

Left populism is dead, long live left hegemony. Lessons from European politics*

Samuele Mazzolini

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Venice, Italy ✉

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rpub.101258>

Recibido: 26/02/2025 • Aceptado: 28/08/2025

Abstract. This paper examines the rise and decline of left populism in Europe, situating it within the broader context of the “populist moment” of the 2010s. While initially seen as a promising strategy to reinvigorate the radical left in response to economic crises and the delegitimisation of traditional centre-left parties, left populism has largely failed to achieve lasting political realignment. The analysis focuses on the conditions of possibility for populism, distinguishing between situational factors – such as crises, social demands, and institutional and social arrangements – and agent-related factors, including light and leader-centric organisation and cultural elitism. These constraints, along with the evolving political landscape, have significantly narrowed the space for left populist projects in Europe. The paper argues that while left populism may have influenced political discourse in certain contexts, its overall impact has been limited, raising critical questions about its viability as a long-term political strategy. In this sense, it suggests that hegemony, rather than populism, should serve the North Star of left political strategy.

Keywords: Populism; Radical Left; Crisis; Cultural Elitism; Ernesto Laclau

[es] El populismo de izquierda ha muerto; viva la hegemonía de izquierda. Lecciones de la política europea

Resumen. Este artículo examina el ascenso y el declive del populismo de izquierda en Europa, situándolo en el contexto más amplio del “momento populista” de la década de 2010. Si bien inicialmente se lo consideró una estrategia prometedora para revitalizar a la izquierda radical en respuesta a las crisis económicas y la deslegitimación de los partidos tradicionales de centroizquierda, el populismo de izquierda en gran medida no ha logrado un realineamiento político duradero. El análisis se centra en las condiciones de posibilidad del populismo, distinguiendo entre factores externos (como las crisis, las demandas sociales y los acuerdos institucionales) y factores internos, como la organización ligera y centrada en el líder y el elitismo cultural. Estas limitaciones, junto con el panorama político en evolución, han reducido significativamente el espacio para los proyectos populistas de izquierda en Europa. El artículo sostiene que, si bien el populismo de izquierda puede haber influido en el discurso político en ciertos contextos, su impacto general ha sido limitado, lo que plantea preguntas críticas sobre su viabilidad como estrategia política a largo plazo. En este sentido, se sugiere que la hegemonía, más que el populismo, debería funcionar como la estrella polar de la estrategia política de la izquierda.

Palabras clave: populismo; izquierda radical; crisis; elitismo cultural; Ernesto Laclau.

Sumario. Introduction. 1. Populism and populist moment. 2. Conditions of possibility for populism. Discussion and conclusion. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Mazzolini, S. (2025). Left populism is dead, long live left hegemony. Lessons from European politics. *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 28(3), 389-401.

* Funded by the European Union (GA number 101107755). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Introduction

In Europe, left populism has remained a minor phenomenon compared to its right-wing counterpart. Nevertheless, the 2010s saw radical leftist circles gravitate toward a political style that, after reaching its high point in Latin America's Pink Tide from the late 1990s onward, promised fresh vitality for an option long languishing since the collapse of actually existing socialism. The relatively successful electoral experiences of Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and La France Insoumise in France suggested that the populist path could enable the radical left to capitalise on a socio-economic crisis that had unsettled the political certainties of the Old Continent. Similarly, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the UK has often been viewed as a manifestation of left populism¹, with its emphasis on grassroots mobilisation and its framing of politics as a struggle between "the many and the few". Alongside these developments, the notion of a "populist moment" gained currency as a distinctive conjuncture – one that could lead either to a reactionary outcome or to a new emancipatory turn.

The rise of disaffected voters, the delegitimisation of centre-left parties due to their support for austerity measures – often symbolically referred to as "Pasokification" after the dramatic collapse of the Greek socialist party PASOK – and the struggles of middle classes and the youth caught respectively in the grip of a credit crisis and a precarious labour market appeared to create fertile ground for a new blueprint centred on an appeal to "the people" in opposition to "the elites". Chantal Mouffe, the foremost theorist of left-wing populism along with Ernesto Laclau, envisioned this moment as an opportunity for a new hegemonic formation to supplant the existing order. She argued that it "could be either more authoritarian or more democratic, depending on how those resistances are going to be articulated and the type of politics through which neoliberalism will be challenged"². Accordingly, the pivotal question was how to federate democratic demands arising from widespread political discontent into a "we-they" division³. If the perceived adversary were immigrants portrayed as a threat to national prosperity, the "we" would be conceived in nationalistic, homogeneous, and xenophobic terms, resulting in what the literature describes as "exclusionary populism". Conversely, defining the "they" in terms of a predatory oligarchy would construct a "we" as a heterogeneous and progressive people, thereby fostering an "inclusionary" form of populism⁴.

The rise of left populism has taken various forms, emerging externally through the creation of new political formations (e.g., Podemos, La France Insoumise) or internally, either by taking over established parties (as with Labour under Jeremy Corbyn) or by adopting a populist framework (as seen with Syriza). With the exception of Labour, these movements lacked direct ties to traditional labour organisations and have often navigated complex and occasionally strained relationships with social movements. Their primary focus has been on crafting highly effective media approaches, with a significant emphasis on digital platforms and a prominent role assigned to charismatic leadership. Contrary to the extremism frequently attributed to them by mainstream media and political opponents, these parties have largely advanced social democratic agendas that would have not been considered particularly radical several decades ago. Nevertheless, parties like Podemos and La France Insoumise have, at least initially, avoided overt identification with the left, aiming to deliberately appeal to disenchanted voters who harbour negative perceptions of such ideological affiliations.

The populist turn has enabled the aforementioned actors to achieve electoral results far surpassing those of traditional radical left forces, both during the same period and previously. In this sense, it has sketched a roadmap that, if only partially and for a time, thrust once-marginal ideas into the spotlight. However, as of 2025, the electoral fortunes of left populism in Europe appear limited, and its political impact largely negligible. Of the four examples previously mentioned, Syriza – the only actor to have attained the highest political office in its country – first lost its confrontation with European institutions, then significantly scaled back its ambitions, and ultimately transformed into an Americanised centre-left political party. Podemos, on the other hand, underwent a process of "normalisation"⁵ over the years, followed by various splits and transformations that severely undermined its political effectiveness. La France Insoumise remains the only actor with some discernible populist leanings, yet it has lost much of its initial rupturist élan, and it seems unlikely that its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, will realistically ascend to the French presidency in the future. As for Jeremy Corbyn, he stepped down as Labour leader after the 2019 election defeat, later being expelled from the party and running as an independent in 2024. Under Keir Starmer, Labour has moved decisively away from Corbyn's populist left-leaning agenda toward a more centrist stance. These developments testify not only to the electoral decline of left-wing populism, but also to the fact that its very existence in Europe has become little more than a memory.

