


Bound to fail? Assessing contemporary left populism

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It has been more than ten years since the first signs indicating the contemporary (*re*)emergence of left populism were observed: the proto-populist movements of “the squares” such as the *Indignados* in Spain, *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece, the Occupy Movement in the United States, and the various uprisings of “the Arab Spring.” A variety of political formations succeeded them, channeling their energy onto electoral representation with mixed results—such as SYRIZA in Greece, PODEMOS in Spain, the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn within the Labour party in the United Kingdom, the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders in the United States, but also the comeback of left populism in the Latin American continent. The whole experience seems to have resulted in evident skepticism in left-wing circles about the effectiveness of “populism” as a political strategy for the left.

In this context, the rise and fall of SYRIZA, and in particular its failure to materialize its economic promise to cancel a Eurozone-enforced austerity, became emblematic of the supposed end of “the populist moment.” The American left magazine *Jacobin*, for example, recently dedicated a whole issue to left populism. The dominant (skeptical) strand of authors maintained that “[s]hort-lived and cruel, Europe’s experiment in left populism had ground to a halt” (Jäger, 2019a, p. 127). As Jäger concludes, the left had “bet the house on populism – and lost” (Jäger, 2019a, p. 124). The solution put forward for the left that experimented with the temptation of populism seems to involve a return to its original socialist values (Sunkara, 2019). Skepticism about populism is indeed prevalent in left academic and political circles. The “left critique” of left populism seems to be grounded on the hypothesis that more “class politics” and less “populist politics” is the answer for a successful future trajectory for the contemporary left. Populism is often perceived as a form of left reformism that contaminated at some point an original class-based purity and for this reason is (necessarily) bound to fail (Seferiades, 2020; Sotiris, 2019).

Notwithstanding the evident setbacks surrounding the last political cycle of left populism, this paper enquires into the abovementioned thesis and seeks to critically assess the claim that left populism is necessarily bound to fail by scrutinizing its foundational hypotheses:

- What exactly does it mean to “fail?” Fail in what exactly? What would be the exact criteria demonstrating left populism’s failure?

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- What could a rigorous genealogy of the left reveal about the central assumptions implicit in the aforementioned criticism? (that populism necessarily involves a reformist orientation, which contaminates a prior purity and that the only solution available is a return to something that promises, well, what exactly? Electoral victory, revolution or, maybe, a “peace of mind” to be secured through restoring theoretical purity and risking political insignificance/marginalization?).

To tackle these questions, our starting hypothesis is that a re-emerging nostalgia of unmediated class purity may be of little help here. Arguments according to which left populism fails because it contaminates left purity seem to reoccupy an essentialist and reductionist terrain, ultimately misrecognizing the articulatory (impure) character of political formations and collective subjects. Such is the link established between *populism* (form) and the *left* (ideological and policy content). A link established, in fact, very long ago, well before Laclau and Mouffe, on the basis of registering the failure and gradually abandoning a prior logic of necessity. Arguably, a rigorous evaluation of left populism cannot be exclusively limited to an assessment of this particular theoretico-political project (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and should be debated within a much broader terrain that also encompasses a long tradition going back to Marx himself.¹

To reintroduce the logics of necessity and contamination seems to betray an obsolete reductionist rationale; it also indicates a rather selective memory. For the articulation between the left and populism emerged precisely on the ground of this prior failure of left/class purity (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, especially the first two chapters). The reasons for this failure have not been lifted; if anything, they are more pertinent today and this cannot be disavowed in elaborating left strategy. On the other hand, although such an articulation may still be able to help left strategy within particular (mainly electoral) contexts, it cannot—at least not in isolation, not on its own, through the opposite reduction of the left to an essentialist, a priori triumphant populism—guarantee a rosy emancipatory future. We are thus firmly located within an ambivalent articulatory space overdetermining strategy within competitive and antagonistic political terrains.

Our central argument is that the bumpy but not inconsequential applications of left populism (often revealing its limitations, but also, as we shall see below, the limitations of “the left” itself) neither suffice to command retreat nor can they guarantee progressive social change with other means (class-based purity). Our argument rests on a series of alternative assumptions. First, one needs to distinguish—analytically at least—populist form from ideological and policy content and their successful or unsuccessful implementation in different moments (elections, governmental terms, etc.). Only by defining anew what exactly is “left” and what is “populist” and how they become articulated can one develop rigorous criteria of (relative) success and failure. Second, against a background that betrays a linear and deterministic view of history, we argue that political antagonism follows a contingent choreography and is subject to unpredictable sedimentation(s) and reactivation(s) (Laclau, 1990). Thus, the question of the suitability of populist strategy cannot be resolved a priori at an abstract level ignoring the historico-political context. Only by articulating a more comprehensive, open-ended, and less arrogant historical sensibility could we perhaps arrive at more pertinent strategic suggestions.

Accordingly, this paper is structured as follows: the first section attempts to differentially identify left populism in a rigorous way, highlighting the form/policy parallax and formulating specific criteria for assessing its success/failure. The second section offers an overview of the trajectory that contemporary left populism followed (mostly but not exclusively in Europe). Drawing on the conceptual apparatus deployed in the first section and the empirical overview articulated in the second section, the third section discusses the assumption that populism constitutes a strategy incompatible with the left in the sense that it will inevitably fail to implement a radical program in power, signaling the eventual death of the populist moment for the left. The discussion brings to the fore the historically intimate relationship socialists, including Marx, kept with populism. It argues that political cycles are always historically contingent and subject to reactivation, while it also highlights the need to seriously discuss the limitations of both leftist orientation(s) and populist strategy(s) in contemporary times. Populism’s dismissal, we argue, seems to be influenced by the profoundly anti-populist liberal mainstream that has influenced the left too.

1 | DEFINING (LEFT) POPULISM

In this section, we attempt to define left populism. Our conceptual strategy unfolds in two steps. By inquiring into the two notions that comprise our conceptual dyad, “left” and “populism,” we first seek to disentangle and approach each notion individually. First, we theorize populism, to which we refer predominantly as *form*; second, we theorize the left component to which we will refer as *content*—that is to say, the programmatic and ideological component that accompanies populist strategy. In the final part of this section, we discuss the extent to which these two sides are analytically distinct to each other, but also the extent to which they can be combined.²

1.1 | Form (populism)

The burgeoning literature on populism points to an emerging consensus on a set of distinct features that are omnipresent in populist phenomena (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 1977; Mudde, 2004; Stavrakakis, 2004). These are *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism*. Following the perspective advanced by the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, we ought to highlight here that “the people” and “the elite” are not mere rhetorical references in a political actor’s narrative. Such an understanding misses the dynamic and performative status of political discourse, which is critical in understanding the construction of political identities and the passionate attachments they can generate (Venizelos, 2021). In our Laclau-inspired conceptualization, populism—like all political discourses with hegemonic pretensions—allows the formation of a salient *collective identification* through which heterogeneous social demands and exclusions find a way to establish links allowing them to challenge effectively the status quo. This would be impossible if all the social sectors and subjects involved insisted on their particularistic differences. In other words, “the people” is called forth in order to facilitate the process of strategic unification necessary to increase the chances of social and political change.³ Populism thus performs the task of extending politics beyond narrow class interests and translating it into a project relevant at the national-popular plane—where the legacy of political modernity has located most of decision-making and the ensuing sociopolitical struggles.

