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People, class, democracy: re-mapping left populism from populist social democracy to popular socialism

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on the insights of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall to introduce the 'critical-relational' approach to the analysis of left-wing ideologies that have been defined as populist. In doing so, we identify four distinctive ideologies: 'populist social democracy', 'populist socialism', 'popular social democracy' and 'popular socialism'. Two key contributions are made. First, the 'relational' aspect of this conceptualization establishes clear distinctions between ideologies that appeal to the 'people' either to: (i) democratically empower ('popular') or disempower ('populist') disenfranchised groups; and/or (ii) disrupt economic class relations ('socialist') or redistribute them without transforming them ('social democratic'). These distinctions, we contend, shed light on important differences between left-wing ideologies that are often conflated in the literature on left populism. Second, the 'critical' aspect of our interpretation aims to reveal how discourses of the 'people' are mobilized within left-wing ideologies to either reproduce or contest economic and political structures of power. Overall, this provides grounding for a more precise empirical analysis of the diverse ideologies that characterize the political left.

Introduction

It has become common for scholars of left-wing parties, leaders and movements to define them as populist. In the authoritative accounts of contemporary left parties in Europe none other than Syriza, Podemos, La France Insoumise, Die Linke, Slovenia's Left Party, the Dutch Socialist Party and Sinn Fein are labeled as populist.[1] A survey of the literature on parties and leaders outside of mainland Europe reveals the same trends: Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn and their supporters[2]; Hugo Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement and Evo Morales' Movement for Socialism (alongside many other Latin American parties)[3]; and the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa have all been named as populist.[4]

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

While scholars conceptualizing and assessing these cases come from a variety of theoretical and methodological traditions, this article focuses on the 'left populist' scholarship based around the 'discourse school' of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In a nutshell, this approach posits that populist appeals to a 'people' vs. an 'elite' is a key discursive device to connect plural and unmet popular demands into a common frontier of antagonism against a power bloc.[5] Relatedly, this approach theorizes left populism as the desirable mode of transformative politics - populist discourse connects different instances of contestation (i.e. feminist and environmentalist movements) into collective and radically democratic frontiers capable of challenging neoliberal and authoritarian power.[6]

This scholarship sheds light on recent strategic shifts that have taken place among left-wing parties and leaders.[7] However, we argue that by adopting populism as the common trait of left-wing politics, left populist literature overlooks salient differences between ideologies on the left. Therefore, drawing on the insights of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, this article develops an alternative theorization and classification of how left-wing ideologies conceptualize the people in relation to class and democratic politics, which we define as the 'critical-relational' approach. This approach is 'critical' because it reveals how ideologies intervene in either the reproduction or contestation of political and economic structures of power.[8] It is 'relational' because it considers ideology to be a crucial cog between the organization of clusters of concepts and the organization of collective political and economic relations. By considering how ideologies reproduce or contest political and economic structures of power, this approach aims to distinguish between left-wing ideologies that have been defined as left populist.

The first section develops our critique of left populism. First, discourse theorists do not provide a systematic basis to assess whether and under which conditions the 'populist' attribute of left-wing ideologies works alongside or against class-based contestation. Second, discourse scholars acknowledge that for left populism to emerge a leadership articulating popular demands into a populist bloc is necessary, but they come short theorizing how different modes of leadership shape populist articulations. Indeed, it may be the case that leadership exercises power *over* the people, therefore undermining radical democracy, whereas in other instances leadership exercises the innate power *of* the people, resulting in the democratic empowerment of politically disenfranchised groups.

The second section makes two distinctions not sufficiently considered in the left populist literature, which form the basis of the critical-relational approach to ideology. First, we differentiate between *popular* and *populist* ideologies. On the one hand, *popular* left-wing ideologies construct and mobilize the 'people' with the intention of activating processes of democratic empowerment against enclosed elites. On the other hand, *populist* left-wing ideologies construct and mobilize the people from the top-down to insulate left-wing elites from opposing elite fractions and/or the democratic empowerment of the people. Second, we elevate the distinction between *socialist* and *social democratic* ideologies to emphasize fundamental differences in how appeals to the people aim to distribute economic power. Indeed, we consider the popular/populist dimension as an ideological attribute, a prefix, of the core social democratic and socialist worldviews which characterize left-wing actors.[9]

The third section applies the critical-relational approach to re-map ideologies defined as left populist. Four ideologies are identified: 'populist social democracy', 'populist socialism', 'popular social democracy' and 'popular socialism'. By unpacking how and why appeals to the 'people' have been mobilized in ideologies through empirical examples, the paper establishes a more precise definition of left-wing ideologies conflated under the left populist label. Finally, in the discussion section, we specify the theoretical contribution of this paper and sketch out the contours of a research agenda for assessing the different ideologies on empirical grounds.

The left populist school

Contrary to the main tradition of populist studies, the ideational school,[10] discourse theorists reject the 'ethical' assertion that populism necessarily renders the people the uniform site of 'good' politics against the 'bad' elites.[11] Rather, the 'discursive' approach defines populism as a 'logic of articulation' which has three main steps:

> (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating 'the people' from 'power';
> (2) the creation of links among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by an unresponsive 'elite' (chains of equivalence); and (3) the representation of 'the people' of populism as marginalized and underprivileged plebs that claims to be the legitimate community of the people, the democratic sovereign.[12]

Through these three main steps, left populists aim to mobilize essentially plural demands into a (necessarily unstable and temporal) coalition.[13] 'Empty signifiers' (often something to do with 'democracy') act as a nodal point to link disparate demands in what is termed an 'equivalential chain',[14] establishing the connective tissue for the discursive construction of a unified 'people' together in opposition against a 'common adversary'.