The left populist turn has largely unfolded under the intellectual aegis of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Whether as an explicit strategic and theoretical reference – as in the case of Podemos and, to some extent, La France Insoumise – or as a broadly shared interpretive framework for

¹ C. Mouffe, "Jeremy Corbyn's Left Populism", *Verso Blog*, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3743-jeremy-corbyn-s-left-populism>. For a somewhat different take, see J. Dean, "Left politics and popular culture in Britain: From left-wing populism to 'popular leftism'", *Politics* 43(1), 2023, pp. 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720960661>.

² C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, London-New York, Verso, 2018, p. 79.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁴ C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 2013, pp. 147–174, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.

⁵ S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, "The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos", *European Politics and Society* 23(3), 2022, pp. 285–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1868849>.

understanding these political developments, their contribution has been decisive. However, references to their works have become increasingly infrequent⁶. Yet precisely because the thought of Laclau and Mouffe was initially so influential, it becomes all the more compelling to examine the decline of left populism through the lens of certain impasses in their theoretical framework. The choice to focus on their perspective is not merely analytical but also grounded in its practical and symbolic centrality: their framework was explicitly embraced by some of the political actors under consideration, and it has been widely adopted by the segment of the scholarly community sympathetic to these experiences and seeking to make sense of them.

The waning of left populism must be understood in light of a broader dual movement that has shaped recent political trajectories. On one side, a series of political events and developments – while far from fully restoring the previous status quo – have nevertheless made sustaining left populist politics increasingly challenging. In other words, the window of opportunity to reorder political loyalties, if ever as extensive as some had anticipated, has not completely closed but has significantly narrowed. Concurrently, structural constraints within the social and political spheres – initially less visible but increasingly decisive over the medium term – have further constrained the feasibility of maintaining a left populist agenda or achieving electoral success. On the other side, and in dynamic interplay with these limitations, the very way left populist politics was conceived and enacted by its protagonists has also hindered the prospects for left populists. Certain shared features of their approach, though not necessarily intrinsic to populism itself, have likely contributed to its decline.

Together, these developments raise pressing theoretical questions about the conceptual underpinnings of populism and pose practical challenges for left populism as a viable strategic horizon – or indeed cast doubt on whether populism can amount to a strategy per se – particularly in the forms it has so far been practiced in the European continent. Specifically then, this paper seeks to make sense of the ultimate inability of left populism to live up to the ambitions of political reconfiguration in the European scenario and to assess the implications of its decline for the broader strategic prospects of the left. In pursuing this inquiry, the analysis draws on selected examples from different European contexts but remains primarily theoretical in nature, aiming to identify common characteristics across cases rather than engaging deeply with empirical details of individual political actors.

To address these issues, the paper is structured as follows. The first section establishes a necessary theoretical distinction between populism and the populist moment. The discussion then turns to the conditions of possibility for populism, examining both situational factors – such as crises, social demands, and institutional and social arrangements – and agent-related factors, including leader-centric and

light organizational structures and cultural elitism. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the paper's findings, addressing the tension between tactical manoeuvring and strategic objectives, especially as it relates to the interplay of populism and hegemony, and considering the broader implications for the future of the left.

Populism and populist moment

The concepts of populism and the populist moment have frequently been conflated, leading to considerable confusion in both scholarly and political discourse. This conflation obscures critical distinctions that are essential for a clear understanding of the phenomena. To address this, it is necessary to begin by delineating the definitions of each. Ernesto Laclau's theoretical framework offers a distinctive lens through which to understand populism, conceptualising it as a political logic rather than an ideology. The importance of such a logic is unequivocal for Laclau, as he affirms that “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” and that populist reason “amounts, ..., to *political reason tout court*”⁷.

At a more concrete level, this perspective positions populism as independent of any specific normative or ideological orientation, allowing it to manifest across diverse political contexts and align with varying ideological currents. At its core, populism operates by dividing society into two antagonistic camps – commonly framed as “the people” against “the elite”, or similar dichotomies. This antagonistic division is a rhetorical device, but one with foundational repercussions insofar as it retroactively structures the populist camp. It simplifies the social field by grouping heterogeneous demands under a common opposition to a perceived adversary.

Central to this process is the creation of what Laclau terms a “chain of equivalence”. Here, disparate and unmet demands – each initially distinct in their concerns – are linked together in such a way that their shared equivalential dimension overrides their differential characteristics. This allows diverse grievances to coalesce into a unified political project. The coherence of this otherwise heterogeneous constellation of demands is anchored by what Laclau calls an “empty signifier”. This signifier, devoid of fixed content, serves as a point of convergence that lends an impression of unity to a plural and fragmented social reality. It is through this empty signifier that populist movements articulate their vision of “the people”, presenting a seemingly, if only partially, homogenous identity in opposition to the adversarial “elite”.

The potency of this political logic, however, is derived in large part from a passionate investment by its supporters, involving the projection of an idealised vision of the future and accompanied by an attachment that sustains the populist project. The figure of the leader plays a pivotal role in this dynamic. The leader emerges as the personification of the populist movement, embodying the unity of “the people” and serving as the ultimate point of

⁶ A. Borriello and A. Jäger, *The Populist Moment. The Left after the Great Recession*, London–New York, Verso, 2023, p. 136.

⁷ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., pp. 67, 225.

reference for their collective aspirations. For Laclau, the leader represents the most extreme – and arguably the most effective – manifestation of the populist logic. By concentrating the affective and symbolic dimensions of the movement, the leader not only amplifies its appeal but also ensures its coherence.

What, then, is the populist moment? Mouffe describes it as a specific historical conjuncture in which

under the pressure of political or socioeconomic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands. In such situations, the existing institutions fail to secure the allegiance of the people as they attempt to defend the existing order⁸.

Laclau had already theorised such moments in terms of dislocations, which, as part of his broader theoretical effort to develop a negative political ontology, represent the limits of objectivity and the opening for new acts of identification⁹. In essence, Laclau refers to a breakdown of the social order that creates a void or lack of fullness, which manifests as a proliferation of demands¹⁰. Faced with these escalating pressures, institutions struggle to maintain stability, thereby setting the stage for the rise of populist politics. In this model, politics then oscillates between reactivation – corresponding to the populist moment – and sedimentation, which aligns with institutionalist periods in which any attempt to disrupt the current order is fully neutralised.

A first problem emerges when taking into account the inherently transitory nature of populist moments. What happens when such moments ebb or come to an end? Benjamin Arditi has already pointed to a paradox here: in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*¹¹, Laclau and Mouffe famously criticised the Second International for basing its politics on the expectation of crises. Yet, Laclau's theory of populism repeats this error by rendering populist politics reactive rather than creative, dependent on preexisting conditions of anomie to initiate a transformative project¹². This suggests, then, that populism may ultimately be better understood not as a strategic category in its own right, but as a contingent tactic dependent on specific moments of crisis and disruption.

