its focus on the discursive dimension of politics and his lack of interest in the organizational dimension, Ernesto Laclau's work tends to neglect mobilizational processes and the social conditions that are conducive to populist politics (Norval, 2006; Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2021, p. 35). Such a tendency has arguably contributed to some serious limits of Laclauian analysis in understanding the conditions for successful populist movements. Furthermore, it may have contributed to a certain disregard for organizational and mobilization processes by political leaders who tried to use Laclau's theory as a guidance for political practice, leading to a short-termist media-focused strategy.

Despite these problems, some insights for developing a mobilizational approach to populist politics can be gleaned from the work of Ernesto Laclau and his engagement with the social psychology literature. As we shall demonstrate in this article, his mature theory of populism, developed in *On Populist Reason* (Laclau, 2005), stems from his critical reinterpretation of social psychology literature, particularly the debate on crowds and collective behavior. This pivotal debate, animated by the likes of Le Bon, Tarde, and Freud, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, was a decisive turning point in the development of social science amid growing anxiety over the growth of mass society and new collective political phenomena.

In our contention, Laclau's critical encounter with this literature is crucial to better understand his definitive theory of populism. Specifically, by critically examining the work of prominent theorists of crowds, collective behavior, and the founders of social psychology, Laclau appears to have retrieved some decisive building blocks to give his theory of populism more solid ethical and theoretical foundations. A more nuanced vision of "populist mobilization" as an iterative process of mobilization/dispersion of the mass/individuals can be drawn from Laclau's engagement with social psychology. This *processual view of populism,* which emerges embryonically in Laclau's definitive account of populism, has considerable potential for application in studying concrete populist movements and their mobilization processes, characterized by their pendulum-like progression.

Laclau's engagement with social psychology literature is three-pronged. First and foremost, Laclau finds essential insights in this literature to develop an "ethical" reclaiming of populism as a phenomenon that has been the object of theoretical and political disdain for too long. Such a key polemical statement is developed by Laclau, drawing a parallel with the "denigration of the masses" that Laclau discovers in early social psychology literature in which crowd behavior was seen as inherently irrational and bordering on violence and instinctive action –hence as fundamentally pathological. Laclau suggests that perhaps behind this denunciation of crowds as pathological lies a reluctance to accept the complexity of various forms of internal coordination of the crowd and the mass as political phenomena deserving attention.

Second, Laclau finds in the social psychology literature a suitable conceptual toolkit to construct his theory of populism, following his earlier discussion on the logics of equivalence and difference. Developed from the theoretical framework introduced in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), the logic of equivalence operates by constructing chains of association between disparate elements, reducing their specificity to emphasize their shared opposition to an antagonistic other, thus producing a unifying identity. In contrast, the logic of difference functions by maintaining the particularity of elements within a system, dispersing antagonism, and integrating demands into a differentiated and plural order. In principle, these logics are not purely oppositional but rather mutually constitutive, shaping the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that underpin political articulation and identification. An equally nuanced perspective emerges in his engagement with social psychology. Drawing on Freud, Laclau acknowledges that groups can exhibit varying internal dynamics, particularly in the relationship between leaders and followers. This recognition

opens the possibility for a configuration in which the leader maintains a more egalitarian footing with their followers, fostering a different model of group interaction.

Thirdly, such a literature is favorable to see populism as a processual form of identification rather than merely a theory of identity. Questions of identity and identification are central to Laclau's intellectual trajectory, running through his engagements with discourse theory, hegemony, and political subjectivity. However, it is in *On Populist Reason* that the emphasis on identification as a contingent and dynamic process is most systematically elaborated. This is also achieved by drawing on Freud's famous discussion of the "external object" as a focus of identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1922). For Laclau, such a Freudian theory of identification represents the most sophisticated point of arrival in the debate on crowd theory and collective behavior insofar as it links the process of mass cohesion to a libidinal form of identification with a leader. While this does not imply a strategic or rational act of leadership, it is nevertheless coherent with Laclau's view that populism often operates through leader-centered dynamics.

Such insights are incorporated into the discursive understanding of populism advanced by Laclau. We are well aware that Laclau's concept of discourse –drawing on Wittgenstein –encompasses both linguistic and extra-linguistic elements. However, this recognition is not matched by the development of middle-range theoretical tools (Glynos & Howart 2007, p. 64; Ostiguy & Moffit 2021, p. 59) that would account for how populist identification concretely takes place. The high level of abstraction in Laclau's framework risks, in practice, conflating the discursive with the merely linguistic, that is, with what is ostensible, explicit, and readily nameable.

While Laclau's engagement with social psychology opened the possibility of linking discourse to affective, mobilizational, and institutional dynamics, this line of thought has not been fully pursued toward the elaboration of what might be called a discursive-mobilizational theory of populism. Such a theory would not treat discourse solely in terms of semantic or structural features but would also attend to how discursive formations operate affectively and organizationally to produce collective identification, action, and institutions. Indeed, this is arguably the direction in which scholarship on populism may be heading. There are striking homologies between populist discourse and mobilizational practices –between the role of empty signifiers and the symbolic function of leaders as organizational nodes –which call for deeper inquiry and may point to a distinctive feature of the populist logic itself.

