

# RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON **Populism**

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## 27. Psychoanalytic political theorization

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, psychoanalysis has emerged as an important tool to study populism. The scholar who contributed the most towards the psychoanalytic turn in populism studies was certainly Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014), inspiring a new generation of researchers to explore this fruitful interdisciplinary articulation. These authors have awakened academia to the fact that psychoanalysis is not limited to studying particular subjects. They have stressed that every subject emerges as such within a socio-political context. Subjectivity is always politically shaped. This understanding is not entirely new, though. For instance, around one third of Sigmund Freud's works were devoted to discussing social issues. Recent contributions have nonetheless moved beyond the reflections of the pioneers of psychoanalysis. They not only provide fruitful concepts for understanding the force of populist phenomena, but also allow the conceptualization of a radical democratic populism.

Drawing on this literature, this chapter attempts to summarize the main contributions of psychoanalysis to populism studies. This effort is divided into three moments. First, we map the lineage that connects contemporary populism studies with Freud's early comments on mass psychology. Yet, the current psychoanalytic turn in populism studies tries to break with the simplistic stigmatization of the masses as a threat for democracy that was still present in Freud's work and continues to occasionally influence mainstream accounts of populism. Second, we discuss four psychoanalytic categories that have been recently deployed to explain the force and salience of populist discourses: drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment. Third, we highlight two psychoanalytic metaphors – symptom and sublimation – that have been utilized to account for populism. We shall argue that while the metaphor of populism as symptom resonates with undemocratic expressions of populism, the metaphor of populism as sublimation better captures radical democratic populist experiences.

### FROM MASS PSYCHOLOGY TO POPULISM STUDIES

Traditionally, the irruption of the masses within politics has been regarded with suspicion. Part of this suspicion might be justified, as some mass phenomena can indeed threaten liberal democracy. However, historically, the hostility towards the masses has also figured in discourses that sought to dismiss legitimate demands of disenfranchised groups, associating them with a hateful mob. In this first section, we will briefly present Freud's mass psychology as paradigmatic of such a pessimistic view of mass formation. Then, we will discuss the efforts taken to counterweight this perspective, and how the current discussion on psychoanalysis and populism addresses this stigmatization.

Efforts to use psychoanalysis to study populism are inscribed within a long tradition. In fact, Freud's famous reflections on mass psychology from 1921 discuss the writings on crowd

formation by authors such as Gustave Le Bon and William McDougall that predate the very development of psychoanalysis as a field of enquiry. However, in this thread, Freud's contribution is seminal as it moved beyond the impasses of previous works. As Freud points out, preceding studies on crowds ended up relying on the underdeveloped notion of suggestibility – the idea that subjects have a tendency to imitate one another, in a contagious process, and that leaders with prestige would be particularly able to influence others. Suggestibility, Freud says, was a 'magical word' that did not explain the dynamics of the masses (Freud 1955 [1921]: 88).

Freud's contribution was key because, moving beyond the dead-ends of suggestibility, he stated that it was libido – i.e. love – that played the role of a glue fusing a mass together (Freud 1955 [1921]: 90). And it is in his mass psychology that he associated libido with a concept that would be key to psychoanalysis as a whole: the concept of identification. Identification can be understood as an internalization process, through which the subject introjects an external image of who he/she ideally must become, always assuming the perspective of the others' gaze. In what may sound like a psychoanalytic  *cliché*, to explain the identification processes in masses, Freud starts by explaining the first experiences of identification in early childhood, in the libidinal connection between the baby and the baby's caring others. While Freud presents different and complex models of identification in adult life, one can say that in all cases it is related to love (Freud 1955 [1921]: 105–107). And this is not different in mass formations.

In a mass, Freud says, there are two axes at play during identification processes (Freud 1955 [1921]: 134–135). The first, the vertical axis, involves the fascination of the members of the mass by a leader – or by a guiding idea, although he does not develop this hypothesis. The second, the horizontal axis, establishes the identification between the members of the mass themselves, based on the shared love for this fascinating entity. In a nutshell, in a mass formation the members of the mass identify with each other because they are all fascinated by the same object – generally a charismatic leader. This leader presents himself in a paternal position of authority, embodying the ideals of the subject, but foremost is seen by the mass as loving its members, protecting them from helplessness.

