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The fantasy of the populist disease and the educational cure

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The populist turn has produced contrasting conceptions of education. Research has suggested that individuals educated to university level are unlikely to support populist discourses. Meanwhile, populism is often understood as a social illness or disease that needs to be cured through education. This article argues that both populist and anti-populist discourses are fantasies in which education comprises an ideological grip. In the populist fantasy, education is perceived as being ideologically controlled by the elite. In the anti-populist fantasy, education is seen as being inherently emancipatory, liberating us from irrationalism and economic inequality. The article concludes not by showing how these ideological alternatives might be reconciled, but by suggesting that we can only proceed by creating new discursive landscapes where emancipatory education can be understood differently.

Keywords: populism; Lacan; Laclau; emancipatory education

Introduction

This article will theoretically explore the links between populism and education. We take as starting point the definition of populism as the discursive division of the social space between two antagonistic groups—'the people' and 'the regime' (Laclau, 2005) —and theoretically examine how those who are guided by populist discourses (e.g. Brexiters) and those who seek to resist them (e.g. Tony Blair) discursively construct education. Through a critique of ideology (Glynos, 2001), we aim to explore the potential role of education as an ideological force, drawing individuals towards populist or anti-populist logics. Yet, we do not seek the end of ideology, which Althusser (1971) sees as the biggest ideological quest of all. Our target is to demonstrate how the populist/anti-populist opposition is itself ideological, thereby foreclosing the educational options available.

The discursive relation between populism and education is complex. Some research studies have argued that individuals who participated in higher education are unlikely to hold political views in line with populist discourses (Spruyt, 2014; Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Meanwhile, those supporting populism have been seen as 'ignorant',[1] 'less educated' or 'uneducated'.[2] For such writers, populism is a 'social

illness' that needs to be cured.[3] Here they align with critical educators who see the purpose of education as being to 'emancipate' us from the false ideologies that trap us in oppressive relationships (Freire, 1972; Kincheloe, 2008). There appears to be other evidence that, intentionally or otherwise, some populist leaders have used the question of education to mobilise the 'lower educated' to their cause (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Runciman, 2018). Donald Trump's 'I love the poorly educated' is just one example of this (Gerrard, 2019). But some tabloid newspapers have railed against this negative characterisation of the political landscape. A headline from the British tabloid the *Daily Mail* claimed: 'POPULISM: It's the BBC's new buzzword, being used to sneer at the "uneducated" 17 million who voted for Brexit'.[4] We later read in the same outlet:

> To liberals, the word populist indicates these voters are vulgar, ill-informed and under-educated. It suggests a lumpen mass of people—quite different, of course, from the well-informed and well-heeled commentators and political leaders who feel something has to be done about [the] unsavoury views of the general public.

This article will theoretically examine different discourses of education in contemporary western societies and contextualise the alleged populist turn, with its alternative attitudes to the supposed populist disease and the postulated educational cure. The article will focus on interrogating the present upheaval by examining how the purpose of education has been variously analysed in relation to the discourses of governance, of the university or of revolution, where identifications shift as divided subjects govern or get governed, educate or get educated, resist or get resisted. Lacan's (2007) schemata of the four discourses (governance, education, resistance, analysis) will underpin the ways in which we see language exercising both formative and transformative power, as shifting administrative arrangements open or close specific modes of identification (Brown *et al.*, 2014, 2015). Lacan's notion of the master discourse (governance) underpins Laclau and Mouffe's work on how different forms of common sense emerge in response to administrative arrangements. They suggest, 'Lacanian theory contributes decisive tools to the formulation of a theory of hegemony. Thus, the category of . . . master-signifier involves the notion of a particular element assuming a "universal" structuring function within a certain discursive field' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. xi). By considering how political activity harnesses common-sense notions, the article will ask how emancipatory education is variously understood today.

Populism

In everyday discourse, populism often provokes negative connotations (Bale *et al.*, 2011). In Europe: 'Given the near-exclusive association of populism with far-right, anti-European, economico-politically irresponsible and even extremist movements in the European context, this diagnosis of populism often extends into demonization' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 120). Even in more sophisticated accounts where populism encompasses both right- and left-wing forms, populism is still considered by many as a threat to contemporary modes of governance. For instance, the former EU President Herman van Rompuy defined populism as 'the Greatest danger

for Europe'.[5] More radically, Tony Blair's think tank, the *Institute For Global Change*, seeks to renew the centre against populist politics.[6] In academia, there are multiple and often contradictory understandings of populism (e.g. Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013; Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). These include conceptualisations of populism as an ideology, as a style, a performance, a strategy or organisation, and as a discourse (see Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017 and also, different contributions in this special issue). Multiple debates flourish across these approaches (What is the nature of populism? What is the role of the leader? Is populism only right-wing populism? Is populism a threat for democracy?). For our purposes here, however, we shall utilise the definition of populism as a discursive logic, centred on the emergence of the people as a collective actor (Laclau, 2005). Here, populism is defined as the discursive division of the social and political space into two groups: the people, constructed as the linkage of 'a series of initially heterogeneous unsatisfied demands' and the regime, those 'accused of frustrating the satisfaction of these demands' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 123; see also Laclau, 2005).

