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Unexpected results on democratic processes (e.g. Brexit referendum, US and Greek elections) have brought discussion on populism to the forefront of the global agenda. Although the phenomenon is not new (Zaslove 2008), its present manifestation is understood as a sharpening of antagonistic relations in present-day Western societies (Hawkins et al. 2016). Populism is consensually defined as a division of social and political spaces into opposing groups, 'the people' and 'the elite' (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2007; Žižek 2006) but theory and research on populism often examines the populist *modus operandi* (at least) in two competing ways. For some, populism is caused by a combination of charismatic leadership, sophisticated party machinery and propaganda (Mudde 2010). Thus, populism is here understood as an ideology that "displaces the antagonism and constructs the enemy (...) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice" (Žižek 2006, 555). For others, present forms of populism appear to be a reaction among those feeling economic, cultural and political vulnerability in relation to globalization and exclusionary economic and political structures (Spruyt et al. 2016). Here, populism is understood as 'the essence of politics', a potential 'cure' to present democratic deficits (Laclau 2007; Martinelli 2016). By contrasting Slavoj Žižek's (1989; 2006) recent works on philosophy and psychoanalysis with work in the area of 'radical democracy' (Laclau 2007a; 2007b; 2014; Mouffe 2009; Rancière, 1999, 2006), this article discusses these two different understandings of populism and the educational implications deriving from each.

We take as a starting point for this discussion three shared assumptions that, in our understanding, underlie both Žižek's work on populism and the perspective from radical democracy, as found in the work of Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière. First, in contrast with those who describe populism as a demagogical form of politics, we understand populism, along with Pollock et al. (2015), as "legitimate political positions within a pluralist discourse" (143). Populism is here considered to be no more or less demagogical – or not necessarily so - than other forms of politics. Second, populism lacks any clear world-view or belief system (Canovan, 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that both left and right-wing forms of populism coexist in present-day Western societies (Inglehart & Norris 2016). Third, 'the people' is always constructed against an Other, often defined as 'the elite' or the 'established power' (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2007). There are multiple examples of this in recent populist discourses. As discussed by Inglehart and Norris (2016), "despite being located on opposite sides of the aisle, Trump's rhetoric taps into some of the same populist anti-elite anger articulated by Bernie Sanders when attacking big corporations, big donors, and big banks" (5). In Europe, the populist rhetoric has often challenged the project of European Integration. Whilst the most well-known case is the Brexit Referendum in the UK, a number of populist leaders have promised to hold a referendum on EU membership (Martinelli 2016).

This article is structured as follows. We first examine the notion of populism in relation to Žižek's work, then in relation to work from the perspective of 'radical democracy' (Little and Lloyd, 2009), characterised by a concern for the expansion of the public sphere and a reconignition of the positive dynamics of conflict, dissensus and plurality. Here, we draw principally on the work of Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière. We then identify the main differences of the political project deriving from these two understandings. We argue that one of the sharpest points of difference between the two perspectives – and therefore one of the most illuminating for thinking through the challenge of populism – is in their conception of what constitutes the political terrain. We conclude by emphasising some of the educational implications of these two understandings, particularly with regards to the role of the educator. Whilst motivated by a shared concern for social justice, educators' approaches to the challenge of populism – both for them and their students - are likely to be very different depending on how populism, and politics, this is understood.

### **First perspective: Populism as an ideological narrative**

The work of Žižek (1989, 1992, 2006) provides a first theoretical framework for assessing the nature of populist movements. In Žižek's words, an ideology—as a symbolic construct, a “social fantasy” (Žižek 1992, 142)—is always a necessary counterpart to some real antagonism. Ideology is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked (Žižek 1992, 142). It is our purpose here to deploy Žižek's theoretical tools to briefly examine how populism can be understood as a “social fantasy”.

Within the Žižekian field, social antagonism is irreducible, that is, there is always something thwarting the establishment of a completely orderly society. Every identity, including 'the people', is sustained by an inherent antagonism, a deadlock preventing its full actualisation. The question then arises of how to make sense, how to symbolise such an antagonism – which kind of symbolisation is built to give meaning to what is seen as corroding the social structure?

