RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL, RELATIONAL APPROACH TO POPULISM

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the relational, socio-cultural approach to populism, also referred to by some as "performative". The approach claims phenomenological validity cross-regionally and is complex enough to provide a theory of populism and its subjective logic, while minimal enough to be used handily by other scholars. Populism is not a set of decontesting ideas or "ideology", but a way of being and acting in politics, embodying in discourse and praxis the culturally *popular* and "from here", in an antagonistic and mobilizational way against its opposite, together with personalism as a concrete mode of authority. Defined in the most synthetic way, populism is the flaunting of what I typologically call the "low". I also argue that civilizational projects of different kinds create a distasteful "unpresentable other"; populists then claim that this Other is nothing less than the true Self of the nation, its "authentic" people, disregarded in that process. Relatedly, the article introduces the general populist scheme of contending forces*,* present cross-regionally and in left as well as right populisms, with "the people" facing a three-way coalition: a nefarious minority Otherized; global forces strongly playing in favor of it; a government in line with that minority or alliance. Populism extolls the national pleb "as is" and promise to reconcile the nation with itself by making the plebs the whole. The cultural component of populism should be domesticated by political scientists, since it has deep roots in cleavage formation theory, the sociology of distinction, and updated Gramscian and Weberian sociopolitical analyses.

KEYWORDS: Civilizing, Performative, Personalistic Leadership, Political Identification, Political Communication, Populism, The People.

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1. Introduction

This article introduces and summarizes the relational, socio-cultural approach to populism. The specificically populist component of political appeals and performances can hardly be ideological in the conventional sense of either a set of ideas or a set of tightly inter-woven propositions, principles, plans for public policies and ontological world views. Populism, moreover, also presents itself on quite opposite extremes of the political spectrum, particularly in Europe, as well as in more centrist ideological positions, as historically observed in Latin America. This is because populism, in fact, operates somewhere else, as a rhetoric or, more broadly, as a style or mode in politics. Populism is a way of stating certain things, a certain discourse (in the narrow sense of the term), but also and as well a praxis. That is, populism is something that *is done*.

Populism, as a way or a certain style of doing politics, is done for relational purposes, to create a specific kind of bond between the populist leadership and the social sectors he or she is appealing to. But it covers a broad range between, at one extreme, "show business" and the theatrality of public performances to both bond (with certain people) and antagonize (others), thus falling in the field of political communication, and, at the other, the expression of pain, suffering, frustrations, prejudices, social fears or humiliations that often result from social cleavages, thus belonging in the last instance to the field of political sociology. One pole does not invalidate the other; but the first is usually viewed as being more superficial and malleable, while the second is often presented as "deeper" and harder to change. What is relevant here is that the specifically populist dimension is not a set of ideas per se, but a way of both presenting them and relating with a particular public. Populism is thus about *form*—although that form may actually convey much more "content" politically than a typical policy program. While the radical right and the radical left *are* indeed ideologies, populism is a mode of delivery, a "way of being" in public. In the socio-cultural approach, populism is thus understood as a form (a style, a mode of relation)—thus its remarkable polyvalence on the ideological left-right spectrum.

Through a successful populist leader, populism, in its fullest expression, seeks to embody the people, to "make it graphically flesh". And here "the people" is not an abstract citizenry or some desimbodied *volonté générale*, but, importantly, the people as "national pleb"—the two elements, combined, being key.[1] In contrast to classical Marx-

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[1] The relation between "the nation", populism, and nationalism is discussed below. Suffice it to say that populism does not invoke "the pleb" in general (the way Marxism, for example, invokes "the proletariat"), but generally and almost always "the pleb from here", which in practice is almost always a given "recog-

ism, "the people" as privileged actor is/are not a "proletariat", defined by relations of production and whose profile amongst nations would be very similar given similar economic conditions, nor is it objectively "the nation" as a whole. Populism is always a part claiming to be the whole.[2] That is, it is the national pleb claiming to be "the people" (as a whole, or "true whole"). In populist terms, the populists represent the "authentic"[3] and "deserving" or "long suffering" "people of the nation", who have been ignored or taken advantage of by an establishment—not necessarily "the political elite". For this reason, cross-regionally, populists seek to represent the pleb qua non-elite, and more specifically a "pleb from here". The socio-cultural element comes in through the graphical display or scenic representation of this "people from here", treated "painfully" on the public scene as if second class or at least not the way they think they "deserve" to be. The use of informal, locally-anchored, language, the exaggeration of "typical" displays, the body language, are all key, recognizable, telling elements of populism socioculturally. And this use, often quite transgressive, is always directed antagonistically at an Other, manifestedly not of the "national pleb".

Because of this immanence of the performative component, of the audiovisual nature of relevant first-hand material, and especially furthermore because of how I define "the low" (see below), the *personalized leadership*—not the name, but the leader him/herself—is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of populism. Not surprisingly, we have Perón-ism, Chavismo, Gaitanismo; and online sites on populism always figure these peculiar leaders, from Trump, to Marine Le Pen, to Chavez. If populism is a way of being in public, or more exactly the performance of a way of being in public, this cannot be done without the central actor, whose name, according to Laclau, acts as the essential empty signifier congealing the equivalential chain—and who also happens to have (quite) a voice. The symbol of the left is red, the Socialists used to display a rose, the Green have a color as their symbol, but there is no Peronism without the infinitely displayed pictures of Perón and Evita; Chavez, alive as President, was on every walls of Venezuela; there is no Front National without the Le Pen family; no "Party for Freedom" without platinum blond Geert Wilders, etc. Because I focus not only on discourse

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nizably *national*" pleb. In Argentina, as an example, Peronists *always* refer to themselves as "the popular *and national* camp".

[2] A wide range of authors have made that claim, from Laclau (2005) to several of his followers (and especially in Argentina), to non-Laclauians such as Canovan (1999) and Brubaker (2020). That is, "the people" is not only the subalterns, the underdogs, but, in populism, the subalterns *claiming to be* "the whole", the nation/people as a whole, through what Laclau calls a hegemonic operation. Here, needless to say, the vertical axis disappears, replaced by the claim of *fullness of the community*.

[3] By "authentic" I do not mean "pure", a term of Mudde´s definition of populism. "Authenticity" involves something recognizably "national-and-popular" or more precisely, truly "popularly from here".

(and platforms) but on ways of being in public, the latter object is impossible to study without such personalized (and generally uncommon) leaderships.[4] To be sure, the centrality of the leader (as a necessary, but not sufficient condition) does not mean that the political movement or "party" is authoritarian or even top-down. It only means that it is personalistic. In fact, in most Latin American populisms, party discipline and top-down control is *very weak.*

In the socio-cultural approach, depictions are concrete, immanent, almost audio-visual. That is, populism is not apprehended only through "reading" speeches, but by listening to them and by watching the utterer. At its extreme, the primary data for this approach should be audio-visual. In contrast to the orthodoxy of the ideational approach, we study discourse and ideation *inductively*, and treat it in the broader sense of meaning-creating praxes. Methodologically, the case studies can feed on ethnography, field research, discourse analysis, partiticipant observations; the disciplinary tent is also broadened to include in addition to sociology and political science, cultural studies, critical studies and rhetoric.

Despite this flexibility and inductiveness, the socio-cultural approach to populism does introduce, as meta-categories and at a more technical level, a key dimension of differentiation in political appeals and performances that we call the "high" and the "low," explained below. The resulting high-low dimension in politics is in several instances as structuring and defining politically as the conceptually orthogonal, much-used, and relevant left-right dimension. Therefore, combined, there can be a "low left", such as for example Hugo Chavez and Chavismo, as there can be a "low right", such as Donald Trump and his rumbonctious supporters. The same applies in relation to "the high", with more specifically a "high left", as with Lionel Jospin, and a "high right". In Italy, Beppe Grillo and Umberto Bossi (performing in a certain way that he is "from here") can be understood respectively as low (arguably) "left" and low right. Left-right are important differences politically, but so are high-low differences. In countries like Argentina and perhaps increasingly in Italy, the high-low cleavage may be more determinant for political alliances than the left-right one.

