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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Populism: symptom or sublimation? Reassessing the use of psychoanalytic metaphors

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Abstract In the effort to articulate political theory and psychoanalysis, two psychoanalytic metaphors—symptom and sublimation—have been separately used by political theorists to explain the emergence of populism and its relationship with democracy. Going back to the works of Freud and Lacan, this paper provides a critical reassessment of the uses of these two psychoanalytic metaphors by authors such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Benjamin Arditi. The paper concludes that the two metaphors are complementary, as the distinction between symptom and sublimation is key to differentiating between undemocratic and radical democratic constructions of popular identities.

Keywords populism · psychoanalysis · radical democracy · symptom · sublimation

As populism becomes the word of the moment, many scholars have tried to understand this phenomenon. A debate has emerged on whether there is only one kind of populism, or if it can have different populist expressions with different democratic stances (Mouffe, 2020, p. 3). This article starts from the acknowledgement that while psychoanalysis has been fruitfully used by many authors to explain the affective dynamics of populism, very little has been written on how psychoanalytic concepts may contribute to distinguish different kinds of populism. For instance, two psychoanalytic metaphors have been frequently applied in academic literature to explain populism: symptom and sublimation. However, even though Freud conceived symptom and sublimation as two opposed "destinies of the drive," the two metaphors were never presented together in opposition to each

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other. To fill this gap, I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of prior uses of these metaphors. In this process, I will be able to present my own interpretation of them, which will contribute to understanding their key role in distinguishing various kinds of populism.

The paper divides into two parts. First, I analyze the metaphor of populism as a symptom. As Jason Glynos notices, although Chantal Mouffe does not openly present this parallel with psychoanalysis, her book on *The Return of the Political* (1993) has a title that "echoes the Freudian notion of 'the return of the repressed'" (Glynos, 2003, p. 192), which is Freud's formula for the symptom. Since then, the metaphor has reappeared many times, in latent references as well as in well-developed interpretations such as those of Benjamin Arditi. I will present the interpretations that compare populism with symptom to claim that it has democratic potentialities, but also assess the limits of these views.

The second part of the paper examines Ernesto Laclau's and his followers' idea of populism as sublimation (Laclau, 2005, p. 113; Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 131). Despite indicating some problems with Laclau's incorporation of psychoanalytic notions, I claim that this metaphor is more promising in its democratic potentialities. From this, I conclude that the two metaphors are not mutually exclusive, but rather can complement each other. While the metaphor of symptom may describe undemocratic expressions of populism, sublimation would be an adequate metaphor for democratic populism.

Populism as a symptom

Freud once described the symptom as an "ingeniously chosen piece of ambiguity" and said it would have "two meanings in complete mutual contradiction" (1917/1963b, p. 360). I believe we should bear this description in mind when we investigate its use as a common metaphor to explain populism: for many authors, populism would be a symptom of democratic politics. Its ambiguity, I argue, emerges from the different interpretations that can be derived from this metaphor. From some perspectives, this metaphor highlights the democratic potentialities of populism, while other points of view suggest that populism represents a threat to democracy itself.

Let me start by presenting the position of those who, in one way or another, claim the redemptive dimension of populism as a symptom. I will focus now on the work of Mouffe and the early writings of Arditi, although it is important to acknowledge the inspiring reflections of Paula Biglieri (2005, pp. 159–178) and Nora Merlin (2011, p. 282) on the matter. Their accounts are qualified, but all use this metaphor to see populism as potentially democratic, capable of redeeming democracy. For them, populism would be the "return of the repressed."

It is well known that, right from the beginning, the idea of symptom in the psychoanalytic works of Freud refers to a psychic consequence of repression. Freud initially considered in his theory that what was being repressed was a traumatic idea which could not fit into one's mind (1893/1966, p. 170). With the development of his drive theory, Freud would explain that he was dealing with the repression of a representation associated with a drive, and that this repression was led by the ego and the superego (1915/1957d, pp. 150, 154; 1926/1959b, pp. 90–91, 113; 1933/1964, p. 57).

In Freud's first formulation the drive consists of two parts: it has a representation and a "quota of affect" invested in this representation. What happens in repression, according to Freud, is a traumatic experience that separates these two parts, throwing the unbearable representation out in the unconscious mind (1909/1955a, p. 196). Nevertheless, as Freud explain, the detached "quota of affect" from which the traumatic representation was deprived can neither be repressed nor dissolved. For Freud, in repression the psychic energy remains and resurfaces at the conscious level as a symptom. The "return of the repressed" is, therefore, the return of something that could not be thematized by the subject.

The question, of course, is what does it have to do with democracy. What should democracy be redeemed from? What has been repressed and needs to reemerge?

