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Mad Marx? Rethinking Emotions, Euro scepticism and Nationalism in the Populist Left

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Abstract

Much attention has been devoted to how right-wing populists in Europe challenge the consensus on the benefits of European integration, but left-wing resistance to the EU is less discussed. Existing analyses tend to distinguish between three constructions of political community: a postnational EU, the populist right invoking national sovereignty, and the populist left invoking popular sovereignty. However, empirical analyses struggle to find consensus on how left populists relate to the EU, and if they invoke claims to national or popular sovereignty. This article argues that this empirical impasse stems from that populism and Euroscepticism are performative categories and not simply analytical tools, and serve to produce exclusion. There are two dichotomies in this exclusionary frame: emotional populists/rational EU, and the postnational EU/nationalist populists. Through an analysis of Podemos in Spain and the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, I show how the lines between the postnational EU, the national sovereign, and the popular sovereign are frailer than previously thought. The article concludes that these categories are less analytically astute than they are politically motivated, and analyses of the populist left in Europe must consider the performative dimension of its key terms.

Keywords

Populism; Euroscepticism; Nationalism; Emotions; Podemos; UK Labour Party

Populism is often seen as a threat to European democracies, repeated by policymakers, commentators, and academics alike. Populists are said to disturb the modern way of doing politics, which focusses on reasoned debate and consensual approaches. These are two of the main pillars of the European collaboration, following the Habermasian ideal of communicative action. Conversely, populism relies on propaganda, demagoguery, and manipulation of the masses. They are often seen as staunch Eurosceptics, who are drastically against the postnational constellation of the European Union (EU). This discussion has been most prominent with regards to right-wing populists, and the European establishment has watched with horror how a period of relative political stability has been exchanged for a clear challenge to European integration from the right. Nevertheless, populism is by no means only a right-wing phenomenon. Over the past decade, a distinct form of European left-wing populism has emerged, at times taking inspiration from its South American counterparts. Parties such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise in France, have all contributed to a renegotiation of what left-wing politics means in Europe today.

These parties and movements have been labelled with similar terms as their right-wing counterparts, which is often a gross simplification. There are distinct differences between right- and left-wing populists, but also similarities in the type of rhetoric surrounding member states' relationship with the EU. In this area, left-wing populists are often very critical of European integration, but are basing their critique upon how the EU has failed to protect Europe socially, and put economic integration and prosperity ahead of people's lives and livelihoods. They also accuse the EU of being a depoliticised institution which makes decisions without involvement of its citizens, but they support European integration in some form (van Elsas, Hakhverdian and van der Brug 2016). It is thus often argued that there is a strong divide between the technocratic EU and the political and antagonistic populist left (Halikiopoulou, Nanou and Vasilopoulou 2012). As such, the literature on populism tends to reinforce three distinct ideas of political community: one based on a postnational European identity, which is the main ethos of the EU; one based on national sovereignty, which is the preferred community of the populist right; and one based on popular sovereignty, which is the mantra of the populist left, and should be seen as different from the ethnic and xenophobic versions of right-wing national sovereignty.

This article argues that this divide is much more spurious than imagined, especially when discussing left-wing populism. Empirically, there is no consensus in the literature on whether left-wing populists ascribe to one version of political community or the other. This article will demonstrate how left-wing populist parties are in many ways rearticulating a particular 'European' way of life, which is not directly at odds with how European democracy in the EU is conducted. Whilst being sceptical of the EU, left-wing populist parties are less sceptical of what it means to be European, and rely on a particular vision of how politics should be enacted. Often, the solution lies in promoting popular sovereignty to strengthen democracy. At the same time, many left-wing populists also place a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, in defence of a national working class. As such, when discussing populism and Euroscepticism on the left, it is important to further qualify what these concepts mean. The strong dichotomies contribute to a simplified understanding which omits how left-wing parties are sometimes more European than they are left-wing. Ultimately, this article will argue that the current readings of left populism and Euroscepticism and the inability to neatly categorise these movements and parties stem from the distinct *performative* character of the terms populism and Euroscepticism. In other words, the terms are not simply used as analytical tools, but have a political purpose of delineating the outsiders of European politics. Left-wing populist movements are in fact much closer to the European political ideal than some would like to admit.

The article will begin with an overview of how left-wing populism and Euroscepticism are currently conceptualised in the literature and identify how there are strong debates on their main idea of political community. In the second part, the article will argue that only by looking at the performative function of these terms – how they create an inside and an

outside of the political mainstream – can we begin to understand the muddled empirical picture of the populist left in Europe. The article shows that this performative aspect of the terms left populism and Euroscepticism functions through two dichotomies: the difference between the emotional populists and the rational EU, and between the nationalist populists and the postnational EU. By demonstrating that left-wing populist parties exhibit clear characteristics of what we would term 'rational' or 'postnational' (and vice versa), the article contends that these distinctions are not simply analytical, but performative, and cannot be seen as neutral markers of political phenomena.