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[4] To be sure, leadership is also very important in non-populist parties, as with Trudeau for the Liberals in Canada, Merkel for the CDU in Germany, Thatcher for the Tories in Britain, etc. But all these parties are much older than those leaders, will continue to exist well after them, and even during their terms such parties stood for relatively clear political principles, platforms and ideologies. In contrast, the PSUV (who even know those acronyms?) is whatever Chavez decided it was; Peronism existed quite well during a large portion of its existence (1955-1973; 1976-1983) without even having a political party. And the PJ has sequentially adopted pretty much every political ideology that exists, while who is its leader is never in doubt.

Like left and right, high and low are typological political categories. Reality, actors, and of course history are in contrast fluid. The same way the left may be partly hegemonic in a polity, then give way to a rightwing reaction as part of certain socioeconomic agential transformations, the high can the in same way be hegemonic in a given country, leading to the emergence of a low challenging it politically and even taking power, followed by a polarized political reality or a new hegemony now of the low. Bluntly said, it is not because the typology is well-defined, that reality does not evolve and change. High and low are typological tools for grasping a changing and evolving reality. Finesse therefore lies in the historical analysis itself. The types, on the other hand, must be judged by their theorical (and social) meaningfulness and by their sociopolitical relevance.

"High" and "low" as political categories, like "left" and "right", cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Populism is, by definition, I argue, "on the low" (see below), but it is also, more specifically, a *flaunting* of that low, intentionally (and one may add antagonistically), on the public scene. Similarly, the "self-controlled" high, in its adamant anti-populism, almost always expresses fear of the *dérive,* "the drift", or of *dérapage*. To put it in a non-orthodox way, the populist low is always a kind of "joyful desecration of the high". And it tends to be animated, furthermore, by what I have called elsewhere (2014: 22) a "combative pleasure principle".

This approach to populism therefore does not downplay the importance of affects in populism. It is particularly well suited to take into account the emotions of the bond and of the interpellation. Culturally, epic poetry as in the case of the speeches of Hugo Chavez, music as with the Peronist march, or folk songs as with the American populist tradition, have always had a central presence in populist phenomena. And this should not come as a surprise, as populism is both expressive (more than ideational) and relational—"constituting" or extolling in many ways a people, at least in terms of identity and identity creation.[5]

This approach is thus relational, between an "asserting" (or "flaunting") leadership, on the one hand, and on the other, popular sociocultural identities or, if not, popular traits and ways of doing that can then be articulated as political identities. With the emphasis on the informal, culturally-popular, from here, comes also an element of – performed—*closeness*. The informal form stands, in many ways, as (substantive) content for both proximity and for antagonism (to what is). Second, because of the marked contrast with the mostly standard "high" ways of doing politics, populist appeals are transgressive, improper, and antagonistic, in that they are intended to "shock" or pro-

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[5] To be sure, music has been equally important for the left, especially the more radical left, as well as the radical right.

voke. Formally, our approach is an understanding of populism as transgressive informality in antagonistic relation to formalities. In many ways, this is the "low" I have written about (2009, 2017) and the "bad manners" Moffitt has emphasized (2016). These are not just *any* bad manners, however, but "bad manners" that are culturally plebeian and recognizably from here. And with their performative emphasis on closeness, populists concretely perform—in an antagonistic way—a *representation* ("acting"/"portrayal") or re-presentation of the people from here, "*as is*." Arguably, populists accomplish a double trick: by re-presenting "people" as they (think) they are, they constitute a certain kind of "people".[6]

Populism should thus be studied empirically by looking at the performance and praxis of politicians (which includes, but is not limited to, discourse), and therefore audio-visually. In terms of performativeness, I am willing to call this approach *performative* provided that, in contrast to a certain post-structuralist take on performativity, the political link that populist performance creates be popularly understood as coming from an expressive self, and not just simply from a given repertoire. When this performed expressive self of a populist leaders "works", it creates identification—vertically, certainly, with the leader, but also horizontally amongst *compañeros*.

As the "sixth truth of Peronism" states: "For a Peronist, there is nothing better than another Peronist!" Solidarity betweens adepts of a populist movement is highly valued and, when done under that guise, much practiced. It is also worth quoting the well-known *Marcha peronista*, still massively actively sang, seven decades after its composition:

Let's imitate the example
of this Argentine "real man"
The Peronist guys
All united we shall triumph
                    My General, you are so dear
Perón, Perón, great leader
                    You're the first worker.

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[6] This does not mean that they constitute a people "from scratch", that is, from a purely discursive operation; but it also means that they are not purely "mirrors" of something objective. There is a selection of traits, of emphases and forgetfulness, of certain experiences and not of others, that may resonate (or not) with their public. More importantly yet, there is a specifically political operation that transforms a certain *popular* into a given "pueblo" akin to the populists' advertised identity.

The song is certainly about a macho leader to be imitated, but it is also about the "Peronist guys who united shall triumph". The General may be a great leader, but he is also a worker—albeit the "first worker".

Comradship (together with a certain form of "exclusivism") comes first, together with the typical extolling of the people as they are.[7] Of equal importance to the lyrics or "discourse" analyzed here, is the *way* in which the Peronist march is always sung: banging all together the sides of the bus while crossing the city, accompanied by huge drums (*bombos*) at rallies, while raising and moving one´s arm with a "V" sign, etc. This performative practice is both expressive *and* ritualized, both chaotic and highly pre-dictable. But in any case, *popolare*, informal, and emotional it is.

Such forms, from a post-Marxist standpoint, are (intelligent) ways to construct he-gemony within non-dominant social sectors in society. Gramsci in particular was sensi-tive to the role of form in the difficulties experienced by communism in Southern Italy. That is, hegemony always extends beyond the political or ideological realm (and pre-supposes something *anterior* to it), involving social and cultural processes, as Gramsci recognized decades ago.

Because populism is relational and performative, it gets "constituted politically in the act", itself. In contrast to socialist or liberal beliefs that can exist within the popula-tion without a socialist or liberal politician (since these are ideologies), there are not *per se* populist beliefs (although there can be a populist sensibility) and no populism to speak of without the phenomenon itself being practiced. Thus the current trend to study populism from a demand side of "populist beliefs" amongst the voters (Spruyt et al 206), separately from a supply side (of "populist speeches" by political leaders), is problematic. The situation is moreover made more complex, second, in that populism in its *praxis* actually redefines the borders of what is *sayable* and hence doable in poli-tics. The examples are too numerous to list: one may think of Perón taking off his suit and speaking in short sleeves in the 1940s (something then highly inappropriate and which caused scandal); of Chavez singing (form) on his television show and telling G. W. Bush on public television that he is a donkey, a coward, and a drunkard (content); of Trump's campaign launch speech accusing Mexican illegal immigrants of being drug traffickers and rapists;[8] of Beppe Grillo's Vaffanculo; etc. In that sense, populism often

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[7] Note that in contrast to revolutionary socialism, the goal is not to create a "new man" or transform the self; the people, as they concretely are, are simply the best! And the people, here, are certainly not de-scribed as "pure", but simply as "great".