The focus of our theoretical examination is on contemporary manifestations of populism and anti-populism in countries often included in both the so-called Global North and Western World. Populist activity, that is activity guided by the discursive logic described above, has been documented since at least the second part of the nineteenth century (Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017) and recent populist leaders include authorities across all continents [e.g. Senegal's former President Abdoulaye Wade (Resnik, 2017); Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Jaffrelot & Tillin, 2017); Bolivia's former President Evo Morales (De La Torre, 2017)]. However, in our definition, the notion of 'the people' does not have a fixed meaning; it functions as an empty signifier that 'take[s] on the colour of [its] surroundings' (Canovan, 2004, p. 242). The notion of 'the people' within populist discourses responds to time and space and is highly susceptible to national nuances (Pollock *et al.*, 2015). Thus, we have decided to limit our analysis primarily to countries in Europe and secondarily to the USA, Canada and Australia.

These contexts have some particularities that need to be acknowledged. First, right-wing populists have been more successful than their left-wing counterparts in these regions, with some exceptions.[7] Our analysis focuses on the role education plays in populist discourses rather than on the way 'the people' or 'the elite' are constructed. Yet, the (particular) populist fantasy we examine is unavoidably tainted with 'right-wing colours' that might not be generalisable to all forms of populism. Second, primarily in Europe, populism is a pejorative term, whether right or left, that feeds a variety of anti-populist discourses. As such, our examination does not offer a framework for examining all forms of populism and anti-populism, but rather a perspective from which to question the very notion of emancipatory education.

In what follows we will theoretically explore how education is discursively constructed by both populist and anti-populist sides. Using Lacanian theory and its later interpretations by Laclau, Žižek, Glynos and Stavrakakis, we will argue that whilst populism is a fantasy of the people in which institutionalised education is perceived as an obstacle, on the anti-populist side education functions as a driver towards epistemological, political and economic wholeness. Whilst drawing on the work of academics, politicians and journalists to illustrate our arguments, we wish to emphasise

that this is a theoretical article in which we construct our arguments deductively. As such, we will not justify here any method or data set. Rather, we will begin by conceptualising emancipation as discussed by Laclau and later use this theoretical lens to examine how both sides construct education.

Conceptualising emancipation

A large survey of the academic literature reviewed a broad range of conceptualisations of education from the point of view of how education is variously aligned with alternative conceptions of democratic ambitions (Sant, 2019). It identified the existence of at least eight emancipatory projects, where each sustains its own distinctive ontological, epistemological and ethical grounds. This plurality—we suggest—underpins the contrary ways in which populist and anti-populist positions appear within educational contexts. Laclau (2007) has similarly argued that the assumptions typically built into the term 'emancipation' do not provide a single political trajectory. He explains how there are two incompatible lines of thought built into the notion: 'one that presupposes the objectivity and full representability of the social, the other whose whole case depends on showing that there is a chasm which makes any social objectivity ultimately impossible' (p. 125).

Emancipation simultaneously means transparency in reaching an ultimate rationality and eliminating power relations. The problem here is that rationality can only be built within these power relations. In his classic text *Knowledge and human interests*, first published in 1968, Habermas (1972) emphasised how '"subjective interests" do not stand outside social totality, they are themselves moments of social totality, formed by active (or passive) participants in social processes' (Žižek, 2020, p. 104). Habermas (1976, p. 348) later spoke of 'systematically distorted communication' within those social processes concealing the 'hidden exercise of force' (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 78). Yet, Althusser, and his student Foucault, rejected Habermas's idea of undistorted communication. For Althusser (1971), the notion of the end of ideology was the biggest ideology of all, whilst Foucault (1997) thought it naïve to suppose that force was a bad thing that needed removal:

> The idea that there could exist a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints seems utopian to me. This is precisely a failure to see that power relations are not something that is bad in itself, that we have to break free of. I do not think a society can live without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others. (p. 298)

Žižek (1989) suggests that the debate between Habermas and Foucault shields a more fundamental distinction between the works of Althusser and Lacan. The core issue, as Žižek sees it, relates to how supposed imperfections in present human practices provide motivations in shaping future practice, but unlike Habermas, Žižek's Lacanian stance does not suppose that these imperfections can be resolved. For Žižek, life as it is actually being lived is always at some distance from the supposed model of how it might be lived, or how we would like or imagine it to be. This failure of fit results in dissatisfactions that are seen as needing to be overcome. This locates, or activates, desire—a desire that can never be fulfilled.