POPULISM ON THE LEFT

There are many disagreements around the definitions of populism, but a few core assumptions are relevant to the discussion of left-wing populism. This article does not agree with the literature which sees populism as a threat to democracy, where the liberal world order is posited against a dangerous and authoritarian populist wave (Müller 2016; Mounk 2018). Another perspective revolves around whether populism can be seen as an ideology, what Mudde refers to as a 'thin' ideology which must be carried by a host such as conservatism or socialism (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Mudde's perspective has become the mainstream of populism studies, as his minimal definition of populism makes it easy to operationalise an otherwise rather slippery concept. This does not mean that there are no other challenging perspectives put forward. For instance, there is strong support for a perspective which would rather identify populism not necessarily as a strong political identity or ideology, but as a political style, or a rhetorical *modus operandi* (Ostiguy 2017; Moffitt 2016). This enables a perspective which sees populism as a form of politics which can be enacted by anyone, not simply actors which we would traditionally label as populist.

In addition, there is a growing field of discursive or critical populism studies, which follows the political thought of Argentinian Ernesto Laclau. From his seminal work *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005), it can be concluded that populism is neither a specific ideology nor a political style, but rather a political logic. This perspective sees populism as an articulation of different demands emerging in society which are subsumed under one central 'empty signifier' which can be a political leader, a slogan, or party (Laclau 2006, 2005). Importantly, this identity-making is never fixed and is always rearticulated, and populist identities are therefore always potentially present in politics, and can emerge as challengers to the hegemonic order. Populism is not simply a rhetorical device to be attached to other, 'real' ideologies, but a way of doing politics which potentially exists everywhere, and the antagonistic relation between the people and the elite, supposedly particular to populism, is a core assumption of all politics (Mouffe 2018).

These differences in perspectives also have consequences for how specifically left populism is conceptualised, and there is ample divergence within the field on whether to treat populisms left and right as two sides of the same coin, or whether they are drastically different. Again, Mudde is one of the authorities on how to conceptualise left- and right-wing populism, and he has, together with Rovira Kaltwasser, developed a conceptual framework which divides populism into an exclusionary right-wing form, and an inclusionary left-wing counterpart (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). This argument is largely based on a comparison between the European populist right and the South American populist left, and Mudde and Kaltwasser conclude that left-wing populist would rather refer to a more inclusive idea of 'the People', which can and should be contrasted to the right-wing, xenophobic idea of 'the Nation', which indicates a hostility to migrants and foreigners. This perspective has become very popular, and is used widely when analysing different varieties of populism in the European context (van Elsas, Hakhverdian and van der Brug 2016; Plaza-Colodro, Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne, 2018; March 2017). There is also literature which argues that left-wing populists are heavily concerned

with economic issues, rather than cultural politics (Keith 2017; Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro 2018; Plaza-Colodro, Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne 2018).

The Muddian perspective, however, has been challenged by critical populism studies, which argues that the differences between left- and right-wing populism are more complex, and that there is a strong normative argument surrounding the debate on populism. What is omitted is the democratic potential of populism, and in particular populisms of the left. In this interpretation, populism is a political identity which seeks to challenge the status quo and return power to 'the People'. Importantly, however, this is not done with reference to a People confined within a Nation, but one which sees the People as not related to birthplace or bloodlines. Instead, left-populism is a 'discursive construction resulting from "chains of equivalence" between heterogenous demands whose unity is secured by the identification with a radical democratic conception of citizenship and a common opposition to the oligarchy' (Mouffe 2018: 80). In this sense, there is no core disagreement between the Muddian perspective on exclusion/inclusion and the perspective put forward by critical populism studies. They do agree that left- and right-wing populism are distinct and cannot be equated. Nevertheless, there are important differences which are relevant to this article. If following Laclau's work and accepting that all politics is to some degree populist, one cannot envision political ideologies as separate from populism, as Mudde proposes with his distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' ideologies (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019: 8).

EUROSCEPTICISM ON THE LEFT

The difference between right- and left-wing populism becomes even more muddled when addressing European integration. When investigating the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism, it is often assumed that the two are closely related, even though Euroscepticism is influenced by the position on the political spectrum (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2008). It is often argued that Euroscepticism is located at the extremes (Halikiopoulou, Nanou and Vasilopoulou 2012; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002; De Vries and Edwards 2009) and that populist parties are likely to be more radical (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). This has resulted in a viewpoint that populist parties are more likely to be Eurosceptic than mainstream or centrist parties (Plaza-Colodro, Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne 2018; Gómez-Reino, Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro 2018: 347).