In developing our discussion, we shall begin by situating our contribution within the broader contemporary discourse on populism and popular mobilization. Subsequently, we shall examine the three theories of mass mobilization that emerge from Laclau's reading of social psychology: first, the plebophobic(i. e. informed by a detestation of the people) anda pathological view of the masses associated with the notion of "suggestion", as advanced by figures such as Le Bon and Taine; second, the shift toward the concept of "imitation", as developed by Tarde and McDougall; and finally, the Freudian breakthrough grounded in the joint notions of love and identification. In light of the arguments presented thus far, we interrogate some of Laclau's positions in the second and third parts of *On Populist Reason* and outline an alternative framework for understanding and classifying populist mobilization –one informed by Laclau's own engagement with classical psychology. We shall conclude with some general remarks about the relevance of this Laclauian intervention to the current scholarly debate on populism while pointing to some directions for future research in this area.

Populism as a logic of discourse and mobilization

The scholarly debate has often approached populism from a symbolic standpoint, viewing it as an ideological or discursive phenomenon. Cas Mudde famously presented populism as "[a] thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, '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, p. 543). Similarly, Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell saw populism as an ideology that "pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who were together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice" (2007, p. 3).

Other authors have instead represented populism as a kind of rhetorical style (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2016). Benjamin Moffitt has described populism as a distinctive political style, which, besides the aforementioned appeal to the people versus the elite, involves the frequent resort to bad manners to demarcate the populists against the elite, and a rhetoric that attempts to exploit situations of societal breakdown, or perceived decline. A similar discussion of populism as style is found in Michael Kazin's analysis of US populism, which presents populism as a persistent rhetorical style used by different political forces, first on the left and then on the right (2014).

Ernesto Laclau's highly influential theory of populism has instead theorized populism in discursive terms. Stemming from the tradition of the Essex School of discourse analysis that he gave birth to, Laclau emphasized other features of populism, such as the role of empty signifiers, the performative impact of acts of naming, and the importance of chains of equivalence binding together different demands in a symbolic assemblage vis-à-vis a common enemy. Moving off from Althusser's view of a social formation as a combination of various "regional" layers (economic, political, ideological) and espousing the philosophical approach of Derrida and other post-structuralist authors, Laclau did not see discourse as a separate ontological realm, but as an all-encompassing practice carrying concrete and material consequences.

Arguably, this discursive approach has also contributed to some of the simplifications inherent to Laclau's theory of populism and its democratic status. Specifically, by defining democracy strictly as the potential

to continually forge a "new" people (Laclau, 2005, p. 171) –thereby equating populism with democracy and discarding procedural norms –Laclau's theory risks overlooking some of the challenges that populism can present. While it avoids the misplaced liberal concern about populism's supposedly inherent authoritarian or proto-fascist tendencies, such a conception may be too lenient toward populism taken to an extreme, where the exacerbation of the "we-they" polarization and the centrality of the leader produce outcomes that hinder the very process of creating a "new" people that Laclau himself champions.

On this point, Laclau has faced criticism, even from sympathetic perspectives, for leaning too heavily toward equivalence and homogenization, emphasizing a semi-transcendent "heroic" politics rooted in the idea of the subject as a creator *ex nihilo* (Norval, 2006). By approaching populism from a more concrete angle of organizational and mobilization practices, it may be able, on the one hand, to better account for more complex and differential practices of internal coordination and organization of populist movements; and, on the other hand, to identify a plurality of manifestations of the populist logic, some of which are democratic and normatively agreeable and others which are not.

The emerging debate on populist mobilization developing in political sociology is geared toward addressing these issues. Drawing on Laclau's remarks on the difficulty of defining populism, political sociologist Robert Jansen introduces the term "populist mobilization" in his influential 2011 article in order to theorize "populism as a mode of political practice" (Jansen, 2011, p. 75). He used the term to argue that "populism should no longer be reified as a movement or regime type, but rather understood as a flexible way of animating political support" (p. 77). Thereby, he defines "a project of populist mobilization any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (p. 82) and argues that "populist mobilization thus describes any sustained political project combining popul*ar* mobilization with popul*ist* rhetoric", underlining that the two can appear in separation.

Such an approach highlights that "it is important not to assume that mobilizing actors constitute a solidary collectivity, as the formation of such a collectivity is often the result –and sometimes a primary goal –of mobilization" (p. 83). Such a condition of pre-existing collective solidarity and identity is precisely what seems to happen in many populist movements where the subject of the people is not mobilized from a pre-existing pool of mobilization, but rather created afresh as part of the process of mobilization (Gerbaudo, 2017). Ultimately, for Jansen, "[p]opular mobilization might be thought of as a subtype of political mobilization, in that it is the mobilization of ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action" (2011, p. 83).

Popular mobilization and populist rhetoric are conveniently separated as they are not always found together: sometimes, you have popular mobilization without populist rhetoric, and other times, populist rhetoric without popular mobilization. Beyond the emphasis placed on elections and referenda, populism is not seldom accompanied by political inaction (Westlind, 1996, p.104). In the context of mobilization, the two instead are paired: "[t]he populist rhetoric animates, specifies the significance of, and justifies the popular mobilization; and the popular mobilization instantiates the populist rhetoric in a popular political project" (p. 85). This emphasis on the performative character of populist mobilization is particularly relevant to the discussion that follows. What it leaves unanswered is the nature of specific mobilization mechanisms deployed by populist movements as a counterpart of populist rhetoric.

Greek political scientist Paris Aslanidis has built on Jansen's notion of populist mobilization to discuss how "activists leverage a wide variety of symbolic and cultural resources to construct a resonant populist collective identity and create a broad political tent for people to rally under" (2024, p. 2). He proposes "viewing populism as a discursively constructed collective action frame" (p. 45), found in many processes of popular mobilization. He argues that this approach "enables us to move away from the inclination to categorize political agents as either populist or non-populist in a rigidly dichotomous manner. Instead, it invites us to treat populism as a "gradated, multifaceted, and constantly evolving phenomenon" (p. 46).