[8] The accusation to Mexicans immigrants is of course nativist and not populist. But the provocative, trans-gressive public style and sheer excess of tracing with pathos murders in the US to such an unlikely cause is, *in form*, populist.

domestically launches a socio-cultural *revolution* about public political manners, about what is sayable in public, about what a statesman is and should be, etc. It is further-more incorrect to reduce such excentric, provocative, "innovative", and shocking-to-many behaviour to "national traditions", as certainly nothing of the style of Chavez had ever existed in Venezuela before him, or of Perón's in Argentina before him, or (at least in the 20th century) like Trump in the U.S. For better or worst, successful populists of-ten *create* a before and an after, in the way politics is *done*. So in that sense, "doing populism", with that stylistic rupture—something that always triggers sharp resistance and reactions—*creates* "populism". It is thus misleading to simply measure "populist political opinions" (as if such things existed, as the core of populism is not at the level of opinion) and match it with political supply. This methodology does not grasp the performative nature and societal effects of populist performance. Certainly, some ter-rains are more fertile for populism than others, but the so-called supply and so-called demand do not exist separately from one another.

Ideologies, even if "thin", require a certain level of complexity if they are going to both *decontest* (Freeden, 2003) and provide meaningful answers.[9] But populism is a *re-lational* phenomenon, defined by the connection established between the leader and supporters, a relation that displays both a socio-cultural and a politico-cultural compo-nent (see below). It is relational *furthermore* in terms of the people-leader's hostile re-lation *to* a "nefarious" Other. It ends up thus being about identity creation and identi-ties, more than about "world views" or "ideologies.

At the other extreme, populism should not be reduced to simple manipulation or "sheer demagogy" to achieve numbers, as often happens in the so-called strategic ap-proach (e.g. Weyland 2001), where ideas as such appear irrelevant and the leader is everything. I much recognize the centrality of leadership features, but do not treat populism as a merely *top-down* phenomenon, but rather, as a *two-way* phenomenon and process. Oddly enough, the ontologically entirely different, constructivist discur-sivist approach is often guilty of the same thing, assigning an all-powerful role to dis-cursive interpellations on "blank" subjects. In "demagogy" there is something decep-tively simple in that the success of the appeals is never fully explained, except either by the followers´ lack of sophistication and/or the leader´s lack of scruples. There is thus a very fine line theoretically between an all-powerful strategic leader who manipulates

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[9] It is difficult to phantom how the three lines of Mudde's definition can thus be an "ideology". The thin ideologies of feminism or of ecology are infinitely more complex than that. While analyses *of* populism abound, populist texts (in the political or social movement arena) are also rare, in contrast, say, to quality feminist texts or ecological publications.

the unarticulated (or "blank") mass, and an articulated popular demand that is simply "in wait" of its supply.

Finally, I attempt to provide here a normatively neutral definition of populism (and an explanation of its supporters' logic), relying on the normatively complex concept of the "low" in politics. In the "flaunting of 'the low,'" there is certainly a subjective, identity-affirming notion of "antagonism," central in many definitions of populism (including that of Laclau 2005). In Europe, populism has generally had a highly negative normative connotation. It has also, or moreover, been associated with the right. In the Americas—both the US and Latin America—populism has generally carried a positive normative connotation, particularly for left-of-center analysts and scholarly sympathizers of the popular sectors (e.g., O'Donnell 1973; Collier and Collier 1991). In the Americas, populism is a concept associated with socially-democratizing, incorporating, plebeian and anti-elitist defining features. The more recent Laclauian radical-left understanding of populism, linked politically (and historically) to Kirchnerism, Evo Morales' government and Chavismo, has crossed the Atlantic to Europe with Podemos´ professors, Melanchon´s France Insoumise and the akin Syriza government. Overall, populism is somehow normatively understood as simultaneously characterized by an authoritarian and intolerant drift *and* emancipatory potential (Mouffe 2018). My approach is not indifferent to these key debates, on the contrary; but as a starter, it certainly does not posit that populism is to be expected more on the left or on the right, nor that it has per se either an exclusionary or an incorporating and emancipatory social effect.

The following section introduces this (antagonistic) sociocultural-"performative" approach and its logic through an "affectual narrative" (Weber, 1978: 25). Despite the very local nature and texture of all populisms, they are cross-regionally characterized by a surprisingly similar affectual narrative. The subsequent section—core of the article—introduces and presents the notions of the "high" and the "low," in politics.

2. The Affectual Narrative and the Populist Schemata

There is something odd about populism: populists claim to represent the authentic people and/or nation, are allergic to foreignizing trends, and affirm to be particularly anchored in their own particular nation. Yet, they tend to trigger the almost unanimous condemnation of the diverse authorized voices of the very nation to which they are so attached. The situation is thus in sharp contrast, say, to Marxists who are attacked and rejected by capital (and its organic intellectuals), and who very much agree with that particular excommunication. Populists in contrast not only disagree with such a disa-

vowal, but turn it around as an indication that they, not those disavowing them, truly *represent* the nation and its people. While there may be irreconcilable antagonism between populists and the anti-populists, both claim to represent what "the people of this nation truly stands for". Second, despite these grand claims, the ideological elaboration of the populist claims tend to be limited—while awakening strong contrarian passions.

How is one to solve these related puzzles? I wish here to start at the most generic and somewhat abstract level, with what I have called "civilizational projects" and their empirical, concrete relation to the popular sectors. Even one of the most radical of such projects, the republican project of Third Republic France, inspired by the discourse of the French Revolution, has often in practice been a project of *instituteurs*, of school masters "educating the peasants". Clearly more classist have been the oligarchical liberal projects of South America in the late 19th century, whether in Chile, Argentina or Brazil. Such projects, despite their sinuous historical progression, have had "right", but also often "might", on their side –as in the full capture of the state apparatus. The more "right" and "moral appropriateness" have been stringently emphasized (always with the help of might), the more a sort of "unpresentable Other" as a result has emerged or been created. The democratic and racially-blind project of US liberalism had its unpresentables in the redneck Confederate Southerners. The open-minded, inclusive republican project in France has its unpresentable Other in the not soft-spoken "racist" or xenophobic *laissés pour compte*.[10] The proper, "Europeanized", socially-mobile Argentine of the Alberdi/ Sarmiento civilizational project had its unpresentable Other in the alledgedly more "brutish", less educated, darker skinned, and socially not mobile "*cabecita negra*" ("little black head") or even in the 1940s union-affiliated worker who did not mind breaking with left parties (of cadres) in order to support a Coronel with "fascist" sympathies (but who improved conditions of living). The Erdogan project has been the underside of the historical Kemalist project in Turkey. A similar list[11], for any country that has experienced populism, can arguably be drawn up.

Such "civilizational projects" possess remarkably varied content. They are as variegated, depending on the society, as liberalism, multi-culturalism, adapting to the ways and manners of the First World or the West, orthodox "textbook" economics, European integration, racial integration, colonial France's "*mission civilisatrice*", etc. And reac-

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[10] There is no reason for an ENAP graduate, in France, to be xenophobic.
[11] Had there been mass politics in 19th century Italy, populist movements based on local dialects would certainly have taken place in reaction to the erudite project of Italian unification. Perhaps *brigantaggio* could also be read through these lens.

tively, the content of populism will therefore not be the same in France, the US South, Venezuela, Southeastern Europe, or the Philippines. The key point here, however, is that such civilizational projects will *invariably* create what I call an "Unpresentable Other". And this Unpresentable Other usually provokes shame or embarrassment on the part of "decent" (*gente decente*), "politically correct" (in the US), "proper" or "well-educated" people.