Schematically, one could represent left populism as pursuing antagonism on a predominantly vertical (bottom/up) axis of political competition rather than the “classical” (horizontal) left/right axis, or the right-wing populist/*nationalist* plane of ethnic out-grouping (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Ostiguy, 2017): “the people” are framed as politically subaltern and are thus perceived as located at the bottom of society, and “the elite,” which is framed as nefarious and illegitimate, is seen as placed at the top. This vertical structure of populist discourse does not necessarily put left politics second; on the contrary, it often constitutes the condition for their broader appeal and salience. Through populism, a left program is framed as “common sense” and is articulated as “a politics of the people,” for “the people,” and “by the people.” A left program that promotes redistribution, free health care, or free education, for example, can frame these demands in a populist way: that is, by establishing them as properties of “the people” (i.e., properties of the differential-particular bodies and psychosocial entities that are individually and *simultaneously* deprived from them) against an “establishment” (that prohibits “the people” from accessing these resources and fully enjoying them). The common and simultaneous source of deprivation (located at the action or the inaction of the “establishment”) introduces a common point of identification and creates the conditions for a shared struggle; the latter is energized by an embedded promise to regain *popular sovereignty* (neither *national* sovereignty nor *class* hegemony) and often facilitates a unification process based on the creation of equivalential linkages.⁴

1.2 | Content (the left)

Political science has devoted significant efforts to define the left component of populism drawing on the criteria set forth by key theoreticians who sought to distinguish left from right-wing politics. Such classificatory criteria are, for

example, Bobbio's (1996) notion of "equality" as a regulative ideal (i.e., "the left" stands in favor of social equality and seeks to eradicate social inequality) and Alessandro Pizzorno's (1993) "inclusion/exclusion" classification (i.e., "the left" champions more inclusion in terms of redistribution, social rights, political participation). More recently, Dani Filc (2010) developed an analytical mechanism that distinguishes left from right (populist) phenomena that is widely used in research on populism. Hence populism's *ideological* orientation can be identified on the basis of three distinct dimensions of inclusion and exclusion: (1) the material dimension (who is included/excluded from the material redistribution of resources), (2) the political dimension (who is included/excluded from processes of participation and social rights), and (3) the symbolic dimension (who is included/excluded from the symbolic and cultural pillars of a community). In this sense, one could speak of "inclusionary populism," which best describes left populist phenomena (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Overall, as Luke March (2011) put it, the "left" element of leftist populism signifies populism's relationship with traditional left-wing themes such as social justice, welfare-ism, internationalism, and, above all else, equality. The populist element is related to the form we analyzed earlier. Thus, left populism can be defined as "one way" in which a leftist programmatic package can be articulated (regardless of its degree of left radicalism), within a certain context, in order to construct a popular collective subject and acquire a form/shape potentially able to undermine the status quo. Its aim is to expand representation/inclusion and increase participation, strengthening (symbolic and affective) identification. Consequently, "[a]lthough populism is [often] presented as incompatible with pluralism, the truth is that left-wing populism, in general, advocates for plurality and diversity in society, as the left has usually done" (Agustín, 2020, p. 11).

Taking into account the conceptual clarification offered so far, what becomes evident is that, analytically at least, there are *two distinct components* in the syntagma "left populism": the *left* component of a concrete political project and its *populist* strategic shaping. Each involves its own typologies. With respect to "leftist radicalism," one could identify degrees of intensity related to *how much redistribution of wealth* is envisaged and with what means; with regard to populism one identifies degrees depending on *how deep and intense is the polarization between "the people" and "the elite" posited; or the extent to which the equivalential overdetermines the differential axis* expanding or, at least, keeping intact over time the aforementioned processes of unification and empowerment. Needless to say, these two components, the leftist one and the populist one, can be, once more, combined together *in different degrees* (more/less populism, more/less leftism). This argument directly challenges the belief that populism is to be a priori equated with reformism. Following this rationale, all revolutionary, communist, socialist, social-democratic, and radical-leftist projects can employ and adopt a populist pattern as long as they predominantly pit "the people" against "the elite." This is why what historically emerged in the left has been a set of very different populisms, from revolutionary (Narodniki in Russia) and Popular Front ones (the coalition led by Leon Bloom in France) to idiosyncratic social-democratic ones (Papandreou in Greece).

Thus, to accuse populism of being inherently reformist (class-based critique) tends to misunderstand populism. The latter is a mobilizational strategy based on the logic of equivalence (creating paratactical antagonisms between groups of demands and values) and not on the logic of difference (prioritizing administration, tackling each demand in its particularity in order to diffuse its potential alliances with other unsatisfied demands). Hence, it seems that not all populists are "reformists" and not all reformists are "populists" to the extent that reformism would, in most cases, involve a movement from equivalence to difference. Indeed, the variety of left populist phenomena "highlights the importance of taking diverse sociopolitical contexts into account in order to understand how populism is embedded within different left-wing traditions" (Agustín, 2020, p. 12). As we shall see toward the end of this text, not only populism does not constitute a strange bedfellow for the left but even Marx had flirted with the idea of (revolutionary) populism.

Although there is often a tendency to articulate the notions of "radical left" and "populism" as two opposing entities in the conceptual ladder, in this subsection we sought to clarify the conceptual features of both. It is not only that "radical left" and populism fail to incarnate a strong antithesis; they can also be combined with each other, while each notion can sustain different degrees (of populism and radicalism respectively) rendering visible a variety of typologies.

In the next subsection, we will focus on the relationship between populism and policy because the “left argument” positing the ultimate failure of populism is most often grounded on a particular “failure” to implement policy orientations premised on the aforementioned features. It may accept that populism can work as an oppositional strategy, but sees populism as hindering policy implementation, when a governmental term is examined.

1.3 | Populism and policy: A plea for analytical clarity

Does populism necessarily fail in power? What exactly do we mean by failure? Is this failure rooted in its inherently reformist nature? Scholarship that focuses on the “causes and effects of populism” has admittedly offered further knowledge with regard to how different populist parties respond to the challenges of institutionalization and governance. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) investigate empirically whether populist parties can manage to implement policy with relative success and survive “discounts” on their programmatic promises once they move from opposition to power. Their affirmative conclusion goes against prominent assumptions such as those made by Canovan (1999) and Mény and Surel (2002) who essentially argued that, once in power, populist parties will necessarily fail to implement their promises and will eventually vanish and become like other mainstream parties (also see Mudde, 2017). The conclusion of the former seems more in line with the empirical reality of numerous concrete examples, highlighting the resilience of populism in power—such as in Latin America where populism has become an almost inseparable and recurring feature of governance. Yet, their conceptual and analytical strategy seems flawed.