The problem of class

Laclau and Mouffe's[15] initial work was explicitly positioned against the 'economic reductionism' of classical Marxist thought. Conventional class-based socialist mobilizations, in following the logic of classical Marxism, inadvertently close the space of possibility for collective progressive change:

> What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital 'r', as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that renders pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political imaginary.[16]

Based on this political and theoretical intervention, they call for the notion of 'radical democracy' to replace socialism as the central signifier for radical left politics. Democracy, unlike socialism, is the most salient signifier for uniting fundamentally heterogeneous groups in the struggle against inequality and subordination. The socialist dimension, according to this theory, should form only '*one* of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa'.[17] Class struggle must be relegated from its privileged position to

sit alongside the multiplicity of democratic struggles that emerged during the 1960s: feminism, civil rights, and more recently, environmentalism.[18]

Laclau and Mouffe's later work emphasizes the synergy between movements for radical democracy and left populism: Populist discourse translates the sporadic and pluralistic impulses of democratic movements into collective blocs capable of changing social relations by demarcating a 'united' people in opposition to an 'oligarchy'.[19] Indeed, scholars in this tradition have highlighted how parties such as Podemos, Syriza and even the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn have deployed a populist discourse to translate the anti-austerity movement into a more comprehensive electoral force.[20] According to these scholars, the success of these parties cannot be put down to the 'the traditional left conception of the capital/labour cleavage', which 'no longer produces much political effect'.[21] Instead, the conventional class-based demands of socialism have become increasingly peripheral to a radically democratic struggle that unites multiple plural demands into a collective frontier.[22]

Our first main critique of the discourse school is that it tends to reduce disparate forms of left-wing politics to populism. In Laclau's later work,[23] populism is often synonymous with politics rather than one form of political logic among many,[24] a conceptual ambiguity that leads many scholars to overstate the salience of a populist discourse and downplay lines of difference between cases. What *precisely* are the differences among diverse left-populism's if they all follow Laclau's three main steps?

Additionally, whilst this tradition convincingly conceptualizes 'the people' as a signifier whose concrete meanings depend on the relations with other core concepts, dismissing the materialist foundations of ideologies in societal relations is particularly troublesome.[25] Indeed, as put by Joseph, if 'people have an interest IN something' beyond their subjective wants or desires – their interests 'must correspond to something real'.[26] As a result, economic reductionism is replaced with a form of cultural reductionism that collapses all praxis into populism and concomitantly into discourse, effectively turning politics into a game over who wins over language.[27]

This leads to two main challenges. First, the absence of a conception of the 'real' beyond discourse makes it difficult to disentangle the complex interplays between the 'people' and economic classes in different cases. It is not a stretch to consider a scenario in which the 'people' are mobilized by progressive actors to call for the redistribution of some economic wealth without a fundamental transformation in class relations, and a contrasting scenario in which the 'people' are activated to transform class relations by revealing the source of economic power.[28] For example, there is significant evidence that some left leaders and their supporters, including Jeremy Corbyn and Nichi Vendola, have attempted to utilize a discourse of the 'people' to elevate a class-based challenge to economic power, whereas others, such as Pablo Iglesias, have used appeals to the people to relegate class politics.[29]

Second, while the discourse school provides fruitful insights to understand specific moments of discursive constructions, it struggles to explain why populist articulations tend to be transient, whereas ideologies that have a clear view of how economic production should be organized are much more durable. In that regard, the longstanding nature of socialism and social democracy, whose differences can be muddied by the left populist literature, illustrates the fundamental linkage between economic organization and the politicization of a 'people'.[30] By exploring how appeals to a 'people' can be made in

tandem with 'class', the critical-relational approach establishes a basis to discern how ideologies appealing to the people intersect with class-based politics.

The problem of democracy

The relations between populism and democracy are far from unequivocal and have led populist scholarship to conceptualize and analyze how different types of populism affect (liberal) democracy. Notably, Cas Mudde and Cristòbal Kaltwasser[31] have described a distinction between 'inclusionary' and 'exclusionary' populism, in which a 'political' dimension considers what groups are encouraged to participate in the democratic system or prevented from doing so. Parties on the left, such as the Bolivian MAS party, Venezuela's PSUV party and Podemos are generally equated with inclusionary populism, whereas right-wing parties are equated with exclusionary populism.[32]

Theorists in the discourse school avoid these sub-classifications because, as previously discussed, populism is seen as a general articulatory device for alternative politics, which can result (mostly) in left or right populism. While the common trait of populism across the political spectrum is articulating discourses to unite the people around answers to unmet social demands, it is, however, left populism which represents the mode of advancement of a radical democracy. The combination of these theories may render the relations between left populism and democracy relatively straightforward: left populism is inclusionary because its discourse engages otherwise unheard popular voices into a radical democratic politics, which, therefore, would positively democratize democracies.[33] And yet, there are two further questions which we believe are not answered satisfactorily: First, how does the left-populist radical democracy relate to existing liberal democratic regimes? Second, how are the people of left populism concretely empowered as a radically democratic subject?

It is our view that Laclau and Mouffe's answer to the first question throws open more problems than answers.[34] In Laclau's theorization, the discursive connection through equivalence turns democratic demands into popular demands. In other words, it, unites demands of previously disparate groups that, if left alone, are typically co-opted by the 'institutionalist' powers of liberal democracy.[35] However, whilst this view fairly draws attention to the inherent tension between radically democratic populist demands and liberal democracy, elsewhere Laclau and Mouffe stress the pivotal nature of liberal democracy in the pursuit of hegemony: 'the task of the Left [. . .] cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy'.[36]

This view should be seen within the context of its first elaboration in the 1980s, whereby they sought to provide an intellectual ground for Eurocommunism as a third way against the 'real' socialism of the Soviet bloc and the horizontal and prefigurative politics of emergent protest movements.[37] Nonetheless, the tension in the relationship between populism and liberal democracy has become compounded by recent interventions made in the discourse school. In particular, Chantal Mouffe has argued that populism today is a reaction to a new 'post-democratic'[38] phase of liberal democracy with reduced possibilities for the inclusion of disenfranchised masses.[39] In response to the emergence of this qualitatively new phase Mouffe amplifies her calls for left populism[40] without updating the theory to address the democratic deficit she now

identifies, and even more problematically, the question of *how* the transition can be made from within an even more authoritarian polyarchy to a radical and plural democracy. As a result, the theorization provides little ground to distinguish how different left populist assemblages seek to gradually shift the institutions of neoliberal polyarchies toward more radical forms of democracy.

