

The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe

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► **Abstract:** While the rise of populism in Western Europe over the past three decades has received a great deal of attention in the academic and popular literature, less attention has been paid to the rise of its opposite—anti-populism. This short article examines the discursive and stylistic dimensions of the construction and maintenance of the populism/anti-populism divide in Western Europe, paying particular attention to how anti-populists seek to discredit populist leaders, parties and followers. It argues that this divide is increasingly antagonistic, with both sides of the divide putting forward extremely different conceptions of how democracy should operate in the Western European political landscape: one radical and popular, the other liberal. It closes by suggesting that what is subsumed and feared under the label of the “populist threat” to democracy in Western Europe today is less about populism than nationalism and nativism.

► **Keywords:** anti-populism, democracy, nationalism, nativism, populism, technocracy, Western Europe

If there is one sign that the elite are nervous, it is when they cannot keep their story straight about the supposed greatest threat to democracy to be faced in recent decades: populism. In the latter months of 2016, revered media outlets like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times* were calling 2016 “The Year Populism Went Mainstream” (Glaston 2016) and “The Year of the Demagogue” (Barber 2016), and *Foreign Affairs* was arguing that populism is a pathway to “How Democracies Fall Apart” (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2016). A few months later, however, the tune had changed. Following the failure of a number of populist actors to achieve high office in Western Europe—*notwithstanding the fact that their electoral chances had been wildly overhyped by the media*—outlets such as *Time* were admitting that “2017 Might Not Be Europe’s ‘Year of the Populist’ After All” (Bremmer 2017), and *The Financial Times* were pondering “The Strange Death of European Populism” (Robinson 2017). This indicated either a profound misreading of contemporary political currents, wishful



thinking, or an unwise combination of the both. It also indicated a peculiar reading of what constitutes populist success or failure: it takes a fair amount of chutzpah to consider populism “dead” when, at the time of writing, numerous European countries are either led by (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Switzerland) or include populists in their government (Austria, Denmark, Norway); when populist parties in several other European countries are the second or third most popular parties (France, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands); and in yet other European countries, center-right parties have adopted watered-down versions of populist actors’ policies, style and discourse (Akkerman et al. 2016).

Such whiplash thinking also reflects one of the central, and thus far, underexplored divides currently emerging in the contemporary Western European political landscape: the divide between populism and anti-populism. While the former phenomenon has obviously received a great deal of attention in recent years, the latter has not. This may be a result of the fact that unlike the usual binaries constructed as “opposites” of populism – whether elitism, pluralism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) or liberalism (Müller 2016) – anti-populism is not a clear ideological disposition or mode of governance, but rather an odd mix of ideological and strategic bedfellows pulled together in a temporary alliance of opposition to populism. This short article examines the construction of this divide between populism and anti-populism in contemporary Western Europe. It does this by first defining the contested concept that is populism, before moving onto considering how to conceptualize anti-populism by drawing on the work of Yannis Stavrakakis (Stavrakakis 2007; Stavrakakis et al. 2017a) and Pierre Ostiguy (2009, 2017). It then argues that what is at stake in the increasingly stark divide between populism and anti-populism are radically different conceptions of how democracy should operate in the contemporary Western European political landscape – both valid, but very much at odds with one another. It closes by suggesting that what is subsumed and feared under the label of the “populist threat” to democracy in Western Europe today is less about populism, and far more about nationalism and nativism – and while a number of so-called “populist” actors combine these features, we need to be clear in disambiguating what is truly a threat in this stylistic, discursive and ideological *mélange*.

What is Populism?

It is something of a cliché to state that populism is a contested concept. This contestation has only increased in recent years: following the high-profile cases of the success of Donald Trump and the shock Brexit

result of 2016, both popularly interpreted as triumphs for populism, wrestling over the term has been a core feature of both popular and academic debates (see, for example, Judis 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016). In the recent debates about what populism “is”, four main approaches can be identified: seeing populism as an ideology, strategy, discourse or political style (Moffitt 2016). It is the first of these that has undoubtedly become the most commonly utilized in the literature on Western European populism. This definition views populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2007: 23). Despite this approach’s influence, it has increasingly come under fire from critics, specifically for its binarism, its methodological inconsistencies when operationalized and applied, and the complications of insisting that populism is a “thin” ideology (Aslanidis 2016) – something that has been most damningly rebuked by the very author responsible for the concept of “thin ideologies”, who argues that “[a] thin-centred ideology implies that there is potentially more than the centre, but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive. It is emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred” (Freeden 2017: 3). The strategic approach, typified by Weyland’s definition of populism as “as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland 2001: 14), has been very influential in the literature on Latin American populism, but has had less uptake in the literature on European populism. This is due to its limited travelability in terms of its focus on lack on institutionalization, which has not been a feature of populism in the European context – something Weyland (2017: 61–64) acknowledges – as well its issues in casting far too wide a net in terms of cases, taking in religious or labor parties as well as millenarian movements (Hawkins 2010: 168), and for not engaging with the key referent of “the people” (Moffitt and Tormey 2013), which most other definitions of populism see as core to the phenomenon.