In Albertazzi and McDonnell’s analysis, “the success or failure” of populist parties in government lies on the *policy* rather than on the *formal* (populist) component of the equation. Their findings are premised on whether government experience “corrupts” the *ideological* (right-wing in their case) core of the populists. Is it, however, the ideological-programmatic core that defines a phenomenon as populist and can, therefore, determine its assessment (e.g., success or failure in power)? In our view, the answer is negative. Once again, we have to return to the analytical kernel of populism. As we have already pointed out, the categorization of sociopolitical phenomena as “populist” rests on the identification of the two formal criteria, *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism*. Thus, in order to identify populist phenomena in government one should stick to the very same criteria, asking the very same questions: is “the people” the central point of reference of a given discursive articulation or some other principle, for example, “the market?” Is the articulation equivalential in that it continues to sustain links established among differential elements framed as politically subaltern and suppressed by some dominant structure? Is the sociopolitical space still dichotomized between “the people” and “the elite” when in power? (Because arguably the successful implementation of policy still requires strong hegemonic support, although it cannot be guaranteed by its presence.)

In the case of Albertazzi and McDonnell—the same applies, more or less, to the “left critique” of populism—it is, once more, the policy core that is examined. Crucially, research that focuses on the relative success or failure of populist actors to achieve policy outcomes close to their programmatic promises in order to determine the success or failure of populism per se jeopardizes the conceptual clarity of populism: in reality, what it strives to study is not the populist (formal) component but the policy one. This has critical conceptual and political implications in that the success or failure of “populism” is ultimately determined through an analytically inconsistent strategy, which essentially focuses on something other than the phenomenon it is supposed to study. It needs to be restated then that there is no single policy that is populist per se; populism is the discursive architecture that structures programmatic content in one way (equivalentially) and not another (differentially). Last but not least, there are also contingent factors influencing the supposed “failure of populism” to achieve its promises that may be exogenous to the phenomenon itself and not endogenous to it. As we highlight later, these factors usually have to do with the historical and institutional context (local and global), the trope of political antagonism, institutional imagination, political diligence, and so forth. At any rate, we will return to this point toward the end of this text.

The distinction that we put forward, between populism and (left) policy, rests on Ernesto Laclau’s move to distinguish *form* from *contents*—reviewed in the two preceding subsections. As Laclau argued, the logic of populism “is not

to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group but in a *particular mode of articulation* of whatever social, political, or ideological contents." In restating our argument in Laclau's words, "a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist" (Laclau, 2005, p. 33). A similar argument is also to be found in the ideational conceptualization of populism that, despite its limitations, cogently discussed elsewhere (Katsambekis, 2022), highlights that populism does not constitute a "fully-fledged ideology", but is rather "easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies" (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). In this sense, we find ourselves back in the distinction between *form* (framing, strategy) and *content* (policy, ideology, programmatic theses).

Following the articulatory understanding of *left populism* developed in this conceptual section, a "failure" due to the populist element should rather be understood as the inability to maintain an affective popular hegemony—political and/or cultural, inside and outside the institutions—that effectively cross-cuts different sections of society resulting in the construction of a potent collective subject able to challenge the status quo in the long run. When, on the other hand, a left populist agent fails to implement economic and political transformations that are canonically ascribed to a "leftist narrative," this should be understood, in the first instance, as a failure in the implementation of the left component of the left populist project and not necessarily as anything related with its populist strategy/style—when, of course, the latter remains operative in power, partly facilitating implementation. Analytically at least, the two components—the strategic one and the programmatic one—are and should be kept distinct and examined separately before being assessed as a whole. So, is populism necessarily bound to fail once it enters the institutions and should therefore be seen as an incompatible strategy for the left in power? In conceptual terms the answer is a clear "no"; but what about concrete experience? Having sought conceptual clarity as to the meaning of left populism, we will now proceed to review the trajectory contemporary left populism followed in the aftermath of the Great Recession in order to further illuminate this last question.

2 | CONTEMPORARY LEFT POPULISM IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT RECESSION

Left populism re-emerged in light of the social exhaustion, discontent, and political de-alignment in the years after the 2008 financial collapse. The square movements in Spain, the United States as well as various instances that formed part of the Arab Spring marked a turn in the politics of the last decade. These movements put forward demands in favor of democracy, equality, dignity, and economic justice, and introduced a distinct symbolism and jargon for the contemporary left. Transferring the legacy of the alter-globalization movement onto the electoral arena, these proto-populist movements questioned the political establishment, highlighted the void in political representation, and demanded the return of "the demos" to the forefront of decision-making (Gerbaudo, 2017).

Following this (pre-)populist conjuncture, numerous electoral experiments seeking ways out of the left's chronic deadlock (often due to a class-based particularism) became evident in the left hemisphere. Some addressed questions of participation and focused on digital forms of organization, communication, and democracy (Deseriis, 2017). While many favored a movement-oriented structure, others favored more hierarchical organization and others a blend of both (Della Porta et al., 2017). Some pushed for more radicalism in terms of their *left* discourse and program, like Slovenia's *Levica* (Toplišek, 2019), and others presented higher degrees of *populist* framing as opposed to classical socialist rhetoric like the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party (Maignushca & Dean, 2019). There are also "disputed" or "borderline" cases, such as the Dutch Socialist Party and *Die Linke* in Germany: although populist repertoires have been frequently employed by the two parties, populism cannot be considered as the main logic that defines these two left-wing parties as its employment seems to be a matter of an occasional mode of communication. In the case of the Dutch Socialist Party, Lucardie and Voerman (2019) distinguish between weak and strong populism. In the case of *Die Linke*, Hough and Keith (2019) show how degrees of populism enlisted depend on the arena where discourse is communicated as well as on which member of the party articulates it. In France, one observed an "idiosyncratic type" of populism

infused with very “French characteristics.” *France Insoumise*’s left program was blended with “staunch patriotism,” drew on the French republican tradition, and was heavily centered around the figure of its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Marlière, 2019). The “patriotic variant” of left populism provoked “the left” and sparked discussions in that references to “the homeland” were framed as paradoxical against the typical left narrative that supposedly needs to be exclusively internationalist. This peculiar style of left politics seemed to combine a rather inclusionary type of nationalism, or patriotism as themselves would call it, that drew on the notion of “the homeland” as a key locus of articulation and simultaneously advocated for the incorporation of migrants and minorities into its sociopolitical vision.⁵

What becomes evident is that contemporary left populism names a polymorphic collection of political experiments that often shared little in terms of their internal architecture, organizational dynamics, types of leadership, and programmatic agendas. But, importantly, their logic of articulation prioritized profoundly *people-centrism* and *anti-elitism* (followed, secondarily and to different degrees, by traditional class-based leftist traits). Contemporary left populism employed a renewed political vocabulary, aesthetic, and style that extended beyond those of both the orthodox left and the center-left. It contested the status quo and sought to subvert it; it opened up discussions about the reorganization and reorientation of the left and its strategy in light of the impasse amply illustrated by the events of 1968 and 1989; it brought “the party” and the state back onto the center of the debate; and, ultimately, it set out a clear demand to govern rather than abandoning the central political arena (Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018) or voluntarily occupying the margins (gaining peace of mind and avoiding difficult challenges by condemning the left to voluntary insignificance).