While drawing on Laclau, Aslanidis argues that his focus on leader-centered political parties is problematic because it overlooks the relevance of populism to many recent social movements. Further, he proposes that –contrary to Laclau's engagement with Freud's analysis of the psychology of groups, which we shall shortly discuss –"empirical evidence supports the existence of populist mobilization in the absence of such libidinal bonds or an explicitly hierarchical organizational structure" (p. 56). Further, Aslanidis criticizes what he describes as Laclau's "groupist" inclination while suggesting the need for an analysis that does not ground micro-mobilizational processes on psychoanalytic notions (p.56). Both Jansen and Aslanidis offer some useful insights for moving beyond the limits of Laclau's theory of populism, which overlooks the importance of mobilizational processes and their social conditions. Yet, as we shall propose, it is wrong to see the root of Laclau's limits in his psychological and, more specifically, psychoanalytic perspective. In fact, it is precisely at this level that we can find some valuable insights to illuminate the performative practices through which the "people is formed".
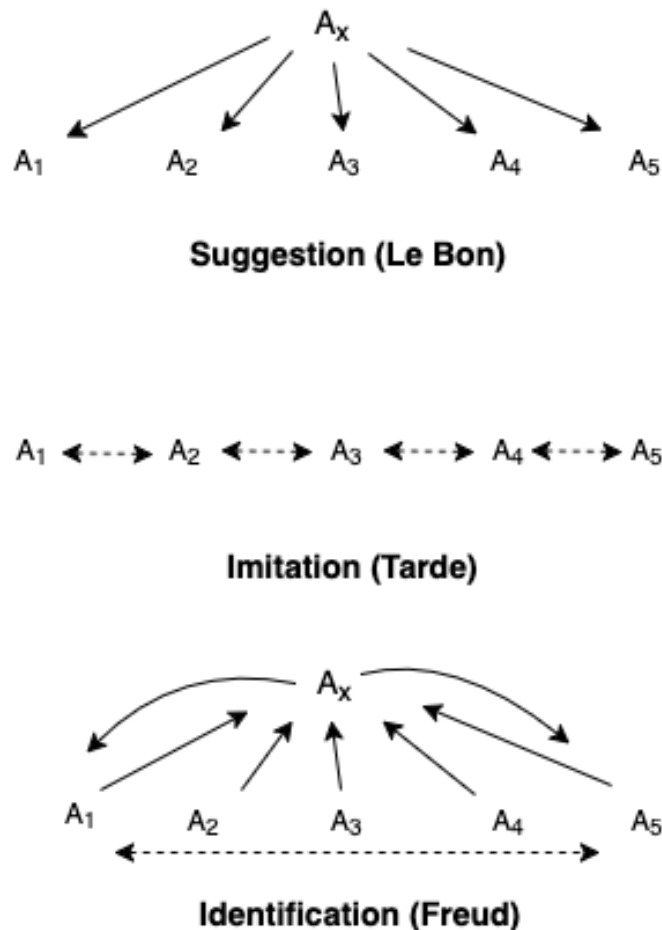
Figure 1. Coordination mechanisms of mass mobilization in light of different social psychological theories

Note: Authors' elaboration

Developing a psychoanalytic theory of populist mobilization allows for overcoming the excessive abstraction of Laclau's theory of populism and developing some of the insights inherent in the current debate on populist mobilization. Laclau's theory has been criticized for placing too much importance on the unity and homogeneity of the people and not accounting for the presence of significant internal differences across various populist movements. Using the insights drawn from the study of mass coordination mechanisms we can form a matrix *of different forms of mobilization, and specifically different forms of populist mobilization*, which can serve to capture this plurality of mobilizational logics.

To summarize the argument that will be presented in the following pages, Laclau ultimately retrieves three possible theories of mass mobilization which differ in terms of the directionality of social influence among the individuals in the mass (Figure 1). The first one, suggestion, is the one that Le Bon put forward in his theory of the crowd, strongly influenced by the theory of hypnotism. In this theory, the coordination of the mass unilaterally cascades down from the leader, or in its absence from a mysterious collective spirit of the crowd, down to the individuals who are thereby framed as gullible receivers of the magnetic inducements coming above. The second coordination mechanism is imitation, a concept central to Tarde's analysis of contagion. In this context, social influence travels through a horizontal channel from individual to individual rather than being the direct emanation of a leader.

Finally, in the third mechanism, that of identification associated with Freud's theory of the psychology of groups, the coordination of the mass travels both ways, operating through identification among individuals who share a common denominator: the love for a leader acting as an external, yet relatable, object, as well as the love for one another mediated by identification with the leader (as indicated in Figure 1. by the presence of a horizontal arrow at the base complementing identification with the leader). Thus, moving from the first down to the third type, there is greater acknowledgment of the possible active role of individuals in the mobilization of the people, even when this is catalyzed by the presence of a leader. In this sense, the populist leader may operate not as an unmediated sovereign will, but as a contingent point of unity whose authority depends on the ongoing rearticulation of collective demands.