The latter two approaches – seeing populism as a discourse or political style – offer a distinctly different stance towards populism. As opposed to focusing on the ideological aspects of populism, these approaches see populism as something that is *done*. Here, the stylistic, performative and relational aspects of populism take precedence. As a result, while the ideological approach tends to focus almost exclusively on populist *parties*, and the strategic approach on populist *leaders*, discursive and stylistic

approaches take a wider view of the varieties of actors that can and do utilize populism. While discursive approaches tend to see populism as “a specific type of discourse which claims to express popular interests and to represent associated identities and demands (the “will of the people”) against an “establishment” or elite, which is seen as undermining them and forestalling their satisfaction” (Stavrakakis 2017: 527), the political style approach goes a step further to take in its explicitly performative aspects. Ostiguy’s stylistic-informed approach to populism as the “flaunting of the low” (versus a technocratic “high”) makes this clear: “[h]igh and low have to do with ways of relating to people; as such, they go beyond “discourses” as mere words, and they include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing, etc. As a way of relating to people, they also encompass the way of making decisions” (Ostiguy 2009: 5). My own definition of populism also accounts for these embodied, symbolically mediated aspects of the phenomenon, seeing it as “a political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat” (Moffitt 2016: 45). While all central approaches to populism (excluding the strategic one) share the core minimal reference to the divide between “the people” and “the elite” or establishment, where the discursive and stylistic approaches push the literature forward is that they firstly recognize populism as a gradational rather than binary category, thus opening up more nuance in the study of populism; and secondly, they take seriously the role and processes of representation and identity formation under populism, and consequently the drawing of lines between “the people” and other political identities. This comes in particularly handy when it comes to conceptualizing how the frontier between populism and anti-populism is formed, maintained and reinforced in the contemporary Western European environment.

What is Anti-Populism?

Mainstream approaches to populism tend to oppose it to elitism and pluralism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), liberalism (Müller 2016), “diversity, tolerance and plurality in politics” (Finchelstein 2017: 173), or “civic responsibility and participation” (Gerodimos 2015: 623). Yet other than elitism, there are issues with the normative baggage attached to these “opposites,” with each of them concealing a rather damning claim about the undesirability of populism for democratic politics. There is, however, a less normatively charged way of conceiving populism’s opposite: seeing it, quite simply, as anti-populism. This formulation, however,

has not received a great deal of attention in the academic literature. This stems from a few possible reasons. The first is, as mentioned earlier, that populism is often treated as a binary category, in that one “is” or “is not” a populist, meaning that the wide identity of “anti-populist” is not sufficient as an “opposite” when trying to conceptualize political identities in the European political sphere given its broad nature. Here, “thicker” ideologies like liberalism or pluralism, or even values like diversity, tolerance or civic responsibility are put to work to “oppose” populism conceptually. The second reason is that most studies of populism in Europe are conflated with the study of the radical right (see Stavrakakis et al. 2017b), and as such, most democratically-minded scholars have good reasons to take a normative stance against such actors. However, populism is *not* necessarily linked to either side of the ideological spectrum, nor even to radical positions (Pop-Eleches 2010; Učeň 2007), so the conflation of the nativist and authoritarian aspects of such actors with their populism is unnecessary and unhelpful. Thirdly, political scientists who study the phenomenon often fall into the category of being “anti-populist” themselves, whether unwittingly or explicitly, given their concerns about populism’s allegedly corrosive effects on liberal democracy (see Moffitt (2016: 134–142) on implicit anti-populism; for recent examples of explicit anti-populism in political science, see Mounk (2018) and Müller (2016)). “Anti-populism” is thus the default position for the academy, and as a result, its “naturalness” makes it somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study.