Democratic symptoms

Considering the polysemy of the word "democracy," we must start by clarifying what we mean by it. In this article, democracy stands for radical democracy. The idea of radical democracy assumes a post-foundationalist ontology which rejects that any subordination relation is well grounded—be it in religion, biology, materialism or any other principle (Glynos, 2003, p. 192). An ethics of radical democracy implies understanding that all these markers of certainty ultimately cannot hold. It is up for the community to establish its own *vivre ensemble*, being open to questioning and transforming any given social practice.

For the authors who see the metaphor of populism as a symptom as indicating the democratic potentialities of populism, democracy should have its radicalness redeemed from post-democracy. For Mouffe, for instance, the post-democratic consensus excluded many debates from the public arena.

The idea of post-democracy was originally proposed by Colin Crouch. It describes a context where, despite the growing adoption of liberal democratic institutions worldwide, the decline of traditional class structures brings about an increasingly elite-led politics in which democracy is reduced to a quiescent and "tightly controlled spectacle" of periodical elections (Crouch, 2000, p. 2). As Mouffe understands it, post-democratic discourse provides and tries to impose a definitive formula to manage human affairs. Its goal is to replace the government of persons by the administration of things. Democracy, in this discourse, is castrated of any radicalness and becomes ineffective in practical terms. All parties simply accept and adapt to the hegemonic order, consolidating it by presenting its policies as a matter of technical, scientific knowledge not to be questioned. In this process, they avoid questioning a relevant political aspect of social life—the economic system as it is structured. As Mouffe states, in the last few decades society was confronted with "a fate that [it] had to accept …. No space was left for the citizens to have a real choice between different political projects" (2018a, p. 4). In short, post-democracy has ossified democracy. Radical alternatives are excluded and repressed as they threaten the post-democratic "democratic" consensus. According to Mouffe, this repression of political alternatives is not without consequences. The repressed returns as a symptom.

Mouffe stresses the affective dimension involved in this reemergence of the repressed. As she states, it is not only discourses that are repressed in post-democracy. "Political passions cannot find an outlet" either (Mouffe, 1999, p. 9). However, as happens with a symptom, one can repress a discussion, but not the anguish associated with it (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 213). In practical terms, Mouffe says, "privatization and deregulation policies contributed to a drastic deterioration in the conditions of the workers" (2018a, p. 18). These policies produce anguish, helplessness, which Laclau (1990, p. 39) termed "dislocation."

In this context, some expressions of populism would be the means for the resurfacing of what was once repressed, possibly reinvigorating democratic life. Moreover, populism would reinstall conflict into politics. Contrary to the idea that there are no alternatives, populism's antagonistic character would indicate that things could be different, pointing towards the radical contingency of sedimented social practices.

Yet, if Mouffe's analysis was often seen as associating populism and symptom, she never openly did so. The author who publicly advanced the metaphor of populism as symptom the most, and pointed to its redemptive potentialities, was Benjamin Arditi.

Arditi goes beyond the simple insight of a symptom as the "return of the repressed." He develops this metaphor by presenting the notion of "internal frontier." As he says, for Freud the symptom was experienced as something external to the ego. Nevertheless, it was internal to the subject. In Freudian terms, it was an "internal foreign territory" (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 57). Or, to use Lacan's neologism, *extîme*, exterior and intimate at the same time (Lacan, 2006; Miller, 1986/2010, p. 13). According to Arditi, populism is at the "internal periphery" of democracy (2005, p. 89). Populism could reinvigorate democracy precisely because it operates inside democracy, but in such a way that would challenge it to accomplish its unfulfilled promises.

To advance his argument, Arditi relies on Slavoj Žižek's comments on symptom. For Žižek, the notion of symptom refers to an exception that marks the lack of basis of any symbolic order (Žižek, 1989, p. 21; Arditi, 2005, p. 92). It points to something that went wrong. The symptom is not simply an element of the symbolic order but rather an example challenging this order, something pointing to its inconsistency. It is the aporetic moment when the universal principle shows its exceptions and blind spots, allowing it to be reclaimed and its meaning reinvigorated. According to Žižek, that was what Lacan had in mind when on at least four occasions he claimed that Marx invented the symptom (Lacan, 2002, pp. 26, 101; 2007, p. 164; 1966, p. 234). Žižek interprets Lacan as indicating that the proletariat is a symptom of capitalism. The proletariat which "freely" sells its labor on the "free" market can be the element that denounces the farce of a symbolic order structured around the idea of "freedom" (Žižek, 1989, p. 18; Marx, 1867/1996, pp. 83–84).