According to Žižek (1989, 140-144), it is by displacing our own inherent antagonisms onto an alien or foreigner Other, that we are able to conceal them:

“In populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice; symmetrically, our own—the populist political agent's—identity is also perceived as pre-existing the enemy's onslaught” (Žižek 2006, 555).

This creates a fantasy of unity, where eventual antagonisms within society are disavowed and transposed onto the Other as the source of antagonism. The populists, in Žižek's words,

“refuse to confront the complexity of the situation, to reduce it to a clear struggle with a pseudoconcrete enemy figure (from Brussels bureaucracy to illegal immigrants). Populism is thus by definition a negative phenomenon, a phenomenon grounded in a refusal, even an implicit admission of impotence” (2006, 576).

In the UK, the 'BREXIT' movement has been defined as a populist movement (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Brexiters have externalized some inherent problems within the British society (e.g. large equality gap, the failure of the National Health System) into an external 'entity', the European Union. The UK is not an isolated case. Other European populist movements have followed similar paths. In France, for instance, Marine Le Pen had promised to hold a referendum on EU membership if she won the presidential elections. In all these cases, the European Union (on other occasions, migrants might play a similar role) is presented as an intruder whose elimination would enable us to restore order, stability and identity (to paraphrase Žižek, 1989, p. 144).

A particular entity assumes the role of the force of corruption, which, once eliminated, will allow the full actualisation of the oppressed identity. However, if, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have shown, “society doesn’t exist”, that the field of the social is always an inconsistent field structured around a constitutive antagonism or impossibility, then this ideological mechanism of allocating the source of evil to an external cause can be seen as an ideological fantasy (Žižek 1989, 142), whose function is to mask this inconsistency, the fact that “society doesn’t exist”. In other words, an ideological narrative is built that allows for members of a social group to perceive as external, something that is inherently out of joint. Such is the typical mode of an ideological formation.

The move that Žižek suggests as a way of breaking with this logic of identification is what Lacan named, “traversing the fantasy”: to recognise that the properties attributed by populists to the European bureaucracy or to illegal immigrants is not something external to the system but an inherent part of the system itself. The current capitalist economy produces, as part of its own workings, impoverished masses, massive migrant dislocations and, ultimately, terror. The disavowal mechanism that consists in allocating the cause of these problems to well-defined identities (migrants, Muslims, Southern and Eastern Europeans, etc.) ends up performing a very important ideological task: it inhibits us from approaching the problem from the universal position that capital occupies today.

### **Second perspective: Populism from the viewpoint of radical democracy**

For Mouffe and Laclau, as for Žižek, antagonism is at the basis of the social fabric. However, in contrast with Žižek, for whom there is a “fundamental social antagonism”, the “class struggle, that divides the social edifice from within”<sup>1</sup> (Žižek 2000, 124), for Laclau and Mouffe, no form of antagonism is pre-determined. More theoretically, “there is no overlap between the ontic and the ontological orders” (Laclau 2014, p. 5). Society is ontologically framed by antagonistic relations but none of these relations is ‘inherent’ to the system. Rather, the system itself is created through antagonistic relations that, simultaneously, need to be discursively constructed. Mouffe writes, “political practice cannot be envisaged as simply representing the interest of preconstituted identities but as constituting these identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain” (2009, 99-100). Each system is defined by a ‘we’ and an Other and all ‘we(s)’ and all ‘Other(s)’ need to be (politically and discursively) constructed.

‘The people’, in Laclau’s work, appeals to universality and aims at the achievement of social fullness, but ‘the people’ does not have any content of its own. ‘The people’ operates as an ‘empty signifier’ the meaning of which is defined by situated discourses (Laclau 2007a). Particular discourses are here understood as responses to specific problems. But a particular discourse, in a process of hegemonization, “overflows its own particularity and becomes the incarnation of the absent fullness of society” (Laclau 2007b, 72). The particular discourse becomes the hegemonic discourse of ‘the people’ in such a way that it is understood as giving response to different dissatisfactions generated by the existing order. This is precisely the power of ‘the people’.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of ‘class struggle’ in Žižek’s work is often matter of debate (Žižek 2006; Laclau 2014). In this paper, we understand that, for Žižek, ‘class struggle’ is not to be confused with two positive entities— workers and capitalists—struggling against each other. Instead it designates the very antagonism that prevents the objective (social) reality from constituting itself as a self-enclosed whole (Žižek, 1994). As expressed by Žižek (1994): “The question of the suitability of the term ‘class struggle’ to designate today’s dominant form of antagonism is secondary here, it concerns concrete social analysis; what matters is that the very constitution of social reality involves the ‘primordial repression’ of an antagonism” (p. 25).