Freud's theory of mass formation was ground-breaking and allowed one to consider the mass dynamics at play in well-established institutions, beyond short-lived crowds – indeed the Church and the Army figure as Freud's main examples. Nonetheless, it still reproduced a pessimistic tone. Like Le Bon and McDougall before him, Freud still saw the masses as sacrificing critical thinking. Masses blind the subject 'to the pitch of crime', he said (Freud 1955 [1921]: 113).

Freud himself has pointed out that the uncritical fascination by a leader does not come alone. He envisaged human relations as ontologically conflictual. Of course, conflict is not something necessarily negative. A frank disagreement between different opinions, after all, stands at the base of liberal democracy. As a pessimist, however, Freud thought that the conflict that accompanied mass formation involved a somewhat fanatical mobilization to eliminate antagonistic scapegoats and deny politics as such (Freud 1961 [1929]: 110–114).

The problem with Freud's pessimism is that it ended up dismissing from the outset the possibility of a *democratic* mass. To counter his account, therefore, some authors sought to think of an emancipatory mass. As Vladimir Safatle indicates, this was notably the case of Freud's contemporary Paul Federn. Inspired by the revolutions of his time, Federn claimed that socialist experiences would allow for the emergence of leaderless masses, of a fatherless society based on non-hierarchical egalitarian fraternal bonds (Federn 2002 [1919]: 233–234). Whereas original, Federn's conjectures were harshly criticized and, furthermore, contrasted

with the authoritarian tendencies that unfolded from the revolutions he saw as promising (Safatle 2015: 114).

After Federn, others challenged Freud to consider collective emancipation. This was the case with the Freudo-Marxist tradition, in which one finds authors such as Wilhelm Reich (1945 [1936]) and Herbert Marcuse (1966 [1955]). Despite their different trajectories, Freudo-Marxists generally thought that the masses' tendency towards vertical paternal organization – verified even in socialist experiences – could be addressed by some form of sexual revolution (Reich 1945 [1936]: 260–269). Whereas undoubtedly influential, their defence of a libidinal liberation has been nonetheless described as naïve and idealized, to say the least, notably from a perspective informed by Jacques Lacan (Stavrakakis 2007: 28).

Yet, a different solution could emerge to move beyond Freud's pessimism if one considered that relations where the vertical dimension still plays an important role can, nevertheless, be emancipatory (Safatle 2015: 113–114). Together with Slavoj Žižek, Laclau is a central figure of the so-called psychoanalytic turn in political theory starting in the late 1980s, precisely inspired by the works of Lacan. Here, the debate around mass formation reappears through discussions around populism.

Although the term populism did not always carry a pejorative meaning, mainstream scholarly production around the concept has reproduced the aforementioned tendency of vilifying the masses (Stravakakis and Jäger 2018: 558). Populism, in this sense, has also been associated with resentful, dangerous mobs. Even the Marxist left has contributed to this repudiation, claiming to know the objective interests of the working class and presenting populism as deceptive manipulation (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022: 62–64, 138–139). Laclau's theory of populism tried to break with these hegemonic understandings (Laclau 2005: 19).

For Laclau, populism is neither good nor bad. Populism, he says, is a political logic through which a collective subject emerges. There is populism when a number of particular subjects are assembled under a common symbol, such as the signifier 'the people', against an antagonistic other (Laclau 2005: 130). Whereas populism can acquire undemocratic expressions, Laclau ceaselessly stressed that this was not necessarily the case. The conflict populism entails can precisely strengthen liberal democracy from a radical perspective. In some configurations, conflict denaturalizes hierarchies, shows that society could be organized on radically different grounds and, in this process, facilitates the incorporation of subaltern groups.