> Lacanian psychoanalytic theory portrays a subject divided between what she is doing and what she says she is doing. This division is located differently for different people, and the type of division determines who you are, who we are, and how power and dis/pleasure function to secure alignment or non-alignment with particular discursive formulations. The individual is constituted according to the composition and mode of their identifications. (Brown *et al.*, 2014, p. 285)

Whilst Habermas had sought to remove the distortions that have arisen in language by supposing that we could get behind these distortions or ideologies to see the truth, for Althusser, in contrast, we always occupy an ideologically derived position. We never have the luxury of speaking from outside an ideology. A particular example that Althusser (1971) offered was the schooling process. He described schools as an instrument within the 'ideological state apparatus', a device through which the preferred ways of the state were disseminated with general consent. For Lacan, truth always evades historically specific constructions of knowledge. In turn, Laclau (2007) resisted the idea that specific forms of rationality are able to provide comprehensive depictions of reality. Thus, no emancipatory project could set itself the task of removing unwanted power, since consensual harmony is not a possibility— differences will always need to be resolved through historico-political processes. Such projects can merely adjust the rationalities that guide our actions, as universal values could be agreed upon. Rather, we exist in a state of persistent adjustment to new circumstances, where rationalities both follow and lead our actions, but where the supposed possibility of alignment between rationalities and actions can never be achieved. These points are further discussed more fully in different educational contexts by Brown *et al.* (2010), Brown and McNamara (2011), Brown (2018) and Brown *et al.* (2019).

Emancipation, however, operates as an illusion in numerous fantasmatic narratives. In the Lacanian framework, fantasies are ideological mechanisms that tell us what and how to desire. We are unavoidably incomplete, fragmented and dissatisfied. Fantasies create a consistent narrative that allows us to explain the reason for our discomfort and the ways in which we can ease such discomfort. In this respect, 'fantasy can be understood as a schema linking the subject to socio-political reality' (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008, p. 262). This happens through what Lacan defines as 'object a'.[8] Object a is an essential part of the fantasy, it is the bit missing that prevents a fantasy from being completed and justifies its failure:

> Object a can be understood here as the remainder produced when that hypothetical unity breaks down, as a last trace of that unity, a last reminder thereof. By cleaving to that rem (a)inder, the split subject, though expulsed from the Other, can sustain the illusion of wholeness; by clinging to object a, the subject is able to ignore his or her division. (Fink, 1995, p. 59)

The notion of emancipation is familiar in multiple fantasmatic narratives, but emancipation is the impossible moment in which object a is finally reached and social wholeness is achieved. Emancipatory education is the mode of education that supposedly leads to this climatic moment. The problem is that, as we have argued, social wholeness is an impossibility, the object a is unreachable and emancipation never happens. It is through this understanding of emancipation as an impossible climatic

moment in the fantasy that we turn to examine what we have named the fantasy of the populist disease and the educational cure, and how this fantasy is treated differently in populist and anti-populist fantasies.

A populist fantasy

Discursive and ideological definitions of populism concede that the essence of populism lies in a discursive understanding of society being divided between a somehow virtuous people and a corrupt elite (e.g. Laclau, 2005; Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017). Following others, we understand that this populist discourse operates as a fantasy narrative (Žižek, 2006; Salter, 2016). The fantasy tells us what to desire. It 'takes the subject beyond his or her nothingness, his or her mere existence as a marker at the level of alienation, and supplies a sense of being' (Fink, 1995, p. 60). The 'people', in the populist discourse, functions as a promise of the wholeness that will temporarily fill the void (Salter, 2016). The term performs a beatific role, promising 'a fullness-to-come once a named or implied object is overcome' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 147). The elite, in contrast, personifies the obstacle that needs to be eliminated for the social to be closed (see also Salter, 2016). If the notion of the people promises wholeness, the elite threatens this wholeness. Emancipation operates as a synonym of liberation or, in Laclau's conceptualisation, at the level of power relations. The people aim to get rid of the powerful and oppressive other:[9]

> 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, p. 555)

Here the populist fantasy keeps the subject at just the 'right distance' (Fink, 1995, p. xii) between the promise of wholeness of 'the people' and the obstacle of 'the elite' and/or the 'other'. Emancipation is the promise of liberation, but as this promise shall never take place, the fantasy can be sustained.

Knowledge is ideological

The role of education in this populist discourse is on the side of the obstacle, where knowledge is ideological *per se*. Facts are selected not because they respond to a criterion of accuracy, but because they are coherent with the fantasy. In other words, facts are utilised to the extent to which they are subsidiary to this populist fantasy and its narrative. That is, they reaffirm 'a dualistic narrative that remains undisputable regardless of actual events' (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 10). We find (at least) two different ways in which this selection takes place. First, Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) once explained:

> "I've felt from day one that being part of the European Union was a very, very, VERY BAD thing for this country. I can't explain it, but I just KNOW I'm right. And I've dedicated myself to it in a way I don't suppose has been wholly rational." (Farage, cited by Kelsey, 2016, p. 978)