Arditi replicates Žižek's argument to claim that populism is a symptom of democracy. As such, populism points towards or embodies a democratic openness. For Arditi, populism formally respects democratic procedures, but questions—and even threatens—the closure of the democratic system at the same time (Arditi, 2005, p. 92). As he puts it:

> [One can depict] populism as the return of the repressed, as a symptom of democracy – as an internal element of the democratic system that also reveals the limits of the system and prevents its closure in the presumed normality of institutional procedures. (Arditi, 2005, p. 88)

In a famous passage, repeated by many scholars, Arditi explains that "populism plays the role of the awkward guest" at a dinner party who does not respect good manners but tells painful truths to the other invitees. It is in this way that the "disruptive noise" of populism stands in for the "return of the repressed" (Arditi, 2005, p. 93).

In this understanding of symptom, populism would produce a disidentification with the people's subaltern position (Arditi 2005, p. 91; Biglieri, 2005, p. 178). It would include Jacques Rancière's (1995, p. 28) "part of no-part." Moreover, in a contentious passage Arditi claims that populism could even raise a problem over the people's own identity as an integral being, the existence of a popular will as such (2005, p. 91). Populism, in a nutshell, would point towards radical contingency, indetermination. As radical democracy is defined precisely as an ethics that embraces radical contingency and indetermination, that fosters awareness that things always could be otherwise, populism as a symptom would be a vehicle for radical democracy.

Morbid symptoms

Despite the redemptive potentialities he finds in populism, Arditi highlights that not all expressions of populism are democratic. He counterweights his analysis of populism as a symptom with reflections on populism as an unsavory "underside" of democracy (Arditi, 2005, p. 91). I totally agree that populism can be an underside of democracy. However, contrary to Arditi, I think that this underside is embedded in the very metaphor of populism as a symptom. In fact, although Arditi follows a very popular reading of Lacan, it seems to me that this reading is incomplete. By complementing it, I argue that a rigorous use of the psychoanalytic notion of symptom would actually suggest that populism as symptom is not compatible with radical democracy. Instead, it would perhaps be closer to what Antonio Gramsci called "morbid symptoms," which emerge when a system enters into crisis and no suitable solution has yet appeared (Gramsci, 1930/1971, p. 276 [Q3, §34]).

The first issue with Arditi's account is that he does not make clear that the *extîme* status of symptom is due to the fact that is not easily understood by the subject (Miller, 1983/1987, p. 114). In fact, the enigmatic status of the symptom was seen at the beginning of Freud's work as a requirement for it to emerge. Its roots must remain in the dark and misunderstood for it to sustain itself as a compromise solution.

This misunderstanding comes precisely from the fact that a symptom is a substitutive representation, a byproduct of repression (Freud, 1915/1957d, p. 154). Repression takes place when the psychic energy associated with an anguish-provoking repressed traumatic image does not dissipate and ends up linked to another substitutive representation. It is this substitutive bonding that produces symptoms. For Freud, the analytical treatment consisted in plunging into the unconscious mind through a process of free association, that could perhaps allow the subject to retrace the connection between the substitutive representation and the original one. Freud believed that the symptom could be dissolved through this process of revisiting the traumatic experience, and by discussing the repressive process—one's relation with the law, for example. It is with this paradigm in mind that Lacan would claim that the unconscious was structured as a language (Lacan, 1956/2018, p. 24). He saw an equivalence between Freud's idea of symptomatic substitution with the linguistic concepts of metaphor. In this framework, Lacan says the symptom would work as a metaphor: it is a signifier that takes the place of an original (1966, p. 528).

The problem is that this psychic metaphor—the symptom—remains obscure for the subject. Contrary to what Merlin (2011, p. 282) has suggested, for instance, the symptom does not instigate its own interpretation, but rather it is something that only exists while the subject avoids interpretation. In the end, the idea of a symptom as a substitutive representation indicates that a symptom does not touch the real issues (Freud, 1917/1963b, p. 358). The symptom is not a solution to the problem. After all, despite his view that a psychoanalyst should not treat a symptomatic patient as a degenerate, Freud nevertheless stresses that symptoms are pathological (1917/1963a, p. 260). A symptom may indicate that there really is something wrong but its immediate diagnosis is by definition incorrect. It indicates the existence of a "hidden truth" but at first this remains hidden.

The problem becomes both more complex and clearer if one considers that symptoms are formed within a fantasmatic frame. Since Freud, fantasy and symptom form a pair: fantasy determines and shapes the symptom (Freud, 1908/1959a, p. 159). But what is fantasy? For Freud, fantasy is the other side of the coin of a desire—he even uses the expression "fantasy of desire" or "desiring fantasy" in various moments of his work (1900/1953, p. 264). Desire in its turn is understood by Freud as the product of a dissatisfaction. One fantasizes because there is something lacking. And it is this idea that Lacan develops in his formulations on fantasy.