The second problem on the relations between the people and democracy in left populist theories concerns the issue of *who* articulates the people through discourses and *how* they do it. Laclau proposes that for the people to be constructed, the frustrated masses must recognize some element of symbolic unity carried out by leaders who 'incarnate a process of popular identification that constructs "the people" as a collective actor to confront the existing regime'.[41] What remains under-theorized, however, is how different modes of leadership constitute the people into a collective subject aiming to radically democratize democracy *or* passive objects that generate consent for an elite dictated project.[42] As brilliantly put by Arditi, this lack of specification of the attributes of leadership is deeply problematic:

> Laclau sidesteps the question by focusing on the way in which politics-as-populism fosters cohesion through individuality. This prevents him from engaging with those [...] who see in the populist mode of unification unedifying traits such as the infallibility of the leader [...], the suppression of dissent in the name of the unity of the 'people,' and so on. This undermines the presumed populist empowerment of the underdogs or produces a travesty of empowerment by subjecting the 'people' to the dictates of a leader.[43]

This critique may overlook the possibility for 'alternative' and 'more collective' leadership which movement politics has been cultivating.[44] Nonetheless, Arditi captures a key tension in Laclau's theory: whether the construction of the people is consistent with radical democratic imaginaries or not is strongly dependent on whether the leaders make the people a fully democratic subject, or instead relegate them to yet another object for individual leaders to cultivate their individual power. Unpacking this divide further, we argue, can explain key differences in how the people are mobilized in relation to democracy in discrete left-wing ideologies.

Beyond left populism: A critical-relational approach to the people in left-wing ideologies

Building on these critiques, this section proposes a critical and relational conception of ideology which aims to unpack how appeals to the people intersect with economic ('class') and political ('democratic') relations in left-wing ideologies. The approach explicitly draws on Gramscian theory, which we believe provides the grounds for a fruitful dialogue between distinct approaches seeking to uncover the evolutions and possibilities of left-wing politics.

It is well known that Laclau and Mouffe base their theory of left populism on an extension of Gramsci's theory of hegemony.[45] For Gramsci, hegemony is key for understanding how consent to certain modes of production is secured through the praxes of 'intellectuals' in the multiplicitous spaces of the social – such as the political, cultural and the religious – who cultivate ties between social classes and, in doing so, establish hegemonic historic blocs. However, these groups can only become hegemonic if they

organically represent and elevate political leaders in either the ruling or the subaltern classes.

Laclau and Mouffe praise Gramsci for taking the concept of hegemony beyond the economic reductionism of classical Marxism, but criticize him for failing to fully grasp the radically open and contingent potential of his own thinking because of the importance he places on 'real' economic classes:

> Thus, Gramsci's thought appears suspended around a basic ambiguity concerning the status of the working class which finally leads it to a contradictory position. On the one hand, the political centrality of the working class has a historical, contingent character: it requires the class to come out of itself, to transform its own identity by articulating it to a plurality of struggles and democratic demands. On the other hand, it would seem this articulatory role is assigned to it by the economic base – hence, that the centrality has a necessary character'.[46]

Alternatively, the critical-relational approach calls for a return to Gramsci in order to understand how ideologies shape the nexus between ideas and material practices of left-wing politics. This is done in two key ways. First, we draw on Stuart Hall[47] to distinguish between *populism*, which constructs a passive 'people' from the top-down to protect elite fractions from opposition, and *popular* ideologies, which construct an active 'people' to democratize political relations. This distinction goes beyond left populist literature in clarifying the role that different modes of leadership can play in articulations of the people. Leaders can appeal to the people to generate consent for the exercise of power *over* the people (populism), or they can seek to harness the innate power *of* the people to democratically empower the disenfranchised masses (popular).

Second, and crucial for our line of argument, we agree with Gramsci that ideologies are (potentially) an organizing instrument for material economic relations. Like the ideational school, this perspective understands that ideologies are 'mental frameworks' held by individuals and social groups:

> the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.[48]

But the Gramscian tradition also emphasizes that they are a connective tissue between individuals and material economic relations. Indeed, the original Gramscian conceptualization of ideologies places them in a dialectical unity between the content (the economic structure) and the shape (the superstructure) of social relations.[49] It is on this basis that we emphasize the continued conceptual importance of *social democracy* and *socialism* to differentiate between left-wing ideologies attempting to achieve more egalitarian goals within the confines of an economic system based on private ownership and market competition (social democracy), and ideologies committed to replacing the position of the dominant economic class with an alternative system of public ownership (socialism).[50] Appeals to a people among left-wing ideologies will vary in the effect they have on economic relations depending on which of these ideologies they are attached to.

The differences between this approach and the discourse school can elucidate why we consider this to be both a critical and relational framework. The distinction between 'popular' and 'populist' democratic articulations, and the emphasis on the co-constitutive relationship between ideological and material economic

relations, draws attention to the relational character of ideologies. They are intersecting clusters of 'concepts' that systematize representations of the world by political groups,[51] and their attributes depend on the complex interplay between material political, economic and social relations. Unpacking how ideologies marshal groups in these social relations brings us to the *critical* part of the approach –it starts from the assumption that structural social power exists and aims to uncover the way in which ideologies produce, reproduce or contest this structural social power.[52] The article will now outline the two core dimensions of this theory in further detail.