In that light, populism, independently of continents, can analytically be understood as an antagonistic appropriation, for political, mobilizational purposes, of an "*unpresentable Other*"—itself historically created in the process of a specific "proper" civilizational project. The political entrepreneurs *flaunting this Other*, in turn, claim to be speaking in the name of a "repressed truth" (especially in Europe) or of "previously excluded social sectors" (more often in Latin America) or the "silent majority" (in the US). The populist casts that so-called "unpresentable Other" to which he is appealing as both *damaged* and "swept under the rug" by official discourse and policies. Populists present themselves as fetching such people from "under the rug" and bringing them to the political fore in a loud, perhaps ugly (or at best, oddly "exotic") but definitely "proud" way. In that sense, populism is clearly performative.

The last step in this affectual and sociocultural narrative is what I call the final inversion: the so-called Unpresentable Other is presented to be not some Other, but in fact the "truest" ("too long forgotten") Self of the nation, of "the people." That is, the Nation and its people is not what "they" tried to transform it into, but "the remainder" (and in many way more "originary")[12]: us. If they take power and achieve political dominance, populists cast the previous "civilizers" as a minority who never understood the sensibility and interests of the "vast majority of our people", presented as socioculturally distinct. In that case, the ex "civilizers" have lost the battle for hegemony. Thus the inversion: the old Representatives were not representative; and the Other is no Other, but our truest Self.

The populist leader generally claims—politically incorrectly and often vulgarly and with "bad manners"—to be the "fighting hero" of that (truly) authentic, *laissé pour compte*, people. Because of what has been stated, populism is thus almost always *transgressive*: of the "proper" way of doing politics, of proper public behavior, or of what can or "should" be publicly said. This transgression ("in bad taste"), as with the biting insults of Hugo Chávez, the utterly incorrect Bossi or Berlusconi, the extravagance of Huey Long, can be appreciatively received in certain sectors. Some of these

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[12] It is not surprising in that light that most populisms acquire a nativist form, independently of questions of immigration, so-called cultural "anxieties", etc. That nativism, however, is not originary but reactive, linked *constitutively* to the "civilizing" project.

transgressions, when by a male politician, figure as "manly," with quite "home grown" elements. Since populism claims to speak on behalf of a "truth" or a "reality" that is not accepted in the more official, larger circles of the world, and of private praxes that are not deemed proper in official politics but that are quite "typical of the reality from here", if there is thus not some kind of "scandal," whether in terms of policy practices, public behavior, positions championed, or mode of addressing adversaries, then one is not really looking at a case of populism. When it has the wind in its sails, populism is the celebratory desecration of the "high."

Finally, and simply, there is a kind of populist schemata of the *forces en présence*, that seems to be universally present across world regions and countries, *as well as* across the political spectrum, left to right (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Populist Scheme (cross-regionally)
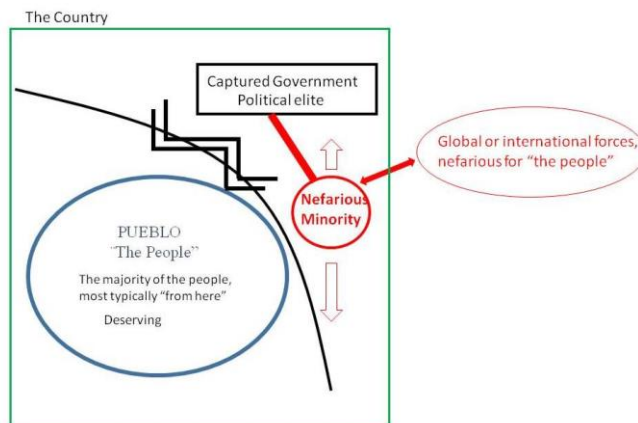
Source: Author's Elaboration

The main actor (perceived by populists as already existing, but in fact politically to be constituted) is of course "the people", *el pueblo, il popolo, le peuple*. By definition, this is the majority of the people of this society. The diagnosis is there are a large number of individuals/people from "the people", usually the most "typically from here," whose voice is not being heard, and whose interests are not being safeguarded. They are also not given the "due recognition" they "deserve", whether as downtrodden indigenous in Bolivia, long-time Frenchmen in France, or hard-working (white) Americans in the US.

"The people" faces unfortunately a *three-way* coalition: a key, nefarious, and re-sented minority –the Social Other—at odds with "the people"; hostile (and very power-

ful) global/international forces, playing in favor of the former; and a government or political elite incomprehensibly in line with that minority or with that "alliance". The nefarious minority, first—of the three, generally the object of greatest hatred—is *not necessarily* the social elite, and even less so the famed political elite of Mudde and others. That nefarious minority can be the oligarchy, the illegal Mexican immigrants, the financial sector, an ethnic but powerful minority, the liberal elites of the Coasts, the Jews, the "White Turks", white colonizers or black minorities, depending on the casting of the social antagonism (see also Brubaker 2020).[13] Usually, that "nefarious minority" has a direct or indirect link with the civilizational project referred to above: whether it is multi-culturalism, liberalism, the *mission civilizatrice*, or else.

Synchronically, in the populist script there is always, second, a set of global or international forces (allied with the nefarious minority within the country), whose role for the people is clearly negative. This can be imperialism and its alliance with the local oligarchy; it can be globalism in its alliance with financial capital *and* immigration and refugees (as stated by Marine Le Pen in her double prong); it can be "countries taking advantage of us", as Trump states; Soviet infiltration for McCarthy; European colonialism; and now perhaps the technocrats of the EU in Bruxels; etc.

In populist diagnoses, the problem could have remained strictly one of social antagonism if "our" government and most of the political elite (even crossing the left-right divide), third, had not taken the "wrong" side. To reverse this disgraceful situation, politics and the control of the state thus become indispensable tools. The focus of populism´s analysts on the political elite, however, is partly misguided: sometimes the "political class" is, indeed, the nefarious minority in question and is understood in terms its unwarranted social priviledge; but most of the times the political elite is mainly "guilty" of not taking the side of "the people".

Provocatively "speaking the truth" in public, agitation, and mobilizing are the *only* populist remedies. Agitation, indignation, provocations become ontologically indispensable in populism, since willful political action is absolutely "all there is."[14] Once in power, it is striking in contrast how the language of "love" towards their own followers

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[13] Not for this do I distance myself from the vertical axis that is key in populism (in contrast to nationalism), as De Cleen and Stavrakakis have forcefully written. Even when the nefarious minority is objectively situated "below" or at "the margins", as stated by Brubaker, there remains for those sympathetic to populism a certain sense of unacceptable "victimhood", of being "left behind", of not being given the recognition they/we rightfully deserve *because* of the alliance of the political elite with the minority and allied global forces at "our" expense.

[14] This is probably why post-fundational Laclau equates populism with *politics*. Lenin, independently of his professed Marxism, may have been in *What is to be done?* the first "populist" theoretician (something Laclau seems to have grasped).

becomes central and omnipresent.[15]

In the following section, we turn to the more technical and central notions of "the high" and "the low" in politics, at the core of the approach I present.

3. The High and the Low in Politics

The high-low axis in politics has to do with ways of *being* and *acting* in politics. The "high-low" axis is, in that sense, "cultural" and very concrete—perhaps more concrete actually than left and right. High and low have to do with ways of *relating* to people; as such, they go beyond "discourses" as words. They include levels of language, accent, body language, public gestures, and ways of dressing. As a way of relating to people, they *also* encompass the *way of making decisions*, in politics. These different traits may arguably be more difficult to *credibly* change than left-right positioning. High and low are in many ways about private expressions in the public sphere, or the publicization of the private man. This is why, particularly in the case of low ways and manners ex-pressed in an impudent or imprudent way in a public sphere hegemonized by the high, the low is often about transgression. But at the very same time, the high and the low involves "public performance". Whether it is credible "show business" or the tailored expression of the "true self" is mostly irrelevant.[16] What matters is that in relation to already existing social-cultural identities, high and low ways of being allow the voter to recognize a politician as credibly "one of ours." High and low are thus not superficially or faddishly about style, but connect deeply with a society's history, existing group dif-ferences, identities, and resentments. In some instances, as in Argentina or Turkey, they even "stylishly" express deep-seated cleavages.