Let us now zoom into two specific left populist parties that attracted significant academic and public attention and whose (downward) trajectory was framed as the end of the populist moment for the left. Spain’s PODEMOS could be considered as a paradigmatic case of left-wing populism. The party placed at the core of its discourse the promise to “restore popular sovereignty” and constructed sharp frontiers between “*la gente*” as the ordinary citizens who are disadvantaged and excluded from political decisions and “*la casta*” as the corrupt two-party system. PODEMOS constituted “an original case of interweaving political philosophy and democratic radicalism” mainly inspired by the theories and strategic proposals of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and by the Latin American populist experience (Valdivieso, 2017, p. 1). This was evident in the incorporation of Laclauian terminology in PODEMOS’ discourse and the close politico-theoretical exchange that Chantal Mouffe maintained with PODEMOS’ “number two,” Íñigo Errejón (see Mouffe & Errejón, 2016). PODEMOS sought to turn itself into an “electoral machine,” which skyrocketed the party’s popularity already within a few months after its emergence, creating a serious threat to the political establishment. However, PODEMOS never won the state. Its institutional engagement, even in the opposition of the Spanish parliament, was accompanied by critical setbacks, and its electoral momentum faded. Eventually, PODEMOS’ leadership entered a series of bitter fights between the *Pablistas* who represented the left flank of the party and the *Errejónistas* who supported the populist hypothesis. That, interwoven with the various attempts to form coalitions with forces that the party previously considered part of “the establishment”—as well as the rise of centrist and far-right “populist” competitors such as *Ciudadanos* and *Vox*—made PODEMOS lose much of its credibility. In 2018, PODEMOS reached an agreement with the social-democratic PSOE to form a government on a progressive social policy agenda.

The most promising example of radical-left populism was arguably SYRIZA in Greece. The party emerged out of the post-2008 cycle of resurgent popular mobilization to demand state power and the reversal of neoliberal policies (Katsambekis, 2016). The stakes were high, as were the promises made by Alexis Tsipras—and the hopes the people placed on his shoulders. Yet, already a few months into its administration—suffering its lack of leverage in its negotiations with international creditors—SYRIZA was forced to sign a harsh austerity agreement (Katsambekis, 2019). Soon, SYRIZA’s story took on different names, marking the bitter taste it left for the Greek and the international left: “capitulation,” “the Greek case,” “SYRIZA’s failure,” and even “the betrayal.” To be sure, there were many policy areas where SYRIZA attempted to safeguard and modestly expand the last remaining bastions of social rights for the marginalized strata. For example, measures that the left party implemented once in government included offering free health care to 2 million uninsured people, free meals to school children, a minimum solidarity income for the poor, a hold on family home repossessions, a restructuring of non-serviced loans, a law granting citizenship to second-generation immigrants, and recognition of civil partnership for same-sex couples and of the right of same-sex couples to adopt

and foster children (Douzinas, 2017; Katsambekis, 2019; Tambakaki, 2019). However, SYRIZA's failure to deliver its key promises may have been pivotal in the downward trajectory the party followed. After all, SYRIZA initially rose to power by promoting a program centered around economic demands for the restoration of the popular sectors' previous conditions and, most importantly, the cancelling of the Greek debt and the reversal of austerity measures. In other words, left populism brought SYRIZA to power; however, the inability to push forward its policy agenda (the "left" component of left populism) gradually affected its ability to mobilize the popular sectors and to operate as a salient point of populist identification—and not the other way round. The July 2019 elections in Greece brought the right-wing establishment back to power. What SYRIZA offered was too little too late. However, it is important to note that the percentage SYRIZA secured (31.53%) was "only" 3.93% lower than the one the party gained in 2015 when it achieved power (35.46%).

Our brief overview has shown that an array of contemporary left actors employed populism to different degrees—revealing a rich typology of left populism(s): as rich as the distinct left variants, currents, and sects of the non-populist left.⁶ Some parties employed populism as a communication strategy to capture power, while, for some others, populism functioned as an integral logic structuring their identity. Thus, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the diverse and complex character of left populism. Left populism cannot be reduced to a single monolithic category (as it usually happens with "populism" *in abstracto* thus disorienting populism research). We can perhaps distinguish between core/agential/strategic/political and peripheral/communicative/tactical/electoral (left) populism. The former would refer to hegemonic forms of populism rooted in salient identifications, such as (left) Peronism in Argentina. The latter would refer to communicational instances of populism that are tactically employed (consciously or unconsciously) in precise moments, such as electoral campaigns. Both SYRIZA and Jeremy Corbyn were proven to be such cases. Besides, they both failed to take seriously popular choice expressed through referendums and thus gradually lost their agential dynamism (to sustain an interpellation/identification loop producing long-term affective collective subjectivities) (see Meadway, 2021).

3 | LEFT-WING POPULISM: AN ASSESSMENT

As our analysis has shown, some of the political actors briefly reviewed above remained fringe parties in opposition; many have gradually entered parliaments, taking up the role of challenger actors; a few threatened incumbent governments; while only one, SYRIZA, has achieved power as a major partner and one, PODEMOS, as a minor partner in coalition. Nonetheless, after having reached a peak in 2015, the left populist cycle that sparked in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis became increasingly weakened in Europe; and, ironically, many of these vocal radical leftists relocated further to the center. Does this signify the end of left populism? In this section, we pragmatically discuss the merits and limitations of left populism—because, obviously, both exist—and ask anew whether populism can be seen—on balance—as a suitable co-traveler with the left. We critically assess the "success"/"failure" of left populism by bringing into dialogue the critical conceptual and hermeneutical strategies deployed in the earlier sections with the empirical contemporary phenomena discussed in the previous one. In what follows, we revisit, once more, the assumption that populism—as another name for reformism—is an incompatible strategy for the left that will inevitably fail to implement a radical program in power, signifying the end of the populist moment for the left.

3.1 | From conceptual analysis to historical genealogy

In framing class-based politics as the true and only form of radical left politics (see Sotiris, 2019), certain left perspectives make populism and reformism synonymous (also see Seferiades, 2020). Seferiades postulates that there "exists a far more cognizant term to describe [populism]: reformism – the old ideology of the 2nd International, according to which robust and lasting social change can be effected through a protractedly centripetal class-collaborationist

Burgfriedenspolitik or, simply, by playing by the rules of the game” (Seferiades, 2020, pp. 235–236). The relationship between “left radicalism” and “populism” is conceptualized as a hierarchical relationship in which the former takes the name of “the pure” and the latter of “the impure.” Yet, such a conceptualization falls into the essentialist trap that imposes conceptual hierarchies on asymmetrical categories (see Aslanidis, 2015): as we already clarified analytically, reformism and populism are neither synonymous nor antithetical. Populist strategy cannot be reduced to reformism, but can even inform a vernacular revolutionary politics, which can also be explicitly socialist. This is not to deny that a radical-institutionalist form of reformism (Mouffe, 2018), populist or otherwise, may be crucial within particular conjunctures that cannot sustain more radical democratic alternatives; let us not forget, after all, that political activity rarely takes place in ideal conditions: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited” (Marx, 1996, p. 32). At any rate, a detailed analysis of reformism is irrelevant here; what is important is to show that the evidence does not allow an exclusive association of populism with reformism.