However, a thorough understanding of Laclau's argument requires studying the psychoanalytic concepts on which he increasingly relied, starting with minor references to psychoanalysis in 1985 and ending up with in-depth discussions of Freud and Lacan from the turn of the century onwards. Although his incorporation of psychoanalysis is not uncontroversial and remains open to various interpretations, it stands at the basis of his claim that such a thing as a radical democratic populism could exist.

## THE LIBIDINAL FORCE OF POPULISM

Before explaining how Laclau's contributions, drawing on psychoanalysis, allow one to think of a radical democratic populism, it is worth indicating how the recent psychoanalytic turn has contributed more broadly to a more comprehensive understanding of the strength of populist discourses, radical democratic or not. In this effort, the works of Laclau and Žižek are seminal, as well as the reflections by Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, which further developed

these orientations. Certain advances in this field have led to the emergence of ‘critical fantasy studies’, a promising field of research from which populism scholars have benefited (Glynos 2021).

All these authors have pointed out that a discourse – be it populist or not – does not hold simply because of the rhetorical force of its arguments (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004: 209–213). To some extent, an internal cohesion of ideas must be the least important thing to explain why, for instance, a reference to the ‘people’ can be so appealing. Drawing on Freud’s argument presenting libido as the glue that fuses masses together, these authors have argued that what sustains a discourse is the libidinal, affective investment it invites and may receive. And to further account for this affective investment, they have relied on Lacanian categories such as drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment. I will now briefly present these concepts and then explain how they have been applied in populism studies.

To explain the notions of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment, it is necessary, once again, to reproduce a psychoanalytic *cliché* and claim that everything starts in early childhood. As Lacan would put this, all humans are born prematurely (Lacan 1966 [1960]: 810). Newborns depend on someone who takes care of them. Moreover, a newborn is always confused, to say the least. The baby does not understand itself as a fully separated subject. The newborn does not know where its mouth ends and where the mother’s breast begins. They form a whole that the newborn experiences – or, to be precise, will retrospectively idealize as if it had experienced – as some kind of pre-symbolic full enjoyment. This experience was described by some of Freud’s interlocutors as an ‘oceanic feeling’, which he referred to as ‘an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole’ (Freud 1961 [1929]: 65).

It is from these early experiences that one can understand the notions of drive and desire. The notion of drive is one of the most complex in psychoanalysis, located at the limits between the somatic and the symbolic. In the symbiotic relation with the mother, the mother eroticizes zones of the baby’s body, at the same time as the baby gets attached not to the mother as a whole but to traits of the mother. Drives, therefore, are always partial – they name the effort not to seek an object in its entirety, but to seek only a trait of the object – a mnemonic trait that refers to early childhood – and find a bodily satisfaction not from grasping the object, but rather from repeatedly encircling it. As Lacan explains, it’s not from the food that the mouth gets its satisfaction, but from the mouth itself – ‘*le plaisir de la bouche*’ – as an erogenous zone (Lacan 2014 [1964], 188–189).

The notion of desire is related but ultimately distinguished from the drive. In brief, the drive is at the basis of desire. According to Lacan, desire appears when the symbiosis between the newborn and the mother is broken, in a process that he calls symbolic castration (Lacan 1991 [1970]: 83). When the mother is not at hand, the baby must communicate with her through language, through symbols. These symbols will lead the baby to realize that it is a separated entity. Lacan calls this process symbolic castration because the pre-symbolic full enjoyment will never be recovered. The subject is thus marked by what Laclau has named a ‘dislocation’ (Laclau 1990: 29–33), which Emmy Eklundh would more recently call a ‘crisis of subjectivity’ (Eklundh 2019: 132). The subject is marked, in other words, by a constitutive lack. It is irreconcilably split between an external image of itself and its inner being, in two parts that will never form a full identity. This produces a *malaise*, helplessness or, as Lacan would put it, anguish. In this process, desire and fantasy emerge.