Suggestion: the pathological view of the masses

The real novelty of *On Populist Reason* (2005) vis-à-vis the previous works of Ernesto Laclau lies in the book's engagement with social psychology, a branch of psychological science concerned with the relationship

between individuals and groups. Interestingly, despite some notable exceptions (see, for example, Aslanidis, 2024, p. 56), the importance of this engagement has not been sufficiently recognized to date. In the initial chapters of his *magnum opus*, Laclau deals with a significant stream of social psychology scholarship devoted to the issue of crowd psychology, with authors such as William McDougall, Gabriel Tarde, Gustave Le Bon, Scipio Sighele, and Cesare Lombroso. These authors focused on understanding how individuals' behavior changes in crowd situations, providing a propitious vantage point to explore the relationship between individual experience and collective action. The issues they raised in terms of the relationship between individuals, groups and institutions have since become the object of intense debate in more recent works in social psychology, engaging with the internal dynamics of social groups, social movements, political parties and other organisations (see for example Tajfel, 1974; Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013).

These phenomena are of evident interest to the study of populism and, more generally, to the kind of political theory developed by Ernesto Laclau, given his profound interest in psychology. Laclau had already engaged at length with Lacan's psychoanalysis, especially as it concerned processes of signification. Yet, it is remarkable that, before the publication of *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau had never dealt with classical social psychology and with the process of formation and mobilization of the masses. This makes his engagement with social psychology towards the end of his career even more interesting.

Our contention is that social psychology literature is the decisive new "ingredient" that allows Laclau to revise his theorizing of the nature of populism as a political phenomenon. The strategic importance of this engagement with social psychology literature can be fully appreciated when considering that the first three chapters of *On Populist Reason* are almost entirely devoted to such an engagement with social psychology literature, developing a line of argument that is foundational to the theses developed in the following chapters. Hence, our contention is that such reflections furnish an interpretive key to making sense of and even refining Laclau's mature theory of populism. But what does Laclau gain exactly from his engagement with social psychology literature?

The first is that provides a more solid foundation for what we may describe as Laclau's "ethical" defense of populism, a standpoint which in Laclau's work is accompanied by the denunciation of the way liberals have surreptitiously transformed it into a pathological phenomenon, or what we could describe as "plebophobia". Laclau develops this point by tracing a parallel with the way classic social psychology literature expressed a "denigration of the masses" –made explicit in the title of Chapter 1 –as manifested in the work of authors such as Gustave Le Bon and Taine. Reviewing these authors provides Laclau with a way to make sense of how populism has been (unfairly, in his opinion) subjected in modern and contemporary literature to a process of conceptual demonization.

For Laclau, the foremost example of denigration of the masses is offered by the theory of the crowd in Gustave le Bon, which has had a wide echo in intellectual history, with reverberations that have gone well beyond academic fences. It is rumored that the book was an inspiration for Mussolini and other fascist leaders. Le Bon's text was not particularly original in the strict sense –other thinkers before him had already formulated similar theses, as Freud recalls (1955, p. 82). However, this work most clearly established some clear-cut dichotomies that imposed themselves on the public imagination and which informed political debates at the time. These dichotomies fundamentally positioned some phenomena as normal and healthy and others, such as crowds, as aberrant and irrational. These latter phenomena were those which –according to le Bon –resulted from an almost hypnotic power, which he called the power of suggestion. The interest of such a distant debate for Laclau may seem limited, but it is certainly not. In the aristocratic revulsion of le Bon for the irrational crowd, Laclau immediately sees a parallel to the snobbish suspicion manifested time and again by liberal elites towards populist phenomena, accompanied by the moral reprobation for that part of society willing to vote for them (Laclau, 2005, pp. 21-30).

The point of departure in studying mass coordination mechanisms is the notion of suggestion. Le Bon uses the term to express the mobilizing power exercised on the crowd by specific images and words, regardless of their meaning (2001, pp. 61-66). Laclau challenges the notion of suggestion by arguing that a purely denotative grammatical and semantic rationality is unattainable (Laclau, 2005, p. 25). A strict relationship between signifier and signified cannot be sustained; instead, the connotative processes associated with associative-paradigmatic networks are presented as the normal, non-perverse functioning of language. For Le Bon, suggestion can command an impressive mobilizing power, leaving the individual with little room for resistance. However, Le Bon's recommendation is not to turn the back on it but to try to harness its power. Here, Laclau scoffs at Le Bon's presumption of acting "as a true new Machiavelli" (2005, p. 23), offering advice to rulers –"the true statesman" as Le Bon puts it (Le Bon, 2001, p. 64) –on how to take advantage and manage the force of the masses rather than be overwhelmed by it.

Le Bon lists three rhetorical "devices" that can achieve this power of suggestion and can be read as different organizational-mobilizational logics. The first is *affirmation*, by means of which completely mendacious ideas can be filtered to the crowd, thus triggering collective action. On this point, Laclau argues against the reduction of an affirmation to a simple lie since the former could well be the fruit of a collective experience denied by the prevailing social rationality, as well as the first step towards the emergence of a new truth capable of breaking with the existing discursive paradigm (2005, pp. 26-27). The second is *repetition*: it allows us to sow new ideas and dispositions in the collective unconscious. Laclau is willing to accept its descriptive validity, except to specify that it is an unavoidable requirement of social and ethical life (2005, p. 27). Finally, the third artifice is *contagion*. This term was initially conceived by Le Bon in pathological terms (as if echoing a worldview steeped in the logic of contagion and epidemic science) and traced back to the more

general phenomenon of "suggestibility", a term whose flimsy explanatory pretense was already discussed by Freud as reminded by Laclau (2005, p. 28). Against this framing, Laclau proposes that contagion should not be understood as morbidity but rather as a shared content that, lacking a direct outlet, can only be expressed through symbolic representations.