As such, those few thinkers who have dedicated time and space to conceptualizing anti-populism have come from outside the “mainstream” of populism studies, developing and drawing on discursive and stylistic approaches to populism. An early indication of thinking along these lines came from Alan Knight, whose work on populism as style in Latin America argued that “[i]f ‘populism’ is, to a degree, a useful and discernible phenomenon, it is logical to look for its elitist counterpart, ‘anti-populism’, that is, a discourse/ideology/style which deplores the coarse, degenerate and feckless character of ‘the people’” (Knight 1998: 239). The thinker who has done the most work in following Knight’s advice in this way is Yannis Stavrakakis, whose Essex School-inspired work on the construction of the populism/anti-populism divide has argued that such a conceptualization is not only “logical” as per Knight, but indeed *necessary* to understanding populism. Drawing on a Saussurean approach to identity formation and difference, Stavrakakis (et al. 2017a: 12) argue that “[p]opulism is inconceivable without anti-populism; it is impossible to effectively study the first without carefully examining the second”. Moreover, this is not merely a philosophical question, but one grounded

in empirical reality: studying populism alongside anti-populism ensures that one can contextualize the phenomena within “the broader hegemonic struggle” that constructs and reinforces “the emerging populism/anti-populism frontier” (Stavrakakis et al. 2017a: 2) in the contemporary political landscape.

For Stavrakakis, this landscape – a Europe grappling with the aftereffects of the combined shocks of the Global Financial Crisis, the Eurozone crisis, and more recently, the European migrant crisis – has seen “the axis between populism and anti-populism emerge as the dominant cleavage, an ideological rupture that organizes the political meaning of our current predicament, orienting the discursive production of various political actors in Greece, southern Europe and beyond” (Stavrakakis 2014: 505). In such an environment, “irresponsible” populists of the left – the Greek SYRIZA standing up against the Troika, Podemos channeling the energies of the 15M movement in mobilizing against *la casta* in Spain – and the “dangerous” populists of the right – the likes of the nativist Front National, Alternative for Germany, the Dutch Party for Freedom and so forth – are joined together as a threat against the very existence of Europe. Here, the populism versus anti-populism narrative is solidified into a position in which “Europe and populism are viewed as the two extremes of a radical antithesis” (Stavrakakis 2014: 510) – on one side, defenders of Europe who are “obviously” anti-populist, and on the other side, the Eurosceptic populists hell-bent on setting fire to the European project. While this discursive move utilized by anti-populists has some truth behind it – indeed, many populist parties are nationalist or Eurosceptic in the current context (Harmsen 2010; Mudde 2013) – it also ignores the facts that a) there are a number of non-Eurosceptic populist actors in the current European political landscape, including Podemos and the DiEM25 Movement; b) that there are good reasons to be critical of the way that the European project is currently constituted that do not need to be subsumed under the label of “populism” (Follesdal and Hix 2006); and c) that it is often less these actors’ populism that seems to be the problem here, but rather their nativism, a point that this article returns to in its conclusion.

The other central theorist of anti-populism is Ostiguy, whose work has mainly focused on Latin American populism (Ostiguy 2009), but is also applicable to the Western European context and beyond (Ostiguy 2017; Ostiguy and Roberts 2016). As mentioned earlier, Ostiguy’s work goes “beyond” the merely discursive, to take into account the way in which the sociocultural, performative and affective dimensions of populism operate. For him, “populism is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the “low” (Ostiguy 2017: 84) – whereas “[d]efense of the high is certainly the key feature of the much under-studied phenomenon of

anti-populism” (Ostiguy 2017: 75). This low/high populism/anti-populism divide requires some explanation. Socioculturally, the populist low is characterized by coarseness, “bad manners” (Moffitt 2016), a lack of inhibition and a sense of localism, whereas the anti-populist high is characterized by its “proper” manners, polish, learnedness and a sense of cosmopolitan worldliness. Sociopolitically, the low is characterized by personalism and strong leadership; whereas the high is characterized by institutionalism, proceduralism and legalism. As examples of the low, Ostiguy (2017: 17) points to the familiar populist cases of Hugo Chávez, Huey Long, Carlos Menem, Sarah Palin and Silvio Berlusconi, whereas for the high, he mentions the likes of Lionel Jospin, Nelson Rockefeller, David Cameron and Mario Monti. The high/low divide, as Ostiguy stresses, is not abstract: it “has to do with ways of *being* and *acting* in politics. The ‘high-low’ axis, in that sense, is ‘cultural’ and very concrete – perhaps more concrete in fact than left and right” (Ostiguy 2017: 77). More so, this cultural aspect cannot be explained away as “mere” aesthetics, fashion or something trivial: Ostiguy (2017: 77) argues that the high and low “connect deeply with a society’s history, existing group differences, identities and resentments.” The kind of Bourdieuan habitus that one inhabits or represents – with its requisite tastes, affects, body language, accent, posture and so forth – are not something that is merely put on and taken off at will in some kind of postmodern identity bricolage, but rather something that is deeply rooted in a society’s culture: witness, for example, the visceral distaste those from the anti-populist high in the United States have for Donald Trump’s taste for McDonald’s, KFC and Diet Coke, and the media attention these tastes have garnered. This distaste has little to do with ideology, but rather, codes of what is “appropriate” in sociocultural terms in the US: the implication, here, being that Trump’s – and his followers’ – tastes are vulgar, inappropriate and childish. Their “lowness” marks them as populist, against a far more refined and proper anti-populist high, who perceive themselves as the adults in the room. What looks trivial – what a political leader chooses to eat – thus reveals itself as rather important, vested with concrete, embodied politicocultural meaning, and playing importantly into the vital realm of affect.