This said, the connection between Euroscepticism and populism on the left is not identical to that on the right. Much research on this nexus has taken a distinctly Northern European perspective, where right-wing populist parties have typically been more dominant than their left-wing counterparts. As such, recent literature on left-wing populism and Euroscepticism is a welcome addition to the field, which also nuances the idea of this relationship (Rooduijn 2018; Plaza-Colodro, Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne 2018; Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro and Plaza-Colodro 2018; Della Porta, Kouki and Fernandez 2017; Damiani and Viviani 2019). It is widely assumed that the left-wing resistance to the EU stems from a mostly economic perspective (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). The EU is seen as a neoliberal vehicle which has made market competition its main motto, something which is strongly disputed on the left (Kagarlitsky 2017; Bailey 2019). The narrative is strongly related to the 2008 financial crisis and the following austerity policies implemented in much of Southern Europe, which is to blame for subsequent decline of living standards and a loss of faith in democratic institutions (Lapavitsas 2019; Kagarlitsky 2017). Left-wing populist parties in Southern Europe are more likely to be opposed to relinquishing economic sovereignty, which is seen as a key component of a fair and equal society for its people (Plaza-Colodro, Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne 2018; Damiani and Viviani 2019). This focus on economic sovereignty instead of necessarily national sovereignty is seen as a distinct difference from right-wing populism, where the resistance to the EU would emerge from a culturalist perspective, and a conviction that other

European countries, and other countries in general, pose a threat towards the welfare of the domestic population.

Nevertheless, there are traces of protecting the national population also within the populist left. Some researchers would argue that the commitment to nationalism is more a commonality than a difference between populisms left and right (Halikiopoulou, Nanou and Vasilopoulou 2012), whereas others would maintain that left-wing populists are not concerned with national sovereignty, but with popular sovereignty (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Damiani and Viviani 2019). When discussing left-wing positions towards Brexit, for instance, this is seen as stemming from a careful balance of protecting the domestic working population, whilst at the same time resisting neoliberal Europe and remaining in solidarity with the working class in other countries. What has been referred to as constructive ambiguity (Bailey 2019), indicates the at times contradictory position taken by the United Kingdom (UK) Labour Party in relation to European integration, where the party tries to distance itself from the nationalist right, whilst at the same time expressing Eurosceptic sentiments.

The issue of nationalism and Euroscepticism in the European populist left is not subject to scholarly agreement. The evidence on how left-wing populist parties relate to European integration is highly varied across time and space, and does not necessarily fit into how we have traditionally defined Euroscepticism (Keith 2017). This empirical impasse is the core focus of this article, and in the sections below I will argue that the explanation for this lies in the strong will to separate the populist left (or right) from the European mainstream.

LEFT POPULISM VERSUS TECHNOCRACY: A SPURIOUS DIVIDE?

Instead of looking at definitional problems or trying to categorise varieties of populism, analysis must engage with how the terms populism and Euroscepticism are *performing* a certain political practice which benefits from creating an inside and an outside of political actors. By reinforcing the divide between the three main forms of political community – postnationalism, national sovereignty, and popular sovereignty – the field reaches an empirical stalemate since left-wing populists do not neatly align with either of these categories.

What does it mean to look at populism as a performative category? There is a tendency within populism studies to focus on what is commonly referred to as the measuring problem, but this aim has often been criticised for focussing on 'degreeism' (Pappas 2019). These strands of research try to define populism as either a nominal or ordinal category, in other words, *whether or not* an actor/speech/ideology is populist, or *to what extent* can we say that this actor/speech/ideology is populist (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). However, this can also lead to problems in defining populism against non-populism, where mainstream actors can, in fact, exhibit very high degrees of populist rhetoric (Pauwels 2011; March 2017: 287). Others have pointed out that using populism as an ordinal category is the most useful approach, since this allows us to place actors on a scale, comparable to the left-right spectrum (Ostiguy 2017).

What becomes absent in the discussion is how the term populism itself carries normative value and is not an analytical concept devoid of political ideology. This has been researched in the emerging literature on anti-populism, where it is argued that many of the current studies on populism are implicitly or explicitly seeing populism as a threat to democracy (Stavrakakis 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, Nikisianis et al. 2018). This misses the democratic potential of left-wing populism, which, according to these scholars, has an inclusionary and egalitarian mission. There is also important literature seeing populism as a signifier. This signifier can be used for political purposes, and populism as a term has become a way for the established political elite to label other actors as

unwanted elements (Glynos and Mondon 2019; Dean and Maiguashca 2020). Discourses on populism are thus of equal import to the phenomenon itself (Degano & Sicurella 2019; De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018). In other words, populism is not only a nominal or ordinal category, but a *performative* category, which is in and of itself highly political (Eklundh 2020).

What does populism as a category perform? The need to erect strong barriers between the newcomers to European politics and the old guard is not done in a value vacuum. Underlying the wish to label populists and Eurosceptics as outsiders lies an unwillingness to see how these actors are in many senses more similar to the political mainstream than many would like to admit. In fact, these dichotomies are not as strong as first thought, and by softening the barriers between the political inside and outside, we can demonstrate how populists and Eurosceptics are, in fact, central to the European order. Two dichotomies in particular are central to mark populists and Eurosceptics as outsiders: The emotional populists–rational EU, and the nationalist populists–postnational EU. The first dichotomy argues that populists and Eurosceptics are highly emotional and antagonistic, in contrast to the rational EU which is based on consensual decision-making practices. The second dichotomy relates to the national-postnational divide, where current research has struggled to place left-wing populism into extant categories. Are they nationalist and oppositional to the EU in a different, and perhaps better, way than the populist right? I argue that the focus on popular sovereignty seen within the European populist left is not principally at odds with the European project as an articulation of a People tied to a specific territory. Ultimately, this strengthens the idea of citizenship as a community of birth. Engaging with the cases of left-wing populism and Euroscepticism in Spain and the UK, the following sections will outline how these dichotomies are difficult to uphold empirically.