In the following chapter, Laclau (2005, pp. 31-64) reviews several other thinkers whom he places along an evolutionary trajectory of social psychology, beginning with an obscurantist and denigratory view of the masses, and culminating in a more scientific and less reactionary theory in the work of Sigmund Freud. Among such plebophobic authors discussed by Laclau features the work of Hippolyte Taine (1878) –whose work historically preceded that of le Bon –but who, according to Laclau, is ultimately of no particular interest as it comes close in many respects to the view of Le Bon. In Taine as in Le Bon, the masses are also described in pejorative terms to highlight their stupidity, cruelty and threat to the social organism. Two other elements are also underlined, namely the coincidence between rationality and the individual on the one hand and irrationality and the crowd on the other –which is also reflected in Le Bon –as well as the greater propensity of women and children to mental contagion compared to men, and of the lower classes compared to the aristocracy.

According to Laclau, the appearance of a truly analytical approach to the question was for a long time hindered by the propensity to treat the question of crowds in pathological terms and the consequent recourse to medical science and psychiatry in particular. Interestingly, Laclau provides an overview of the dispute that, at the end of the 19th century, pitted the Salpêtrière and Nancy schools in France against each other to establish the meaning and functioning of hypnosis (2005, pp. 36-39). In the view of the Salpêtrière school, led by Jean-Martin Charcot, hypnotic phenomena were believed to have a physiological basis, indicating neuropathology. In contrast, the scholars associated with the Nancy school maintained that any person could experience hypnotic states. Laclau retrieves an important symptom of the intellectual climate of the times in this debate. The initial supremacy of the Salpêtrière school, with its pathological view of hypnosis, over the Nancy School, was a sign of how backward the terms of the debate still were, amid a plebophobia that led to a systematic denigration of the masses and their internal coordination mechanisms.

Laclau notes that, in the same period, the emerging scientism of the social sciences took a different path, but ultimately leading to similar political implications. This was most evident in Italy, where the Positivist School of criminology led by Cesare Lombroso retrieved the propensity to commit crime in "atavism" and physical features such as the form of the skull –leading to the development of the now infamous criminal phrenology. Some of the theses put forward by Lombroso and his collaborators, such as Scipio Sighele, the author of *The Criminal Crowd* (2018), were also applied to political uprisings, which were treated as part of the general tendency of mob crimes.

Imitation: the horizontal power of coordination

Despite its anti-popular bias and its insistence on sifting healthy from unhealthy political phenomena, Laclau believes that the initial crowd theory offered some insights that would later lead to a more plausible understanding of collective behavior. Particularly, it highlighted the dominance of emotion over rationality and the importance of the identification of the crowd with the leader; this is the kernel of truth of crowd theory from which a more sophisticated understanding of the crowd and other collective processes can begin to emerge.

It is with the progressive international discrediting of the Lombrosian school and the reversal of influence from the Charcotian school in favor of the Nancy school that Laclau identifies the first signs of a shift away from a pathological perspective on mass society (2005, p. 39). The new mass coordination mechanism here is that imitation, introduced by Gabriel Tarde. For Laclau, this logic initially seems to replicate the stereotypes of the masses as irrational and violent, as it remained indebted to the category of suggestion (2005, p. 41). This is evident in the early studies of Tarde on crowds, where he divides the task of invention –the leader's responsibility –from imitation –typical of the masses and characterized by an activation of lower mental functions. Thereby, here, we seem to be still in a terrain close to the theory of suggestion. However, in the work of Tarde, this theory of imitation progressively evolves in the recognition of the existence of very different social aggregations (2005, pp. 44-47). These range from the most rudimentary ones, exemplified by the crowd, to the most organized, manifested in the corporation.

Tarde's taxonomy of various social groups with different logics of internal organization is an important advancement in social psychology for Laclau, as it highlights the presence of a plurality of social logics, which can be simultaneously operative in the structuring of a social group. A key example for Laclau is the variety of roles the leader can assume. In the case of primitive crowds, the leader is physically strong and endowed with typically "male" attributes. In more evolved ones, instead, the leader must demonstrate intellectual superiority, a necessary feature to coordinate masses that in the meantime, become less violent and more controllable, and are increasingly shaped by the social form of the public –favored by the spread of modern communications media –rather than that of the crowd (Tarde, 1989).

Indeed, for Tarde, the crowd, with its requirement of physical propinquity, is a phenomenon destined to be surpassed by the public, a social group that can operate at a distance, thanks to mental cohesion enabled by modern media. Further, the public form allows multiple and overlapping memberships, while crowds are usually more exclusive in their forms of belonging. Such a condition highlights how social groups do not inherently have to follow the logic of homogeneity and assimilation attributed to the crowd but can be a space of tolerance, plurality, and skepticism. This is important for Laclau as it undermines the suspicion of the

masses and social groups, shared by early social psychology and contemporary liberal scathing commentary on populism. Thus, with the mature work of Tarde, we move well beyond the logic of suggestion and into a logic of imitation, which can be, in many respects, reconciled with political rationality.

Another author relevant to the development of this taxonomy of social logics of coordination is the British psychologist William McDougall. McDougall (1920) alerts us to the possibility of different human aggregates with different ethico-political implications. The simple ones, the crowds, are described in terms that are congruent with those of Le Bon. These multitudes are highly homogeneous and have a high degree of excitability. In them, the individual tends to lose self-consciousness, with a noticeable lowering of intelligence: we are once again in the terrain of suggestion. However, the case is very different for the more organized groups that McDougall analyzes, such as churches, armies, or political parties.