The people and democracy: Popular versus populist ideologies

As discussed in the previous section, left populist scholarship proposes that discourse is the construction of an agonistic or antagonistic boundary between some 'us', the people, and some 'others', the elite,[53] under the promise of giving power and/or resources back to the former.[54] This connection requires the exercise of leadership, represented either by symbols, parties or charismatic individuals. This theoretical approach, we have argued, does not satisfactorily answer a question – *how* do these leaders organize the 'people' in relation to democracy?

In our view, Stuart Hall's distinction between 'authoritarian populist' and 'popular-democratic' can help to answer this question more precisely. Authoritarian populism, on the one hand, is defined as a type of leadership 'from above' that is 'pioneered by, harnessed to, and to some extent legitimated by a populist groundswell from below . . . [which] served to win for the authoritarian closure the gloss of populist consent'.[55] Hence, so this line of thinking goes, populists present fractional elite interests as the universal interests of a *passive* 'people' and therefore close the space for contestation by absorbing the people into dominant forms of common sense.[56]

A popular-democratic ideology, on the other hand, is 'inextricably linked with the deepening of democratic life, and the widening of popular-democratic struggle'.[57] A chain of concepts is organized into an ideological frontier that subjectifies disparate groups into a 'people' by redefining what belongs in the 'central domain of elite or dominant culture' and what belongs in the 'culture of the "periphery"'.[58] By opening the space for the representation and recognition of a disenfranchised 'people', the popular democrat opens the space for *active* popular contestation 'against the power bloc'.[59]

By democracy, we do not mean its reification in a list of liberal democratic institutions (i.e. free elections, independent judiciary, checks and balances, constitutional rights). Rather, we adopt a critical definition of democracy, in line with Iris Marion Young, as a lively process of political empowerment of disenfranchised groups with two essential attributes. First, democratic processes must distribute sufficient resources and skills for all citizens to participate in decision making. Second, 'democratic structures should regulate decision-making not only in government institutions, but in all institutions of collective life, including, for example, production and service enterprises, universities and voluntary organizations'.[60]

Therefore, whether an ideology is popular or populist rests on how the 'people' is conceptualized and mobilized in relation to democracy. To summarize, we define 'populism' and 'popular' as follows:

- Populism is an attribute of ideologies appealing to a passive people with the aim of protecting the extant material or symbolic resources of an elite fraction (that claims to speak on behalf of the 'people') from opposing elite fractions (to which the object 'people' is antagonistic), or when the former aim to appropriate the material or symbolic resources currently held by the latter.
- Popular is an attribute of ideologies appealing to the 'people' with the aim of subjectifying diverse disenfranchised groups into a progressive democratic project that aims to activate and empower the people to the detriment of enclosed elites to which the 'subject' the people is antagonistic.

These definitions, we believe, add conceptual precision to analyses of 'left populism' by limiting its scope to those ideologies whereby the leadership of left-wing elite fractions is run *over* the people, therefore constraining the democratic empowerment of disenfranchised groups. Conversely, the 'popular' is an attribute of left-wing ideologies whereby the people acquire their own leadership through processes of democratic empowerment. However, on its own, this distinction is not sufficient to qualify how appeals to the people made in different democratic articulations tap into core ideologies which left-wing actors adopt with regard to the relations of production. This is why we consider the populist/popular attribute as inextricably linked to core ideological dividing lines in left-wing politics, such as the one between social democracy and socialism, which we turn to next.

The people and the class: Socialist versus social democratic ideologies

The conceptualization of the relations between the people and classes in left populist scholarship is somehow paradoxical. On the one hand, discourse theorists conceive classes as discursively constructed political subjects beyond any real anchorage in real economic class relations.[61] On the other hand, populism is seen as a crucial connective device for establishing alliances between classes (for instance, farmers and industrial working class)[62]: the former perspective indicates that classes are not real, whereas the latter suggests that class cleavages are actually primary drivers of different forms of political and social organization.

Contrary to this view, we argue that the conceptualization and mobilization of the people does not work in isolation and only rarely manifests outside of class politics. Therefore, we see ideologies *as* grounded in class relations and *not* merely as a 'system of ideas'. They are organizational – they are organized by and organize material relations. Accordingly, the 'people' are not pointed in a unilinear direction: Depending on their root ideology they can either reinforce, cement and reproduce existing class relations or they can contest, disrupt and undermine them.

This observation leads us to our second key distinction – the relation between appeals to the people and the representation of dominant and dominated classes in the relations of production. To help tease out this distinction further, we argue that parties classified as left populism[63] bear either social democratic or socialist core ideologies.[64] Of course, as with any ideology, their definitions are contested and are never static. However, we draw on the conceptualization by Bolton[65] to define socialism as the ideology promoting the commitment to democratic public ownership and control of the economy, and on Berman,[66] to define social democracy as an ideology that aims to use public institutions

to achieve more egalitarian goals within the confines of an economic system based on private ownership and market competition.

When it comes to conceptualizing these ideologies according to the relations between the people and class politics, we see *social democracy* as the ideology proposing the people as the site/subject of protection by public institutions without the disruption of capitalist relations of production.[67] On the contrary, socialist ideologies connect otherwise dispersed classes into a political site/subject of the 'people' that aims to disrupt or even replace dominant economic classes in capitalist society, and affirm more cooperative and equitable forms of economic organization at the heart of production.[68] Hence, we argue that the form specific ideologies take depends on how the political subjectivity of 'the people' (either as popular or populist) is connected to the practices of class politics (either socialist or social democratic).