Like Stavrakakis’ approach to the populism/anti-populism divide, Ostiguy’s approach is useful in that it carries little normative baggage, and makes clear that populism *as well as anti-populism* do not automatically reside on a particular side of the ideological spectrum. As Ostiguy and his co-author Roberts stress, “the acrimonious divide between populism and anti-populism is actually orthogonal to the left-right economic axis in that we find populist movements on the left and on the right, as well as anti-populist reactions anchored left, center, and right” (Ostiguy and

Roberts 2016: 26–27). This lack of ideological mooring is precisely what is so unsettling about populism, according to Ostiguy and Roberts (2016: 26): “populism is also disruptive because its antagonistic ‘simplification of the political space,’ most often, does not map onto the conventional alignments or axes of political competition. Instead, a populist/anti-populist divide tends to dissect, cut across, or reframe these conventional alignments.” This makes sense not only analytically, in terms of categorizing political actors – say, for making sense why ideologically disparate leaders like Marine Le Pen and Pablo Iglesias can both be seen as populist – but also politically, in terms of making sense why anti-populists of different ideological stripes can join together to concretely oppose populism. Here, ideological differences matter less than the populist/anti-populist distinction, which is one reason why we can see situations like the *cordon sanitaires* against Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Front National in France and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden uniting rather diverse political actors.

There are good reasons to draw together Stavrakakis and Ostiguy’s approaches. While Stavrakakis’ approach to the populism/anti-populism divide explicitly focuses on the discursive construction of the frontier between the two opposing camps, thus paying attention to the construction of political identities, Ostiguy’s approach arguably “fills in” the content of the two camps, making sense of their sociocultural and sociopolitical practices. To put it another way, Stavrakakis’ approach provides insight into the formal processes of political identification between populism and anti-populism; while Ostiguy’s approach gives insight into the affective and “thick” dimension of what populism and anti-populism look like in practice. In the Western European context, we can thus register the way in which populism’s “low” is used as a delegitimizing argument against it; versus the “high” and thus “proper” way of doing politics advocated by anti-populists. One can think here of the sociocultural barbs aimed at “wild” populists like Beppe Grillo who swear and act “hysterically,” the ponytailed and goateed Pablo Iglesias, or the “unproper” pint-swilling Nigel Farage – all to be contrasted with anti-populist “mainstream” politicians, who know how to dress, talk and act “properly” in the political realm without engaging in such “low” theatrics. The same goes for the accusations levelled at supporters of right-wing populists as being backward, uneducated simpletons from rural backwaters or forgotten industrial towns who have been manipulated by populist Svengalis, or the supporters of left wing populists as hopelessly idealistic and unrealistic political naïfs or smelly hippy students who have no idea how the world “really works.” We can see something similar in regard to the politicocultural dimension: while populist demands for “direct democracy” (Bowler et al. 2017) or a sense of sovereignty at a local, regional or national level

are portrayed as selfish, immature and vulgar, the yielding of decision-making powers to the supranational European level is seen as mature, sensible and the “right thing to do.” Questioning this structure and the democratic deficit of the current setup of the EU (Follesdal and Hix 2006) or offering even the softest of “soft Euroscepticism” (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004) is dangerous ground to tread if one does not want to be tagged as a populist.

What is at Stake for Democracy?