The circular construction between crisis and populism fully comes to the spotlight when considering the binary distinction between the “time of politics” and the “time of post-politics”, which overlooks the complexity of transitional or “grey” phases. In Laclau's framework, the “time of politics” corresponds to the populist moment

– a phase of contestation associated with the moment of the political – whereas the “time of post-politics” signifies a phase of social sedimentation characterised by institutional stability. However, this dichotomy struggles to account for intermediary phases in which elements of instability coexist with mechanisms designed to maintain equilibrium. These “grey times” defy easy categorisation, as they blur the boundaries between reactivation and sedimentation, demanding a more nuanced conceptual framework to adequately theorise the coexistence of antagonism and homeostasis.

The enthusiasm surrounding the notion of the populist moment and the tendency to treat populism as the ultimate strategic remedy for the left's weaknesses often obscure a more significant insight from Laclau: the rejection of a taxonomic conception of populism¹³. By adopting a gradualist approach, populism ceases to be a binary matter of black or white, instead becoming a variable interplay of equivalence and difference. This allows for political practices to be seen as more or less populist, thereby facilitating diachronic analyses and moving beyond the simplistic labelling of specific parties or leaders.

Consequently, a political actor truly aiming to operate cunningly should calibrate the level of antagonism based on the circumstances in which they operate. A miscalculation – adopting a populist approach when it yields no tactical advantage or failing to do so when it would be beneficial – remains a persistent risk. Excessive polarisation, as has been evident in certain cases of left-wing populism in both European and Latin American contexts¹⁴, has often led to political disidentification, running counter to the promise of unity that populism inherently seeks to deliver.

While Laclau's formalist model suggests that crises can lead to various outcomes depending on how political forces manage to harness discontent, this view risks overlooking the qualitative differences between crises. Crises are shaped by specific political, social, and economic conditions that precede them and influence their interpretation, making them resistant to a purely strategic reading. To fully grasp the stakes of populism, it is essential to move beyond its formal structure and consider the conditions that enable its emergence and effectiveness. This requires shifting our focus to the conditions of possibility of populism, which determine when and how populist articulation becomes a viable political course of action.

Conditions of possibility for populism

Arthur Borriello and Anton Jäger argue that the populist moment of the 2010s emerged from both short and long-term developments¹⁵. In terms of short-term factors, they highlight the 2008 financial crisis and the mismanagement of its aftermath by European political and economic elites. Rather than

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁹ E. Laclau, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London-New York, Verso, 1990.

¹⁰ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹¹ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London-New York, Verso, 1985.

¹² B. Arditi, “Review Essay. Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason*”, *Constellations* 17(3), 2010, p. 494, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00587.x>.

¹³ E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

¹⁴ S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, *op. cit.*; S. Mazzolini, “Left populism and institutions: lessons from Ecuador on Laclau's antinomies”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 29(2), 2024, pp. 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2094620>.

¹⁵ A. Borriello and A. Jäger, *op. cit.*

adopting neo-Keynesian measures to stimulate growth and generate employment, these elites – whose decisional epicentre lay within the European Union and its institutions – opted for austerity-driven public service cuts. This approach not only failed to address the crisis effectively but also stifled any possibility for meaningful debate or alternative policy options, thereby generating widespread democratic discontent and a crisis of representation¹⁶.

As for the long-term developments, Borriello and Jäger build on Peter Mair's work on the "representative void"¹⁷. The erosion of party democracy, characterised by the decline of mass membership parties and the civil society structures that supported them – such as trade unions, clubs, and other grassroots associations – has profoundly transformed the organisational landscape of politics. These networks once provided a dense layer of intermediation between the state and citizens, enabling broader political participation and a sense of shared stake in the public sphere.

The dissolution of this associative model, accompanied by the increasing fragmentation and atomisation of society, has left a vacuum in political life. In response, political leaders – whether from established or emerging movements – have increasingly relied on vertical, leader-centric modes of organisation. These are often supplemented by digital platforms and forms of disintermediated participation, which bypass traditional intermediary structures.

While these long-term trends remain deeply entrenched and currently show little sign of reversal, it is equally true that the populist moment – understood as a phase of genuine political acceleration marked by the possibility to operate a sharp polarisation between "the people" and "the elite" – is far from guaranteed to endure indefinitely or to deliver a new social order out of exhaustion of the current one. Likewise, populists do not always succeed in their efforts to construct "a people". The ability of any particular populist instance to disrupt and reorder the political field varies significantly, depending on various elements dynamically linked to the broader socio-political environment. These factors ultimately determine whether populist discourse resonates – or fails to resonate – with its intended audience.

This variability underscores the complex relationship between structural conditions and agency in shaping the effectiveness of populist politics and the longevity of the actors that adopt it. The capacity of a populist project to emerge, thrive, and succeed depends on what I will term the *conditions of possibility for populism*. These conditions influence not only the initial emergence of a populist practice but also, more importantly for our analysis, its viability over time.

These conditions can be categorised into two domains: situational and agent-related. Situational

conditions pertain to structural factors beyond the immediate control of the populist actor, such as economic crises, institutional arrangements, or the broader political climate. Agent-related conditions, on the other hand, concern the agency of populist actors, encompassing their political abilities, organisational capacity, and rhetorical effectiveness. The following sections will examine these conditions in greater detail, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by left populists in contemporary Europe.

Dwindling crisis and new cleavages

As hinted above, the populist moment is often cashed out in terms of the moment of the political, that is a period in which some dislocatory event – associated in Lacanian psychoanalysis with the negative dimension of the real – announces the crumbling of the social edifice. In the words of Yannis Stavrakakis:

The moment of the political is the moment made possible by the structural causality of this real, a moment linked to the surfacing of a constitutive lack within our fantasmatic representations of society. It amounts to the cut of dislocation threatening all symbolisations of the social, to the ultimate subversion of any sedimentation of political reality¹⁸.

However, some questions emerge regarding the scope and intensity of the political moment. Is it always and necessarily destined to challenge all existing symbolisations, or can it manifest in forms that do not entail a total rupture with existing structures? Is dislocation uniformly disruptive, or can its intensity vary depending on contextual factors? *Mutatis mutandis*, such considerations echo a much-abused quotation from Gramsci in relation to crises that has gained widespread attention in recent years: "the old is dying and the new cannot be born"¹⁹. This phrase, however, goes a step further by suggesting that something new is inevitably bound to emerge. It is worth noting here that crises can not only be sutured but also possess a potential that is neither static nor absolute – one whose intensity varies and remains contingent on a range of contextual elements.

It is thus imperative to introduce a stronger constructivist criterion for evaluating crises and the opportunities that they offer to political challengers. Crises are not merely objective events, nor, even less, moments within a teleological movement. Not even in a weakened form of a pendular oscillation between sedimentation and reactivation, where each crisis would inevitably herald the emergence of a new order, however indeterminate and unforeseeable. Rather, crises represent opportunities for discursive framing. While such moments are undoubtedly supported by material realities, their political significance depends on how they are articulated and scaled within specific discourses. Even more importantly,

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 61–62. The authors correctly argue that the centre-left's abdication of its role as a viable channel for mounting frustration – at times even serving as the most zealous political force in implementing austerity measures – played a crucial role in this context.