Conceptually and at the theoretical level, the high-low axis consists of *two* related sub-dimensions or components: the *social-cultural* and the *political-cultural*. The latter is "cultural" in the same sense that one can speak of certain political sub-cultures. The former is cultural in a more sociological way, in the sense which sociologist Bourdieu (1979) writes about cultural capital, when it comes to "distinction." Both are empirical-ly as well as theoretically correlated. Their angle one to the other—borrowing from the idiom of statistics—is sharper than that between the main two well-established dimen-sions of the left-right axis (the "valoric" and the "socioeconomic" issues). The high-low

[15] In Latin America, this is remarkable in the discourse of Evita, of Chávez, and in campains ads of Cristina Kirchner.
[16] And with exceptions, the two may not be as far apart as one would theoretically say. It is doubtful, for example, if Donald Trump in private is less (or more) of a bully than he is in his public performance.
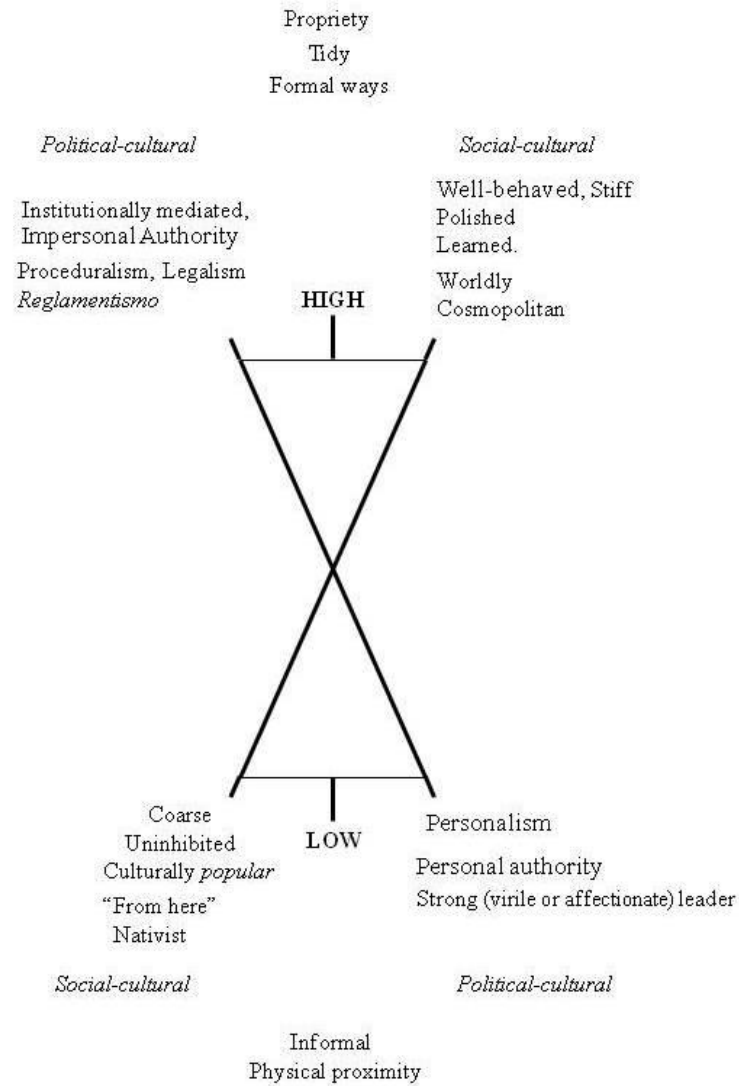
axis thus appears more unequivocally unidimensional (in a Downsian way), than the left-right dimension.

A last preliminary clarification, regarding terminology: since our approach is basically relational, we prefer to talk about *appeals*, in politics. It should be stated, first, that appeals have a substantial emotional side, in that they trigger affects and at times identification. Second and in contrast with a pure post-fundationalist ontology, identities cannot be entirely reduced causally to circulating discourses. There is in my view a subjectivity, however dislocated, that must be interpreted. More precisely, there is not a radical original absence, but sets of *experiences*, involving very real sensations (pain, hunger, feelings of contempt, vulnerability, etc.), which must be interpreted and for which certain interpellations are more *apt* to *resonate* than others. There is something sociologically and historically "already there" that insures that all discourses and interpellations cannot be blindly interchangeable. The struggle for hegemony moreover involves already-constituted subjects, capable of being drawn to different interpellations which resonate more (or less) with their experience. I thus ontologically posit a subject with a "space" between sociological and discursive determinations. A complex process occurs between the felt experience of the person and interpellations that name it, at the level of identity creation. Successful populisms are particularly effective at presenting interpellations in which the (sedimented) "identity of the popular" achieves some recognition. My ontology therefore includes *actors*, not only discourses.

Turning from post-structuralists to rationalist scholars who may equate appeals (as discussed above) with demagogy, appeals in politics equally apply to the left-right dimension. From a rationalist standpoint, an appeal in politics is simply a way in which a politician or a party attempts, usually consciously, to *woo* supporters. Programmatic appeals or platforms are thus *also* appeals in that same generic sense. In contrast to a Downsian perspective assuming already-fixed and already-constituted voter preferences, appeals may reflect, but can also bring to life, preferences and liking/dislikes. Furthermore, new appeals and "images" can unsettle and modify already-constituted identities: for example, a person may have considered herself a leftist, but when faced with the style and performance of Hugo Chavez, react by going to the anti-populist camp.

If populism is the (antagonistic, mobilizing) flaunting of the "low," we had now better define what is the "low," in politics (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Constitutive Dimensions of High-Low Appeals in Politics

Propriety
Tidy
Formal ways

Political-cultural

Social-cultural

Institutionally mediated,
Impersonal Authority

Well-behaved, Stiff
Polished
Learned.

Proceduralism, Legalism
Reglamentismo

Worldly
Cosmopolitan

HIGH

Coarse
Uninhibited
Culturally *popular*
"From here"
Nativist

LOW

Personalism

Personal authority
Strong (virile or affectionate) leader

Social-cultural

Political-cultural

Informal
Physical proximity

Source: Author's Elaboration

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The Socio-Cultural Component

The first and perhaps main component of the high-low axis is the *social-cultural* appeal (or performance) in politics. This component encompasses manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public. On the high, people publicly present themselves as well-behaved, proper, composed, and perhaps even bookish. Politicians on the high are often "well-mannered", "self-restrained", perhaps even polished, in public self-presentation. Negatively, they can appear as stiff, rigid, serious, colorless, somewhat distant, or even boring. The "technocratic look" such as that produced by the French *grandes écoles* is clearly on the high. On the low, people frequently use slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, are more demonstrative in their bodily or facial expressions as well as in their demeanor, and display more raw, culturally popular tastes.[17] Politicians on the low are capable of being more uninhibited in public and are also more apt to use coarse or popular language. To the observers on the high, they often appear as more "colorful" and in more extreme cases, somewhat grotesque.

It cannot be stressed enough that the "low" in politics is *not* synonymous with poor people or lower social strata. In the US, Donald Trump was immensely richer than Barack Obama, but Obama was clearly much more "high." The same applied in Italy between Monti (and even more so, Veltroni), on the high, and Berlusconi, on the millionaire low. Even in the electorate, levels of wealth and high-low positioning can in no way be equated.