This perspective establishes an alternative view to the left populist scholarship, which, by assuming the primacy of populism, posits that left populism moves progressive politics beyond the socialist/social democratic and radical/reformist divide, to forge a new form of radical reformism, as Chantal Mouffe puts it.[69] Our contention is that this divide is still very tangible and can help to explain fundamental differences between left-wing ideologies that have been labeled as populist. By reestablishing the importance of this divide, we hope to add some specificity to the classification of left-wing ideologies.

People, democracy, class: Re-mapping left-populism

Having defined the core distinctions between popular and populist appeals to the 'people' and specified how these may be attached to socialist or social democratic ideologies, we can now propose a re-mapping of left-wing ideologies that have been defined as populist. The main attributes of the people-democracy and people-class relations in left-wing

Table 1. Re-mapping left-populism: People, class and democracy in left-wing ideologies

	Populist social democracy	Populist socialism	Popular social democracy	Popular socialism
People – Class Relations	People as the receiver of economic protection without redistributing power away from dominant economic classes	People as the subject connecting dominated classes to contest and/or disrupt the position of dominant economic classes	People as the receiver of economic protection without redistributing power away from dominant economic classes	People as the subject connecting dominated classes to contest and/or disrupt the position of dominant economic classes
People -Democracy Relations	People as the passive object to support the strategies of a select group of political elites who claim to speak on behalf of the people against elites as a whole	People as the passive object to support the strategies of a select group of political elites who claim to speak on behalf of the people against elites as a whole	People as the subject connecting disenfranchised groups to contest and disrupt political elites through active processes of empowerment	People as the subject connecting disenfranchised groups to contest and disrupt political elites through active processes of empowerment

ideologies are summarized in Table 1. Our proposed typology results from the four logical combinations of the populist/popular and social democratic/socialist possibilities:

(1) Populist Social Democracy is an ideology that aims to mobilize the 'people' to enforce or reinforce the political power of enclosed left-wing elites and use public institutions to achieve more egalitarian goals, but without fundamentally changing class relationships in an economic system based on private ownership and market competition.

(2) Populist Socialism is an ideology that aims to mobilize the 'people' to enforce or reinforce the political power of enclosed left-wing elites and disrupt, contest or replace the position of dominant economic classes.

(3) Popular Social Democracy is an ideology that aims to mobilize the 'people' to transfer political power away from enclosed elites to disenfranchised groups and use public institutions to achieve more egalitarian goals, but without fundamentally changing class relationships in an economic system based on private ownership and market competition.

(4) Popular Socialism is an ideology that aims to mobilize the 'people' with the aim of transferring political power away from enclosed elites to disenfranchised groups and disrupt, contest or replace the position of dominant economic classes.

Figure 1 showcases how different assemblages of democracy, people and class in these four ideologies can result in material processes which point the people in different directions. For example, when appeals to the people are combined with the absence (-) of a democratic ethos or class-based ideology, resulting in populist social democracy, appeals to the people, in practice, disaggregate class politics by co-opting the working class into existing institutions and insulating elites from contestation.

The following sub-sections will develop this classification further with references to empirical examples of parties and leaders that have been labeled as left-wing populists in previous scholarship. Whilst typologies are static, in the cases we attempt to demonstrate that ideologies can dynamically shift between the different ideological types depending on the specific historical and material circumstances.

Populist social democracy

Populist social democracy has two core features. First, it mobilizes the people as passive agents to cement the legitimacy of enclosed elites and close the space for popular contestation. Second, the 'people' serve as legitimacy for the pursuit of an economic programme that aims to use public institutions to achieve more egalitarian goals, whilst preserving class relationships within an economic system based on private ownership and market competition. We consider the Government of Syriza in Greece between 2015–2019 as a seminal example of this ideology.[70]

Scholars in the discourse school see Syriza's rise from unfancied outsider that had won less than 5% of the vote as recently as 2009 to forming a government in 2015 as a groundbreaking example of a successful left populist strategy.[71] Following the collapse of the Greek economy in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, an anti-austerity movement had exploded into life, with one survey finding that up to 36% of Greek
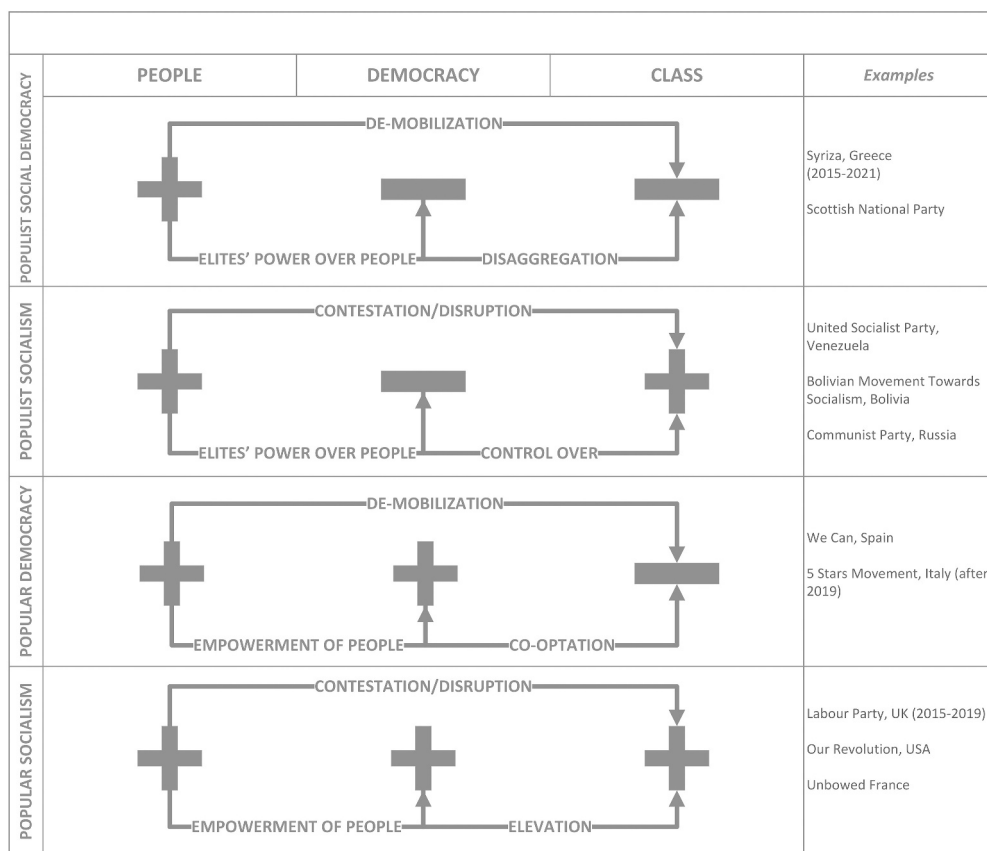
Figure 1. The direction of the people in different left-wing ideologies.