Two features observed by McDougall in such groups attracted the attention of Laclau. First, the moral and intellectual standards of the group may rise well above those of the individuals composing it: the converse of what is customarily argued about crowds. Secondly, groups can contribute, according to McDougall, in fostering a "feeling of self-esteem". By being socialized within groups, individuals' egotistical impulses can be sublimated in favor of altruistic tendencies directed toward other group members. The unity of the group in this context derives from a sense of equivalence among all members; a logic which chimes very well with the notion of "equivalential logic" used by Laclau in the continuation of his text to describe the process of populist identification.

The Freudian breakthrough: love and identification

These developments lay the groundwork for what Laclau terms the "Freudian breakthrough". To begin with, Freud is applauded for defeating the dualism between normality and pathology, which explains why the starting point of his analyses is not the rabble of Le Bon or Taine but two highly organized groups such as the Church and the Army (Laclau, 2005, p. 40).

This first operation is followed by a second in which another dualism is attenuated, that between social psychology and individual psychology, since the latter, although it focuses on the individual man, "only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is […] in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others" (Freud, 1955, p. 69). However, Laclau sees a further twist in Freud's first steps, according to which, although falling within a single field of study, the relationships that the individual establishes with others are contrasted with narcissistic processes, "in which the satisfaction of the instincts is partially or totally withdrawn from the influence of other people" (Freud, 1955, p. 69).

This nuance allows the Argentinian theorist to include the members of a group in the sphere of social psychology, while individual psychology is relevant only to the leader of the group. But if the second investigation is not integrated with the first, there is the risk of offering a partial reading of social aggregation – one that reduces it to mere manipulation, entirely shaped by the leader's intentions and thus incapable of explaining the reasons behind leadership (Biglieri & Perelló, 2012, p. 64).

Misunderstandings in this domain are clarified by removing the notion of suggestion and substituting it with Freud's concept of libido. Importantly, love should not be interpreted solely in sexual terms, as instinctual drives, under circumstances other than those leading to sexual union, "are diverted from this aim or are prevented from reaching it, though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognizable" (Freud, 1955, pp. 90-91). These libidinal drives also play a critical role in limiting narcissism within group dynamics, thereby curbing excessive self-love. But how does love function as a mechanism of social cohesion?

In exploring the social bond, Freud differentiates between genuine falling in love and identification. Falling in love is directed toward the group leader by its members; it occurs when the object of love takes the place of the ego ideal. In this process, the object becomes so exalted in the eyes of group members that their ego is diminished, subordinated, or even sacrificed, with the object becoming their most significant self-representation (Freud, 1955, p. 113). Identification, in contrast, connects group members based on their shared object of love, forging an equivalential relationship among them. Freud encapsulates this as follows: "*A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego*" (Freud, 1955, p. 116, emphasis in the original). In essence, while identification fosters bonds between peers, love is directed exclusively toward the leader, paralleling the dynamic between brothers and a father figure.

From this passage, Laclau draws significant implications: the leader is not simply a first among equals but aligns with Freud's depiction of the horde leader, an authoritarian figure reminiscent of the analysis in *Totem and Taboo*. However, does this fully encapsulate the issue? According to Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, as cited by Laclau, Freud's essay leaves no ambiguity: society is inherently a political construct centered around a beloved leader, the linchpin of mass coherence. Laclau challenges this interpretation. While acknowledging the political dimension and the role of shared love in uniting group members, he identifies in Freud's work alternative modes of social organization. Freud himself clarifies that his earlier formula applies specifically to a mass lacking the structured characteristics of an individual, which are achieved only through secondary organizational processes (Freud, 1955, p. 116).

Laclau begins to see Freud's argument as outlining a continuum where fully organized structures and entirely narcissistic leadership represent two extreme, hypothetical poles. The practical realities of social organization, as informed by Tarde's insights, lie somewhere in between. Freud elaborates on this in the chapter "A Differentiating Grade in the Ego" (Freud, 1955, pp. 129-133), where he observes that in many

individuals, the division between the ego and the ego ideal is not well-defined, enabling the retention of narcissistic self-contentment. This means that the need for a leader is neither absolute nor unqualified, as it would be if the object entirely dominated the ego ideal.

For a leader to be accepted, therefore, more is required than mere identification among followers united by shared love. The leader must also share positive attributes with the group. This shift has clear implications for Laclau: under these conditions, the leader becomes a *primus inter pares*, fostering a dynamic of mutual identification between members and the leader. In this scenario, the leader embodies both paternal and fraternal roles. Ultimately, the leader, by sharing common traits with the group, ceases to be "in all its purity, the despotic, narcissistic ruler" (Laclau, 2005, p. 59) and is instead held accountable to the collective. This shift undermines purely authoritarian models of leadership and paves the way for a more democratic and reciprocal relationship between leader and followers. Such a relationship is more consistent with Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, in which leadership is not based solely on domination but emerges through a complex interplay of consensus and coercion, ideological articulation, and popular support (Laclau, 2005, p. 60).