I have described the psychoanalytic details of his theory elsewhere (Zicman de Barros, 2020, pp. 514–515). To simplify a rather complex theory, let us say that, for Lacan, the subject is marked by a crisis of subjectivity. We are not identical to ourselves. We are split between an external image of ourselves and our "inner self," and these two parts will never coincide. This split produces a lack, which is anguish provoking. The fact that our identities do not fit produces uncanniness. We are constantly threatened by their precariousness, by their radical contingency.

Fantasy emerges here as a mechanism to cope with anguish and to try to establish a grounded identity. Fantasy offers objects that fascinate the subject with the promise to solve the subjective split and produce an experience of full enjoyment. It can assume many forms. A young man can idealize that “conquering” a pretty woman would fill a subjective lack. A shopaholic can be convinced that buying a new pair of fancy shoes provides some deep satisfaction. A charismatic politician can claim that their victory would make their country great again. The problem is that there is no solution for the subjective split, no reconciled identity, and no such a thing as full enjoyment. No object—be it a pretty woman, a fancy shoe, or a demagogue—can cope with subjective lack. Instead, they imprison the subject in what Lacan called the metonymy of desire (1966, p. 528). One pretty woman after another, one fancy shoe after another, or one politician after another, the subject replaces objects of fascination in an impossible quest (Lacan, 1973/2016, p. 142). Moreover, in politics fantasies frequently assume the form of what Jacques-Alain Miller and Žižek call “theft of enjoyment” (Miller, 1986/2010, p. 55; Žižek, 1993, pp. 201–202). The fantasy of thieves of enjoyment promotes the exteriorization of one’s subjective split in the political arena, in a way that the subjective constitutive lack of full enjoyment is illusorily presented as the result of the obscene enjoyment of the other—such as corrupt politicians (Glynos, 2021, p. 7). Not by chance, beyond the blind love for an idealized object, various authors working on political affects have associated populism with resentment towards an antagonistic other (Hoggett, 2018, p. 403; Demertzis, 2006, p. 112).

We must still clarify how fantasies relate to symptoms. Lacan understands that despite movements of the metonymy of desire, fantasies will always refer to fixed traces from moments of early childhood associated with retrospectively idealized experiences of enjoyment. And it is around these traces that symptoms will coalesce. For both Freud and Lacan, ultimately there is no way to treat a psychoanalytic symptom without finding and dealing with the fantasies in which the symptom is anchored.

This explanation of the importance of fantasies in symptoms allows us to understand the problems of those who use the metaphor of populism as a symptom to claim that it would be redemptive for democracy. It is difficult to think that something that is by definition misunderstood could be redeeming. When Arditi indicates the democratic potentialities of populism as a symptom, he somehow fails to stress the role of fantasies in shaping symptoms. Biglieri (2005, p. 170), we should acknowledge, does go beyond Arditi and indicates the importance of fantasy in populist symptoms, but ultimately she does not present this as a problem. Both Arditi and Biglieri disregard that while a symptom can express some truth about the subject’s suffering, it is nevertheless alienating. Translating it into political terms, if populism indicates some latent problems in democracy, it may nevertheless be guided by fantasies in which an idealized entity called the “people” names the promise of a reconciled society of full enjoyment. As such, instead of challenging identities as Arditi has suggested, populism as a symptom would construct and reaffirm identities, tracing a solid line separating “us” from the obscene “others.”

The description of populism as a morbid symptom—that is, populism as a possible corrective to democracy but one that is nevertheless inadequate—is present even in authors who do not engage with psychoanalysis. This path of criticism was inaugurated by Margaret Canovan (1999), who presented populism as a promise to redeem democracy that nevertheless can also threaten it (pp. 9–11). In the same vein, although scholars such as Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser support the redemptive dimension of populism as it fosters democracy and can even assume an inclusive function (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, pp. 159, 164), it becomes clear as their argument develops that populism's "corrective" role can only be enacted if there are sufficient institutional controls to block populists from actually rising to power. Populism in government would be dangerous precisely because of the fantasies it implies, which moralistically oppose a virtuous homogeneous people against a corrupt elite (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 5–6). Moralism here clearly leads us back to the fantasies of "thieves of enjoyment." Hence, despite the nuances of their analysis, for these authors in the end populist experiences remain "pathological symptoms of some social disease" (Canovan, 2004, p. 241).

Mouffe herself would agree that radical right-wing populism does precisely that (2005, pp. 55–56). It somehow is the expression of "legitimate democratic aspirations" (Mouffe, 2018b, p. 68). However, by discursively constructing scapegoats and appealing to "essentialist identities of nationalist, religious or ethnic type" (Mouffe, 2009, p. 552), it avoids facing the actual sources of one's anguish—which Mouffe associates with austerity policies, but as we have seen is foremost an inescapable condition of every subject. Either way, the repressed returns in inadequate forms (Mouffe, 2002, p. 13; 2020, p. 3). The "return of the political" takes place with "the growth of other forms of collective identification" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 9) led by fringe political actors who represent a threat to the liberal democratic regime itself.