Let us examine this in relation to present forms of populism in Western societies. Political scientists associate the rise of populism to economic, political and cultural challenges. In a context of multiple sovereignties (Brown, 2014), the incapacity of national governments to implement effective policies together with the crisis of the traditional parties have generated a crisis of representative democracies (Martinelli, 2016). Simultaneously, the processes of deterritorialization (Appadurai, 1990) and the 2008 economic crisis have accentuated the polarization (cultural and economic) of Western societies among the ruling economic/cosmopolitan elites, the “ethnic folk” and the migrant other (Friedman, 2015). Those who align themselves with populist discourses, often described as the “losers of globalization” or “losers of modernization” (Martinelli, 2016) are united by their dissatisfaction. In relation to recent events, Mouffe explained in an interview,

“In France, the majority of the working class is voting for Marine Le Pen. It’s easy to understand, because these sectors have become the losers in globalization. Le Pen has been able to articulate—in a xenophobic vocabulary—the demands of the popular classes. They are democratic demands. They are ordinary people who are suffering. But Le Pen comes with the discourse: “I understand that you are suffering. The people who are responsible are the immigrants.” She is establishing a frontier against immigrants. Le Pen says that she cares about the people while the French Socialist Party—like Clinton—has no discourse about people’s genuine problems with the status quo. People don’t trust the establishment leaders and parties anymore. They no longer convince. It seems to me that this is what Sanders was trying to do. He was giving another answer. The adversary is not immigrants, but it’s Wall Street and financial interests. This is left-wing populism.” (Mouffe and Shahid December 2016).

In Mouffe’s account, “ordinary people” are suffering in contemporary Western societies. This suffering is not only assumed to be part of the human condition but also a result of a political order that does not give response to the economic, political and cultural challenges previously mentioned. Individuals might have different demands in relation to these challenges but the populist discourse might give answers to them all. In this context, populism becomes a clear alternative to the “establishment leaders and parties”.

But ‘the people’ is disputed by (at least) two competing discourses. On one end, right-wing forms of populism including Marine Le Pen, Trump, Wilders and others aspire to define a system constructed through antagonistic relations between ‘the people’ and an Other which is defined in relation to ‘immigrants’ and the establishment leaders who have allowed this immigration to happen. But on the other end, there are competing forms of populism. For Sanders, Podemos and SYRIZA among others, ‘the people’ is not constructed against ‘the immigrants’, but against the “establishment leaders and parties” and “Wall Street and financial interests”. An attempt, on both ends, right-wing and left-wing, to ‘hegemonize’ ‘the people’ and to define a new system. ‘The people’, as a signifier, can be interrupted by competing discourses defining different relations between the we and the Other. The populist competition responds to what Gramsci defines as a “war of positions”, “strictly speaking a logic of displacement of political frontiers” (Laclau 2007a, 153).

Something akin to this, “logic of displacement of political frontiers” finds expression in Rancière’s (1999, 2004, 2006) work as the constant but irresolvable struggle between the ‘police’ and ‘politics’. For Rancière, there exists both a ‘police’ logic that seeks to delineate society neatly (thus muting the equality that exists in all political systems since the original democratic rupture in Athens) and a logic of ‘politics’ that seeks to disrupt such delineations (thus exposing their contingency, and highlighting the equality inherent within them. These two logics are opposed and constantly in tension with each other. Those moments in which ‘politics’ (always democratic politics for Rancière) ‘breaks through’

and ruptures the political status quo result in a reconfiguration of the current delineation of society; they leave their traces in a reconfigured political order. For Rancière, genuine politics always involves a claim to equality, which can also be seen as an instantiation of 'the people'. His reference to the civil rights movement in the USA provides a helpful illustration:

The young black woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who, one day in December 1955, decided to remain in her seat on the bus, which was not hers, in this way decided that she had, as a citizen of the United States, the rights she did not have as an inhabitant of a state that banned the use of such seats to individuals with one-sixteenth or more parts of 'non-Caucasian' blood. And the Blacks of Montgomery who, a propos of this conflict between a private person and a transportation company, decided to boycott the company, really acted politically, staging the double relation of exclusion and inclusion inscribed in the duality of the human being and the citizen.' (Rancière 2006, 57).

One significant point to draw from the quotation above is that the civil rights movement cannot be seen as a case of identity politics or the articulation of a particular set of interests within the public sphere. Rather, it was a claim to universality, which at the same time, also took the form of a very material and situated struggle against a particular injustice - one that played on the tensions between equality and inequality before the law. What is also interesting in Rancière's work, from the point of view of populism, is that he sees the act of politics as something that is collective but not based on any predetermined conception of the community or 'the people'. He writes that politics is performed by 'uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories and languages' and insists that '[a] political collective is not, in actual fact, an organism or a communal body' (2004, p. 40). Such acts are always also indeterminate - they may or may not support a reconfiguration of the political status quo along more egalitarian lines. Viewed from a Rancierian perspective, populism *can* be understood 'positively' (from a democratic point of view) *if* it is aligned within a politics of disruption and reconfiguration of the political community in the direction of equality. But it is not necessarily so. Populism can also work to support the police logic of a 'smooth' political community in which everyone and everything has its 'proper' (unequal) place.

### **Differences in the political project**

Besides the three shared assumptions we identified in the introduction, here are differences in the way Žižek, on the one hand, and Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière, on the other, understand populism, which relate with the divergent ways in which these authors define 'the system' and 'antagonism'. For Žižek, antagonism as such is an inherent part of the Social, a piece of the real that forever resists symbolisation, a name for the incompleteness of society. Following Hegel, the obstacles are perceived as imposing disorder from the outside and need to be perceived as internal to the same system they seem to disrupt. This is the core of Hegelian dialectics: to posit what at first sight appears as external, as an internal feature of the same system that posits it as external. In this sense, antagonism is immanent to any society. In the same way, for Laclau and Mouffe, the Social in itself is contingent. What we understand as the Social or the social system is nothing else than a space of representation that has 'sedimented'. The difference between the two approaches concerns the way antagonism is conceptualised. Whether for Žižek, antagonism is an intrinsic part of the structure, for Laclau and Mouffe antagonism is understood as the 'something' outside this space of representation. It is from this outside position that the possibility of change emerges. The Social itself only exists in so far as there is something outside it. But the contingent nature of this 'outside' matters when defining the nature of the 'inside' and therefore the system. Thus, Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek agree that any social system is necessarily incomplete. But for Žižek, its incompleteness is intrinsic

to the system, its own inherent limit (the point of *extimacy* to use Lacan's neologism). An externality that is *internal* to the system. For Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière, the system in itself is created by this externality. The externality can never be assimilated but if the content of this externality does indeed change, the system in itself might change.

This difference of approaches has important consequences for how we position ourselves in relation to the political. In political terms, if we follow Žižek, emancipation doesn't come from "outside", from an imagined or alternative community – in itself a very middle class endeavour, of people who can actually afford to live alternatively, but by engaging with what we have and changing it from within (the state, capitalism, globalisation). It also invites us to put ourselves – enlightened academics writing about the faith of the world from our comfortable desks – as part of the problem by the way we participate in much of the same reality we desire to change. In this sense, in a move akin to populism, academics tend to posit outside of their own practice – in an external entity, being it poor teaching, flawed curriculum, governmental pressures, etc. – the reasons for their misfortunes. By focusing the attention somewhere else, populism reinforces the same *status quo* which (theoretically) aims to challenge.