Emotional Populists: Rational EU?

One of the key distinctions often made between populists and non-populists is the emotional character of the former (Müller 2016). In the growing literature on emotions and populism, populist actors are branded as more emotional than their mainstream counterparts, and there is an implicit assumption that there is a clear division between the rational mainstream and the emotional populist (Skonieczny 2018; Breeze 2019). There is also research which tries to determine what kind of emotions that populists are employing to increase their electoral support (Wirz 2018; Salmela and von Scheve 2017). Norris and Inglehart are convinced that populists are in direct opposition to liberal democracy, which must, for all means and purposes, be based on rational decision-making (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Also in Mudde's ideational approach we can see how populism, when labelled as a thin ideology, is considered to be less sophisticated and lacks intellectual refinement (Mudde 2004), which can be seen as another expression of how populists are less rational than the mainstream. Also, within the more critical sections of populism studies does it become evident that populism is indeed not entirely based on rational thought. For instance, Ostiguy is convinced that populism signifies the 'low' against the mainstream 'high', when populists are labelled as 'coarse' and 'uninhibited' against the 'well-behaved', 'proper' and 'refined' politics of the mainstream (Ostiguy 2017: 80). Moffitt has also supported this distinction, when arguing that populism has a 'tabloid style', and that it is often associated with bad manners (Moffitt 2016). This should be seen in opposition to establishment politicians, who are more often displaying 'rigidness, rationality, composure, and the use of technocratic language' (Moffitt 2016: 43).

This becomes particularly accentuated when analysing populist attitudes towards the EU. The difference in the ways of doing politics is seen as acutely steep, where the European project is seen to be based on a Habermasian idea of consensus-making which is at its core incompatible with the populist emotional response. As Habermas (1996, 1984) has argued, decision-making must take place between rational political subjects who recognise one another as such. This recognition is what will ultimately enable consensus; if political subjects can evaluate the validity of one another's truth claims, there will be a possibility

to identify the common good for the community. Consensus can only be built between rational subjects, and if subjects are more emotional than rational, then consensus will not be possible, since the common good cannot be identified. The emotional – rational dichotomy is thus also central to the division between a consensual EU and antagonistic populists. Not only are populists disturbing the consensual process, but it is also inherently impossible to include them since they do not possess what are thought to be necessary characteristics of valid political subjects: capacity of rational thought and reasoned debate.

This article argues that the emotional-rational dichotomy between the emotional populists and the rational EU demands further analysis. First, there are many instances of rational deliberation in the populist left. Many contemporary left-wing populist parties are strongly connected to social movements, and Labour and Podemos are no exception. In Spain, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, a vast array of movements against austerity proliferated throughout the country (Flesher Fominaya 2015a, 2015b; Della Porta 2015; Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki and Mosca 2017). Many would like to argue that this was the starting point for the Podemos, and that the party is simply an elongation of the claims made by the social movements (Iglesias 2015). It is important to note how the horizontal movements of our time are not simply 'mad mobs', but often construct claims through processes of deliberation and discussion which are similar to the Habermasian ideal. In Podemos, there have been strong attempts to make the party available for the members, where deliberation is accessible to all. For instance, Podemos only has one type of member, who all have full voting rights (Iglesias, Errejón, Monedero, Bescansa, et al. 2014: 4), thus eliminating the distinction between active and passive members. There is also no membership fee. In addition, Podemos' political programmes are constructed through an online process within the membership, Plaza Podemos, where members can propose and deliberate on policies. Plaza Podemos is seen as 'a space for debate and deliberation where, among all of us, we decide on things that matter to us and where we together create ideas, projects and proposals that will be fundamental pieces of political change' (Iglesias et al. 2014: 3). Members can also do this through a system of 'circles', a local-level community where proposals are discussed. These practices are strongly indicating that Podemos are following a logic of deliberation which is technically no different to deliberative practices in European institutions (Borge Bravo and Santamarina Sáez 2016; Ardanuy Pizarro and Labuske 2015).

The British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn has also exhibited similar patterns. It has been claimed that Corbynism signified a clear attempt to reconnect with grassroots' movements in the UK in order to revitalise the party (Maiguashca and Dean 2019; Bailey 2019). As Corbyn himself has argued, 'We are a social movement and we will only win the next general election because we are that movement of people all around the country who want to see a different world and do things very differently' (BBC 2016). Whilst the UK did not experience a strong anti-austerity movement directly after the 2008 financial crisis, the country has nevertheless endured a prolonged period of austerity politics, which has given rise to a range of initiatives from civil society, such as housing activism, pro-immigration protests, environmental protests, and feminist movements (Bailey 2019). One of the key actors for the left is the rise of Momentum, which is primarily concerned with electing a Labour government faithful to leftist values. Growing the membership and involving the membership to a higher degree was one of Corbyn's main aims, and which also bears witness to an increased focus on deliberation (Maiguashca and Dean 2019: 150). As such, to say that left-wing populist parties are at direct odds with the deliberative, consensus-based practices so often hailed by European technocrats is difficult to support empirically. Rather, it is clear that left-wing populists and their commitment to social movements are based on the same ideals of defining the common good through rational deliberation, and that this is a necessary component for any democratic politics.