The dynamics of fantasy are key to understanding the difference between drive and desire. Since Freud’s early writings, the notion of fantasy is the other side of the coin of desire. He

even uses the expression ‘fantasy of desire’ or ‘desiring fantasy’ at various times in his work (Freud 1953 [1900]: 264). Desire is precisely the product of a lack. One fantasizes because there is something lacking. Fantasy is the means to provide an answer to desire, to seek to overcome this lack. However, while in the drive one seeks a partial trait of the object, in desire one ends up seeking a phantasmatic object in its entirety. Fantasy will present an object that promises to re-establish the idealized pre-symbolic full enjoyment. The problem, for Lacan, is that no object can play this role (Lacan 2014 [1964]: 303). Even when the subject acquires the desired object, after an initial euphoria from a partial body enjoyment from the drive, the only thing to be ultimately experienced is frustration (Lacan 2016 [1973]: 142). Every idealized object will be inadequate to provide full enjoyment, to overcome the subjective split and provide the subject with a full identity with itself. The pre-symbolic full enjoyment cannot be recaptured.

As a result, fantasy does not provide a proper answer to lack, but rather misleads the subject. One could say that, in this process of seeking an idealized object, the subject gets lured by fantasy. The subject is lured by the phantasmatic promise that having this object would re-establish a moment of pre-symbolic full enjoyment. In this context, the goal of psychoanalysis is for the analysand to accept that the subject is indeed split, marked by a constitutive lack. What is achieved by the end of analysis, in fact, is a different way of dealing with this lack, with the fantasies it produces, and an alternative way of enjoying. At the end of an analysis, the subject may discover a way to value experiences of bodily enjoyment from the drive in their irreducible partiality, being able to enjoy the lack (Stavrakakis 2007: 279).

With the notions of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment in mind, one can analyse any discourse – and, notably, the variable spectrum of populist discourses – to determine the dynamics explaining its strength. Every society deals with drives, desire, fantasy and enjoyment in a particular way. In the case of undemocratic populist discourses, however, three aspects of affective dynamics deserve special attention: the fantasy of a reconciled society; the notion of ‘enjoyment-in-transgression’; and the idea of ‘theft of enjoyment’.

The claim that populism invokes fantasies of a reconciled society draws on the understanding that the collective realm is not only central in symbolic castration, but that it can take part in the fantasies of overcoming this castration. For instance, when a populist candidate claims that his/her victory would make the country great again, or lead a march towards a promised glory, he/she might be appealing to fantasies of full enjoyment, to the fantasy that through a reconciliation of a society freed from division, constituting a gated community freed from anguish, the subject would also arrive at a state of fullness, of identity with itself (Stavrakakis 2007: 196–197). Of course, these fantasies can never be fully realized. Their promises may be momentarily sustained by experiences of partial bodily enjoyment from the drive – such as blissful political rallies – but these *amuse-bouches* will never deliver a pre-symbolic full enjoyment.

The notion of ‘enjoyment-in-transgression’ is developed in dialogue with the fruitful tradition – often labelled stylistic, performative or socio-cultural – that focuses on the performances of populist politicians. In this tradition, Pierre Ostiguy has associated populists with a performative ‘flaunting of the low’, which Benjamin Moffitt would call ‘bad manners’ and Théo Aiolfi has more broadly named ‘transgressive style’ (Aiolfi 2022: 6–8; Moffitt 2016: 44; Ostiguy 2017: 73). As Safatle observes, whereas populist leaders would present themselves as figures of authority, they would also assume a carnivalesque attitude that presents them as simply another one in the crowd (Safatle 2015: 107). These performances resonate with Georges

Bataille, who had already affirmed that organized transgression and prohibition form a pair in social life (Bataille 1987 [1957]: 68). Modes of domination can be based on fantasies that reaffirm ideals of authority and obedience, but not only on that. To be bearable, a discourse that defends rigid obedience to the law must accommodate moments for its own transgression – periodic carnivalesque transgressions are the pressure release valve that contributes to reaffirming the ruling order. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Žižek, Glynos and Stavrakakis have argued that there is enjoyment in transgressing the law and that, when this transgression is organized, the enjoyment it produces can paradoxically participate in sustaining a structure of domination (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 268; Žižek 1994: 55).