On the other hand, if we follow Laclau and Mouffe, emancipation in itself might not exist. Emancipation would, at least to a certain extent, imply the movement from a 'fake' Social to a 'real' one in which the universal problem would be solved. And we know that for Laclau and Mouffe the Social is in itself discursively constructed and no problem is in itself universal but rather a situated experience. Laclau and Mouffe, instead, implicitly encourage (all of) us to fight for 'our' problems whilst we seek alliances with others experiencing similar problems. Only through these alliances, can we discursively construct/define the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the Social system and, in consequence, the system itself. If present forms of 'populist' politics are important here, it is precisely because they challenge the existing frontiers of the system. They position the establishment leaders and parties as the 'Other' and by doing so, they challenge the status quo. In Rancière's terms, this challenge to the status quo is always instantiated through a specific claim to equality and universality by those not only marginalised but rendered invisible as political subjects within the given status quo. Their visibility becomes a political act.

In essence, the difference between the two perspectives we have outlined here lies in how each understands what constitutes the political terrain. Whilst for Žižek, this terrain is the current, capitalist system, for Mouffe, Laclau and Rancière, the political terrain exists both prior to and beyond any particular political 'status quo' – something which, along with the antagonisms and tensions inherent to it, have always to be constructed politically. As Rancière argues, "the power of the people is always beneath and beyond these [juridico-political] forms" (2006, 54). If populism is a displacement of the 'real', as something that exists only within an inherently unequal and exploitative system, as in Žižek's thought, then it can never be framed positively. And the question of how we respond to populism becomes one of how we recognise our own complicity within the attempt to displace 'real' economic antagonisms via the construction of a spectral 'other'. If, however, from the perspective of radical democracy, we understand populism as something that marks a rupture with the current political status quo, exposing its precarity and contingency, both of which are equally 'real', then populism can be a positive and vital force for political change. For Žižek, this positive force is the force of the negative.

### **Implications of both approaches for education**

These different approaches have important educational implications. If we understand populism through the lens of radical democracy, the links between education and populism are seen as simultaneously more powerful and risky. The work of Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière suggests a more positive standpoint, one in which teachers and students do more than teaching or studying. They

open up the discussion not only to the exposure of ideology but also to the possibilities of agency. Educational settings such as schools and universities can become one (among other) political settings where the struggle to define the 'lack' takes place. Settings where teachers and students participate in the political act of constructing themselves as teachers, students and as 'the people'. In other words, where 'the people' and the 'Other' are not only reproduced but also produced (Szkudlarek, 2011). Where possibilities to create alliances that define the 'insiders' and the 'outsiders' exist. Where educators and students can discuss whether Wall street, or the immigrants, to use Mouffe's example, are behind our problems. This would approach what Biesta (2006) has argued is the vital work of democratic education - both in providing political spaces of disagreement, and in encouraging students to learn from those moments in which they have had the opportunity (or not) to act politically in the world. But "opening education up to the elements of populism could therefore be an opening for affects and demands that are not directed towards a democratic life" (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017). Educational settings (and other political settings) become spaces where 'the people' and the Other can be defined in terms we might not all agree with. Where some of our students, or even ourselves as part of what is sometimes defined as the 'cultural elite' are constructed as the other. The challenge for education here becomes the same question as for politics; a change in the status quo is not necessarily a change we all might want.

If, in contrast, we follow Žižek in understanding antagonism as being 'within' the system, education is impossible. Education fails because it ignores its own fundamental antagonism. Simultaneously, in the context of capitalist schooling, education fails because all the problems of contemporary education (systematic failure, reproduction of inequality, etc.) are inherent to education in itself. Education is impossible not because of external obstacles, but because it is part of the very notion of education never to completely reach its goal. In the conditions under which education would finally be possible, it would no longer be needed. It is because education ultimately fails—in the sense that there will always be a gap preventing us from a direct immersion in our surroundings—that it is finally necessary. Education is thus simultaneously impossible and necessary. It is the necessary condition for someone to become part of a certain culture or society, but it never completely succeeds because, as explored before, the lack that is the subject is the lack of culture. The challenge in this perspective is precisely to engage with the impossibility of education, not as a negative deadlock, but as the condition of possibility of any alternative education (or politics). Bringing populism into educational settings would then reproduce the same ideological game that it claims to challenge.

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