It is, nonetheless, often claimed that left-wing populists are based on a cult of personality. The problem with this narrative is that it tends to tie instances of vertical party structures and strong leadership to an emotional or irrational element of left populism. In reality, the

vertical structures and the focus on clear and strong leadership are strategic decisions made by left populists in order to gain electoral power. This, I argue, is by no means a process which defies rational behaviour, but which is deeply steeped in a European model of political representation, used liberally by parties throughout the continent. Many would like to argue that the focus on Pablo Iglesias or Jeremy Corbyn is but a mere demagogical device intended to manipulate the masses, and at first glance this can seem accurate. Podemos has since its foundation in 2014 been strongly tied to its leader, even printing his picture on the ballot for the 2014 European Parliament elections in Spain. The argument for this was that Podemos needed to create a space for representation for the previously unrepresented (Chironi and Fittipaldi 2017; Barberá González and Martín del Fresno 2019). In the words of Pablo Iglesias, for Podemos 'the task, then, was to aggregate the new demands generated by the crisis around a mediatic leadership, capable of dichotomizing the political space' (Iglesias 2015: 14). Moreover, he argued that it was paramount to construct a popular identity around a leader:

This populace ... was not "representable" within the traditional left- right categories of the political space. In the context of high dissatisfaction with the elites, our objective of identifying a new "we" that included the TV nation initially came together around the signifier "Pablo Iglesias". (Iglesias 2015: 17)

As such, whilst social movements matter and can create support for individual causes, real political change comes from taking part in institutions (Errejón and Mouffe 2016). Iglesias himself was to be the carrier of this new representative reality, and even though people would not necessarily care about politics, or identify themselves along the left-right spectrum, they would know the 'guy with the ponytail' from his appearances on television. Podemos have from the start been clear about that their political project is about taking power, it is about taking a place in the institutions that make political decisions.

This reasoning has also been seen in the British Labour Party under Corbyn. Even though, as described above, the party has made a clear effort to connect with grassroots movements and broaden and involve the membership, there are clear instances of where the leadership in and of itself becomes the articulating signifier for the whole movement (McTernan 2016; Blakey 2016). There are diverging opinions on whether Corbyn himself supported the focus on his own persona as leader, but the fact remains that both Momentum and the party itself are, like Podemos, interested in taking power and taking a place in extant institutions: 'Momentum wants to see a more democratic Labour Party with the policies and collective will to build a more democratic, equal and decent society in government' (Schneider 2015). There are also strong traces of the vertical structures of the trade unions within Corbynism, which supports clear hierarchical and representative orders (Wainwright 2018; Maiguashca and Dean 2019: 148). In addition, the practice of focusing on large rallies and the omnipresent chant of 'oh, Jeremy Corbyn', indicates a strong investment in Corbyn as the representative leader (Worth 2020). For some, this has not been sufficient to label Labour under Corbyn as populist (Worth 2020; March 2017; Maiguashca and Dean 2019), which further complicates the picture, but again supports the idea that the definitions of populism are highly performative and not simply designed for analytical clarity.

In sum, when looking at the so-called movement parties of the populist left, it is often difficult to establish whether they are clearly horizontal or vertical, or emotional or rational. They are therefore often referred to as hybrid parties or movement parties, owing to the mixed empirical picture (Della Porta et al. 2017; Chironi and Fittipaldi 2017). This inability to neatly align left-populism along predetermined categories stems from an inability to see how the definition of populism, and its distinction between the emotional and the rational, has a clearly performative character. In other words, the main effect of this distinction is not analytical clarity, but creating an outside and inside of the political mainstream, when, in fact, left-populism is clearly part and parcel of what European party politics stand for.

National Populists–Postnational EU?

The second dichotomy between populists and the mainstream is the assumption that populists are nationalist, and the EU is postnational. Left-wing populists are said to be more focussed on popular rather than national sovereignty, which should, according to their supporters, create a deep rift between the nationalism of right-wing populism and the concerns for the domestic working class of the populist left. There are, however, problematising factors also in this dichotomy. Left Euroscepticism has, similarly to left-wing populism, become a performative category which is trying to focus on the differences between the populist, Eurosceptic left and the EU, rather than seeing the similarities in their *modus operandi*.