¹⁷ P. Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London–New York, Verso, 2013.

¹⁸ Y. Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, London–New York, Routledge, p. 75.

¹⁹ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 276.

crises can be amplified or downplayed through the actions of political and social actors. Furthermore, the persistence of the structural conditions that facilitated the emergence of a populist moment – such as relations of domination – does not alone determine its trajectory. The evolution of a populist moment is shaped by a multitude of additional factors, including the unfolding of daily political events and the balance of power relations.

A closer examination of the recent European context reveals that the mechanisms of restoration implemented in past few years have significantly weakened the scope for a sharp critique of the system, which was more feasible in earlier periods. While not constituting a genuine reversal in economic policy, the Next Generation EU initiative – representing the largest economic stimulus package ever approved by the European Commission – marked some departure from past approaches. This program, designed to help member states recover from the COVID-19 pandemic – particularly those most adversely affected by the austerity measures of the Eurozone crisis²⁰ – included a substantial proportion of grants rather than the punitive and highly conditional loans that had typified earlier EU disbursements. This shift, along with the expansion of sovereign bond purchase programs by EU monetary authorities, alleviated some of the most acute socio-economic tensions. Collectively, these measures signified an attempted shift towards a governance model more oriented toward investment and redistribution²¹ – albeit a transient one – reflecting a clear awareness among European elites that a pro-cyclical response during the pandemic could have exacerbated the populist challenges that had already gained traction in preceding years²². In practice, however, these shifts were often more effective in projecting an image of change than in altering the structural logics of governance.

Yet politically, this agenda played a critical role in mitigating the divide between responsibility and responsiveness, as conceptualised by Peter Mair, at least in the eyes of the European electorate. Responsiveness refers to the degree to which political leaders or governments effectively address the demands of citizens and societal groups, embodying a core democratic principle of aligning governance with the electorate's preferences. In contrast, responsibility entails adherence to the constraints imposed by economic and political interdependence among nation-states, formalised through treaties, agreements, or informal mechanisms, which inherently limit leaders' autonomy²³. The pandemic-

era measures effectively narrowed the perceived gap between these two dimensions, demonstrating how a governance approach informed by the logic of difference could dismantle or preempt further populist challenges. By addressing socio-economic grievances and reducing perceived tensions between democratic responsiveness and institutional responsibility, this strategy contributed to stabilising the political environment and curtailing the momentum of left populist movements.

Likewise, within the social-democratic left, both at the level of leadership and among associated intellectual circles, there have been notable shifts and reconsiderations in relation to the Blairite, “third way” trajectory of past decades²⁴. While this does not amount to a full-fledged, uniform, or even entirely sincere reversal, the narrative at the core of the left populist gamble in Europe – one that initially allowed the centre-left and centre-right to be cast as indistinguishable – has become increasingly difficult to sustain. At the same time, the mounting pressure on left-leaning voters from the growing radical right with its ever more illiberal inclinations, together with the rising salience of issues such as civil rights, climate change, and the so-called cancel culture, has breathed new life – albeit in a renewed form – into traditional fault lines, above all the divide between progressivism and authoritarian conservatism. This reordering of political identities significantly constrained the prospects for a viable left-wing populist challenge.

Equally problematic for left populists, new fault lines have emerged in recent years, posing significant challenges to their project by cutting across their bases of support. These emerging issues have gained salience in the public sphere, displacing the centrality of the concerns on which left populist movements' surge was predicated, as well as undermining the dichotomous framing of society that populist strategies typically deploy.

A transnational example is the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a polarising divide between proponents of vaccination and stringent confinement measures and those who opposed them. This divide notably intersected with the base of populist movements. Some supporters aligned themselves with sentiments of national unity during the crisis, temporarily suspending the adversarial logic that is central to populist rhetoric. Conversely, others, who rejected the measures implemented to mitigate the pandemic and its effects, experienced a deepening of their anti-systemic sentiments.

In addition to the pandemic-related schisms, other national-level dichotomies have surfaced that complicate the populist endeavour to forge a unified “people”. In the United Kingdom, Brexit entrenched social divisions and sharpened fractures within Labour's constituencies. Corbyn's already difficult task of uniting the middle class, the well-educated urban sectors, and the working classes of the North

²⁰ K. Armingeon, C. de la Porte, E. Heins and S. Sacchi, “Voices from the past: Economic and political vulnerabilities in the making of next generation EU”, *Comparative European Politics* 20(2), 2022, pp. 144–165, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00277-6>.

²¹ A. Crespy, T. Moreira Ramalho and V. Schmidt, “Beyond “responsibility vs. responsiveness”: reconfigurations of EU economic governance in response to crises”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 31(4), 2024, p. 928, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2316286>.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 934.

²³ P. Mair, “Smaghi versus the parties: Representative government and institutional constraints”, in A. Schäfer and W.

Streeck (eds.), *Politics in the age of austerity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 157–158.

²⁴ R. Manwaring and J. Holloway, “A New Wave of Social Democracy? Policy Change across the Social Democratic Party Family, 1970s–2010s”, *Government and Opposition* 57, pp. 171–191, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2020.33>.

of the country was further undermined by the sharply divergent attitudes of these sectors toward Britain's exit from the European Union. Similarly, in Spain, the contentious issue of Catalanian independence – or even the legitimacy of holding a referendum on the matter – generated another cleavage that disrupted the potential for Podemos' populist narrative to achieve broad-based resonance.

France presents yet another case of these shifting dynamics. The emergence of the Yellow Vest movement (*gilets jaunes*) as a major social force introduced a new and somewhat amorphous constituency of discontent. While Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise attempted to appeal to this movement, its reception was lukewarm, and the party struggled to establish a strong foothold within it, in part due to hesitations and misalignments with the movement's broader demands.

Taken together, these developments highlight how the emergence of new, salient issues has effectively sabotaged the populist ambition to construct and consolidate a cohesive "people". By fragmenting the social landscape and displacing the issues that once provided fertile ground for populist mobilisation, these fault lines have impeded the possibility of building a new, unified popular bloc.

Right-wing demands

As mentioned previously, crises typically manifest themselves in a proliferation of demands that institutional channels cannot or are unwilling to meet. The ability to articulate demands in a chain of equivalences makes them, in Laclau's theory, "floating signifiers", that is signifiers that can acquire different meanings depending on the discursive constellation in which they are inserted. To put crudely, to the same problematic answers of very different type can be given, depending on how they are framed within a specific narrative.