The association between radical right-wing populism and fantasy explains why many authors reject populism *tout court* as an emancipatory project. Such reservations are increasingly present in Arditi's own work. Gradually distancing himself from Laclau, Arditi reaches the point of attacking Laclau's defense of a populist strategy. He joins other scholars who see populism as a morbid symptom and depict Laclau's position as hypocritical or cynical.

For his critics, Laclau's populism reaffirms fantasmatic logics to mobilize citizens to the benefits of his left-wing agenda. According to Arditi, there is a cognitive asymmetry in Laclau's defense of populism. He says that, while Laclau "is fully aware that there is no chance for a reconciled society actually materializing," he sees no problem in promising this impossibility to "the masses, who embark in a project of plenitude" (Arditi, 2010, p. 496). The problem is that, if on one hand populism can be good in pragmatic terms to advance a progressive political project, it would not be compatible with the ethical stances of radical democracy (Lefort, 1986, p. 18; Žižek, 2008, p. 264).

Not far from Arditi, some authors even affirm that Laclau has "established him[self] as a member of a caste", somehow ending up in "a new '*trahison des clercs*'" that he had once denounced (Laclau, 1988, p. 28). As Kojève (2012) has pointed out, intellectuals who want to effectively intervene in politics have, at all times, been drawn to tyranny—"*attirés par la tyrannie*"—becoming advisors of tyrants or tyrants themselves (pp. 259–262). Laclau is somehow accused of repeating what was seen as a serious mistake by Georges Bataille: flirting with fascism. Bataille claimed that the best way to counterattack fascism was to use its techniques and appropriate the weapons of the adversary (1970a, p. 382; 1970b, p. 421). Bataille was impressed by fascism's ability to mobilize the people, particularly when compared with democracy's inability to do the same. As Bataille himself would later admit, the problem with this presumptuous realism in using the weapons of the adversary is that, *in extremis*, it could be hard to distinguish between an emancipatory "real revolution," championed by Bataille, and a radicalized version of a fascist uprising (1976, p. 461).

Populism as sublimation

Is there a way to save Laclau's defense of populism from the criticism that presents it as a fantasmatic strategy? If we continue to follow Arditi and see populism as a symptom, we would probably reach a dead-end. However, Laclau himself offered another psychoanalytic metaphor to study populism. I am referring to populism as sublimation. Laclau began to associate populism with sublimation in *On Populist Reason* (2005) as a way to summarize many positions that he had developed on hegemony over the years. As he explicitly says, the logic of populism is the same logic of sublimation (Laclau, 2005, p. 116).

But what is sublimation? And can it work beyond the logic of fantasy? I will shortly show that the way Laclau employs the idea of sublimation is not free of problems. Nevertheless, I believe that a correct use of the notion of sublimation to study populism can be very useful as it sustains the view that collective identities may indeed be compatible with a radical democratic ethos.

The definition of the concept of sublimation is one of the less systematic in psychoanalysis. Even if many passages discuss this theme in Freud's work (Assoun, 2017, p. 5), Freud never produced a metapsychological text on this idea. From what one can gather, in Freud sublimation is opposed to symptom as another possible destiny of the drive (Freud, 1915/1957e, p. 126).

While the symptom is a product of drive repression, sublimation is marked by deviation. In sublimation, when confronted with the impossibility of satisfaction, the drive deviates from its aim. For Freud, it meant the production of a new object for the drive (Freud, 1933/1964, p. 97). Sublimation is therefore a creative process (Birman, 1999, p. 171). That is why it is frequently associated with artistic production (Metzger, 2015, p. 133). In this sense, sublimation sometimes appears in Freud's work as a welcome outcome for treatment.

The idea of deviation is key to understanding Lacan's theory of the sublimation. It all begins with his reconceptualization of his notion of drive. Lacan claims that the very idea of satisfying the drive with an object cannot hold. The drive is not satisfied from its object, which is variable. Satisfaction of the drive comes from elsewhere. As Lacan indicates, it is not from the food that the mouth gets its satisfaction but from the mouth—"*le plaisir de la bouche*"—as an erogenous zone (2014, p. 188).

As Lacan himself admits, what he is doing in his comments on the drive is to generalize some characteristics of sublimation, which is defined as being marked specifically by the deviation, and as being satisfied in deviation (2014, p. 186). What happens with symptoms is that this fact is hidden in the metonymy of desire. Taken by fantasies, the subject desires empirical objects as if they could cope with subjective split, which ends up causing psychic suffering (Lacan, 2014, p. 188). Therefore, sublimation ends up as the destiny of the drive *par excellence*—in the sense that through sublimation the drive's deviation is fully accepted. To sublimate, in this sense, means precisely accepting and making explicit the impossible satisfaction of the drive by empirical objects.