This dichotomy is well-established in the literature, and Rovira Kaltwasser has even claimed that the main opposition to right-wing populism does not come from left-wing populists, but what can be termed the cosmopolitan elite (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It has been argued that right- and left-wing populists both see the nation-state as the primary arena for politics (Halikiopoulou, Nanou and Vasilopoulou 2012). Similarly, left radical parties in Europe are generally seen as sceptical to the neoliberal project of the EU (Keith 2017). There is an increased acceptance that left-wing and right-wing populists are not identical when invoking the concept of sovereignty, and that they are based on two different sets of political community. Based on a distinction between sovereignty based on an *ethnos* or a *demos*, scholars argue that the main subject of right-wing populism is the *ethnos*: a collectivity connected to culture, ethnicity, or race (Akkerman 2003: 15). In contrast, the main subject of left populism is the *demos*, the people who are included in a political community based on a notion of citizenship (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). It is by no means denied that the articulation of the People can often be done within the limits of the Nation, but left populism also opens a space for a People which is not based on blood lines (Stavrakakis, Andreadis and Katsambekis 2017; Custodi 2020) and a left return to the nation state is rather a critique of capitalism and neoliberalism (Charalambous 2013). There is a clear aim to theoretically oppose the right-wing monopoly of the term sovereignty and to reclaim popular sovereignty for the left. This has been done extensively by scholars who believe that the way forward for left-populism is to create a national popular, often inspired by a Gramscian notion of how to create a successful counter-hegemony (Mouffe 2018; Gerbaudo 2017).

However, the lines between national sovereignty, popular sovereignty, and European postnationalism are not as clear as often claimed. In contrast to much of the literature on left populism and Euroscepticism, this article contends that popular/national sovereignty and European liberal democracy have developed in tandem and cannot be easily separated. Most of all, there is a tendency not to discuss how European political actors left, right, and centre are all reliant upon an idea of sovereignty which is based on difference. Both popular and national sovereignty are historically designed to delimit the inside of politics to the outside of politics, a pattern still visible today.

Drawing on scholarship on the genealogy of sovereignty, it can be argued that the national and popular versions are not conceptually distinct, but part and parcel of a European identity project which relies on an articulation of a People which is tied to a particular territory. The creation of a sovereign People which has the power in a modern state is always done through a *racialised* conception of that People (Meister 2009: 120). Drawing on Foucault's idea of 'race war' (Foucault 2003), it can be argued that there is no state sovereignty without the creation of racialised difference, whether that difference is based on cultural or biological ideas of race: 'Race in this sense is the "hidden" element in the nation that makes its people 'equal' and enables national to produce a "fictitious entity", a "populism", that substitutes in a postfeudal world for the rule of family aristocracy (Meister 2009: 121).

Western conceptions of democracy, in other words, does not rely on a strong sense of equality, but on difference (Rancière 1999). The People are never constituted through an aggregative or deliberative process as is so often claimed in democratic theory, but based on exclusionary forces which count some over others. Mann (2012) has taken this argument further and contends that democracies always host a potentiality for genocide; the very fact that the People should be purified from groups who do not share the 'foundational values' of the political community can result in everything from political disagreement to ethnic cleansing. Importantly, this difference is gradational and not substantial. This dark side of democracy is essential to understanding the problematic facets of popular sovereignty, which is nothing but a 'dominion by a people over land as a permanent defence against racialised persecution' (Meister 2009: 133).

The narrative that left-wing populism is different from its right-wing counterpart and also distinct from postnational constellations rests upon the distinction between national and popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty, however, is often deeply influenced by the problematic foundations of European political thought even though it is thought to represent a beacon of equality and popular power. In *The Racial Contract* (1999), Mills exposes how Western democracies, are built upon an idea of the People as carrying certain characteristics. These characteristics are by no means happenstance and form part of a wider pattern of how European countries have designed a political system in order to favour some people over others, preferably to be implemented worldwide. The very famous scholars which we hold in high regard for having developed our modern ideas on popular sovereignty were, in fact, often the strongest defenders of slavery and of racial discrimination. Popular sovereignty is thus still riddled with its historical ties with class, racial and gender discrimination.

The problem of inclusion into and exclusion from the popular sovereign is to a high degree centred on the reason – emotion dichotomy, as described above, but must also be connected to how reason is often highly racialised. Even if left-wing populists do not outright refer to a 'white' *demos*, popular sovereignty in Europe has historically been associated with characteristics reserved for whites. The strong focus on rationality in the European populist left indicates an acceptance of the rules of the game, a game which is designed upon exclusionary principles. Mills and Eze (Mills 2017 1999; Eze 1997, 1995) argue that racial hierarchies are still centre stage when discussing democracy and political subjectivity, and that much of this stems from an overreliance of rationality in democratic theory. Rationality was often seen by the contractualists as the defining feature of the civilised Man, reserved for the white population. Modern-day democratic theory would never argue that rationality is reserved for whites, but this is nonetheless what the practice has ended up reinforcing. Democratic theory anchored in rational thought, it is claimed, is a raceless enterprise; rationality can be bestowed on any human being. Nonetheless, as so eloquently argued by Toni Morrison, there are times when claiming racelessness is itself a racial act (Morrison 1992: 46). In other words, to argue that popular sovereignty can be separated from national sovereignty, and that a left-wing populist sovereignty is not influenced by the concept's historical heritage is a slightly more problematic stance than admitted. Similarly, Balibar has argued that:

The idea of a popular sovereignty (collective decision-making, representation of the interests of the mass of citizens, and control of the rules by the ruled), that could be dissociated by its statist forms remain enigmatic, if not inconceivable. Its genealogy is masked more than it is illuminated by the current opposition between national sovereignty and the "postnational constellation". (Balibar 2004: 134)

Some may argue that even though national and popular sovereignty are historically tied together, surely the EU is a project which refutes national boundaries and thus overcomes the sovereign problem? However, Balibar argues that the racialised difference which underlies the concept of national and popular sovereignty is not limited to nationalism, but

rather an 'excess of nationalism'. 'There actually is a racist 'internationalism' or 'supranationalism' which tends to idealise timeless transhistorical communities such as the 'Indo-Europeans', 'the West', 'Judeo-Christian civilisation' and therefore communities which are at the same time both closed and open' (Balibar 1989: 59).

As such, there is no guarantee that a postnational project like the EU would not suffer from the same racialised articulation of the connection between a certain People and a certain territory. Such articulations in fact become blatantly obvious in EU communication in 'protecting the European way of life', where the People of Europe are tied to both a specific place, and particular cultural habits, or in the fierce protection of Europe's borders. The sovereignty of the People of Europe is constructed upon a fictitious identity which creates a clear demarcation between what is thought to be the rightful ruler of this place, and any potential illegitimate challengers to this dominance. This type of racialised identity formation is identical in the rhetoric of the EU to the populist incarnations throughout the continent.

As such, the boundaries between the postnational EU and the nationalist populists become increasingly blurred. There is a denial within the mainstream to recognise their racist and exclusionary practice, and this is something which is seen as belonging to the 'political extremes' such as populists. However, racism does not only surface as direct speech, but can also be identified as practices of the state, security policies, or simply arguments around 'cultural' habits, where people want to 'stick with their own' (Wade 2015). It is also increasingly evident that racist practices form part and parcel of the political mainstream, whilst defending the 'rights of the People' or freedom of expression (Mondon & Winter 2020).

How does the difficulty in separating the three forms of political community, – a postnational EU, a national sovereign, and a popular sovereign – present itself in analyses of left-wing populism? In Podemos and the UK Labour Party under Corbyn the lines are increasingly challenging to separate, which explains the difficulty for scholars to pinpoint them as supporting one or the other. It is obvious that popular sovereignty is an important concept (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Damiani and Viviani 2019). Podemos has made it their mission to call for a renegotiation of democracy where the People are better represented, and where unelected bureaucrats in the EU should not have the power to make decisions which so clearly affect the lives and livelihood of ordinary Spaniards (Iglesias 2015; Iglesias, Montero, Monedero, et al. 2017). At the same time, the notion of the Fatherland (*patria*), has become increasingly important for Podemos, and invokes patriotism and Spain as a nation to construct a political community:

We have a democratic, not a nationalist, idea of the fatherland, which identifies the fatherland as the people. We are trying to illustrate how those who are using the word national are also, at the same time, selling our national sovereignty for cheap. We are therefore trying to restore our economic and political sovereignty, a necessary action to restore the country and the interests of the majority. (Errejón in Marco 2015)

Similarly, Custodi argues that Podemos invokes a particular notion of the Fatherland which is based on welfare policies, popular mobilisation and pluralism (Custodi 2020). Whilst there are certainly differences between the rhetoric of the populist left and populist right, any articulation of a specific People tied to a specific territory reinforces an idea that attributes citizenship to a community of birth.

In addition, when analysing the most commonly used words in all of Podemos Facebook communication 2014-2017, it was found that *España* (Spain), was consistently in the top five words used (Eklundh 2019: 224). Podemos has justified this focus on Spain the nation as a core function of political community by saying that the nation-state is still the main area where politics is enacted, and that democracy must be achieved by involving the

citizens of Spain. Whilst their rhetoric says nothing about blood lines, there is an implicit assumption that the nation as political community will provide the quickest route to more democratic decision-making (Agustín 2020: 107). At the same time, Podemos are by no means advocating for a Spanish exit from the EU. As such, there is a simultaneous belief in the European project, further demonstrating how the distinctions between popular sovereignty, national sovereignty, and a postnational Europe are losing their edges.

In the UK Labour Party under Corbyn, a similar disintegration of these limits can be discerned. Analysts and scholars alike disagree on Corbynism's stance towards the EU, and dispute whether Corbyn is a staunch nationalist or a supporter of international solidarity. This analytical stalemate, I argue, stems from the blurred lines between postnationalism, national sovereignty, and popular sovereignty. If the underlying common assumptions of these analytical distinctions is not discussed, in this case the racialisation of a People tied to a specific territory, analysis will inevitably struggle to make a strong empirical case.