The idea of the ‘theft of enjoyment’ resonates with another important dimension of populism: its reliance on antagonism. It has already been indicated that, for Freud, society is irreparably traversed by fanatical conflict. For him, whereas men aim to construct gated communities, they also attribute their subjective crisis to ‘a strange and threatening “outside”’ (Freud 1961 [1929]: 67). Complementing Freud, Lacan suggests that the hostility among humans is sustained by one’s constant tendency to judge one’s own enjoyment in comparison to that of others, and the propensity of idealizing the other’s enjoyment as constantly better (Lacan 2001 [1974]: 534). It was following these reflections that Jacques-Alain Miller and Žižek would then define the fantasy of the ‘theft of enjoyment’ (Miller 2010 [1986]: 55; Žižek 1993: 202–204), which refers to phantasmatic discourses that present an antagonist – e.g. the corrupt elite, or the immigrant – as ‘thieves of enjoyment’, as another who is enjoying at one’s expense and that must be eliminated for full enjoyment to be recaptured. This idea is important when studying populism to the extent that moralizing tropes are a common feature associated with populist discourses, presenting the other’s enjoyment as obscene, undeserved and immoral (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018: 559).

Whereas psychoanalysis could thus contribute to our understanding of the strength of populist discourses, a further question remains open. If undemocratic populism invokes these fantasies of full enjoyment and scapegoating otherness, which dynamics take place in radical democratic populism? How can the conflict it entails rather strengthen liberal democracy?

## POPULISM: SYMPTOM OR SUBLIMATION?

To understand the distinct affective dynamics of radical democratic populism, one can think of other moments in which psychoanalysis has appeared within populism studies. I am referring to two psychoanalytic metaphors that have been often used to study the phenomenon. In recent years, scholars have referred to the notions of ‘symptom’ and ‘sublimation’ to explain the dynamics of populism (Zicman de Barros 2022: 218). In what follows, I argue that, while the metaphor of populism as a symptom is related to undemocratic tendencies in populist outbursts, the metaphor of populism as sublimation allows one to consider something very different: a radical democratic populism.

Before doing this, I must stress that Freud presented symptom and sublimation as two different destinies of the drive. For Freud, the symptom is the by-product of the drive when it undergoes repression. Freud claims that the drive is the source of ideas and affects (Freud 1957 [1915]: 152–153). When the drive cannot find satisfaction – for instance, because satisfying the drive would be in conflict with the moral ideals of a subject – trauma occurs and the unbearable idea associated with it is repressed, thrown out of consciousness and into the

unconscious mind. The symptom emerges from repression because, as Freud suggests, simply taking an idea out of consciousness does not impede it from impacting the subject's life. It happens because the 'quota of affect' invested in an idea can neither be repressed nor dissolved or evaporate. It remains present and, left alone, produces anguish. To escape anguish, the detached 'quota of affect' ends up resurfacing at the conscious level connected to a substitutive representation (Freud 1957 [1915]: 149, 154).

This idea of symptom had several implications for political theory. Implicitly or explicitly, various authors have associated populism with a symptom. Chantal Mouffe was one of the first to evoke this concept. She wrote a book called *The Return of the Political* (1993), whose title resonates with Freud's idea of a return of the repressed.

In Mouffe's framework, populism is the symptom of a post-democratic society. The idea of post-democracy stands for a context in which liberal democratic institutions exist and operate, but where there are no real disputes among different political projects. In post-democracy, the idea that society could be radically different is repressed (Mouffe 2018: 13). Mouffe has claimed that centre-left and centre-right mainstream parties have become hardly distinguishable. Such political groups had accepted and naturalized a liberal consensus stating that policies should be set by experts seeking efficiency and mostly implementing austerity measures. In this process, something that is key for democracy – the frank conflict between ideas – cannot take place (Mouffe 2018: 4).