Despite their differences, sublimation is in deep dialogue with the end of analysis (Birman, 1997, p. 98; Metzger, 2017, pp. 75, 219). Lacan's idea of an end of analysis implies confronting the fact that there is no empirical object to satisfy desire. Instead, the subject must realize that satisfaction comes from the drive, in a movement diverted from its target, which revolves around an impossible object. Žižek summarized this process in general terms:

> The moment he [the subject] changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task [to grab an object], squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive. (Žižek, 2006, p. 7).

We are not far from Lacan's reflections on sublimation, characterized by a satisfaction from repetition, from reworking the lack in an infinite repetition (Lacan, 2014, pp. 213, 258).

Before discussing the political implications of sublimation, it is worth mentioning that Lacan stopped discussing sublimation after his sixteenth seminar. This switch of focus was accompanied by what many authors interpret as an evolution in the idea of symptom in Lacan's work (Žižek, 1989, p. 77). Instead of examining sublimation, Lacan gradually starts to discuss what one could call the real dimension of the symptom—what he called "*sinthome*" (2005, p. 11). This is a complex notion on which Lacan would work in the last years of his life. Nevertheless, Lacan's shift of focus does not invalidate all that he said about sublimatory processes, as there is some continuity between his reflections on sublimation and his discussion on the symptom as real (Metzger, 2017, pp. 214–215).

To wrap it up, let me say that the symptom as real is close to what Freud referred to as the drive part of the symptom the subject faces when he interprets his symptoms and confronts his fantasies (Freud, 1926/1959b, p. 98). I might call it the "navel" of the symptom, a fixed kernel of enjoyment. It is what repeatedly emerges from the circulation of the drive and, as in sublimation, finds satisfaction in its very circling movement.

It was probably this idea of symptom as real that Arditi had in mind when he said that populism is a symptom of democracy. However, he disregarded the fact that one only faces the symptom as real after traversing fantasy.

The empty place of sublimation

What makes sublimation a fruitful concept in thinking about politics is the fact that it involves some sort of production. It assumes a political importance not only because sublimation can take place outside the analytic frame (Metzger, 2015, p. 139), but because it produces a new object, a paradoxical symbol around which, I argue, a radical democratic community could be organized.

As I have suggested before, the status of the object in sublimation is different from the object in symptom formation processes. Symptom is linked to fantasmatic idealization, to the subject seeking to grasp impossible ideal objects, which favors repression (Freud, 1914/1957c, p. 95). On the contrary, when Lacan presented his enigmatic formula for sublimation—sublimation elevates a particular object to the dignity of the Thing (*das Ding*) (Lacan, 2019, pp. 187–188)—he meant that the object in sublimation represents an impossibility *as such*. It is only a support around which the drive circulates without ever trying to grab it.

Elsewhere, inspired by Paul-Laurent Assoun, I have called the objects produced or elevated in sublimation paradoxical sublime semblants, or sublimatory objects (Assoun, 2017, pp. 91, 124; Zicman de Barros, 2019, p. 109; 2020, p. 518). They are paradoxical because they intend to point towards the real, which by definition is at the limits of the symbolic order and cannot be symbolized.

But how to symbolize what cannot be symbolized? It is not a matter of actually symbolizing the real, but rather evoking it through aesthetic practices. To illustrate this point, Lacan refers to Heidegger. While discussing ontology, Heidegger uses the example of a clay pot, pointing to its internal void. In short, he says that it is the possibility of pouring liquid into and out of the clay pot that shows the pot's essence (Heidegger, 1994/2012, pp. 5–12). Lacan would build on Heidegger's clay pot example to illustrate how the symbolic can be structured with an emptiness, a void inside, constituting a non-saturated symbolic space (Lacan, 2019, p. 201).

The symbols that Lacan uses to exemplify sublimation are precisely those that involve some reference to emptiness, to a non-saturated empty place (Lacan, 2019, pp. 190–191). For instance, he refers to an artwork composed of empty matchboxes that evoke the subject's condition, marked by split and incompleteness (Metzger, 2015, p. 137). These aesthetic practices may resonate with another of Freud's observations on sublimation: the fact that the subject who sublimates frequently leaves his sublimatory work incomplete, unfinished, or at least claims it has such status (Freud, 1910/1957b, pp. 66–67).