Such a theoretical point leads to the assumption that political articulation is a process where various political projects compete on equal footing. Laclau's conceptualisation of demands portrays them as a raw, unshaped material devoid of any ideological orientation, suggesting, at a theoretical level, an "essentialism of demands" that contradicts the very principles of Laclau's theoretical framework²⁵. In this view, demands emerge spontaneously in the social arena, seemingly malleable, without a historical background, and ready to be mobilised and shaped by competing political projects. By the same token, Mouffe speaks of a "democratic nucleus" at the base of many of the contemporary demands that push people to vote for right-wing populist parties, a nucleus which can be readily appropriated by a leftist project²⁶.

The emphasis on reaching voters from opposing ideological camps is undoubtedly more insightful than the prevailing tendency among leftist circles to isolate themselves in insular "ghettos" disconnected

from broader societal discourse and common senses. However, this approach risks fostering false illusions and misdirecting political practice by assuming that individuals are inherently open to seeking new identifications – an assumption that may not always hold true.

This perspective is indeed inherently synchronic, focused entirely on the present moment and neglecting the numerous influences that shape the emergence and "appropriability" of such demands. Social demands rarely appear in a pristine, untainted, or naive form. While they are not disconnected from material conditions, they are always, in some sense, "pre-processed", already imbued with political direction, shaped by historical trajectories, and carrying an implicit political subtext. Demands do not acquire a central role in political discourse out of nowhere; they are often already moulded discursively by agents who have engaged in long-term political work. Thus, it is rare for a demand to be a completely floating signifier, ready to be assimilated into a variety of discourses. Instead, it emerges with specific undertones as the product of sustained and multifaceted political labour.

It is sufficient to look at the types of demands that have gained traction across most European countries in recent years. Among them are calls for stricter immigration controls, opposition to multiculturalism, the protection of national culture, tougher citizenship and asylum requirements, harsher criminal penalties, lower taxation, resistance to LGBTQ+ rights, the defence of the so-called "traditional family", and opposition to gender equality or diversity initiatives. These are hardly left-wing claims that can be easily resignified or co-opted.

The populist moment then, during which various parties attempt to translate social discontent into electoral support, is not a flat, horizontal playing field. Rather, it represents a moment of condensation – albeit one where the political skill of individual actors retains some significance – of processes that have already occurred. This explains why right-wing populism continues to retain formidable strength, and its electoral fortunes have not been on the wane as in the case of its left counterpart. The work of articulation and polarisation of right populists finds resonance with the superior capacity of right-wing actors to mainstream their ideas and exert the role of a rebel counter-coulter²⁷.

Adding to this challenge is the fact that neoliberalism, despite being discredited as an ideology, continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary subjectivities. Right-wing populism, by avoiding any serious challenge to neoliberal principles – whether at the level of policy (beyond a few partial exceptions) or in anthropological terms – enjoys a greater degree of freedom to operate. The changes it proposes may appear bold, but they do not fundamentally threaten the underlying social dynamics. It is no coincidence that the only European countries where social discontent has taken a partially left-populist turn are those that have experienced the active presence of social

²⁵ T. Zicman de Barros, "Desire and Collective Identities: De-composing Ernesto Laclau's notion of demand", *Constellations* 28(4), 2021, pp. 511–521, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12490>.

²⁶ C. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, op. cit., p. 22.

²⁷ A. Nagle, *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2017.

movements. These movements have shaped and articulated demands that were already framed, at least partially, in inclusionary terms (notably France, Greece, and Spain).

When they achieve mass mobilisation, collective struggles and movements alter values and attitudes at a molecular level, fostering the proliferation of egalitarian demands while also producing new leaderships that can later be deployed in more explicitly political arenas. This transformative process is indispensable and sheds light on a significant gap in Laclau's theory, which has little to say about this critical dimension of political change.

Hostile political and civil society

In moments of political decomposition and crisis of political institutions and old leaders, there is an opportunity to unify potentially majoritarian political wills that can open a cycle of democratic expansion and the recovery of sovereignty. In this sense, we, while acknowledging the many differences, recognise that we have learned a great deal – intellectually, personally, and politically – from the processes of change in Latin America²⁸.

The case of Podemos offers a particularly revealing case insofar as the conditions of possibility for populism are concerned, as the party drew significant inspiration from the left-wing populism of Latin American leaders like Chávez, Morales, Correa, and the Kirchners in order to design their political irruption into the Spanish scenario. But did they really, as Errejón asserts in the quote above, take note of the differences between Europe and Latin America? The contention here is that Spanish party's founders failed to fully account that conditions for practising populism differed substantially from the countries in which many of the initial leaders had been engaged²⁹.

On the institutional front, Latin America's predominantly presidential systems have facilitated political mobilisation around individual leaders, enabling a more direct and rapid path to political power. In contrast, Europe's parliamentary systems emphasise consensus-building and negotiated politics, making it much harder for populist movements to gain swift and decisive control. The inability to assert control and the risk of being seen as politically ineffective compelled populist actors to negotiate and collaborate with existing political parties. This shift was further driven by pressure from core voters eager to prevent right-wing victories, prompting a more conciliatory approach. The initial anti-systemic stance, which equated centre-left and centre-right parties and rejected traditional leftist classifications (a position particularly evident in cases like Podemos and, to a lesser extent, La

France Insoumise, as well as in the Italian Five Star Movement's dilemmas), was ultimately set aside in favour of a less polarising strategy.

This shift placed populist actors in a lose-lose situation. On the one hand, moderating their rhetoric and aligning to some degree with traditional parties meant abandoning the essence of populist politics and losing the appeal of novelty, especially among disenchanted voters with minimal stakes in the current system – precisely the demographic they had sought to attract while maintaining their urban base. On the other hand, persisting with a confrontational populist tone risked rendering them ineffective within the constraints of the political system, thereby diminishing their broader appeal.

Socially, Latin American populist experiences unfolded in less complex civil societies, where the entrenched structures supporting local oligarchies were less robust than the denser institutional networks in Europe. The representational void often discussed in the European context is thus only partial; traditional social cleavages and their associated actors – especially those dedicated to defending the interests of the propertied classes – still retain enough vitality to constrain the manoeuvring room available to new political entrants. While political identities and loyalties in Europe are more fluid than in the past, a degree of sedimentation persists, preventing dramatic and rapid upheavals. More precisely, “the void is either not empty enough or too empty altogether”³⁰: on one hand, existing systems of mediation limit opportunities for a large-scale reordering of political identifications, while on the other, societal atomisation makes it challenging for populists to secure and retain new voters and members in the medium to long-term.

Light and leadership-centric organisation

Let us now turn to factors within the realm of agency – those conditions shaped by the specific strategies and practices through which left populists have crafted their politics. Unlike traditional left parties, left populists have largely avoided relying on or establishing cooperatives and associations within civil society that could serve as foundational supports for their political projects. In other words, aside from vague declarations about the need to draw on loosely defined social movements, many of which had already lost their momentum, they have frequently neglected the importance of building parallel organisations beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere.