The literature on Labour under Corbyn does not identify strong support for the view that Corbyn should be seen as populist, and argues that he did not invoke the necessary signifiers of populism, such as the People, popular sovereignty, or anti-elitism (Maignashca & Dean 2019; March 2017). Nevertheless, some argue that Corbynism is the development of a 'national-popular' following the Gramscian tradition. A national-popular seeks to challenge the hegemonic order in and create a counter-hegemonic narrative. Importantly, the national-popular should be constructed from below, through popular movements, and 'provide a basis for national-popular consciousness *within* current countries as a means to counter neoliberalism' (Worth 2020: 91, author's emphasis). This framework comes as a critique of the anti-globalisation movement, and argues that to be truly effective, national politics is the main front of struggle (Gerbaudo 2017). The strong emphasis on the connection with social movements and civil society within Corbynism would, according to Worth (2000), indicate a nascent national-popular construction within the Labour Party.

The discussion becomes even more accentuated with regards to Brexit. Within the Labour Party under Corbyn, there were several factions, some of who supported Brexit (or so-called Lexit), and some who were ardently pro-Remain (Bailey 2019). The Lexit faction were much concerned with the neoliberal stance of the EU, and argued that only an exit from the union could deliver true left-wing policies for the UK (Worth 2017). This was supported by the Bennite tradition of Euroscepticism, which assumed that the working class in the North of England would be against freedom of movement for EU workers (Diamond 2018). Even though Labour under Corbyn did in the end endorse freedom of movement, this was, and still is, a hotly debated topic. Corbyn argued in January 2017 that 'Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle, but I don't want that to be misinterpreted, nor do we rule it out' (as quoted in Lucas 2017). Other key figures of the left, such as union leader Len McCluskey has argued that Britain needs to put the brakes on the 'influx of cheap labour', echoing historical resistance to foreign workers and warning that not doing so would incur the dissent of the white working class (Bloodworth 2019). This indicates a clear racialisation of the political community. On the other hand, some factions of the Labour movement, such as Momentum or Another Europe is Possible, struggle with the traditionally Eurosceptic left, and do not want to be equated with reactionary forms of nationalism or xenophobia. As such, Corbynism should be seen as 'an attempt, in part, to galvanise these grassroots initiatives within a political movement that is decidedly uncertain with regards to the Brexit question' (Bailey 2019: 265).

The lines between popular sovereignty, national sovereignty, and support for a postnational EU are indistinct also in the British Left. This inability to neatly place Corbynism into either of these categories stems from an unwillingness to recognise the historical contingency between them. In the current European context, can we ever invoke popular sovereignty without retorting to nationalism, and can we say that being pro-

European means being truly anti-racist? This article answers both questions in the negative. The popular sovereign is historically and presently articulated within a nationalist framework which takes difference as its starting point, and is always racialised. The EU, and support for the European way of life, is by no means freed from these distinctions, and also relies upon core assumptions of what it means to be European. European democracy is constructed around difference, not equality, which is endemic to parties on the left, right and centre.

CONCLUSION

This article began with the observation that there is little agreement on which form of political community that is preferred by the European populist left. Do they invoke national or popular forms of sovereignty, and are they all staunchly against the EU? I have argued that the underlying reason to the difficulty in assigning left populism in Europe to one or the other stems from that these categories are not particularly distinct in the first place, and often more performative than analytical.

The practices of left-wing European populist parties today are not as alien as some would like us to think. They represent an acceptance of the current party system and its institutions, the roads to power, and the democratic foundations underpinning most European political systems. This acceptance does not tend towards the emotional or irrational, but a crude utilitarian perspective of how to gain and remain in power. Underlying much of contemporary left-wing thought is a preference for the European ideal of rationality, which can be seen in the strong focus on deliberative discussions and the efficient vertical party hierarchy. This has been a core practice throughout the 20th century, building on Lenin's insights into labour organisation (Lenin 1901), and trumpeted by the most coveted 'new' theorists of left-wing politics (Hardt and Negri 2012). This dichotomy between rational and emotional thus has a performative character which serves to preserve a certain idea of what 'proper' decision-making should look like. The terms populist and Eurosceptic are therefore not encapsulating how left-wing populist parties in Europe are highly European and are not rejecting the core assumptions of European politics.

In addition, the commitment to popular sovereignty from the left does not indicate that these actors are very different from the European political mainstream, or that they are disjoint from invocations of national sovereignty. Left-wing populists embrace the core assumptions and practice of European democracy in their conceptualisation of the *demos*, which is still reliant on exclusionary ideas of national belonging and the capacity to rationality. In this sense, the term Euroscepticism becomes performative; it functions to label some actors as outsiders, when, in fact, similar ideologies and practices are present on the inside. As has been seen with the term populism, the two are working to perform differences where there are very few. I therefore propose a new reading of the terms populism and Euroscepticism. Instead of seeing them as analytical markers of the exception to Europe, they should be thought of as performative markers of the European core. To be a nationalist is not to be Eurosceptic, and to be populist is not very different to the European mainstream, but rather a natural conclusion of the European wish to distinguish between the worthy citizens and the threatening outsiders.

AUTHOR DETAILS

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