In this quote, the promise of wholeness embodied in leaving the European Union (EU) grips the subject like an impulse, a force, that triggered action: 'I'm right. And I've dedicated myself to it'. It does not matter here whether or not this impulse is 'wholly rational'. In other words, facts are selected according to this narrative trajectory (Waisbord, 2018a). The assertion of any form of knowledge may suppress the underlying truth of the statement. For example, the tendency for politicians to assert that they are being 'very clear' is often used to mask their prevarication. Indeed:

> for most populisms (facts are) a phenomenon of affect more than of denotation, or the mere facts—so in that sense as long as you are making the point you want to make, which the people all know (we have to leave the EU, we have to build a wall...), the exact facts, the exact form of mere speech, mere talk, doesn't really matter. (Osborne, 2017, p. 9)

Second, in this populist fantasy, what matters is not only the expected trajectory but also how the beatific object—'the people'—and the obstacle—'the elite' are constructed. What populists mainly question is not knowledge itself, but the authority behind this knowledge. Farage knows that the EU is 'VERY BAD' and, as such, no knowledge coming from the EU will change this perception.

In this populist fantasy, academics are on the side of the elite. Their knowledge is dismissed as 'elitist and therefore illegitimate' (Saurette & Gunster, 2011, p. 199). It is not the accuracy of this knowledge that is questioned, but the sincerity in the presentation of knowledge (Williams, 2002). For instance, in his analysis of a Finnish populist online forum, Ylä-Anttila (2018) quoted the following contribution:

> I mean gender studies' favourite argument is that outsiders cannot have the expertise to comment on the quality of their research. Only those patting the backs of gender studies scholars do. There are scientific disciplines in which that actually applies (as well as specialities of engineering; I don't think there are more than a hundred people in the world who understand the specialty I myself work in), but many 'humanities' have, after being politicised, become totally indefensible. (p. 14)

Academic knowledge, particularly in the humanities, is considered to be simultaneously 'politicised' and sealed to the opinions of the people more generally, with only 'those patting the backs' of scholars being allowed to comment. In this understanding, academic knowledge is not emancipatory. On the contrary, academic knowledge prevents emancipation. It is the oppressive exclusion of alternative views. It blocks those who are deemed not to have 'the expertise to comment on the quality of their research' (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 14). That is, it is a 'university' veneer of a 'masterized' discourse (Lacan, 2007, p. 103).

Education as an apparatus of 'the elite'

If academic knowledge and research become politicised, then educational activity performs the role of ideological apparatus in distributing elite knowledge. For instance, in 2017 the *Daily Mail* began a campaign to fight against 'Anti-Brexit Bias' at universities.[10] Since academia and its knowledge was seen as being generated by elites, populists could appeal to the 'poorly educated' since they are more amenable to resisting the elite's control, preferring educational practices that escape the control of the academic elite.

In this populist fantasy, institutionalised education prevents emancipation in two different ways identified by Laclau. As mentioned, institutionalised education prevents liberation. What it does instead is reproduce and guarantee existing power relations, defining who has the right knowledge and who does not. Such education defines the cleavage between those who know and those who do not. It also prevents emancipation as transparency and socialises people into understanding the world in a particular way.

However, the fantasy insists that educational practices can escape the control of the academic elite. First, they favour the everyday knowledge of the common people. Populists argue that the people's inherent knowledge is virtuous, since it is proximate to everyday life in opposition to the academic knowledge which is alienated from common sense (Saurette & Gunster, 2011). For instance, the leader of the Australian One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson, once argued:

> Anyone with business sense knows that you do not sell off your assets especially when they are making money. I may be only 'a fish and chip shop lady', but some of these economists need to get their heads out of the textbooks and get a job in the real world. I would not even let one of them handle my grocery shopping. (Hanson, cited in Rapley, 1998, p. 333)

Second, populists argue against the adoption of mainstream apparatuses, for example Trump's discrediting of fake news in his Twitter feeds: 'Don't believe the main stream (fake news) media. The White House is running VERY WELL. I inherited a MESS and am in the process of fixing it.(@realDonaldTrump, February 18, 2017)' (cited in Kreis, 2017). In one way or another, the populist fantasy seeks for education outside institutions that can deliver the emancipatory promise.

The anti-populist fantasy

Anti-populism also works according to a fantasmatic narrative that is constitutive of social reality. Here, the term populism is often accompanied by disqualifying or pejorative terms, where populist leaders are accused of being 'liars'[11] and 'hypocrites'.[12] Those supporting populism are seen as being ignorant or uneducated. This criticism is applied to populists from both right and left. For instance, Jeremy Corbyn was accused of feeding 'the nasty populism of the left', and of having 'armies of angry footsoldiers and stocks of alternative truths to rail against the "fake" news of 'the elites'.[13] Thus:

> in the anti-populist discourse, 'populism' functions like . . . an empty signifier, but this time a negatively charged one: as a discursive vessel capable of comprising an excess of heterogeneous meanings, operating as the synecdoche of an omnipresent evil and associated with irresponsibility, demagogy, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism. (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017, p. 30)

The fantasmatic logic of the anti-populist discourse has its own promise of wholeness, centred in progress and modernisation (Stavrakakis, 2018). Hence, '[c]ontrary to Francis Fukuyama's prediction of the end of history, there is an increasing sense that history is speeding up and taking the wrong turn' (Terentowicz-Fotyga, 2019, p. 269). Here, populists are seen as a threat to the achievement of closure with their

assertions of alternative facts, which are more concerned with the consequences of globalisation and the omnipresence of liberal democracy. That is, 'populists challenge the ideas of a universal project to advance freedom, equality, and human rights, to globalization, and, by implication, to universal public education' (Reimers, 2017, p. 20).