The question that is raised for us, as those interested in democratic theory, is: what is at stake in the divide between populism and anti-populism when it comes to democracy in Western Europe, and indeed the EU project more widely? The first thing to note is that both sides of the populist/anti-populist divide are putting forward radically different (and perhaps incompatible) visions of how democracy should operate in the European context. On one hand, the vast majority of Western European populists wish to wrest some degree of political decision-making power back from the supranational level of the European Union, and to restore sovereignty on the national level, with nationalist arguments about restoring power to the nation intermixing with populist arguments about wresting power back from “the elite” and back into the hands of “the people.” The model of democracy advocated by populists in this case is both popular and radical (Kioupiolis and Katsambekis 2014; Laclau 2005), and is often framed as part of a critique of liberalism. In liberal democracy’s balance between its liberal pillar (emphasizing the right of the individual and primacy of the rule of law) and its democratic pillar (emphasizing participation, majoritarianism and the sovereignty of “the people”) – the tension that Margaret Canovan (2004) and Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens (2007) have called the “two-strand model” of democracy – the populist camp argue that the balance has been tipped too far in the favor of liberalism. Liberalism here is seen as a way to constrain democratic involvement and ensure elite capture of powerful institutions. On the other hand, the model advocated by anti-populists is generally liberal. It values the distance and levels of mediation and abstraction that the complicated architecture of the EU provides. Here, populism is a “pathology” of democracy – a disfigurement of democratic politics that only occurs due to social decay or unbalance (see Jäger 2017). In liberal democracy’s balance between its liberal and democratic pillars, anti-populists see populism as tipping the scales too far in favor of democracy, and thus disregarding (or actively violating) the liberal protections of minorities, checks and balances, and

more broadly, the safeguards of the broader liberal-democratic system, which they see as populists wanting to dismantle.

Both of these camps have good reasons to defend their models of democracy, and both see themselves as “true” democrats, protecting what they claim to hold dear. Yet the moralization of this divide is problematic, in that the discursive frontier between both camps becomes impermeable, with the divide between populism and anti-populism becoming one of good and evil (with both sides obviously seeing themselves as the former). To use Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) terminology, the populism/anti-populism divide has become antagonistic rather than agonistic, with a clear deadlock between the two sides. As Stavrakakis (et al. 2017a: 17) note, neither side is innocent in this regard: “In the ensuing discursive battle between populism and anti-populism, both sides performatively employ simplification of what is at stake and demonization of their enemy.” The critiques that can be lobbed at either side that should seriously give pause to anyone who thinks of themselves as a friend of democracy—the populist tendency towards dangerous personalism on one side; the anti-populist tendency towards technocracy and capture of democratic institutions by corporate interests on the other (Caramani 2017)—thus are disregarded, and with little room for self-reflection and critique, the divide is reinforced and each side digs its heels in deeper.

As a result, the core signifiers of each side of the anti-populism/populism divide become seriously overburdened. For populists, “the elite” and “Brussels” become signifiers capable of carrying connotations of corruption, collusion, dishonesty, exploitation and hatred of ordinary people. For anti-populists, meanwhile, populism “as a discursive vessel [is] capable of comprising an excess of heterogeneous meanings, operating as the synecdoche of an omnipresent evil and associated with irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism” (Stavrakakis et al. 2017a: 16). The fear of “the people” embodied in this characterization has serious problems, however:

although anti-populist rhetoric allegedly targets populism, the demonization of populism conveniently ends up by incorporating all references to the people as well . . . the domination of a predominantly anti-populist logic – consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally – marginalizes the people and its demands. It reduces politics to an administrative enterprise, stripped from the elements of participation and open democratic deliberation, offering no real choice between different alternatives, leaving it prey to the supposedly objective instructions of experts and technocrats. (Stavrakakis 2014: 506)

In short, when anti-populists start targeting “the people” – a collective identity with a remarkable staying power in our broad conceptions of

democracy (Canovan 2005)—we are left on shaky ground. Even self-proclaimed liberals see the danger in this approach: as Jan-Wenner Müller, who is no fan of populism has noted, “[t]he danger here is that anti-populism becomes structurally like populism itself: because they wish to exclude, we exclude them” (Müller 2014: 491). The *cordon sanitaire* against populist right parties mentioned earlier speak to this, as do the echoes of the militant democracy approach that underlie the most extreme anti-populist positions in Western Europe (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Müller adds that instead of going down such an extreme route, “anti populist stances can well go together with a serious engagement with the claims populists raise (including the claim that they, and only they, represent the true people), and, in particular, with addressing the issues about which the voters of populist parties care the most” (Müller 2014: 491). It is fair to say, however, that this engagement and addressing such issues—beyond the cribbing of the populist playbook in sometimes more palatable and “softer” terms (Akkerman et al. 2016)—seems to be in short supply.