citizens had participated in the protests during 2011.[72] In the initial wave of protest, Syriza latched on to the golden opportunity presented by the crisis to transition from its conventional class-based discourse to a populist one. They began appealing to the 'people' explicitly, moving from *identification* with the anti-austerity movement to *representation* of it against the corrupted political 'caste'.[73] They claimed to express the view of this social majority with a relatively radical economic agenda that would reverse austerity and introduce six new policies to redistribute and democratize economic power: '(i) the immediate end to the humanitarian crisis, (ii) the satisfaction of social needs, (iii) the reconstruction of the productive sectors, (iv) the reinvigoration of democracy, (v) the redistribution of wealth, (vi) the expansion of social and collective rights'.[74]

According to the critical-relational approach, Syriza's more democratic discourse and radical economic programme had a popular socialist orientation during this period of opposition. However, this began to change when they formed a government in 2015 and were forced to immediately retreat from their radical promise. After extremely difficult circumstances compelled them, in coalition with the right-wing ANEL, to accept a bailout package provided by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund in return for a harsh austerity programme, Syriza gradually started to adopt a more managerialist discourse. This did not immediately materialize during their first

government (Jan–September 2015), during which they continued to aggressively deride the 'Troika' – the designated term for the consortium of the European Central Bank, EU and IMF that imposed the bailout – as the 'political establishment' forcing the Greek people to surrender to unnecessarily harsh measures that conflicted with the ethos of Social Europe that had been the basis of progressive support for the EU since the 1980s.[75]

However, on their reelection in September 2015 Syriza's ideas and discourse shifted, redefining its ideology as one seeking to justify limited social interventions within the confines of a social democratic consensus.[76,77] Gone were the radical ideas that they advocated during their opposition, and in their place was a more moderate discourse that did not challenge economic class relations, such as a shift from the view that nationalization was an anti-neoliberal project to moderate redistributive promises.[78] Appeals to the people continued but moved from the call for the people to actively participate in the disruption of neoliberal elites, to those for supporting the Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, as the representative of the 'new' in opposition to the 'old' New Democracy (Syriza's main rival).[79] The emphasis on horizontality, pluralism and grassroots democracy was replaced by the undisputed and unchallenged leadership of a figurehead seeking to root out the 'corrupted' old order and protect its 'people' from the harsher effects of austerity.

This example illustrates an advantage of the critical-relational approach. In documenting how Syriza shifted from popular to populist discourses in their transition from opposition to government, we have provided an explanation of the change in the intent and direction of their appeals to the people. Whilst there may have been a genuine desire by leaders of the anti-austerity movement to democratize the Greek political system whilst Syriza were in opposition, it is evidently the case that when in government any appeals had the express intent of legitimating Syriza, and specifically Tsipras', continued power and authority. This distinction is sometimes lost in the left populist literature, which acknowledges that Syriza continued to appeal to the people but cannot explain precisely when they stopped being left populist.

Populist socialism

Populist Socialism mobilizes the 'people' to enforce or reinforce the position of enclosed political elites whilst disrupting, contesting or replacing the dominant economic classes. We consider the Bolivarianism of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), particularly in the second half of Hugo Chávez' presidency, to be an example of this ideology. Other examples that could fit the bill include Rafael Correa's Ecuadorian PAIS alliance, Evo Morales' Bolivian Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party,[80] and the Communist Party of Russia (CPRF).[81]

Chávez swept to power in the 1998 presidential elections on the back of a promise to root out corruption and poverty in Venezuela.[82] His Bolivarian discourse had two main fronts, which at face value had much in common with what has been defined in this article as *popular* socialism. First, a proposed new charter would put social movements and the 'common people' at the heart of state power by introducing a more participatory model of democracy, and second, direct subsidies for the poor and an uplift in public spending in healthcare, education and social security would gradually embed a socialist economy.