For Mouffe, whereas one can repress debate, the associated affects that cannot find an outlet will end up finding a way to reappear in the public sphere. The anguish and helplessness caused by austerity policies end up re-emerging as a symptom in populist outbursts (Mouffe 2018: 18). This, she believes, could redeem politics from post-democracy, re-establishing a space for political exchange and conflicting opinions in the public sphere.

In more explicit terms, the association between populism and symptom has been presented by Benjamin Arditi. He returned to Freud's claim that a symptom emerges in an 'internal foreign territory' of the subject (Freud 1964 [1933]: 57). For Freud, the symptom takes place within the subject, but is experienced as something external. Inspired by this idea, Arditi argues that populism stands at the 'internal periphery' of democracy, 'a phenomenon that develops in its edges or more turbulent regions' (Arditi 2007: 75). Also informed by Žižek, for whom the symptom indicates the failures of a given hegemonic discourse, Arditi claims that populism as symptom points to the blind spots of liberal democracy and nudges it to deliver its unfulfilled promises (Arditi 2007: 92). He famously compared populism with an awkward guest at a dinner party, a transgressive figure who creates uncanniness while saying some undeniable truths (Arditi 2007: 78).

Arditi's formulation inspired several scholars. For instance, Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló developed the idea of populism as a symptom to capture the way it can reinvigorate liberal democracy by indicating that things could be radically otherwise (Biglieri and Perelló 2006: 200–202). That said, although Mouffe, Arditi, Biglieri and Perelló tend to present populism-as-symptom as an emancipatory phenomenon, it is important to point out the limitations of this metaphor. Indeed, for Freud, symptom and fantasy form a pair, and whereas a symptomatic patient should not be stigmatized, the symptom is still pathological, and the ultimate goal of treatment is for it to dissolve.

In a nutshell, the problem with the metaphorical description of populism as symptom is that, from this perspective, populism is an inadequate response. It may indicate that there is something truly wrong in society, but the answer it offers is incorrect, misguided. The kind of

conflict populism as a symptom brings back may not be the frank debate of ideas, but rather the threatening conflict that Freud once worried about. In the end, instead of redeeming liberal democracy, populism's tendency to rely on fantasies of sovereignty, of gated communities that scapegoat the others as immoral thieves of enjoyment, would threaten liberal democratic life even further. One is not far from Antonio Gramsci's idea of 'morbid symptoms' emerging when an old society has already died, but the new cannot yet come to light (Gramsci 1971 [1930]: 276, Q3, §34). In a similar thread of thought, Žižek observes that populism would be '(sometimes) good in practice', but 'not good enough in theory' (Žižek 2008: 264). He meant that, while populism would be able to mobilize people, appearing as a tempting strategy to well-intended militants, its phantasmatic character is not likely to bring about emancipation.

Yet, whereas the metaphor of populism as symptom presents limits, Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation is more promising for radical democracy. In his book *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau openly associates the dynamics of radical democratic populism with the dynamics of sublimation (Laclau 2005: 113). To develop this argument, Laclau strongly draws on the psychoanalytic reflections of Joan Copjec, with whom he hosted joint seminars between 2000 and 2004 in the United States. Another key source of inspiration was Stavrakakis, who had previously wrote on democracy and sublimation (Stavrakakis 1999: 132). Furthermore, Laclau's position takes into account the work of Claude Lefort, who was in direct dialogue with Lacan's reflections on sublimation to develop his own ideas of democracy.

Although Freud remarked that sublimation was a possible destiny for the drive, different from the formation of a symptom, he never provided a systematic definition for this concept. This incompleteness may explain the – not uncommon – imprecise uses of the term in literature, notably in the attempts to articulate sublimation with the realm of politics and with populism. As Freud first flirted with the idea of associating sublimation with an 'ascetization' of the drive, some could claim that the frontier separating sublimation from moralistic repression may not be very clear. That said, with time, Freud abandoned this understanding, and his later account is that sublimation has nothing to do with ascetism or domestication (Birman 2005: 208).