Indeed, a genealogy of left populism reveals a lot about the rich—but relatively unknown—choreography between populism and the socialist left (Stavarakakis, 2022). For a start, one needs to register the implication of socialist ideas and Marx himself in the first historically recorded populist movement, the Russian revolutionary movement of *Narodniki*. This is amply highlighted in Teodor Shanin’s (1983) edited collection entitled *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and ‘the Peripheries of Capitalism*. On the one hand, the Social Revolutionary Party of the People’s Will (*Sotsialnrevolyutsionnaya partiya Narodnoi Voli*) itself had engaged with Marx and Marxism. In their “Programme of the Executive Committee,” for example, they explicitly define themselves as “socialists and populists” (Shanin, 1983, p. 209). On the other hand, Marx himself became increasingly interested in the Russian question and populism toward the end of his life—as his reply to the letter by Vera Zasulich indicates. As Musto (2021), an important historian of late Marx, highlights, the socialist philosopher “highly regarded the down-to-earth character of the political activity of Russian populism—which at the time was a left-wing, anticapitalist movement—particularly because it did not resort to senseless ultrarevolutionary flourishes or to counterproductive generalizations. Marx assessed the relevance of the socialist organizations existing in Russia by their pragmatic character, not by declaration of loyalty to his own theories. In fact, he observed that it was often those who claimed to be ‘Marxists’ who were the most doctrinaire. His exposure to the theories and the political activity of Russian Populists—as with the Paris Communards a decade earlier—helped him to be more flexible in analyzing the irruption of revolutionary events and the subjective forces that shaped them. It brought him closer to a true internationalism on a global scale”.

Cinella suggests that the ensuing shift and Marx’s interest in the *Narodniki* was motivated by the “shipwreck” of the First International and Marx’s disillusionment with the Paris Commune of 1871, and the prospects of radical revolutionary change in the West (Cinella, 2019, pp. 13, 227, 231, 232).⁷ Just before his death, Marx seems to have started embracing Russian populism (*ibid.*: pp. 185, 192, 194) (while, as Pappa (2011, p. 79) observes in his work on Russia during this period, Marx seems to be reluctant to refer to “the proletariat,” which was already present in Russian cities). Marx’s support for the *Narodniki* and the elaboration of a new theory of history beyond eurocentrism constitute, in Cinella’s account, the fundamental features of Marx’s intellectual transformation during these final years (Cinella, 2019, p. 222).⁸ The relationship between populism and socialism has been historically more intimate than both camps have liked to declare (Jäger, 2019b; Stavarakakis, 2022). Laclau (1977) has also stressed the intrinsic affinities between populism and socialism. Yet, this does not mean that the ensuing relationship was any less troubled, that populists were full-blown Marxists, or that Marx himself became a full-blown populist. Intimacy, in fact, is often a precondition for trouble. Marx’s acrimonious debates with Proudhon, his struggle with the Jacobin vision of the “people” handed down by French republicans, and his cautious rapprochement with radical peasant movements all indicate that the attempt to turn a “class” into a “people” was always a troubled endeavor (Pipes, 1960).

Back to the contemporary era, the case of SYRIZA, to which the “left purists” dedicate a significant effort of criticism, is particularly important for our argument too. The blame for the party’s failure to cancel austerity and implement a radical left program was put on *populism* by various academics and commentators as well as by some activists on the left. Yet, the key questions to ask is (first) whether it was SYRIZA’s *populism* that was defeated in 2015 upon the

capitulation to the troika's demands; and (second) whether it was SYRIZA's *populism* that was responsible for that defeat. Indeed, populists' ability to articulate the people from a power position is often weakened, but what if SYRIZA's unsuccessful outcomes were not rooted in the *populist style* that the party followed? On the contrary, its populist style operated as a critical toolkit in mainstreaming left-wing programmatic proposals (by many considered radical) and ultimately gaining electoral support by sectors of the population that did not necessarily ascribe to the left previously.

If we are to speak of a "defeat" in the case of SYRIZA we need to direct the discussion to the gradual abandonment of its commitment to a clear break with neoliberalism. Drawing on the conceptual distinction we put forward in the theoretical section, it seems that what got eroded was not the *populist* but rather the *radical left* component of SYRIZA.⁹ The fact that its promises were implemented with concessions or were not implemented at all indicates a discount in the leftist core of the party. The main feature of the radical left is its opposition to neoliberalism that, as March (2011) highlights, has lost its weight in many of the so-called radical left parties. Similarly, Mazzolini and Borriello (2021) also distinguish between populist and leftist performativity. They argue that part of the reasons PODEMOS declined was rooted in its shift from the "irreconcilable antagonistic relation to the Spanish political system [...] to an agonistic opposition to some of its aspects" (Mazzolini & Borriello, 2021, p. 6). Perhaps PODEMOS' fadeout coincided with the party's strategic choice to abandon its populist direction by recuperating the leftist vocabulary and symbolism and turning to "the niche of the left" than to "the limelight of the political stage" (Mazzolini & Borriello, 2021, pp. 6, 8, 13).

At any rate, there is no populist guideline on how to nationalize the railways or cancel austerity measures (this is the task of policy design), and there is no specific policy that can be defined as populist.¹⁰ To return to the SYRIZA experience, not only populism as a communicational device did not cease to exist during the 4 years in office but it often served as the main discursive repertoire employed by the governing party (Venizelos, 2020). Was this the main reason populist SYRIZA failed in power or was it the reason that sustained it in power despite its failure? This is indeed a subject for debate. What if, for example, the impressive majority achieved in the 2015 referendum was a culmination of its populist character in the first phase that SYRIZA's concrete policies were then proven incapable of sustaining? The reasons for this incapacity should perhaps be sought elsewhere (adverse international balance of forces and lack of alliances, lack of available technical and other resources, etc.); for as it has been forcefully claimed, *populist voluntarism is never enough*.

Given the downward trajectory of contemporary left populism, Sotiris (2019, p. 33) wonders "why it is necessary to still insist on a notion of the people, with all the ambiguities involved in it, instead of opting for something like the working class(es) or labour." Insisting on the populist strategy is not to ignore the importance, and—in some cases—the relative primacy, of worker's struggles, but to stress the *mobilizational function* of the former. Populism is not defined by the mere rhetorical reference to the syntagma "the people" but by the very task of *representing* "the people." Notwithstanding the limits of populism, one must not neglect the dynamics this strategy offered in mobilizing the masses in favor of left policies in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Socialist and progressive ideas became popularized and appealed broadly due to the renewed style that populism brought about (interwoven with the grave socioeconomic conditions). Candidates such as Sanders, who in the past were thought of as old fashioned and dangerous, would have never moved from the margins to the mainstream of American society without it. SYRIZA, PODEMOS, and others would not have been in a position to either honor or betray their policy commitments, to start with.