The first phase of Chávez' presidency was marred by a prolonged period of political instability, culminating in a failed coup d'état and a massive oil strike in 2002–2003 that sent the economy into a severe recession.[83] However, once the situation stabilized, Chávez introduced reforms that materialized the core tenets of popular socialism. In the economic sphere, the fight against US imperialism and the 'savage neoliberalism' that Chávez claimed had strangled the Venezuelan economy and it's 'people' provided legitimation for the nationalization of agricultural land, ports, communication companies, electricity, steel and some sections of the financial sector.[84] In the political sphere, Chávez appealed directly to the 'people' in a series of popular referenda that demonstrated support for a new constitution enshrining the right to free education and healthcare, preserved the rights of indigenous communities to uphold their own customs and practices, and even implemented a recall referendum, meaning all public office holders could be removed from office in a popular vote (including the president).[85] This was accompanied by an inclusionary discourse emphasizing the importance of 'the political representation of groups that have been discriminated against and whose voices have not been taken into account by the establishment'.[86] Inspired by Laclau's theories of left populism, neoliberal and imperialist elites (the 'caste') were derided as the 'enemy' that had obstructed the sovereign will of the Venezuelan nation and its 'peoples'.[87]

However, the second part of Chávez' presidency had a centralizing ethos more aligned with our definition of *populist socialism*. Constitutional reform was driven by personalized, emotional and clientelist links between Chávez and his people. As Weyland explains:

> A central motto of Venezuela's Bolivarianism was 'The people is Chávez, and Chávez is the people'. In other words, as vox populi is vox Dei, so vox populi is vox ducis – the voice of the leader: The people can act only through their charismatic leader.[88]

Chávez used his immense personal popularity to cement what has been described as 'competitive authoritarian rule'.[89] He navigated the institutional architecture to consolidate his grip from within the democratic structures: Poorly defined boundaries between the military and civil sector, a largely state-controlled media, a relatively strong command over the party system and the judiciary, and a plebiscitary relationship with individual supporters all served to fortify his power.[90] The centralizing trajectory peaked in 2007 when a sequence of electoral victories opened a window of opportunity for further constitutional reform that centralized presidential powers yet further. The referendum was defeated, but it was symptomatic of Chávez growing tendency to mobilize discourses of the people to legitimate Venezuela's decline into semi-authoritarian rule.

Two lessons can be learnt from this brief history of Bolivarianism. The first is that there is a fine line between popular democratic and populist articulations. A popular democratic initiative can easily slip into populism if the material practices do not enhance the space for the 'people' to contest elites. A second is that the direction the 'people' are pointed within the populist family can vary greatly. Both Syriza and Bolivarianism sought to shield elites from democratic contestation (hence why we define them as populist), but while Syriza used this power within a regime of capital accumulation, Chávez sought to disrupt dominant economic classes.

Popular social democracy

Popular social democracy shares with its populist counterpart a desire to use public institutions to pursue more egalitarian goals whilst preserving class relationships within an economic system based on private ownership and market competition. However, unlike its populist counterpart, it prioritizes the empowerment of the disenfranchised 'people' in all institutions of collective life. The Spanish movement-party Podemos (We Can) from its outburst in 2014 until its institutionalization as a junior partner of the government led by the Socialist Party in 2019 is a seminal example of this ideology.[91] Another potential case is the Italian 5 Star Movement (M5S) after its ideological transition to the left from 2019.[92]

Scholars have noted Podemos' explicit and reflexive use of Laclau's 'left populist' heuristic. At the heart of their discourse 'lies the antagonistic divide which characterizes populism from a formal-structural perspective: the antagonism between the social majority and the privileged minority'.[93] Pablo Iglesias' speech at Podemos' first conference in 2015 is a clear example of this type of rhetoric:

> We said that we were the homeland, and we were criticized. But, for us, being proud of the homeland is not the rhetoric of politicians who have their bank accounts in Switzerland, but it is having the best public schools and hospitals. It is not the political caste that makes the country run [. . .]. It is the people. This is our homeland, the people[94]!

According to the critical-relational approach, Podemos' ideology started as popular rather than populist because its primary goal was reclaiming citizenship for the 'people' through the peaceful 'occupation' of institutions.[95] This was not a call to transform liberal democracy. Podemos never considered liberal democratic institutions as the fundamental problem, but instead demanded that the 'corrupted' political caste be substituted by a popular movement that reclaims democracy for the 'people'. This 'democratization of democracy'[96] was seen as the most advanced possibility for the achievement of popular empowerment, and it would be achieved by translating the radically democratic impulses of the anti-austerity 15-M movement into an electoral bloc that could disrupt the dominance of PSOE and PP over Spanish politics. In that vein, what was initially a protest *against* the state was turned into a movement aimed at creating a 'democratic historic bloc' *inside* the state[97], by putting an end 'to the artificial separation between the social and the political that neoliberalism imposed and that seeks nothing less than to relegate the social majority into resignation'.[98]

From a critical-relational perspective, the active displacement of socialism threatens to tame and depoliticize class antagonism in practice by *dis*-organizing social movements and trade unions that have been the nodal point of dissent against capitalist economic relations. Therefore, whilst the priority given to popular democratic appeals to the 'people' provided space for Podemos to materialize processes of democratic empowerment, this effectively provided legitimacy for a social democratic rather than a socialist imaginary. Indeed, the democratic call to empower the 'people' can involve a trade-off with the traditional socialist goal of disrupting or replacing dominant class relations if class struggle is relegated as the fundamental axis of left politics.

Finally, to further highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of ideology, it should be noted that its popular appeals to the people were eventually replace by more populist

emphasis as its lengthy institutionalization concluded with its entry into government as as a minority partner in 2019. Indeed, while the movement party was initially characterized by the openness of membership and popular access to public offices, the party's institutionalization resulted in a normalization of party's functioning with a closure of (digital) spaces of direct participation: this process paralleled a shift of party's discourse from an emphasis on the popular assault within and against the institutions of democracy to the people as the site to promote a radical social democratic agenda.[99]

Popular socialism

Popular socialism aims to transfer political power to disenfranchised groups and disrupt, contest and/or replace dominant economic classes. The first phase of what was known as Corbynism – the brand of politics promoted by Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters when leader of the Labour Party – can be considered an example of this ideology.[100] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders' leadership in the US Democratic Party might also be considered examples.[101]

Stuart Hall's reflections on the notion of popular democracy illustrate his socialist thinking. Unlike popular social democracy, popular socialism appeals to the 'people' with the aim of focusing attention 'along the line of the exploited and the exploiters, which, in turn, alone might provide conditions for a more sustained socialist advance'.[102] The 'popular', in Hall's view, is 'one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why "popular culture" matters'.[103]