Instead, they have embraced lightweight, digitally-driven structures, rejecting the mass party model in response to contemporary resistance to bureaucratic hierarchies. However, by making affiliation cheap and effortless, these organisations blurred the line between members and non-members. Easy entry also meant easy exit when circumstances changed. Moreover, driven by populism's singular focus on seizing state power through electoral victories, such parties have tended to focus primarily on the electoral calendar, with activism waxing and waning depending on the proximity to elections. They have

²⁸ Í. Errejón, “Íñigo Errejón: Latinoamérica enseñó a Podemos ‘una política de lo imposible’”, interview with R. Aguilar Agramont, *La Razón*, 2014, <https://www.la-razon.com/politico/2014/08/17/inigo-erregon-latinoamerica-ensenio-a-podemos-una-politica-de-lo-imposible>.

²⁹ D. Copello, “What has become of Podemos? The elites of a radical left party and their evolving dynamics of recruitment”, *Revista española de ciencia política* 64, 2024, pp. 97–128, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.64.04>.

³⁰ A. Borriello and A. Jäger, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

relied heavily on super-volunteers, whose efforts inadvertently revived hierarchical structures³¹. These informal setups, in turn, only served to create more opacity, further complicating decision-making and accountability. Ultimately, after the initial excitement, little remains in terms of sustainable organisational structure. For example, Momentum, the intra-party group backing Corbyn, showcased impressive mobilisational capacities through its model of distributed centralisation. However, this approach undermined the creation of a durable organisation, as its stratarchical structure, which delegated entrepreneurial responsibilities to grassroots members, resulted in significant territorial disparities and fluctuating patterns of activity³².

In parallel, these parties have built their political strategies around undisputed leaders. While this has helped overcome political inertia and injected a much-needed element of passion into the otherwise dry rhetoric of much of the left, it has also come at a cost. First, it has distorted internal party dynamics, encouraging members to seek the leader's favour rather than engage in open debate, fostering internal rivalries, and significantly limiting the space for free discussion and deliberation. This issue reached extreme proportions in the case of Podemos, where dissent from the leader's official line was often treated as an act of treason, leading to expulsions or marginalisation within the party. Second, the leader's political missteps carried far greater weight, as they reverberated more strongly across the party than in less leader-centric structures. As a result, support for the party became particularly volatile. In this sense, the boundary between collective political mobilisation and a fan base blindly devoted to the leader became dangerously thin. Third, it reinforced the preference for a lightweight organisational structure, leaving little room for militants outside the leader's inner circle to play an active role.

These findings challenge Chantal Mouffe's interpretation of populism, which has contributed to certain misconceptions about its nature. Contrary to her claim that populism operates as a "war of position"³³, it is more accurately described in Gramscian terms as a "war of movement". The latter is characterised by bold and rapid manoeuvres that aim to disrupt the status quo and reshape the political terrain decisively, whereas the former involves a protracted struggle of gradual accumulation and the incremental erosion of opponents' power. This "war of position" entails consolidating entrenched positions – what Gramsci metaphorically called "trenches" and "fortresses" – to establish a spatially distributed apparatus that perpetuates a specific hegemonic order or spurs the consolidation of a new one³⁴.

The tactics employed by left-wing populist actors, particularly their reliance on short-term "media blitzes" – often at the expense of deeper societal entrenchment – align more closely with the dynamics of a war of movement – albeit one devoid of violent connotations. In Gramsci's framework, however, the war of movement is intended as the culmination of an extended war of position. While the dismantling of the left's historical fortifications and support structures, painstakingly developed over the 20th century, has rendered strategies of gradual accumulation ineffective in pursuing emancipatory politics without an initial burst of momentum, it is crucial to acknowledge the enduring resilience of existing societal structures and the necessity to engage the struggle also at that level.

Left-wing populism has certainly demonstrated to be an efficacious remedy for temporarily re-centring political attention to the flaws of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, a political approach exclusively focused on direct electoral confrontation faces significant limitations. It struggles to diffuse its ideas widely, especially when crises ebb, and to engage in the cultural and pedagogical groundwork essential for consolidation and sustained progress. Without these foundational elements – such as a heterogeneous yet relatively cohesive ideological voting base, a burgeoning but resilient counterculture, auxiliary spaces for nurturing social bonds, and a new generation of party cadres³⁵ – the potential for long-term transformation and success remains severely constrained.

Cultural elitism

One of the enduring challenges for European left populism has been envisioning ways to engage with disaffected voters, particularly those residing in suburban and rural areas with relatively low levels of formal education, who have developed significant resentment toward the political system. This demographic tends to feel estranged from urban manners, linguistic registers, and lifestyles, harbouring distrust for intellectual discourse and disavowing politics that focus on minority groups.

Over the past few decades, the left – both in its social-democratic and radical variants – has undergone a marked demographic transformation. Once rooted in the working classes, it has increasingly drawn its support from middle- to upper-class constituencies, particularly the cultural elites. French economist Thomas Piketty aptly captured this shift with the term "Brahmin Left", highlighting the left's evolving socio-demographic profile. This transformation has coincided with popular majorities gravitating toward right-wing populist movements or withdrawing from electoral participation altogether³⁶.

This demographic shift has had profound implications not only for policy directions – manifesting in a centrist orientation for social-democratic parties and a focus on identity politics for

³¹ P. Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party. Political Organisation and On-line Democracy*, London, Pluto Press, 2019, p. 171.

³² R. Piazza and D. Cerabona, "Mobilising for organising?: Momentum's distributed centralization and Labour Left strategy under Corbyn (2015–2020)", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27(3), pp. 865–886, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241287178>.

³³ C. Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, London-New York, Verso, 2022, p. 4.

³⁴ A. Gramsci, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–238; A. Gramsci, *Further Selec-*

tions from the Prison Notebooks, ed. and trans. by D. Boothman, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1995, p. 272.

³⁵ A. Borriello and A. Jäger, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

³⁶ T. Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2020.

radical ones – but also for the left’s aesthetic register. While notable differences persist between social-democratic and radical left parties across various contexts, the left as a whole has exhibited a cultural elite behaviour. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* is particularly instructive in this regard. *Habitus* refers to an individual’s internalised set of tastes, preferences, and behavioural patterns, shaped by the material and cultural conditions in which they are embedded. It influences individuals, often unconsciously, to align with familiar social norms, reinforcing their class identity. This *habitus* is subtly expressed through gestures, linguistic choices, and displayed tastes, with the language of cultural elites typically being formal, abstract, and inclined toward generalisation and analytical reasoning³⁷.

The promise of populism stands in sharp contrast to these tendencies. Left populism, at least in principle, aims to articulate a more accessible and broadly resonant sense of popular identity, distinct from the nuanced and complex positions associated with the radical left. It seeks to transcend the shrinking base of urban, culturally affluent supporters and engage with constituencies alienated from progressive elites. To achieve this, left populism must adopt rhetoric, rituals, practices, and symbols that resonate with the so-called “common man”. The successes of the Latin American left during the Pink Tide illustrate how bridging the urban-rural divide can serve as a cornerstone of populist politics.