This social-cultural component is, in fact, a politicization of the social markers emphasized in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in his classic social theory work on taste and aesthetics (1979). From a different theoretical, although equally sociological perspective, it is a politicization of the—empirically quite similar—differences in concrete manners, at the core of Norbert Elias's work (1982). Bourdieu sees cultural capital as a "legitimate" form of distinction or credential, and a marker of respectability. Elias's historical sociology was concerned about a long-term process of "civilization" in manners. Nonetheless, for both sociologists, one pole of the spectrum is a kind of propriety (and even distinction or refinement) that is legitimate by prevailing international standards.[18]

Although sociocultural differences or contrasts are present in all societies, and are even at times very sharp and recognized as quite meaningful, these differences are

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[17] Heavy local accents and expressive body language are all, in a certain way, difficult-to-ignore intrusions of physicality, of the concrete particular body and locality, in social interaction.

[18] It is indifferent that Bourdieu views the function of the habitus of distinction negatively, while Elias much approved of the "civilizing process": of interest here is the spectrum ordering such practices.

usually not *constitutive* of given political identities and often remain largely outside the political arena. For instance, while heavy drinking and loud singing at the pub is part of a stereotyped British working-class identity, it is not specifically associated with the Labour Party or its leaders. But in some cases, sociocultural differences or contrasts *do* become politicized. That is, manners, publicized tastes, language, and modes of public behavior do become associated with, and even defining of, political identities. In such cases, *social* identities with their many cultural attributes interact with *political* identities. While to be sure everything in the social world is in the last instance constructed, those social identities are much more sedimentated than more obviously constructed political identies. We cannot therefore put at the same level of "constructedness" the *popular* and the *pueblo*: traits of the popular can be sociologically observed, while "the people" is more obviously a political discursive operation (which, however, cannot refer to just *anything*).

Appeals on the high-low dimension are not *only* differences in style, although they certainly are that. They are public manifestations of recognizably social aspects of the self (and desires) in society , manifestations that contribute to creating a social sense of trust based on assumed sameness or coded understanding. And quantitatively, politicians as well as parties (that share certain practices) can be ranked ordinally on the high-low axis, within a society.

Within the social-cultural dimension, one must *also* clearly include the more "native" or "from here" versus cosmopolitanism, as shown in Figure 2 and, especially, 3. Certainly, on the more "raw," culturally-popular pole, the *specific* expressions, practices, and repertoires characterizing the sociocultural component can only be taken from a very particular, culturally bounded and locally developed, repertoire (even though the general themes may be quite common). On the other hand, the appearance, deportment, and mode of discourse of political elites generally share commonalities. We thus bring in a second element within the social-cultural dimension of Figure 2 and now shown in detail in Figure 3: the axis or scale between cosmopolitanism and the "from here". This element figures prominently in populist movements, cross-regionally. Identification with "the heartland," as stated by Taggart (2000) and in contrast to more impersonal international cultural ways, is indeed a recurrent element of populism.

Figure 3 – Characteristics and Components of the High and Low in Politics
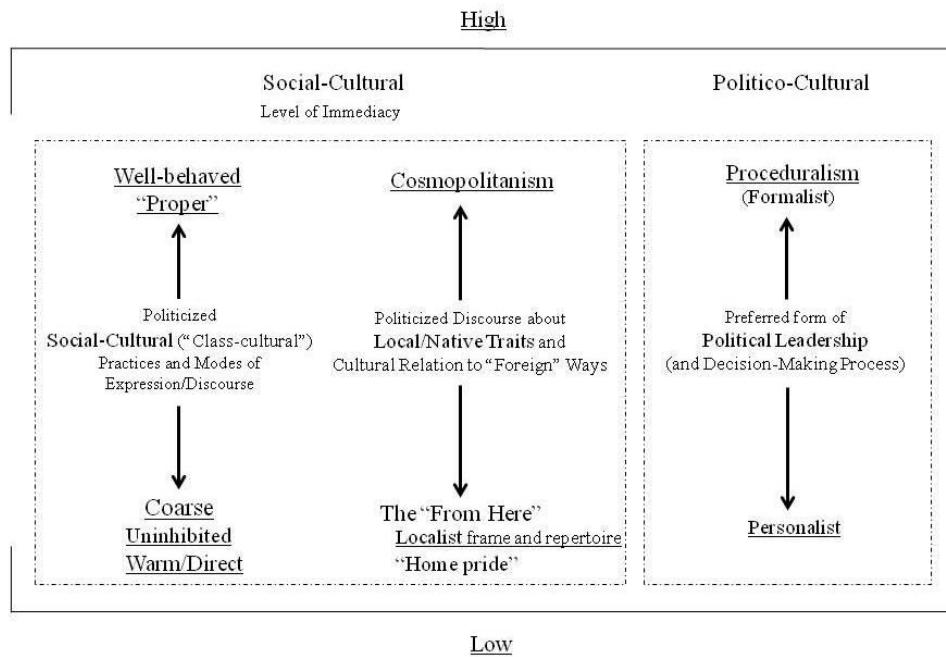
High

Source: Author's Elaboration

As Canovan (1999: 3–5) amongst others has highlighted, "the people" as a collective has more than one meaning: it can refer to the popular sectors, the plebs, the political-ly subaltern, or it can be the people of a *specific* national community, like "the people of England" –at times with tropes of the heartland. The *llaneros* in Venezuela, the hardworking farmers and ranchers of the US heartland, that is, the "typical" and cul-turally-recognizable working people *from here* are *always* at the core of the "true peo-ple" imaginary of the populists. Both aspects belong to the sociocultural dimension.

Considering the—political and conceptual— debates raging in Europe on the relation between populism and nationalism, summarily clarifying one's analytic position is in-dispensable. Indeed, the "from here" could be equated with nativism, which in turn can become equated with right-wing nationalism, in turn becoming synonymous with the common usage of populism in Europe. However, the constitutive component of the "from here" *in no way* entails xenophobic rightwing nativism as, contingently, articu-lated in Europe. In Argentina for example, nationalist Peronist populism, strongly em-

phasizing a certain "from here", discursively embraces lower-class Bolivian and Paraguayan immigration, as such immigrants are also considered "from here" (Latin American brothers, like us), in contrast to a Muslim or Canadian immigrant. Second, in Latin America, the emphasis on the "from here" has been archetypical of *leftwing* populism and nationalism, in opposition to "foreignizing", right-wing, "neoliberal" elites, Bolivia being the most extreme example. One must therefore distinguish what is contigently articulated in Europe from the more generic conceptual understanding of populism.

This being said, there is no doubt that populism goes with "the people from here", not just with the underdogs *in general*—and not just because most political struggles occur within countries, rather than transnationally. The famed expression "national and popular" is thus not merely coincidental. While the concepts nationalism and populism indeed should not be conflated (see De Cleen and Stravakakis 2017), Brubaker (2020) is correct that:

> appeals to 'the people´ are at once vertical (against those on top) and horizontal (against outside forces or groups) and, further, …vertical and horizontal appeals are constituvively interwined, such that ´the elite´is represented a both on top and outside (2020:46).

Ostiguy and Casullo (2017)'s images of "punching upward and outward", or "downward and outward", capture the same idea. In other words, the horizontal and vertical are not just contingently articulated, but rather constitutively compounded. "The people" is thus also a large group different from other peoples and implying some sense of solidarity. As such, as Laclau would also have it with hegemony, "the people" are both the pleb *and* the bounded, distinct community.[19] Inequality and difference are indeed both constitutive components of "the/a people". Populism is the hyping up of both components (the "culturally popular" "from here"), against the self-assured "civilizers" and cosmopolitans on the high. Nationalism, in contrast, does not involve this *internal* fracture or "the double reference to part and whole" (Brubaker 2020:50).[20]

What all poles of our low dimension (Figure 3) share in common is greater emphasis on immediacy (both in discourse and practices), in a more concrete, earthy, and cultur-

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[19] In psychoanalytic terms, nationalism provokes jouissance by promising national greatness; populism provokes jouissance by promising the reconciliation of the nation with itself (by making the plebs the whole, "the reconciled community") *and* by extolling the non-elite.