Besides, the erosion of the welfare state, increasing inequalities, dispossession, privatization, environmental degradation, financial crises, debt, as well as the impact of automation point toward a highly fragmented and decentralized society (Harvey, 2005; Therborn, 2013). As Agustin (2020, p. 51) put it, "the fragmentation of class, due to the multiplicity of social struggles and the vanishing conditions associated with industrial workers, makes it quite difficult for the working class, the proletariat, to continue as the leading emancipatory subject." Thus, the proper question to ask is not whether populism is a suitable strategy, but whether class purism is even possible at all.

This debate is not "postmodern" (Charalambous, 2020, p. 213). As we have seen, toward the end of his life, Marx himself seems to have taken a step "towards a more complex and more realistic conceptualization of the global heterogeneity of societal forms, dynamics and interdependence" (Shanin, 1983, p. 6). The populist logic enables a broader articulation of the collective subject through the ensuing chain of equivalences while preserving the verticality of the

economic and social struggles (Agustín, 2020, p. 51). Employing a populist strategy, Mouffe argues, “does not mean we privilege the demands of the new movements at the expense of those of the working class” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 2). On the contrary, such an argument in favor of left populism stresses “the need for a left politics to articulate the struggles about different forms of subordination without attributing *any a priori* centrality to any of them” (ibid.). Indeed, for many leftists and left-wing theorists this is nowadays accepted wisdom. Although this does not necessarily mean that they accept left populism, they often endorse some type of horizontalism without engaging much with issues regarding articulation and/or representation. Class can perhaps play again its central role in political antagonism, but this cannot result from a universal recognition of its unmediated objectivity through an “enlightenment” process that relies on the a priori assumed epistemic superiority of a supposedly pure Marxist science (an elitist and rationalist claim *par excellence*); such a centrality can only be won within political struggles themselves.

3.2 | Is the populist moment over for the left?

The inquiry over the end of the left populist cycle in the aftermath of SYRIZA’s capitulation is of critical importance for our analysis. The argument over the retreat of the Greek party was elevated to a universal one and became synonymous with the end of the populist moment for the left in general. Discussions on the trajectories of PODEMOS and Jeremy Corbyn adopted similar arguments. Bolton and Pitts (2018) argued that one of the main obstacles in Corbyn’s populist strategy is that it neglected class analysis and disregarded the complexity of social and economic relations. With respect to PODEMOS, Muñoz and Moreiras (2020) argued that the party’s “failure is also a failure of theory.” This was a direct attack on the theories of Laclau and Mouffe in that PODEMOS’ leadership openly embraced populism and attempted to reclaim its meaning, maintaining close personal ties with the two contemporary thinkers.¹¹ The blame for the failure of leftist actors was put on “populism” and the “Essex School” as proponents of progressive democratic populism. Seferiades states that “[d]espite their intense theoretical idiom, when upholding their notion of ‘populism’ Laclau and disciples actually tell us very little about the nature – the practical merits but, more importantly the eye-catching defects – of this strategy” (Seferiades, 2020, p. 235). As is often the case, critics who put the whole blame on the Essex School tend to focus exclusively on Europe where left populism took a downward trajectory. At the same time, they often neglect the abundant literature that sustains a vibrant and critical debate within the literatures regarding the “radical left” and “populism” (Borriello & Jäger, 2020; Charalambous & Ioannou, 2020; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021; Dean & Maiguashca, 2020; Katsambekis & Kioupiolis, 2019; Mazzolini, 2020; Stavrakakis, 2020), and seem to disavow the long genealogy of mutual encounters going back to Marx (Stavrakakis, 2022).

Obviously, the sustainability of any project (populist or not) depends on more than rhetorical repertoires that aim to mobilize the masses. Affective and corporeal identification is a key aspect of political hegemony, but let us turn to organizational material aspects as they will satisfy this discussion better. Skeptics such as Borriello and Jäger (2020) identify “a bitter fruit” (p.6) in Laclau’s theory that, as they claim, is “often marketed as radical and transformative” (ibid.). In their reading, a dogmatic camp within “the Essex school” articulates a “reductive take on the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’” (ibid.)—one that is narrowly focused on electoral media cycles without aspiring to real base-building but rather aiming for social dominance writ large (ibid.). This organizational preoccupation against populism as a prerequisite for the sustainability of political projects is also found in Sotiris (2019, p. 34) and Mazzolini and Borriello (2021). Indeed, the sustainability of political projects requires material organization rooted at the local, national, and international levels. Beyond the electoral arena, relations with workplaces, spaces of domination, social movements and so forth, create linkages with society that are necessary after an election (Kouvelakis, 2022). Although it is true that such concerns are rather peripheral in Laclau’s thought, the latter did indeed argue that “hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that will be easily colonised by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...]” (Laclau, 2014, p. 9). These reflexive articulations seem to be neglected by critics of Laclau.¹²

At any rate, success to enter government is not synonymous with success “in power.” The salience of “the old”—in fact, crumbling, cleavages, and patterns of political representation—imposed serious limits on contemporary European populist contenders (Mazzolini & Borriello, 2021, pp. 2, 8). Populist governments may turn from “responsive” (to the demands of “the people”) to “responsible” actors (in order to maintain institutional or economic stability from external pressures and constraints, left actors are often keen to be coerced) (cf. Mair, 2014).¹³ Left radicalism in power may also be absorbed by the established values of preexisting post-democratic and pro-market institutions, thereby entering a phase of so-called “normalization.” Governing populists often fail to impact considerably not only on the modes of production but, also, on the modes of consumption. In many cases, the contemporary left got trapped in a “nostalgic” or “mimetic” political, economic, and psychosocial overdetermination of desire reproducing neoliberal models of production and reproduction, failing to offer a postcapitalist alternative (Stavarakakis, 2020).¹⁴ But the asymmetry of reasons behind the limitations populists face raises anew the question whether their downward trajectory is rooted in factors that are endogenous to populism or not.¹⁵

Nevertheless, does failure— however defined—bring about the end of left populism? Empirically, at least, one can observe a number of populist phenomena, of distinct typological variants, (re)emerging in the aftermath of SYRIZA’s defeat. Even in Greece, where populism was supposedly defeated by “pragmatism,” Varoufakis’ emergent DiEM25 party points to a new (*quasi*-)populist subtype of transnational populism that aspired to represent “the people” beyond the nation-state (De Cleen et al., 2020), although with limited success. In the Latin American continent, left “populist moments” constitute a persistently re-activating feature. In Argentina, the populist left returned to power in 2019 after a 4-year break and have already implemented significant reforms. Similar is the situation in Bolivia with the re-establishment of MAS’ populism, while Chile’s proto-populist resurgence led to the electoral victory of Gabriel Boric. The victory of López Obrador in Mexico, the return of Bernie Sanders, and the emergence of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States seem to reinforce the argument that populism—like all politics—is subject to reactivation. The empirical picture suggests that not only the populist moment is not over for the left but it has already reinvented itself in different ways.

Against such a background of political reactivation(s), the argument about the end of left populism reminds one of Fukuyama’s deterministic view about the end of history. We would rather favor a contingent logic that understands political antagonism as a fluid cycle of re-politicization and de-politicization. The social and the political are not fixed. They are rather fragile and porous. Windows of opportunity will open and close and the establishment of new orders will always stimulate excluded sectors to demand recognition and representation. The anti-austerity protests of the squares in 2010–2012 were such “an event” that capitalized upon the hegemonic dislocation of neoliberalism, and reactivated left mobilization after many years of political stagnation. Does “defeat” signify then the end of populism or the end of a particular cycle?