However, this dimension has been notably absent in both Ernesto Laclau’s theoretical framework and the practical applications of European left populisms. Laclau’s approach, which largely eschews sociology, reduces articulation to the aggregation of demands while neglecting the cultural and performative dimensions of populism. Crucially, little attention is given to how antagonism is enacted in practice.

Pierre Ostiguy offers a complementary perspective that distinguishes between the “high” and “low” realms of politics, roughly aligning with institutional and populist tendencies, as a means of explaining divergent modes of engaging with the public, rooted in a society’s historical and symbolic frameworks. The “high” is characterised by decorum, refinement, and polished behaviour, whereas the “low” embodies slang, colloquial expressions, ostentatious displays, and, more broadly, the public assertion of culturally raw popular tastes that symbolise what has been traditionally marginalised³⁸. In this way, “manners, publicised tastes, language, and modes of public behaviour” come to signify and even define political identities³⁹. Populist dynamics gain depth and, crucially, achieve their effectiveness by incorporating an excess – a “disorganized and emotive vitalism” – that lies beyond the conventional system of political meanings, ultimately generating

a distinct plebeian grammar⁴⁰. By incorporating this performative aspect, one can more easily grasp why certain populisms manage to resonate better among the populace and cement otherwise heterogeneous constituencies – providing yet another reason why right-wing populism continues to enjoy such enduring strength.

In the case of European left populisms, their leaders have largely struggled to shed their elite *habitus* and adopt a cultural register capable of appealing to broader popular majorities, particularly those with lower levels of formal education. Podemos offers a particularly telling example – by no means the only one – yet perhaps especially revealing of a broader trend affecting all the subjects under scrutiny⁴¹. The *errejonista* faction of the party, despite its stated populist aspirations, retained a cultural exclusivity that reinforced its distance from the popular classes. Its reliance on abstract intellectual frameworks and urban-centric aesthetics conflicted fundamentally with Ostiguy’s “low” register and the national-popular elements essential to populist success. As a result, Podemos’ populism ultimately revealed its cerebral and “laboratory-like” nature, failing to authentically engage with the cultural and symbolic dimensions that underpin effective populist mobilisation.

Conversely, the *pablista* faction of Podemos reverted to a classical radical-left framework, reintroducing traditional symbolism and language. This return to familiar ground placed the party back within a political space that had already been neutralised, thereby limiting its transformative potential. This choice failed to yield significant gains. As the impact of the 2011–2013 protest cycle waned and right-wing nationalism surged, many progressive voters who had once been drawn to Podemos shifted their focus toward defeating the Right rather than transforming the socio-economic system. While the Socialist Party weathered Podemos’s initial challenge and absorbed some of its ideas, Iglesias maintained a confrontational stance toward the Socialists – even as he eventually conceded to forming a government with them – failing to recognise that much of his potential electorate had already adjusted its ambitions. This was further compounded by the embrace of “woke” cultural priorities – such as trans feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, inclusive language, and identity politics – that primarily resonate with urban, well-educated constituencies, further alienating broader popular sectors. Accompanying this shift was a discursive move away from constructing a unified and undifferentiated “people” – the hallmark of Podemos’s early political roadmap – toward an appeal directed at segmented social categories.

³⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London-New York, Routledge, 2010.

³⁸ P. Ostiguy, “Populism: A socio-cultural approach”, in C.R. Kaltwasser, P.A. Taggart, P.O. Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 84.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

⁴⁰ P. Ostiguy, “Gramáticas plebeyas: exceso, representación y fronteras porosas en el populismo oficialista”, in C. Véliz and A. Reano (eds.), *Gramáticas plebeyas: Populismo, democracia y nuevas izquierdas en América Latina*, Los Polvorines, Ediciones Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2015, p. 150.

⁴¹ R. Rojas-Andrés, S. Mazzolini and J. Custodi, “Does left populism short-circuit itself? Podemos in the labyrinths of cultural elitism and radical leftism”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32(4), pp. 960–977, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014782804.2023.2269375>.

Discussion and conclusion

In his critique of Poulantzas' analysis of fascism published in 1977, Laclau argued that it was the very abdication of the popular-democratic terrain by working-class organisations that paved the way for fascism. His polemic targeted reductionist and narrow class conceptions, which obstructed the development of a hegemonic strategy capable of forging a broader popular bloc – one that could have linked working-class demands with the Jacobinism of the petite bourgeoisie before Mussolini and Hitler successfully articulated these sectors. In fact, this argument foreshadows Laclau's later thesis on populism.

Similarly, one might say that left populism should aim to extend its appeal beyond the ever-shrinking circle of those who have already pledged their allegiance to the left, incorporating heterogeneous sectors into its coalition. Yet, as history demonstrates, this task is fraught with challenges. As Laclau himself cautioned in the same text:

Let us remark, to conclude this point, that the parallelism we have used in the presentation of the German and Italian cases, must not lead to the false conclusion that all countries have popular-democratic traditions that are equivalent in their degree of dissociation from the dominant bourgeois discourse and in their potential for incorporation in the socialist discourse⁴².

Laclau's warning about national variations in popular-democratic traditions underscores a key point of this analysis: the conditions of possibility for (left) populism vary significantly. These factors can be grouped into two broad categories: situational and agent-related. Situational factors refer to elements largely beyond the control of political actors, rendering them relatively passive recipients of external constraints and opportunities. Nevertheless, these factors shape the strategic field within which agency is exercised, generating a dynamic interplay with agent-related dimensions. Situational factors include the unpredictable dynamics of crises that create opportunities for populism in the first place, the nature and orientation of existing social demands – as highlighted in the above quote of Laclau – and the institutional and social arrangements that may either enable or hinder a populist gamble.

Agent-related conditions, by contrast, concern organisational structures and cultural predispositions. While not necessarily the result of a populist strategy, light, leader-centric, electorally-oriented organisations are often facilitated by it. In this sense, precautionary measures could have mitigated or prevented such tendencies. Cultural elitism, on the other hand, reflects the social background and cultural formation of those leading these experiments – factors shaped by the conditions of socialisation in which contemporary European leftists emerge.

The combination of structural and operative obstacles ultimately undermined the grand

aspirations of European left populism to reshape the political trajectory opened by the crisis of the 2010s. However, talk of left populism's failure must be approached *cum grano salis*. In Laclau's theoretical framework, populism is a political logic that pervades politics as such. From this perspective, it would be misleading to attribute the failure of particular actors to a logic presiding over political articulation.