If, in the populist discourse, education is part of the obstacle of the fantasy preventing emancipation, then in the anti-populist discourse education is expected to deliver the promise of wholeness. That is, education is seen as inherently emancipatory, drawing the pathway to fulfilling our desire. We see three different ways in which, in the anti-populist discourse, education is charged with the task of fulfilling wholeness and closure: (a) education provides students with the knowledge and cognitive skill to uncover the populist rhetoric (epistemological wholeness); (b) education provides the low-skilled with the knowledge and skills they need to avoid being left behind by the forces of globalisation (economic wholeness); (c) education contributes to political cohesion (political wholeness). We shall now examine each of these in turn.

Epistemological cohesion

In the anti-populist discourse, populists are seen variously as promoting distorted knowledge, failing to think critically, or letting their emotions shield the evidence. For instance, in 2018 the European Commission celebrated a seminar entitled 'Facts against fears: how to address populism?'[14] Meanwhile, a newspaper opinion piece claimed: 'Facts can still defeat populist ignorance—liberals should not give up on them'.[15] This discursive tendency often appears within educational literature. For instance, Corredor *et al*. (2018) argue:

> Preventing evil (e.g. human right violations and war crimes) depends not only on individual elements but also on a complex understanding of social-structural factors and historical dynamics. Without this understanding, good intentions can turn into dangerous political decisions. For example, the idea of voting against the establishment to 'bring a change' can lead people to support authoritarian or populist leaders. (p. 172)

This appeal to neutral knowledge in the shape of facts, evidence and reason is an essential part of the anti-populist fantasy. Knowledge and truth are constituted in relation to the accuracy of facts, the systematic use of scientific method, and the consensual correspondence between assertions and reality. Such an approach promises an epistemological wholeness reminiscent of an 'enlightenment', where science and reason underpin a modern, prosperous and ordered society (Waisbord, 2018b). Kant's 'ultimate destination' signals the transparent realisation of reason in the moment of pure (transparent) emancipation. His account of reason, with education performing a mediating role, has strongly influenced how education is conceptualised (Biesta, 2006).

Populists represent a challenge to this epistemological wholeness but steer clear of poststructuralist, postmodernist or posthumanist understandings of truth, whilst believing in the simultaneous existence of different regimes of truth and the unavoidably ideological nature of knowledge (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). In so doing, they 'offer a watered-down cocktail of Marx and Foucault—knowledge is ideological and

historical, it is embedded in social and power relations, and facts are mere cogs in epistemic systems' (Waisbord, 2018a, p. 10). They are sceptical to the possibility of a neutral or consensual access to reality.

The role of education is crucial to struggle against populism. Education is often portrayed as a way of fostering evidence-based knowledge, critical thinking and reason that might challenge the populist discourse. Thus, if populism is the obstacle to epistemological unity, education is discursively constructed as the tool to overcome this obstacle. For instance, the former chief of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland, Tom Boland, wrote in 2016:

> We need the capacity for critical thought and analysis, and we need academics committed to questioning and testing received wisdom, putting forward new ideas and stating controversial and unpopular opinions, and we need government and the institutions to work constructively, mutually to support our democratic society. Populism contains a special threat to all of that. But 'isms' that would destroy the values, rights and freedoms of Western democracy have been defeated before. Higher education must be at the forefront of the struggle.[16]

Here, higher education is at the 'forefront of the struggle' against populism, as it fosters 'critical thought and analysis'. Populism represents a threat to this epistemological claim and needs to be 'defeated' along with the other 'isms'. Education will, therefore, emancipate us from the obstacle of irrational populism. It 'signal[s] the freedom an abstract individual gains by gaining access to Western reason' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 51).

Emancipatory education, however, also signals the contradictory nature of emancipation itself. Freedom is paradoxically achieved through 'the insertion of newcomers into the preexisting order of modern [Western] reason' (Biesta, 2006, p. 7). In search of epistemological wholeness, transparency is privileged over liberation and existing power relations prevail. Knowledge based on rationality reproduces a cognitive hierarchy that nurtures existing cultural, political, social and economic structures of domination (Odora Hoppers, 2009). Mentions of 'irrationality' or 'ignorance' hint at lesser ways of thinking, experiencing and being. As many have argued, higher education is often not at the forefront of the struggle for liberation, but rather the institutionalised tail end of the modern fantasy (Santos, 2018). In Lacan's schemata, education epistemologically supports rather than resists governance, as in Althusser's notion of state apparatus.