During its initial phase Corbynism attempted to achieve this goal. His leadership aimed to gather support for socialist traditions within the labor movement by appealing to younger progressive activists with an anti-austerity, ecological, feminist and anti-racist message.[104] In doing so, it aligned socialism with the interests of a fledgling 'generation left' whose formative experiences of political activism were in the anti-austerity movement and whose economic experiences were precarious and tenuous.[105] By integrating progressive groups *into* traditional socialist currents orbiting the Labour Party, Corbynism aimed to grow a 'movement' that could forge a 'people' capable of challenging neoliberalism and its associated economic inequalities. The goal, unlike popular social democracy, was to engage with the 'new sectors, new issues and new movements on the left'[106] with the express intention renewing a traditional brand of socialist politics.

Between Corbyn's leadership victory and the 2017 general election the strategy was successful. Party membership doubled in size and Corbyn aimed to democratically empower them by reforming Labour's Internal Party Democracy (IPD) with a series of minor reforms and a more comprehensive Democracy Review.[107] Democratization of party and state was key to the removal of state-led obstacles to socialism because it would position the people 'in and against the state', a phrase often used by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell.

Scholarship has pointed out that, despite the socialist rhetoric, Corbyn's Labour Party pursued, in practice, little more than a conventional social democratic programme.[108] Their 2017 general election manifesto proposed the nationalization of rail, mail, water and electricity as part of a fundamental shift of 'wealth and power' away from political and economic elites toward ordinary 'people'.[109] It did not call for further democratic ownership of the means of production and was willing to leave the majority of the

economy in the hands of private ownership. However, this critique is at risk of conflating a prospective Labour government's 'politics of power' (a social democratic economic programme) with their 'politics of support' (the long-term socialist ambitions of their supporters).[110] Many of Corbyn's supporters drew on the 'language of socialism' to imagine a 'concrete utopia' which radically broke with the neoliberal foundations of modern market economies.[111] Supporters prefigured this utopia with a new political festival – 'The World Transformed' – which established an institutional setting for the cultural and political participation of the 'people' with a whole range of events designed to deliberate on, propose and critique Labour policy, with much of it centering on topics such as climate justice, union organizing and democratic public ownership.

Popular socialism had come under several strains by the time Labour were defeated at the 2019 general election. Perhaps most significantly, the tension between the Brexit mandate and the Remainer views of most of the Labour membership undermined the leadership's support for party democracy, weakening its popular democratic credentials.[112] This, in our view, shows the temporal nature of any ideology, which can change depending on material political and economic constraints.

Discussion and conclusion

The critical-relational schema introduced in this article has provided a template to identify four distinctive ideologies: populist social democracy, populist socialism, popular social democracy and popular socialism. In this section, we will summarize what we believe are the two key contributions to the literature on left politics and populism before sketching out two potential agendas for future research.

First, we provide a conceptualization which allows us to distinguish between ideologies whose appeals to the people consistently aim at democratizing democracy, and those whose claims about the people conceal goals about the reproduction of elite political power. Our *relational* approach assesses how such appeals are grounded either in popular practices of democratic empowerment for disenfranchised groups, or, conversely, on populist practices whereby individual leaders appeal to the people to gather legitimacy for an extension of their power against competing elites. In line with a Gramscian perspective, these distinctions recognize that ideologies and their concomitant appeals to the people are cultural and material products capable of structuring political and economic relations differently. The *critical* dimension of the framework recognizes this and aims to uncover how they organize and shape structures of power.

The second contribution is to provide an original perspective on when and how appeals to the people come to form part of social democratic or socialist ideological orientation. Whereas discourse theorists tend to subsume these differences under the overarching schema of populism, our approach posits that the socialist and social democratic divide continues to shape alternative routes for the mobilization of the people as a political subject. By defining popular/populist appeals to the people as attributes of rooted ideologies that either disrupt dominant class relations ('socialist') or aim to contain them ('social democratic'), we challenge the normative view of discourse scholars that theorize a necessary trade-off between populist and class politics.

However, we also see this contribution as bearer of a fruitful dialogue between Gramscian and Laclauian scholarships. While the latter may be the best-suited approach

for uncovering the micro-physics of the assemblages of discourses in short-term strategies, a Gramscian approach may be best suited to capturing the long-lasting historic functions of left-wing ideologies.

We envision the critical-relational approach as the ground for two research agendas on left-wing politics and populism. First, we provide key concepts for future empirical assessment of different ideologies on the 'popular-populist' and 'socialist-social-democratic' spectra and potentially outside of it. Whilst empirical research may qualify the attributes of the four ideological types we have proposed, they are by no means exhaustive. Future research might identify further demarcating lines between ideologies on the left or alter the axis.

Second, the proposed framework can inspire further conceptualization of the populist/popular attributes with other ideologies beyond those pertaining to left populism. This agenda could potentially conceptualize instances of populist neoliberalism both on the center or center-left (as for instance, with the New Labour under Tony Blair) or the center-right (as with the case of Go Italy under Berlusconi's leadership). In addition, the combination of popular attributes with materially exclusionary visions is a logical impossibility in our framework, which, therefore, would exclude any manifestation of 'popular' ideology by the radical right. However, recent evolutions of politics may present cases which escape strict classifications along the left–right spectrum.[113]

In conclusion, the relational aspect of our proposed classification enables more in-depth analysis of how discourses of the people intersect with broader class and democratic relations. Meanwhile, by taking into consideration the concrete practices, end goals and material effects of ideologies, the critical aspect of the framework establishes a basis for future research to assess the agency that actors within these ideological traditions exercise.

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Disclosure statement