It is true that, for psychoanalysis, sublimation is a means for the subject to realize that the fantasies of full enjoyment cannot hold. But it does not mean resignation. Quite the contrary. In sublimation, the subject discovers how to deal with its *malaise*, how to manage anguish without fully overcoming it. As in the end of analysis, the subject welcomes the experiences of partial bodily enjoyment from the drive and enjoys the lack as such in a rather enthusiastic way (Birman 2005: 208).

Since Freud, sublimation has been connected to aesthetic practices, such as art. But not any kind of art. As Lacan would make it clear, sublimation involves aesthetic practices that disturb, that short-circuit the symbolic order. The artwork Lacan refers to in his comments on sublimation – for example, a work of art composed of empty matchboxes – always point to their incompleteness (Lacan 2019 [1960]: 269). According to Lacan, such an artwork evokes the subject's condition, marked by division and incompleteness (Lacan 2019 [1960]: 190–191). This resonates with Freud's claim that the subject who sublimates often leaves his sublimating work incomplete, unfinished, or at least claims it has such a status.

Sublimation plays an important role in society. As indicated above, the references to emptiness in sublimation influenced Lefort's idea that in democracy the place of power is an empty place – i.e. that in democracy conflict takes place in such a way that no one can claim to embody the source of power, law and knowledge (Lefort 1986 [1983]: 27–29).

Despite the explicit differentiation he introduces vis-à-vis Lefort's formulations on the empty place of power in democracy, a similar use of the notion of sublimation appears in one of the most famous concepts of Laclau's theory of populism: the concept of the empty signifier (Laclau 2005: 166). Although the empty signifier is a polysemic concept, the same idea of a symbolization of emptiness in democracy is present in its constitution. One is dealing with the 'symbolization of an impossibility *as such*' (Laclau 2000: 199).

Following Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation, one can think of an appeal to the 'people' that neither hides from anguish nor invokes fantasies of sovereignty, of gated communities, of full enjoyment. At least, one attempts to organize these fantasies differently. Not far from Lacan's ideas on sublimation, the appeal to the 'people' would instead refer to an entity with porous borders. The 'people' of this kind of populism questions its own identity. Hence, this 'people' is open to that which Laclau has named heterogeneity (Laclau 2005: 141). This is a concept inspired by Bataille but also formulated in dialogue with Gramsci's idea of subalternity. Biglieri and Perelló have associated Laclau's understanding of heterogeneity with Lacan's concept of the real – a notion that he used to refer to the blind spots of the symbolic order (Biglieri and Perelló 2011: 56). In practical terms, in populism as sublimation the appeal to the 'people' constantly welcomes and incorporates the invisible, the heterogeneous, that which Jacques Rancière calls the 'part of no part' (Rancière 1995: 28). A sublimatory populism does not speak in the name of the 'people' to discriminate against the subalterns nor to threaten liberal democracy. On the contrary, it deepens and radicalizes liberal democracy. It appeals to the 'people' to constantly point out the blind spots of liberal democracy, claiming a place for the subaltern in it.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how the psychoanalytic turn in populism studies has contributed to further capturing the affective dynamics that structure populist mobilizations and outbursts. This turn has enriched Freud's breakthrough idea that libido is the main element that keeps a mass together. Indeed, because of his pessimism, Freud understood that the love keeping a mass together would obliterate any critical thinking, thus disallowing the formation of radical democratic collective movements.

Starting with Laclau, various scholars have used the Lacanian categories of drive, desire, fantasy and enjoyment to consider not only the undemocratic expressions on populism, but also its emancipatory promise. In this effort, some have argued that the psychoanalytic metaphor that understands populism as a symptom that reinstalls disagreement and conflict within a post-democratic context would contribute to an understanding of populism as a radical democratic option.

Presenting the limitations of this approach, the chapter has nonetheless claimed that an alternative metaphor deployed by Laclau himself could account for a radical democratic populism. Laclau's idea of populism as sublimation provides a framework to think of an appeal to the 'people' that is radically inclusionary, and that constantly questions the very identity of this 'people' avoiding homogeneous totalizations.

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