3.3 | Left-wing anti-populism?

Much of the conceptual discrepancy illustrated above seems to be rooted in the long labor of liberal academia and punditry, whose anti-populist theorizations of populism have imposed a negative connotation on the term (Stavarakakis & Jäger, 2017). (Liberal) anti-populism has arguably extended its influence on the left too, leading to the dismissal of populism as a potentially beneficial strategy for the left. While liberal anti-populism has recently received theoretical attention (Galanopoulos & Venizelos, 2021; Katsambekis & Stavarakakis, 2017; Moffitt, 2018; Ostiguy, 2017), its left-wing variant remains rather overlooked (Venizelos et al., 2019).

As far as Greek academia is concerned, leftist anti-populism first emerged in the 1970s in the context of a left-wing criticism of the Socialist PASOK and its leader, Andreas Papandreou, which hegemonized the 1980s co-opting left sensibilities and marginalizing traditional parties of the left. Instead of coming to terms with the realities of political struggle and attempting to pragmatically understand what was at stake in order to readjust their strategy

accordingly—something that Nicos Poulantzas had been proposing (see Poulantzas, 2000, p. 263; Poulantzas & Weber, 2008, p. 338)—important left intellectuals like Angelos Elefantis (2008) opted to denounce Papandreu as “populist”—understood as a vulgar type of political activity serving the *petit-bourgeoisie*—and, as a result, of no significance to the left. This attitude was emblematically captured in Elefantis’s motto: “From a socialist point of view, PASOK leaves us bluntly uninterested.”

Although understudied, left-wing anti-populism has historically constituted part of left-wing repertoires. In fact, one could identify (at least) two variants of left-wing anti-populism. In the orthodox/communist anti-populist accounts, populism is (a-historically) associated with reformism, while “the people” is presented as historically lacking the consciousness to lead the political struggle. In the cosmopolitan leftist repertoire evident in sectors with a “high” socio-cultural outlook (such as the new urban, professional, and highly educated class), “the people” often appears as too kitsch as a matter of taste and aesthetically too folkloric (Fassin, 2020, 2017). In both (left) anti-populisms (cosmopolitan and old-school), there seems to be an embedded elitism, which tends to highlight a moral and political agency as fundamentally superior. In the case of “the postmodern left,” to which Thomas Piketty (2019) refers as “the Brahmins,” it is the market, the institutions, or the technocrats that “know better.” In communist anti-populism, it is “the class,” its vanguards and cadres that do so, and for this reason they are entrusted with educating (or indoctrinating?) and leading the masses that are alienated from their true class consciousness.

In both cases, however, “the people” or “plebs” are seen as an amorphous mass that is not legitimate enough to act/lead—either due to technical (in)capacity or due to its underdeveloped political consciousness. In the first case, this is founded on the superior knowledge and experience of a new aristocracy; in the second case, in the superior epistemological and political value of historical materialism. It is important to note that the aversion to people-centrism does not necessarily translate to the absence of the term—as one of the names of an emerging collective subject—from the respective political discourses. It will be an a-historical mistake to argue so, since “the people” has always served as an important signifier for the left. Rather, one could speak of an aversion that is latent in a certain implicit hostility toward the idea of popular sovereignty and empowerment; that is, the idea that “the people,” the demos can rule.

In a paradoxical coalition with liberals, radical leftist anti-populism draws directly from mainstream thought in order to construct its argument. Seferiades (2020, p. 244) praises Urbinati (2014) and endorses her framing of populism as a pathology as he defines the phenomenon as “a deceptive pathology that contaminates social movements.” Žižek (2018) endorses Mudde’s (2004) “homogenization thesis” neglecting the numerous pluralistic populisms, and equates populism with irresponsibility and demagoguery further siding with the liberal distortion of a radical history (see Hofstadter, 1965). The obscure radical-liberal ensemble points to another paradox: left-oriented accounts criticize populism for being reformist, while at the same time liberal-oriented accounts accuse populism of being a huge threat to the institutions. Disarming populism from all sides may result in sustaining the elitist values embedded in current (post)democratic structures.

Ironically, (left) anti-populism contradicts Sartori’s (1970) theories of concept formation in that it ascribes to populism properties that are neither exclusive nor constitutive of the concept. It is not only a certain social scientific ethos that is betrayed here, but also the rich genealogy of left populism(s). Today, for example, as we have briefly seen, we have many detailed accounts of the involvement of Marx himself with the populists, which needs to be highlighted; it remains a mystery why, for example, this is not seriously taken into account by all those suggesting a return to class-based, supposedly purist, Marxist politics. Why did Marx seem to have followed the opposite direction in his final years?

4 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we explored the relationship between “populism” and “the left.” We sought to provide conceptual clarity. Thus, our first priority was to distinguish hermeneutically “the left” from “populism” and then define their joint

formation as a discursive/political (mobilizational) logic that frames leftist programmatic content as the “common sense” politics of “the people” promising the restoration of popular sovereignty. This strategy is particularly relevant for our inquiry into a major (and recurring) conceptual and strategic discussion on the intellectual and political left that, following the setbacks of contemporary left-wing populism, seems to argue that the populist moment is over for the left.

This argument seems to be grounded on the conception that “more class” and “less populist” politics could lead the left out of its current deadlock. Yet, in our understanding, the dichotomy between “class” and “populism” is false in that it ascribes (a priori) to class politics the status of an infallible (pure) truth and to populism the status of (impure) reformism (see also Mouffe, 2018). We find this position problematic in two respects. First, our overview of contemporary left populism showed that its evident setbacks and defeats are rooted in the abandonment of *left* programmatic theses (such as to reverse austerity, to redistribute wealth, to expand sociopolitical inclusion to the marginalized, including migrants) and not in the abandonment of people-centrism and anti-elitism (that define populism)—however, the scope for strategic moves can be weakened when a policy agenda encounters limits. At any rate, one should better examine the retreat of left populism by focusing on the radical left content and not its populist shaping; it is the latter that brought the former policy agenda to the fore, although it could not guarantee its long-term success. Second, this position is historically unsubstantiated in that various leftist projects across time and space have (consciously or not) employed a populist strategy in order to create popular fronts and expand their appeal to the wider population. Indeed, some of these projects can be described as reformist; however, others exhibited more radical commitments. Even more surprisingly, through our genealogical examination we highlighted that even Marx himself showed an increasing interest in populism toward the last few years of his life, to the degree that references to the proletariat were gradually reduced.

Populism’s dismissal seems to be influenced by the profoundly anti-populist liberal mainstream that has influenced the left too. But this is not to say that populism is a panacea. Populism may have been the main strategic option for the post-crash left, and in fact it has driven it out of its long inwardness; but this does not mean that it always constitutes the preferable strategy for the left or that it guarantees success a priori (either in opposition or in power). Yet identifying “populism” as the root cause of all failure seems to obscure a necessary pragmatic evaluation regarding what went wrong with its recent terms in government. This discussion needs to proceed urgently because left populism may soon bring left-wing forces back to government, as it has already started happening in Latin America.