Economic cohesion

In the anti-populist fantasy, populists represent an obstacle to the full functioning of the modern economy. The fantasy relies on a 'losers of globalization' theory (Kriesi, 2014) to explain the pathological character of populism (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2017). The logic here is that populists are those who have not been able to keep up to date with the skills and knowledge that modern society requires (Kriesi, 2014). For example, BBC news reported on an interview with Tony Blair at the Global Education and Skills Forum. The report explained:

> The former prime minister declined to be drawn on questions about US presidential candidate Donald Trump or the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. 'When I look at politics today, I am not terribly sure that I quite understand it.' But he warned of a culture of political 'populism' which was tapping into a mood of resentment. 'There's a lot of anger about.' He said this was playing out in the debate around migration, which he said tapped into people's concerns that 'incomes are stagnating and they aren't really getting anywhere in life'. He said the answer was not to 'blame migrants' but to 'get the education and skills' that could lead to better jobs and opportunities.[17]

In our analysis, education again performs a fix to mend the populist obstacle. The phenomenon of populism is not only aligned with incorrect knowledge, but also a consequence of the distortions that may have arisen from the life conditions of those supporting populism. Thus, if the obstacle to the fantasy of economic cohesion is the life experiences in economic terms of the populist sympathisers, the solution must be in education and skills that lead to better jobs and opportunities. Education will emancipate the losers of globalisation from the conditions that drove them to support populist discourses in the first term. Education will therefore liberate us from oppressive economic power relations.

Nevertheless, there are three essential flaws in the fantasmatic logic underlying this narrative. First, an epistemological flaw is evident in the assumption of a transparent reality in which certain structural conditions ('incomes are stagnating') necessarily lead to certain ideological perspectives ('blame migrants'). But such assumptions can readily be challenged. Empirical research in our contexts suggests that support for populism is primarily dependent on education, age, gender and ethnicity, but it is highly debatable whether or not economic deprivation is correlated with populism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). A direct connection is not always drawn between those who are considered to be economically deprived in the statistics of social scientists and those who affirm that they feel such deprivation (Teney *et al.*, 2014). Structural conditions are multi-faceted. Those whose 'incomes are stagnating' might already have the 'education and skills' and yet not 'have better jobs and opportunities' (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Power relations are also multi-faceted. Those whose 'incomes are stagnating' might be migrants themselves and therefore not 'blame migrants'. Whilst criticising the nativism embedded within far-right populist discourses—'the answer is not to "blame migrants"'—the discourse of economic wholeness draws upon a racialisation (Bhambra, 2017) of the working class that in itself challenges the promise of emancipation from power relations.

Second, there is an economic flaw. Both populists and anti-populists are inscribed in a capitalist society in which wealth is always created at the expense of some. In other words, the system itself is grounded in the principle of having winners and losers, kept updated or left behind (Dean, 2008). The promise of economic wholeness implicit in Blair's account could only be achieved within certain limits, such as national borders, at the expense of everyone elsewhere. In other words, only insofar as some form of colonialism rules in which the metropolis 'wins' at the expense of the colony; a logic that seems incompatible with other aspects of this anti-populist rhetoric.

Third, there is an educational flaw, since education systems embedded within capitalism operate as a supposed meritocratic system. The penetration of human capital theory in education ignores the positional, rather than purely substantive, nature of

educational qualifications (Clarke, 2012). Further, education underpins processes of selection:

> raising the general level of education is not a catch-all solution to fill the gap between the less and the well-educated in political engagement. First of all, there is the risk of educational inflation. Education, by its very nature, is meritocratic. The gap between the well-educated and the less well-educated may very well remain, but at a higher level. The well-educated may start to acquire extra qualifications, beyond college, such as graduate degrees and international diplomas. (Bovens & Wille, 2017, p. 168)

Thus, even if the 'lower educated' could gain 'the education and skills', they would still remain 'lower' educated than their counterparts and still be 'losers' in this process. Education is not capable of emancipating us from economic power relations, because economic inequality is inherent to the capitalist system education and because education itself operates as an ideological apparatus of this system—a justification to economic inequality.

Political cohesion

In the anti-populist discourse, populists also operate as an obstacle to political wholeness as a result of occupying extreme positions. For instance, in reference to 'growing populism', the former Finnish Prime Minister, Mari Kiviniemi, recently explained in an interview:

> Politics have become much more turbulent than it used to be, which makes it more difficult to reach political decisions. Finland used to always have two major parties which could agree on which direction to head in. It meant stable governments, and this is no longer the case.[18]

Similarly, when *TIME* magazine asked European Commission President Barroso 'What concerns you most about Europe today?', his answer was articulated along the same lines: 'Probably the rise of some populist movements at the extremes of the political spectrum' (Stavrakakis, 2014). The populist discourse thus represents an obstacle preventing political wholeness.