It was Claude Lefort who first tried to translate Lacan's reflections on emptiness to politics. Although Lefort avoids discussing psychoanalysis in his political writings, he was close to Lacan. And it was informed by Lacan's reflections on sublimation that Lefort (1986, p. 27) claims that in democracy the place of power is an empty place. It indicates the rejection of any final well-grounded answer in politics, and an openness to radical contingency and indeterminacy.

Despite the polysemy of Laclau's notion of "empty signifier," the same idea of a symbolization of emptiness is present in there. Notwithstanding some lack of clarity in Laclau's incorporation of psychoanalytic concepts, I argue that from his thought one can see sublimation as a means of constructing a political body in the same way that a clay pot is constructed, with an interior void of emptiness (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 132). It is, as Laclau (2005) says of radical democracy, the "producing of emptiness out of the operation of hegemonic logics" (p. 166).

From this perspective, in Laclau's populism as sublimation, the "people" institute an open, non-saturated symbolic place. An example of this would be the fall of Nicolae Ceauşescu in Romania. In this context, the citizens who revolted cut out the coat of arms of the socialist regime from the center of the national flag. This hole represents the lack in the symbolic order—it symbolizes, by its reference to an absence, the production of emptiness (Žižek, 1993, p. 1; Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 135). Therefore, to construct the "people" as an empty signifier, for Laclau means constructing a democratic space—or a space for radical democracy—where the political dispute takes place with the acceptance of the radically contingent character of social life (Laclau, 2000, p. 199).

Here, it becomes clear that the idea of sublimation is productive to thinking about politics because of its connection with the ethics of radical democracy. Sublimation has had an ethical dimension since Freud (1923/1955c, p. 256). This ethical dimension became even clearer with Lacan, who discussed sublimation at length particularly in his 1960 seminar on ethics.

As pointed out above, for Freud sublimation involves the creation of a new object. Already there one may find a certain openness to radical contingency and new beginnings. Joel Birman also reminds us that, according to Freud, this new object must be socially valuable (Birman, 1997, p. 95; Freud, 1923/1955c, p. 256). In this sense, it is important to stress that sublimation is never a solitary phenomenon. It implies the construction of social links. It involves social recognition. Yet, Birman suggests that we are dealing with recognition in a specific sense: not the recognition of a closed identity separated from others by thick boundaries, but the acceptance of the fact that the subject is affected by others, that one is vulnerable (1997, pp. 95–97).

Recognizing our vulnerability is key to an ethics of radical democracy. We are constitutively traversed by helplessness but, instead of trying to cover uncanniness and anguish with fantasies, sublimation is a way to manage this helplessness otherwise, and to some extent even to incite it (Birman, 1997, pp. 85, 97). As Miller has pointed out, not every anguish is paralyzing (2004, §9). Deconstructing illusions may be anguish provoking, but it can be accompanied by another enjoyment presented by Lacan by the end of his teaching (Lacan, 2016, p. 97). Instead of the promise of full enjoyment, what is in play here is an enjoyment of an openness to what is impossible, to what is at the margins and limits of the symbolic order that structures our social life.

The ethics of sublimation also transforms the way political conflicts are performed in radical democratic populism. Freud sees society traversed by conflicts that cannot be erased (Birman, 1998, p. 218). However, in sublimation these conflicts are handled differently. Sublimation does not trace a solid line to define a closed identity and exteriorize anguish in the other as a thief of enjoyment. Sublimation accepts anguish and offers another way to deal with it. The conflict with the other is celebrated as it becomes a sign of radical contingency. As Mouffe claims, in radical democratic populism "the presence of antagonism is not eliminated, but 'sublimated'" (2013, p. 8). And, because the frontier separating us from the others is radically contingent, sublimation in politics nudges us to constantly embrace even those who are beyond this divide. It is populism as sublimation that truly includes the invisible, the subaltern heterogeneous, the abject, the "part of no-part" who is radically excluded from the antagonism between "us" and "them".

Conceptual frictions

Instead of choosing which metaphor—symptom or sublimation—is the most suited to describe populism, I believe that they are complementary. In fact, the distinction between symptom and sublimation is key to differentiating between undemocratic and radical democratic expressions of populism, respectively.

Elsewhere, I have traced this distinction through parallels with other psychoanalytic categories. Seeing this distinction from the point of view of the relation with the object, I opposed sublimation to idealization—which is central in symptom formation (Zicman de Barros, 2019, pp. 98–104). I was following authors such as Birman, who argues that sublimation embraces helplessness, being opposed to idealization (Birman, 1997, p. 94). In another paper, I have traced the same distinction by opposing desire and drive (Zicman de Barros, 2020, pp. 517–519). Considering these differentiations, we can draw the following comparative table:

Kind of populism	Undemocratic	Radical democratic
Destiny of the drive	Symptom	Sublimation
Relationship with object	Idealization	Sublimation
Subjective dynamic	Desire	Drive

As suggested above, the confusion in separating the two sides of this table was perhaps at the base of Arditi's controversial account of populism as a symptom. However, a similar amalgamation of concepts also appears in Laclau's comments on populism as sublimation. Laclau is well aware of the difference between desire and the drive (Laclau, 2008, p. 183; 2005, p. 119). However, at some moments he seems to disavow it. In such occasions, inspired by Joan Copjec (2004, p. 60), he claims that the object of sublimation would assume characteristics of an object of desire and idealization such as becoming "the embodiment of a mythical fullness" and having a "totalizing effect" (Laclau, 2005, pp. 115, 234). Analyzing these passages, we can at least contextualize some of the accusations of cynicism directed at Laclau.