[20] My only difference with Brubaker is that "the people" polysemically boils down to two acceptations, not three. The people are: the non-elite *and* the demos *of* a bounded community. This distinct, bounded community is obviously made up of individuals or people who, in turn (in democratic times) may want to act as citizens (or demos) and be collectively sovereign.

ally localist ("from here") way, while the reverse is true of abstracting mediation. The high, in contrast, tends to justify its concerns in more abstract terms and to convey them through more "universalizing," less culturally localized language. Since the emphasis here really concerns localist traits and cultural practices (more than the nation per se, as in nationalism), one could in fact well imagine a regionalist populism (e.g., in Texas or in Italy´s constitutive regions).

The Political-Cultural Component

The second component of the high-low dimension in politics is *political-cultural*. This component is about forms or style of political leadership and preferred (or advocated) modes of decision-making in the polity. Leadership mode is indeed one of our defining criteria for populism (and non-populism). On the high, there is a claim to favor formal, impersonal, legalistic, institutionally-mediated models of authority. On the low, political appeals emphasize very personalistic, strong (often male) leadership.[21] Personalistic (and, at the Weberian extreme, charismatic) versus procedural authority (akin to Weber´s legal-rationalism) is a good synthesis of this polarity. The high generally claims to represent procedural "normalcy" (at least as a goal to be achieved) in the conduct of public life, along with formal and generalizable procedures in public administration. The personalist pole generally claims to be much closer to "the people", to "love them", and to represent them better than those advocating a more impersonal, procedural, proper model of authority.

Political science has devoted much attention to this "procedural", institutionalist component, almost always normatively favoring the high pole. This attention is not surprising, considering Dahl´s well-known two orthogonal features of (popular) participation and willful acceptance of opposition—the forte of populism and of *liberal* democracy, respectively. There indeed is a strong mobilizational component in the practices of populism (at least in Latin America). Respect for rules, division of powers, and the autonomy of state bodies are meanwhile central in liberal democracy. In most instances of populism in power, cross-regionally, those institutional limitations are explicitly perceived by populist leaders as undesirably limiting popular sovereignty and the people's will.

Liberals are quick normatively and politically to label populist leaders "authoritarians". The label is misleading; "plebescitarian" is much more accurate in the case of the

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[21] The characterization of "strong" is *not* to be equated with "authoritarian," even if politicians on the high often attempt to make that equation for politically motivated purposes. There is also a strong, affectionate, "caring", female gendered version of that personalistic form of leadership, which can certainly be quite combative, from Evita Peron to Sarah Palin's "grizzly moms."

populist logic (Barr 2009: 35-36; 38-39). But for liberalism, there is a small step between majoritarianism and authoritarianism. The same accusation was leveled by liberals against socialism a century ago (e.g. Berlin 1958). The liberal institutional architecture often figures as (and often is) an *obstacle* to popular will and to the redemptive expectations associated with the transformative populist projects. But hostility or indifference to a liberal institutional architecture is not unique to populism. What in that regard is unique to populism is "an appeal . . . proclaiming the *vox populi* . . . [through] vivid [leaders] who can make politics personal and immediate, instead of being remote and bureaucratic" (Canovan, 1999: 14). In its strongest expression, Hugo Chávez claimed: "I am not myself anymore, I am *not* an individual: I am a people!"

Turning from political theory to discourse, a central element on the populist low is, as often stated in Latin America, the valuation of (strong, personalistic) leaders "with balls." "Balls" are, indeed, a nodal point in populism! However, while the language of populism is at times steeped in a certain form of popular masculinity, "ballsyness" is clearly not restricted to men, including in Latin America,[22] but corresponds to daring "people's fighting heroes." In brief, on the political-cultural dimension, the low entails a preference for decisive action often at the expense of some "formalities"; while the high values the "niceties" that accompany the rule of law.

Populist personalized leadership, as a form of rapport, of performed representation, and of problem solving, is a *way to shorten the distance between the legitimate authority and the people*. The polar conceptual opposite of personalized populist linkage is Weberian bureaucracy: impersonal, "fair" in the sense of universal and "the same for everyone," procedural, and overall cold, distant, and not especially friendly." Thus regarding personalistic authority, while liberals generally fear an authoritarian slippery slope, they miss the performed shortening of distance (and especially with the popular sectors) that is a key element of populist leadership.

Consequently, the most extreme form of populist representation (performed, but also experienced) and linkage is *fusion*, i.e., a "fusion" between the leader and the masses. While it sounds ominously fascist, it is also characteristic of some rock concerts. The positive, understudied, flip side of the populist *fusional* discourse, when in power, is that it often explicitly is a discourse of love. But since fascism claims the same fusion, with its "Fuhrer principle" and mass rallies, it certainly briefly bears the question of the relationship of populism to fascism. Differences are important and highly significative.

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[22] Evita Perón, for example, had "much more balls" than most populist male leaders. At the same time, highly personalistic female leaderships have, alternatively, empirically achieved a semi-direct relationship with the people, through very intense public display of affection, love, and nurturing—traditionally quite gendered. If the high tends to be "gender neutral," the low generally accentuates gendered traits.

First, populism always empirically base its legitimacy through the frequent counting of votes—thus "proving" that the populist leader is "what the people want." Fascism (a regime type) ends elections once it wins them; populism appears to *multiply them* and often supplements them with referendums.[23] Second, fascism governs in a disciplined manner, from the state down. Populism is much more ambivalent: though it often uses the state apparatus with little *délicatesse*, it also fosters a myriad of not overly coordinated movements, organizations, circles, with a grassroots component. Third, fascism is more prone to extol the nation (or even "the race") and its leader, while populism extols the people (of that nation) and its leader.

In brief, the politico-cultural component of the low, personalization, is about lack of *formal* institutionalization, a trait central to many political scientists' definitions of populism (e.g. Weyland, 2001), at the same time very much a style of mass politics (Knight, 1998; Moffitt 2016).

Underlying Commonality and Definition

What do these three components of the high-low axis—that is, the coarser culturally- *popular*, the "from here", and personalization—have in common? It is, quite simply, the *level of sublimation* and of suppression judged ideal in the exercise of leadership and authority, as well as public behavior.

On identification and desires in politics, a notable trait of politics on the "low" is its more performative, frequent "soap-opera" aspect. Laclau goes too far in casting the leader as an *empty* signifier, condensing our desire for plenitude. His or her signification is not "empty", while is at times wildly polysemic. For example, the concrete Carlos Menem publicly fulfilled—crassly, but with gusto—many (traditional popular-sector masculine) manly myths. That is, as Laclau also noticed (2005: 58-59), the leader is both *like me* (a "me" with no cultural titles) *and* an ego *ideal*—but one that is accessible and understandable. In populism, those fantasies are coarser *and* display an antagonistic dimension—a flaunting. Populism is thus a kind of personal (on the part of the leader) and collective (on the part of the movement) narcissistic *affirmation*, with "the middle finger" defiantly raised to the well-brought-up, the proper, the accepted truths and ways associated with diverse world elites. It is a flaunting of "our" low, in politics.

In summary and overall, populism, defined, is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular[24] and "from here", and of personalism as a mode

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[23] For example, in Venezuela during the fourteen years of Chavez's rule, there were *ten* major national elections or referendums, where the official side could have lost (and did loose in one instance).