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NOTES

¹ Commonly, Laclau and Mouffe are viewed as patrons of populism but it is important to note that they have neither invented populism theory nor (left) populist politics. It is true that some populist leaders, such as PODEMOS’ Errejón, admitted their dedication to Laclau and Mouffe’s populism; but, at the same time, other populists remain agnostic or even ignorant about their work. Indeed, certain moments or practices in SYRIZA, for example, may resonate with Laclau and Mouffe’s theorization of sociopolitical organization, but it cannot be stressed enough that the ties between the party and the two thinkers were not as strong as one would think. Laclau and Mouffe’s work has indeed played an important role in advancing the study of populism, but their importance lies more in codifying numerous historical instances of populism by developing a novel mode of analysis drawing on postfoundational thought, psychoanalytically oriented political theory, and so on. Yet, due to the strict association between Laclau, and later Mouffe, and the theory of populism—which is nonetheless a contemporary, hyped, and often exaggerated phenomenon—the specific theorist(s) were targeted for the failures of the contemporary left

(see Jäger & Borriello, 2020). “Their theory” was framed as inept at providing comprehensive solutions to left (populists) in government. But was it ever intended to do so?

- ² Obviously such clarity is not always achievable in political practice, where form and content interact with each other continuously and dynamically, morphing into each other. However, in order to properly account for the modes of their interaction within the practical political terrain, it may be useful to clarify their conceptual specificity.
- ³ We use the term populist strategy to denote an articulatory operation that interpellates popular sectors in order to construct, by inviting their active engagement and mobilization/participation, affectively invested collective identifications able to influence decision-making processes. Although we recognize the value of Weyland’s (2001) strategic approach, we distance ourselves from it due to its normatively loaded baggage. The so-called strategic approach to populism seems to overemphasize individualism and the role of the leader, thus downgrading the agency (and desire) of “the people” in relationally engaging in this political process to advance popular empowerment.
- ⁴ Indeed, most (electoral) political projects aspire to establish hegemony via constructing shared (popular) collective identifications—crystallized and minimally recorded as social and political majorities. However, there is a fundamental difference between the orthodox Marxist and the radical democratic take. The former arguably understands hegemony in a narrow sense ultimately disavowing “the political.” It assumes a priori—on the basis of some epistemic superiority—that “the real struggle” lies between “the two and only” classes of society (workers and capital), assumes a universal rational(ist) agreement on that, and posits an automatic unification and mobilization process among the noncapitalist class on the unmediated basis of a more or less objective (necessary) class positionality. As a result, it underestimates the heterogeneity of the social sectors comprising the latter and the contingent complexity of political struggle itself, which involves an often-challenging attempt to unify and mobilize the popular/subaltern pole without preexisting guarantees.
- ⁵ It is important to stress though, that inclusionary nationalist articulations embedded in populist repertoires are not foreign to European left-wing politics. Before France Insoumise, SYRIZA, PODEMOS, and at times Corbyn as well as Andreas Papandreu’s PASOK in the 1980s had also incorporated similar characteristics. In Italy, the partisans of the Communist Party were grouped up in two organizations that were called “Brigate Garibaldi” and “Gruppi di Azione Patriottica.” Left (populist) inclusionary nationalisms constitute almost an organic element of populism in Latin America too. The centrality of the nation is also present in socialist literature. Lenin (1916, pp. 320–360) had written extensively on the nation’s right for self-determination. In addition, in his seminal book *Permanent Revolution*, Trotsky (1931, ch. 2) wrote about “the reconstruction of the nation under the leadership of the proletariat.” Finally, in his *Prison Notebooks* and especially in the passages on the modern prince, Gramsci (1971, pp. 113, 131–133, 104) spoke about a Jacobin force that would awaken the nation and mobilize its collective will in the form of a national-popular orientation.
- ⁶ See Maoists, Trotskyists, Leninists, and social democrats as well as different organizational “models” ranging from leaderless collectives, trade unionists, leader-centric formations, and so on.
- ⁷ This is evident in Marx’s dismissal of any kind of determinism and in his thorough registering of the role of the historical context in political dynamics, two related positions developed in (a) his letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski* and (b) especially in his reply to the letter by Vera Zasulich (Wada, 1983, p. 41).
- ⁸ All scenarios seem to be open here: apart from socialism allying itself with left populism or left populism morphing into some type of reformist agenda, world history has also witnessed left populism paving the ground for certain types of revolutionary radicalization; here, the example of Fidel Castro is revealing as he seems to have emerged out of the Cuban People’s Party (Partido Ortodoxo), a populist organization founded by Eduardo Chibas (Argote-Freyre, 2001).
- ⁹ The party failed to implement an economic program that, as many commentators put it, could be described as *Keynesian*. In addition to the economic demands, other policies focusing on immigration, policing, and poverty indicate further that, ideologically, SYRIZA was situated somewhere between social democracy and the radical left on the left/right spectrum (Kouvelakis, 2016).
- ¹⁰ This was evident in the diverse ways that different populist leaders over the world responded to the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, even within the “family” of left populists, responses were not always identical. See, Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020).
- ¹¹ The skepticism over populism was also evident in the Latin American context too; for example, when right-wing candidates disrupted the hegemony of left populist governments associated with the Pink Tide of the 2000s—Macri in Argentina, and the downfall of Morales in Bolivia. Yet, in both countries left populism has recently returned to power already implementing important social reforms (e.g., a new debt relief agreement and the legalization of abortion in Argentina).
- ¹² Notwithstanding the critique of verticalism, often but not exclusively concentrated in the figure of the leader, it has to be stressed that even self-proclaimed horizontalist projects require some degree of verticality. It is perhaps worth looking into Bakunin’s (1871) and Kropotkin’s (1880) thought on anarchist unionism, alliance building, and vanguardism but also the writings of various anarcho-syndicalists such as the Spanish CNT (see Zoffmann-Rodríguez, 2018). Also see, in this respect, Nunes (2021).
- ¹³ Undoubtedly, the SYRIZA government has been affected by similar constraints set by the eurozone and the cryptocolonial attachment of many Greeks to so-called European values and Europeanisation. In this sense, one needs to distinguish success to win power from success in power.

- ¹⁴ Even in cases where progressive left (populist) governance lasted a while, their governments failed to escape the left's "eternal" deadlocks. In Venezuela, the Chavista movement continued to depend on petroleum in order to provide stability to the country, thus failing to explore alternatives such as green and cooperative economies. In Argentina, the heterodox economics of the Kirchnerist governments that re-incorporated excluded subjects and advanced the lower classes were followed by the restoration of the consumerist and market-oriented values of globalization opening the doors to the elitist and anti-populist right.
- ¹⁵ Another possibility for left populism in power constitutes the transformation of populist radicals into radical authoritarians, often with a little help from the anti-populist opposition (e.g., Nicolas Maduro). In such cases though, one should wonder whether the label "populist" still fits to describe leaders without "the people." Nevertheless, in this text we focus mostly on left populism's institutionalization/normalization that is most relevant to the questions we try to address.

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