Possibilities and limits of populist mobilization

Laclau finds in the Freudian theory of identification a powerful way to come to grips with the potential and internal differentiation of populist mobilization. But to what extent is this theory effective in solving some of the dilemmas of the Laclauian understanding of populism? In the second and third parts of *On Populist Reason* certain inconsistencies begin to emerge in this regard. As Davide Tarizzo perceptively observes in his introduction to the Italian edition (2008, p. xxvi), Laclau's narrative becomes increasingly centered on figures such as leaders, chiefs, and princes, lending the work a distinctly realist undertone. Although the early part of the text gestures toward the possibility of an alternative relationship between leaders and followers –one that avoids the model of the totemic or sovereign leader –the remaining part is nonetheless saturated with references that reinforce precisely that paradigm. This lack of nuance becomes especially apparent when Laclau presents populism as "the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (2005, p. 67). In privileging equivalence, homogenization, and a (semi)transcendent point, Laclau appears to overlook the heterogeneous logics and mobilizing dynamics that animate different populist configurations.

As previously noted, not all populist practices rely on followers who are predisposed to identification rather than idealization –that is, individuals characterized by a weak separation between the Ego and the Ego Ideal, who relate to the leader as a father or elder brother figure, marked by traits that are both exceptional and familiar. This contrasts with the dynamics of idealization, in which the leader functions as a distant, quasi-divine figure to be revered rather than engaged. In the latter case, love becomes a blind, all-encompassing devotion that does not hinge on shared substance or the continuous renegotiation of commonality between leader and led but rather implies the delegation of judgment –a kind of "blank cheque". When cohesion is grounded exclusively in the charismatic centrality of the leader, the movement runs the risk of sliding into authoritarianism. More significantly, Laclau fails to register that under such conditions, the dystopian tendencies diagnosed in early social psychology –such as the emergence of crowds defined by exclusive belonging, the collapse of plural attachments, excessive internal homogenization, and heightened affective excitability –may indeed come to pass.

To move toward a more processual understanding of populist mobilization, a further theoretical inflection is required. In his theory of populism, Laclau has paid limited attention to the concrete organization of the masses and disregarded the intermediary processes. Even sympathetic critics have noted that his account of populist identification largely overlooks the social, political, and cultural networks through which collective identities are forged. Specifically, Laclau tends to neglect the everyday struggles and horizontal cultural practices that foster solidarity, trust, and emotional connections –practices integral to many processes of populist identification (Norval, 2006; Panizza & Stavrakakis, 2021, p. 35). In this regard, Laclau's theory risks excluding forms of sustained popular mobilization. His core unit of populism –the social demand – proves reductive for two reasons. First, it is portrayed as a neutral signifier, available for appropriation and reinterpretation by "populist entrepreneurs", with its relevance tied to moments of political rupture. This framing sidelines civil society as a terrain of continuous ideological contestation and consensus-building, reducing it to a reservoir of latent grievances that acquire meaning only during exceptional conjunctures. The result is a diminished emphasis on the struggles, networks, and organizational processes that unfold outside such extraordinary moments.

Certainly, as previously acknowledged, populism may well arise out of a fresh mobilization around a leader that coalesces otherwise dispersed demands –particularly when those demands lack pre-existing organizational articulation. Yet, in practice, most cases fall somewhere between this atomized, leader-centric model and more movement-based, rooted forms of mobilization. To frame the issue in more explicitly sociological terms –a register largely absent from Laclau's reasoning, as we have seen –we can distinguish between two broad types of populist formations. On one end of the spectrum are populisms constructed primarily around an individual figure who aggregates atomized holders of demands. These are often characterized by intense populist rhetoric but low levels of durable popular mobilization, particularly over the long term. On the other end are populisms that build upon the prior work of social movements and resistance practices. In these cases, the degree of popular mobilization tends to be higher, though often –but not necessarily –at the expense of the more heightened rhetorical logic typically associated with populism.

Both configurations carry distinct potentials and risks for political efficacy. The former tends to more readily capture the libidinal investment of segments of society that, while disaffected with the status quo, remain wary of engaging with any mediating institutions between citizens and the state –a condition Peter Mair famously described as the "representative void" (2013). These segments may prove especially susceptible to the appeal of a messianic leader, though such attachments often remain fragile, lacking deep social anchoring. The latter configuration, by contrast, may benefit from more solid organizational foundations, but its greater reliance on pre-existing mobilizing structures can intensify the play of the logic of difference. This, in turn, may complicate the construction and expansion of a unified "people," making it harder to generate the kind of equivalential articulation that Laclau saw as central to populist politics.

Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's reading (2006) of Freud, Tarizzo similarly proposes a distinction between two forms of populism –one centered on the *masses* and another on the *people* –each with distinct psychological and organizational logics (Tarizzo, 2015, pp. 110–111). This framework allows for a more nuanced analysis of the affective dynamics within populist movements, particularly regarding the forms of identification that bind leaders and followers. Crucially, Tarizzo underscores that the centrality of leader is not necessarily permanent and that a truly emancipatory political project should anticipate and enable the eventual transfer of the leader's unifying function to more durable collective structures. The analytical distinction offered by Tarizzo helps to clarify the extent to which the integrative function of leadership might be shared by or displaced onto alternative sources of cohesion –whether a collective aspiration, a symbolic abstraction, an idea, or even a constellation of secondary leaders. This capacity for displacement is essential if a populist movement is to evolve into a lasting hegemonic project institutionalized in new political forms (see Mazzolini 2021; 2024).

While some cases –like the neoliberal populisms of Thatcher and Reagan –succeeded in reconfiguring social relations and institutional frameworks, many populist experiences fall short of this threshold. When the transformative ambitions of a project fail to consolidate into durable institutions or effect meaningful reform, the more corrosive features of populism often come to the fore: radical personalization, unrestrained antagonism, the erosion of legal norms, and the entrenchment of elite self-preservation. The presentist logic that enables rapid mobilization and policy responsiveness also undermines the durability of its own achievements. If an emancipatory populism is to persist, it must move beyond its dependence on charismatic leadership and invest instead in institutional arrangements capable of surviving electoral defeat, leadership turnover, and shifts in popular sentiment.