At the same time though, populism – particularly in Mouffe's more explicitly partisan rendering – is also conceived as a political strategy deployed by specific actors. One might be tempted to argue here that only agent-related factors can be imputed to the actors under examination here, since situational ones lie beyond their direct control. However, it is populism-as-strategy that warrants critical scrutiny. A different reading – one permitted by Laclau's own framework – is that, since political subjects are not intrinsically populist, they can recalibrate the degree of polarisation they deploy in order to adapt to shifting circumstances.

As we have seen, the populist moment is not static; it mutates, and such transformations should prompt political actors to adjust their conduct accordingly. In other words, populism is not a ready-made manual for political action, let alone a formula for success; at most, it provides a tactical blueprint that can be smartly deployed when the conjuncture allows it. As the Latin American experience of the early 2000s shows, left populism has indeed succeeded in reaching power – but under distinct political and social conditions, and through actors who interpreted and enacted the populist logic in ways that diverged significantly from their European counterparts. Rather, it was the prolongation of populist rhetoric from a position of power – along with a concomitant failure, when circumstances so required, to adopt a more institutionalist ethos – that ultimately undermined these political experiences in the medium term (Mazzolini, 2024).

Put differently, populism may be best understood not as a comprehensive strategy, but as a tactical device with a restricted temporality: a means to seize power or enhance the visibility of a political conflict. As I argue elsewhere, Laclau conflates populism with the broader category of hegemony, thus obscuring the distinctive character of the latter (Mazzolini, 2020). A hegemonic approach represents a more ambitious, long-term strategic project – one that transcends the fluctuations of day-to-day politics and extends articulation beyond the political field *strictu sensu* and into the social sphere at large, thus generating new common senses. A horizon of hegemony does not always or necessarily entail direct confrontation, but rather a more flexible and pervasive articulatory strategy capable of navigating the changing circumstances of the political landscape. As we have seen, however, left populist actors did little to project their influence beyond the electoral arena and struggled to adapt their political conduct to evolving circumstances, ultimately failing to consolidate their position in a more durable way.

Today, with the partial exception of Mélenchon, none of the actors associated with left populism retains significant relevance. Is there anything left of left populism, then? Has it shaped the political landscape in any meaningful way, or, in other words,

⁴² E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London, New Left Books, 1977, pp. 133–134.

achieved any degree of hegemony? Tentatively, one can see its impact most clearly in Spain, albeit indirectly. Podemos did not seize power on its own, but it nonetheless reshaped public debate on key issues, influencing the political positioning of Pedro Sánchez. Initially a moderate upon assuming leadership of the Socialist Party, Sánchez gradually adopted a more pronounced leftist stance, reflecting broader demands for social justice, a shift publicly reinforced by Podemos. In this respect, Spain arguably has the most left-leaning social democracy in Europe today, thanks in part to Podemos' influence. However, this is hardly the type of hegemony initially envisaged by the founders of Podemos.

Bibliography

- Arditi, B., "Review Essay. Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason*", *Constellations* 17(3), 2010, pp. 488–497, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00587.x>.
- Armington, K., de la Porte, C., Heins, E. and Sacchi, S., "Voices from the past: Economic and political vulnerabilities in the making of next generation EU". *Comparative European Politics* 20(2), 2022, pp. 144–165, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00277-6>.
- Bourdieu, P., *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010.
- Borriello, A. and Jäger, A., *The Populist Moment. The Left after the Great Recession*, London-New York, Verso, 2023.
- Copello, D., "What has become of Podemos? The elites of a radical left party and their evolving dynamics of recruitment", *Revista española de ciencia política* 64, 2024, pp. 97–128, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.64.04>.
- Crespy, A., Moreira Ramalho, T. and Schmidt, V., "Beyond "responsibility vs. responsiveness": reconfigurations of EU economic governance in response to crises", *Journal of European Public Policy* 31(4), 2024, pp. 925–949, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2316286>.
- Dean, J., "Left politics and popular culture in Britain: From left-wing populism to "popular leftism"", *Politics* 43(1), 2023, pp. 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720960661>.
- Errejón, Í., "Íñigo Errejón: Latinoamérica enseñó a Podemos "una política de lo imposible", interview with R. Aguilar Agramont, *La Razón*, 2014, <https://www.la-razon.com/politico/2014/08/17/inigo-erregon-latinoamerica-enseno-a-podemos-una-politica-de-lo-imposible>.
- Gerbaudo, P., *The Digital Party. Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, London, Pluto Press, 2019.
- Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by D. Boothman, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1995.
- Laclau, E., *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London, New Left Books, 1977.
- *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London-New York, Verso, 1990.
- *On Populist Reason*, London-New York, Verso, 2005.
- Laclau, E., Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London-New York, Verso, 1985.
- Mair, P., *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London-New York, Verso, 2013.
- "Smaghi versus the parties: Representative government and institutional constraints", in A. Schäfer and W. Streeck (eds.), *Politics in the age of austerity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, pp. 143–168.
- Manwaring, R., Holloway, J., "A New Wave of Social Democracy? Policy Change across the Social Democratic Party Family, 1970s–2010s", *Government and Opposition* 57, 2022, pp. 171–191, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2020.33>.
- Mazzolini, S., "Populism is not hegemony: towards a re-Gramscianization of Ernesto Laclau", *Theory & Event* 23(3), 2020, pp. 765–786, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2020.0043>.
- "Left populism and institutions: lessons from Ecuador on Laclau's antinomies", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 29(2), 2024, pp. 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2094620>.
- Mazzolini, S. and Borriello, A., "The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos", *European Politics and Society* 23(3), 2022, pp. 285–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1868849>.
- Mouffe, C., *For a Left Populism*, London-New York, Verso, 2018.
- "Jeremy Corbyn's Left Populism", *Verso Blog*, 2018, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3743-jeremy-corbyn-s-left-populism>.
- *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, London-New York, Verso, 2022.
- Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C., "Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America", *Government and Opposition* 48(2), 2013, pp. 147–174, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.
- Ostiguy, P., "Gramáticas plebeyas: exceso, representación y fronteras porosas en el populismo oficialista", in C. Véliz and A. Reano (eds.), *Gramáticas plebeyas: Populismo, democracia y nuevas izquierdas en América Latina*, Los Polvorines, Ediciones Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2015, pp. 133–177.
- "Populism: A socio-cultural approach", in C.R. Kaltwasser, P.A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 73–97.
- Piazza, R. and Cerabona, D., "Mobilising for organising?: Momentum's distributed centralization and Labour Left strategy under Corbyn (2015–2020)", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27(3), pp. 865–886, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241287178>.
- Piketty, P., *Capital and Ideology*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2020.
- Rojas-Andrés, R., Mazzolini, S. and Custodi, J., "Does left populism short-circuit itself? Podemos in the

labyrinths of cultural elitism and radical leftism", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32(4), 2024, pp. 960-977, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2269375>.

Zicman de Barros, T., "Desire and Collective Identities: Decomposing Ernesto Laclau's notion

of demand", *Constellations* 28(4), 2021, pp. 511-521, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12490>.