[24] "Popular" not as "widespread in the population," but culturally *popular*, *populaire*, *popolare*, of "the popular sectors," of "regular folks."

of decision-making. The culturally popular and the native act as emblematic of what has been "disregarded"[25] in the polity, while personalism is both a mode of identification and of fixing this "disregard". Defined in the most synthetic way, populism is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the "low."

4. Populism and A Two-Dimensional Political Space

Both the left-right and high-low axes are actually, theoretically and empirically, orthogonal to one another (Ostiguy 2009, 2017).[26] *Together*, they form—when both present in politics—a two-dimensional political space of appeals, in which we can locate actors, parties, and politicians (ibid). This basic political space is illustrated in Figure 4. Such Cartesian location, furthermore, has significant consequences in the sociologically-differentiated reception of political appeals and in the social composition of the vote (Ostiguy 1998).

[25] The accurate term is, in French, *laissé pour compte*, translating roughly as overlooked, eglected, not taken into account, ignored, left by the wayside.
[26] One advantage of the political space delineated in Figure 4 is that *any* combination is not only possible, as is also the case in spaces configured by non-orthogonal axes, but (in contrast to Kitschelt´s spaces) *equally* possible, in any given one society.

Figure 4 – A Two-Dimensional Political Space
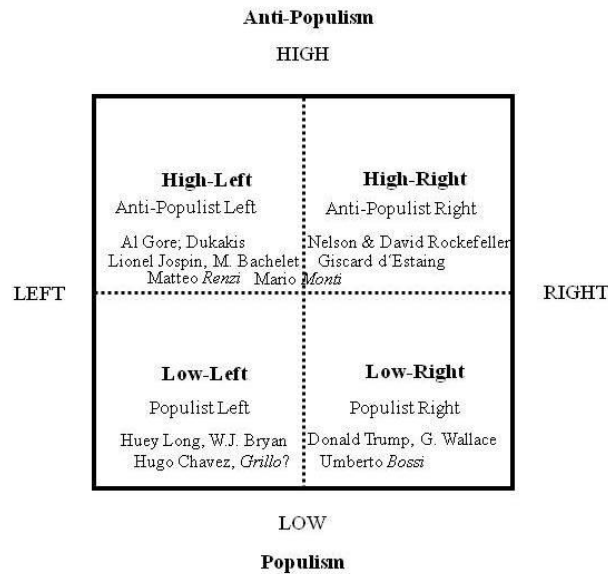
Source: Author's Elaboration

5. Conclusion

This article did not attempt to answer the important question of "what triggers, and when" populism. In the literature hypotheses have come and went. The objective was more narrow, but not for this more modest. The goal was to provide an understanding of populism that is thick enough to make sense of it in and of itself. This understanding goes (much) beyond the three lines of "the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and the Rousseauian expression of the general will," which is not really a theory of populism, nor quite makes it as the definition of an ideology, however thin. Why this thin conceptualization has spread like wildfire in Europe remains to me somewhat mysterious. Methodologically, furthermore, any ideational analysis must be inductive and strive to constantly refresh itself, in that regard—to avoid top-down coding as self-referential.

In my view, there can be *no* populism without presence of the *popolare*.[27] There are many ways, and several facets of the *popolare*, for turning "the" *popolare* into a *popolo* as a useful category in actual politics, and to give it a *particular meaning* through—non-neutral ideologically—political discourses. Since "the people" *does* have a pleb component, it cannot be sociologically entirely neutral, or even less so, be made up mostly of the well-to-do, the social elites, the rich, etc. But what and who this *popolo* is is very much, as discourse-theoretical analysis has it, a product of discursive operations. What discursively defines a *popolo* (the dependent variable of the analysis) is the outcome not only of varying vertical axes, but also, given the *popolo*'s particularity, of an inside-outside axis. Classical Marxism had the analytical advantage of providing a clear fundational anchor in the relations of production and the social trasnformations provoked by capitalism. "The people", however, is *not* a class, and it may not even be a "class alliance" (to use that older language). It is a political operation, as discourse-theoretical analysis has it, but it is a political operation not done "in the void", on "blank slates", having a marked and generally emphasized *social differentiation* component. In that sense, the moralist component of "purity" and "corruption" of the Muddian approach not only is incorrect cross-regionally (Ostiguy 2017), but misses the main boat. Of greater interest is who are the people and who are the people's antagonists (particularly along the lines of Figure 1). The answer to that question provides furthermore the answer to differentiate left from right populism (Ostiguy and Casullo, 2017).

Disciplinarily, the analysis here lays at the crosspoint of discourse and political sociology. The cultural component of populism is not something political scientists should be indifferent to or find superficial but has deep roots in the sociology of distinction of Bourdieu, in cleavage theory, and, in aggiornado way, in "class" analysis of the Gramscian type and in Weberian types of authority. Most importantly, it is a (non-causal) understanding of populism that unproblematically travels cross-regionally and is therefore not limited to Europe and its world, or to the Americas.

Putting attention as it does to the valuation of the culturally *popular*, the unrefined, le *plouc*, *flaite* and *cholo* –all terms, obviously, "from here"—and of personalization as a mode of authority that makes alternative sense, this understanding of populism takes into account questions of "pride", "dignity", lack of recognition, "deservingness", and

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[27] It would be a logical mistake, as a rebuttal, to affirm that "all parties with a 'popular´electorate [would then be] populist" (De Cleen 2019:23). Communist parties with a strong component of miners and factory workers are not, simply for the fact of this electorate, populist. *However*, to have a *sociological* "pleb" component appears to be yet another necessary, though not sufficient, component of populism. Were sociology entirely absent and all just contingent, we would be equally likely to have a populist movement of rich landowners and bankers as that of manual laborers.

many other key emotions very much present in the (dynamic) evolution of public social life.

The approach is therefore not "culturalist", but sociocultural and, at its core, relational. What leads to the emergence of populism in politics is left for other analyses, and can be quite context- or region- specific. Certainly, the decline of mass parties, particularly in Europe, has given great emphasis to the rise of more personalist figures of identification, particularly on the low. In Latin America however, the hyper-personalization of politics under classic populism and mass party creation went hand in hand.

Ending as we started with the category of populism, most publications defining populism have hitherto taken for granted that populism is a nominal category. That is, a "referent" (a politician, a statement, a party, a regime) is either populist or it is not. Even if we could *all* agree on a common definition of populism, it still remains unclear why a nominal category would be the most useful kind. We *do* need nominal categories to semantically know what we are talking about, when using a word in a sentence. When it comes to comparing observations (including about discourses) or even more so, to measurement, an advantage of understanding populism as a function of the use and degree of the "low" in politics is that it allows *ordinal* categories.[28] To put it differently, it permits us to locate our objects spatially, on a scale. We routinely do the same with left and right.

Ordinality is particularly useful both for politics and political analyses. Whether it is for high and low, populism and anti-populism, or left and right, it is often indispensable to be able to refer to a "left-of-center" *or* an "extreme left"; or to the "extreme right" and the role of the "center." There also exist "outflanking on the low"; high-low political polarizations; or high-low party convergences in choosing a candidate. The panorama becomes particularly rich if the two orthogonal ordinalities are combined. This bi-dimensional space, to be sure, is only productive and relevant in certain countries and at certain times, though its utility would seem to be spreading. But is Matteo Salvini more right or more low? Is the French Socialist Party more high or more left? Answers to those questions are not only academic, but have sociological entailments, as seen when observing the resulting social composition and magnitude of the vote.

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[28] Certainly, scholars in the ideational tradition already do that, routinely. See Jagers and Walgrave (2007) for Belgium, Hawkins (2010) for Venezuela, and Hawkins and Rovira (2017) for Latin America. Any quantitative textual coding, either of the sort pioneered by Hawkins (2010) or the standard content analysis, is bound to provide an ordinal, and even interval, measure of "populist-ness."

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