The anti-populist discourse relies on deliberative understandings of democracy. In brief, in (ideal) deliberative democracy, participants commit themselves to the values of impartiality and rationality to seek the best consensual collective outcome (Sant, 2019). They commit themselves to Habermas's (1976) ideal speech situation. The logic here is double. First, the process of deliberation is assumed to be inherently inclusive. Regulated communication processes (free, open and symmetrical) can create the conditions for fair and inclusive public decisions (Habermas, 1976). Populists very often represent a challenge to these regulated communication processes as they view communication 'primarily as the individualized right to express oneself rather than a collective opportunity to deliberate that involves both listening and speaking' (Saurette & Gunster, 2011, p. 214). Second, consensus is to be found somewhere in the centre (Mouffe, 1998). The 'radical centre', or third way, as Giddens (1998, p. 46) explains, 'can only mean compromise, the "middle" between two more clear-cut alternatives'. Thus, political closure needs to guarantee the concentration of the 'extremes' into this 'middle', one in which, through a process of intersubjective

rationality, collective reasons are agreed. By placing themselves at the extremes and by committing themselves to conflict rather than to consensus, populists represent an obstacle that anti-populists need to overcome to achieve the closure of politics.

Education here is expected to operate as the 'glue that binds us together'[19] in this centre. For instance, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova argued that education should offer a way of ensuring that young people are better included to counter populism.[20] When addressing the Council of EU Education and Culture Ministers, the former Spanish Secretary of Education, Iñigo Méndez de Vigo, identified terrorism, populism and nationalism as the three challenges faced by Europe. He further argued; 'These could fracture Europe if we fail to invest in education and in the fundamental values of social harmony and democracy'.[21] By investing in the education of values such as 'inclusion', 'social harmony' and 'democracy', Bokova and Méndez de Vigo sought to challenge the extremism and the 'rupture' that populists 'bring into' the political arena.

The narrative of political cohesion appears to point to an earlier moment of political cohesion, before populism suddenly appeared and threatened to fracture European harmony and its supposed democratic politics of compromise. Education here signals a return to this idyllic past. But of course democracy is itself a fantasy, however it is constructed as a master signifier. We know such harmonic, inclusive and democratic society never existed in the first place, not even when the advocates of the radical centre were in power (e.g. Ahmed, 2004). Then, the deficit—the 'intruder who corrupts' (Žižek, 2006, p. 555)—was to be found in the immigrant 'other' who would not integrate (Wetherell, 2008). Now, the intruder who corrupts is also the populist who performs an essential part of the anti-populist fantasmatic narrative. The populist provides a justification for why political cohesion has not yet been achieved. Only insofar as populists could be eliminated (or educated into the politics of compromise) could the social be closed.

Conclusions

For the populist turn and its supposed educational cure, we need to inspect both turn and cure as two sides of an ideological coin in which people and elite are depicted as adversaries. For Laclau, it would be mistaken to suppose that either party could be shown to be correct. That is, for the people, the situation would not be better if the elite were removed. And for the elite, the populist turn would not be eradicated if the ignorant were to be educated more effectively. Instead, both sides operate through fantasmatic narratives.

The role of education in the anti-populist fantasy is essential, but we cannot agree to it being a panacea since it appeals to an impossible neutrality. Education, in this view, is considered to be inherently emancipatory, a universalising/socialising machine of liberalist and capitalist principles. It signals the route to the ultimate rationality and liberation reached at the end of power relations. But this view does not acknowledge its own ideological nature. Whilst arguing for open-mindedness, critical thinking and openness, the anti-populist discourse gets itself trapped in a narrow understanding of these principles, specifically, a modernist form of education that does not allow other forms of thinking, experiencing or conceptualising the nature of

human beings (Biesta, 2006). In its alleged route to transparency, 'emancipatory' education creates new power relations and a fantasy of a meritocratic system, in which everyone can succeed and where no one will be left behind. But the nature of the system is intrinsically against this principle. One's educational attainment itself becomes the cleavage to justify inequalities. Further, the anti-populist education entails a de-politicisation of politics where the third way is constructed as inherently good.

Simultaneously, it is a paradox that this populist fantasy, with all of its obvious flaws, has highlighted some of the impossibilities of education identified by postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophers. Populism functions as the drunken guest in a polite party, who blurts out painful truths (Arditi, 2007). This populist discourse has seemingly understood the contingent nature of knowledge and how education can simultaneously operate in terms of socialisation and emancipation. Accordingly, emancipation can only happen if education happens outside of educational institutions, since, echoing libertarian traditions of education (e.g. Haworth, 2012), institutions are compromised by their role as ideological state apparatus.