Conclusion

In this article, we have reconstructed Laclau's engagement with social psychology literature to demonstrate how it offers valuable insights for developing what we have described as a "psychoanalytic theory of populist mobilization". We have seen how Laclau finds in the early crowd theory debate some important insights about the roots of the ethical-political denigration of the masses in the social science debate around the turn between the 19th and 20th centuries. But most importantly, there, he also retrieves a trajectory thinking about processes of mass formation, which, starting from the irrationalism of the theory of suggestion, informed by the theory of hypnotism prevalent at the time, progressively gives way to more sophisticated analysis such as the theory of imitation by Tarde and the theory of identification by Freud.

Laclau finds in this intellectual debate some elements to approach the mass and its analogue people as a multifaceted and ambiguous subject, which is not necessarily irrational or violent, as some early criminological theories suggested. As McDougall had already recognized, social groups can take a rather different orientation: some can be democratic and other authoritarian, depending on the circumstances and the actors involved and on the internal logics of organization of various collectives. Similarly, Freud's theory of identification offers Laclau the opportunity to develop a more nuanced view of the relationship between collectives and individuals, where the latter are not just gullible targets, but actively participate in identifying themselves with other human beings who share love for the same leader.

Laclau's engagement with social psychology literature provides useful insights to develop further the debate on populist mobilization –as well as to overcome some limits inherent in Laclau's theory. We agree with some of the remarks made by Jansen (2011) and Aslanidis (2024) about the necessity to distinguish political discourse from political mobilization. In fact, some of the limits of Laclau's theory and its political application can precisely be retrieved in the way it has laid too much emphasis on overtly semiotic processes, thus translating into short-term "media blitz" strategies while overlooking the importance of mobilizational processes, not to speak of the construction of long-term organizational and institutional structures. Nevertheless, we also believe that some of the psychological insights that Laclau brings to the fore, especially regarding his engagement with Freud's theory of identification, which some authors consider as one of the main limits of his analysis (Aslanidis, 2024), contain some potential for a more perceptive theory of populist mobilization.

Drawing on Laclau, we can understand identification and mobilization not as fully distinct or sequential moments, but as potentially integrated and mutually reinforcing processes. Yet in many instances of populist politics, especially when appealing to a dispersed and disempowered populace rather than to pre-constituted "solidary collectives" (Jansen, 2011), identification tends to be prioritized, sometimes at the expense of sustained mobilization. In such cases, the performative act of calling a people into being may generate strong affective identification without necessarily translating into enduring collective action. All in all, Laclau's psychological perspective on populist mobilization, which some of the authors see as a limit, provides a useful "micro-perspective" from the standpoint of the individual to approach processes of mobilization. If anything,

it is a line of theorizing that would merit further development, perhaps engaging further with Lacan's theory of identification (Lacan, 1962). An additional line of future research would be engaging with more contemporary social psychology literature such as the work of Henry Tajfel on the psychology of groups, social identity, and intergroup tendencies (1972) and the connected work on social identifications by authors such as Abrams and Hogg (2006). This appears to be a promising line of future development for understanding the social psychology of contemporary populist movements and their multifaceted manifestations in more detail.

The crux may lie in consistently applying the continuum of different types of populist movements and the associated social logics as an empirical framework for analyzing collective phenomena case by case. There is no guarantee that a given populist practice will be composed of individuals with a weak separation between the Ego and the Ego ideal –individuals who would find in the leader not an idol to worship but a father or elder brother figure with remarkable yet relatable qualities, enabling identification rather than blind adoration. Even left-wing populism (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2016; Mazzolini, 2021) has frequently exhibited troubling personalistic tendencies. These include the perceived infallibility of the leader, their role as an ultimate arbitrator of internal disputes, the framing of dissent as betrayal, and the tendency to suppress opposition for the sake of unity. Such dynamics can lead to the leader's veneration, with challenges to their authority treated as near-sacrilegious acts, ultimately fostering a cult of personality. This transformation erodes the populist essence of plebeian authority, creating a dynamic divorced from the people, who no longer debate the leader's edicts (Arditi, 2010).

The psychoanalytic approach we have developed in this article, offers a refreshing perspective both for the analysis of populist movements and ultimately for populist strategy. It can lead us to appreciate how complete leader control is not necessarily the only possibility. Indeed, as we have argued, there can be forms of populist mobilization that are more top-down and others more horizontal, and many combinations of these two "ideal-types". As we have observed, the presence of a certain degree of narcissistic self-contentment among followers can limit the unconditional delegation of authority to the leader. This dynamic creates the possibility for a form of leadership that operates in a more democratic and interactive manner. This openness is often testified by the ability to transition into a post-leader phase, where the primary focus of libidinal investment shifts to an idea or even to a secondary leader.

Furthermore, such an approach can offer us a better understanding of how even vertical processes, such as leadership-driven mobilization, can, in certain circumstances, display a democratic element because they invite individuals to actively identify with the leader rather than being the manifestation of hypnotic top-down suggestion. Another aspect that can help us develop a more discerning theory of populism lies in the performative and iterative element of mobilization. Contrary to the static and hence often homogenizing view associated with a static conception of popular identity, popular *identification-as-mobilization* is a process that is never completed but needs to happen time and again, this being particularly the case for populist movements in which –as previously argued –the moment of identification and mobilization are increasingly fused together.

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