Conclusion: Nativism, not Populism

The increasing deadlock between populism and anti-populism in Western Europe is obviously not good news for anyone who cares about democracy. It encourages antagonism, and forces those who are otherwise agonistic or seeking a more nuanced position on the dangers or benefits of populism for European democracy to move their chips completely on one side of the frontier or the other. There is no room for the conciliatory centrist with this divide. Are you for “the people” or for “Brussels”? Are you a “true” democrat or a liberal? Are you Leave or Remain? Are you on the side of good or evil?

One must consider whether this fear of populism is somewhat misguided, and instead, if we should actually be focusing on what many anti-populists seem truly fear about their opponents: their nativism. As Rydgren has recently argued,

The European radical right-wing parties are often—and increasingly—referred to as populist parties . . . These parties are mainly defined by ethnic nationalism, and not a populist ideology. Ethnic nationalism also largely influences the radical right-wing parties’ populist message: these parties’ anti-elitist message—directed against an alleged political-correctness [sic] elite—emanates primarily from the idea that an elite of established parties, media, and intellectuals have betrayed their country by embracing multicultural and internationalist ideas—and, often, for selling out their country’s sovereignty to the EU . . . it is misleading

to label these parties ‘populist parties’ – since populism is not the most pertinent feature of this party family. (Rydgren 2017: 486)

In other words, while many radical right parties do indeed utilize a populist style of sorts, and couch their attacks on the EU project and “the elite” of both national and supranational stripes, the things that critics truly worry about – their xenophobia, their racism, their targeting of minorities, and their nostalgia for a more “pure” time with closed borders – are actually features of their nationalism or nativism.

There are fair reasons for confusing the two phenomena – populists are often (but not always) nationalist in the European context and both utilize the signifier “the people.” However, there are also clear differences between nationalism and populism that we need to pay attention to. Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017: 312) have argued that nationalism and populism differ in their formal discursive criterion: while nationalism has a horizontal in/out directionality at its core, distinguishing between “the nation” or “the-people-as-nation” and non-members of the nation, populism has a vertical up/down directionality, distinguishing between “the people” and “the elite.” Nationalism, then, is about membership, borders and shared territorial or temporal space, whereas populism is about a clear power hierarchy, often between socioeconomic or sociocultural positions. When one distinguishes the two in this manner, it becomes quite clear that the alleged biggest threat posed to Western European democracy and the European Union is not populism, but rather nationalism: while populism takes its aim at elites at all levels, nationalism is logically opposed to the very existence of supranational institutions like the EU.

Moving away from populism, and instead focusing on nationalism (and its closely related concept, nativism), shifts the focus away from debating different models of democracy, and in turn has the benefit of not conflating left wing and right wing populist actors as equally “dangerous” actors when it comes to democracy and pluralism. More so, it allows us to disentangle a populist discourse or style from a more substantive ideology (for example, nationalism, conservatism or socialism), and place our analytical and normative focus on the ideological aspect. As De Cleen puts it, the conflation of populism with nationalism in Western Europe has ultimately “given populism a worse name than it deserves. Quite some [sic] of the contemporary critiques of populism are actually critiques of (exclusionary) nationalism. These critiques denounce populism not only for the potential threats of populism per se to liberal democracy, but also for sins that are not in fact populist (but are ‘committed’ by some populists)” (De Cleen 2017: 358–357).

This short article has aimed to show that there is a need to pay more attention to the undertheorized concept of anti-populism, and that doing so can only add more nuance to our understanding of populism itself. Tracing the development of the concept through the work of Ostiguy and Stavrakakis, it has demonstrated that the populism/anti-populism divide betrays our usual ideological assumptions about where populism “fits” in the Western European landscape, and instead cuts across the left-right divide. More so, in drawing these different conceptions of anti-populism together, it has argued for a discursive and stylistic approach to the populism/anti-populism divide, demonstrating how the divide is reflected in sociocultural and politicocultural terms. It then examined the differing models of democracy advocated by both camps, and closed by arguing that the moral campaign against populism may more accurately be considered a campaign against nationalism. Overall, it has hoped to show that anti-populism is not a “natural” or automatic position, but one that is constructed, maintained and defended, and thus is necessary to interrogate, especially for those who care about democracy.

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