The populist fantasy, however, is also victim of its own inconsistencies. Beyond the numerous and dangerous problematics associated with right-wing populism, populist fantasies fail to recognise the impossibility of escaping the ideological constraints either within or outside institutionalised forms of education. Formal (state) education comprises a piece of state ideological apparatus. In Lacanian terms, the university discourse is in the service of the master and it is the task of the analyst to interrogate the compliance of the university (Brown, 2018). And we may indeed interrogate a UK university system steeped in market logic, trying to sell its wares as being useful in the capitalist marketplace. The logic of the anti-populist is that critical thinking and knowledge will defeat ideology. But populism seeks to appeal more directly to those who are troubled by the university's apparent complicity in the rule of the status quo, with the experts merely endorsing the master's will and directly benefitting from it.

Emancipatory education cannot liberate us from power relations, since its own rationality relies on its own assertions of power in the marketplace. Emancipatory education necessarily ties knowledge and authority altogether. Knowledge and human interest, indeed. In Lacanian terms, the master discourse, the operational language of governance, is being processed by the university discourse for public delivery through education or the press (Brown *et al.*, 2014). Lacan explains that a comment 'is admissible only insofar as you already participate in a certain structured discourse' (Lacan, 2007, p. 37), but part of the commentator's self is left out in this encounter, a gap, marking the divide and producing a split subject. This contradiction is also true for the writing of this present article. We, as authors of this article, might well seek an analytic position and yet still participate in competing fantasies. As with any article, we seek to orientate the field of enquiry according to our own preferences. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. 112) put it: 'Any discourse is created in an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre'. In seeking to escape the structures of existing governance, we unavoidably propose alternative governmental arrangements. Time metaphors abound in the hegemony of educational discourses seeking 'improvement' or 'progress', towards 'greater effectiveness' or even the dizzy heights 'outstanding status' or 'world leading', thereby sublimely producing standardised modern notions of change, orientation and a

correct way forward. But the reflexivity of life can result in us celebrating and protecting our current diversity, rather than nurturing futures that might not allow the new to happen. Emancipation, for us, is about enabling a critique of the discursive platitudes that have locked our resolutions into overly familiar pathways.

This leaves us with the question of what we would want emancipation to bring about. How might we conceptualise future paths in education? What would we want them to achieve? Žižek argues that the now elderly Habermas still prefers routes that set their sights on consensual happy endings, but for Žižek (2019, p. 4), it is only in thinking 'dangerously' that we can 'question the presuppositions of human freedom and dignity'. Laclau (2007) similarly argues in favour of 'emancipations', where

> the abandonment of the aspiration to 'absolute' knowledge has exhilarating effects: on the one hand, human beings can recognize themselves as the true creators and no longer as the passive recipients of a predetermined structure; on the other hand, all social agents have to recognize their concrete finitude, nobody can aspire to be the true consciousness of the world. (p. 16)

We will fail again but may learn to fail better, or more likely differently.

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Ethical guidelines

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

NOTES

[1] https://www.ft.com/content/bfb5f3d4-379d-11e6-a780-b48ed7b6126f
[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/opinion/japan-where-populism-fails.html
[3] https://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2018/12/15/5c13df2cfc6c83466b8b4579.html
[4] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4011874/POPULISM-s-BBC-s-new-buzzword-used-sneer-uneducated-17-million-voted-Brexit.html
[5] https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/populism-in-europe-primer
[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/opinion/tony-blair-against-populism-the-center-must-hold.html?_r=0
[7] For example, the Spanish party *Podemos* and Greek coalition *Syriza*.
[8] We agree with Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008) that this is not the whole story. In Lacan, the link between the subject and the social reality takes place through the promise of fullness and through the enjoyment of the body (*jouissance*). However, we will limit here our analysis to the former.

9   In far-right forms of populism, as some of those encountered in our context of examination, this populist logic is often articulated with nativism or xenophobia, with the people being simultaneously constructed against the elite and the immigrant 'other'. We will not discuss this here, as it is not the focus of our examination, but we certainly acknowledge the ethical implications of such ideological constructions (see e.g. Nicolson *et al.*, 2016; Herkman, 2017).

10   https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5018251/Remainer-universities-Anti-Brexit-bias-laid-bare.html

11   https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/25/boris-johnson-michael-gove-eu-liars

12   https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/11/its-not-xenophobia-that-links-new-populists-its-hypocrisy/?utm_term=.4a3333334cd4

13   https://www.ft.com/content/eda6fc12-b0fd-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132

14   https://ec.europa.eu/sweden/events/20180605_sv

15   https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/populism-facts-liberalism-social-media-filter-bubble-a7637641.html

16   http://www.universitytimes.ie/2016/12/the-threat-of-populism-to-higher-education/

17   https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35779235

18   http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org/artikler/portrett/portrait-2018/article.2018-06-19.5972086007

19   https://institute.global/integration

20   https://www.educationandskillsforum.org/news-blogs/is-the-rise-of-populism-the-result-of-a-failure-of-education/

21   http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/Paginas/2017/20171121_educationvalues.aspx

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