It is important to point out the problems with the incorporation of psychoanalytic concepts by Arditi and Laclau. Nonetheless, in my previous work I have showed how the borders separating the two sides of the divide are porous. For instance, since Freud, the difference between idealization and sublimation is not always clear

(Freud, 1921/1955b, p. 113; 1914/1957c, p. 94). As Copjec claims, “the concept of sublimation constantly teeters on the verge of collapse into the related concept of idealization” (1999, p. 6). In a similar way, in Lacan’s work there is an entanglement between the metonymic dynamic of desire and the sublimatory dimension of the drive.

A logical consequence of these reflections is that, although Freud repeatedly opposed symptom and sublimation (1909/1955a, p. 203; 1910/1957a, pp. 53–54; 1908/1959a, p. 161; 1917/1963b, pp. 375–376), the frontier separating the two concepts is also blurred.

Freud had already indicated practical obstacles to sublimation. He warned his readers that it was impossible to sublimate everything (Freud, 1910/1957a, p. 54) and that some of the subject’s drives would certainly be repressed, channeled by “desiring fantasies,” and reemerge in the form of symptoms. From Lacan’s perspective, the difficulties emerge from a possible instability of sublimation. Despite his early comments on how sublimatory objects refer to emptiness, Lacan ends up claiming that potentially any object can be the object of sublimation (2014, p. 188; 2019, p. 191). It means that the very same object can undergo the processes of fantasmatic idealization in desire, characteristic of symptom formation, or sublimation in the drive. In the same vein, in Lacan “fantasies are ineliminable” (Glynos, 2011, p. 73). The subject in sublimation is not abandoning the fantasies that shape his symptoms, but transforming his relationship with them, seeing them differently (Lacan, 2005, p. 136). Therefore, the distinction between symptom and sublimation is foremost a matter of ethics, of ways of facing the world. The different subjective positions imply different ways to face fantasy and its objects. In symptom formation, our identities are seen as closed, with fantasies trying to cope with anguish. In sublimation, fantasies are questioned, and one embraces the anguish this process may produce. Yet, especially in collective contexts, nothing can totally prevent the subject from falling from one position to another.

This blurred frontier adds some degree of instability to the idea of a sublimatory radical democratic populism, which will always be under the threat of falling back into the dynamics of desire, fantasy, and morbid symptoms. Going back to the Romanian example, despite his hideous sins, for some Ceauşescu easily became an obscene scapegoat, the root of all evil, in an iconoclastic fantasy that his controversial drumhead trial and execution would install a reconciled society. This threat is constitutive of the paradoxical endeavor of radical democracy. However, this is not necessarily a problem. The impurity of politics—a fact that should be brought to light by sublimation—would then imply the impurity of sublimation itself. Therefore, if populism has democratic potentialities, they emerge in a tenuous way and are always surrounded by fantasy.

Conclusion

The article has returned to the psychoanalytic concepts of symptom and sublimation to assess the uses of these two notions as metaphors to describe populism. I started by analyzing authors who present populism as a symptom to stress its radical democratic virtues in a post-democratic context. Going back to Freud and Lacan, however, I argue that if we consider that symptoms are always misunderstood and shaped by fantasies, populism would in fact be close to what Gramsci called “morbid symptoms.” It would involve scapegoating and the illusory promise of identity and full enjoyment once enemies are eliminated.

The analysis of populism as sublimation is more promising in its radical democratic potentialities, as sublimation problematizes fantasies. Populism as sublimation would involve the construction of a “people” with an open identity, which accepts its own radical contingency and institutes a non-saturated symbolic space.

Instead of choosing between the two metaphors, however, I regard them as complementary. In fact, I claim that the two metaphors of symptom and sublimation contribute to distinguish between undemocratic and radical democratic expressions of populism, respectively. At the same time, however, the distinction between symptom and sublimation involves more than a clear binary opposition. The construction of popular identities is a complex phenomenon, with both radical democratic and undemocratic potentialities coexisting side by side.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest. My manuscript does not include material sourced from a third party. All citations respect copyright laws.

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