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The transgressive aesthetics of populism

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Abstract

This article consolidates the emerging discursive-performative paradigm in populist studies by presenting the idea of populism as an aesthetic transgression, bridging the gap between discursive and sociocultural-performative strands. The article is broadly inspired by Jacques Rancière's notion of aesthetics as the 'partage du sensible' and critically employs it to understand how populism transgresses the rules establishing what can appear in politics. The article claims that populism is aesthetically transgressive in two ways: (1) by making visible subalternised subjects through the discursive articulation of the 'people' and (2) by naming the 'elite' in a way that makes visible underlying modes of domination. The article argues that this framework allows for a more fruitful understanding of the relationship between populism and topics such as crisis and institutionalism. Moreover, the article employs this framework to differentiate between emancipatory and reactionary forms of populism, connecting emancipatory populism to queer aesthetic practices and explaining how it reinvigorates liberal democracy. Conversely, reactionary populism mobilises what Hannah Arendt called the 'mob' and ends up reinforcing modes of domination.

Keywords

aesthetics, populism, queer theory, subaltern studies, transgression

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Introduction

This article presents the idea of populism as an aesthetic transgression to consolidate the emerging discursive-performative paradigm in the critical literature of populist studies (Ostiguy et al., 2021: 256). This paradigm integrates two preceding strands that had been developing in parallel and in mutual sympathy for years. The first strand is the discursive current, inspired mainly by Ernesto Laclau's conceptualisation of populism as the discursive articulation of the divide between 'people' and 'elite'. The

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second strand is composed of the sociocultural and performative currents, which introduced new features to populism like the flaunting of the 'low' and the performative mediation of crisis. Despite the encouraging results of the interface between these two perspectives, which in recent years have yielded promising contributions for critical populism studies (Casullo and Colalongo, 2022: 62; Venizelos, 2023: 5; Petrović-Lotina and Aiolfi, 2023: 7), their interconnection remains hitherto under-theorised. Even though these promising efforts have reduced the gap between the discursive and performative approaches, work is still required to explain what transformations in the theoretical background of each of the strands are needed for them to be articulated.

We argue that the discursive-performative approach can successfully integrate these two preceding strands if one conceives populism above all as a transgressive aesthetics. The notion of transgression was already marginally present in the work of Laclau and has recently picked up salience, particularly in the sociocultural-performative approach. However, while Laclau and scholars from the discursive approach have included in their analysis the cases of collective actors like movements and parties, recent contributions from the performative scholarship tend to have a micro-sociological bias by focusing primarily on the performances of the populist leader (Peetz, 2020: 642–643; Casullo, 2021: 77; Aiolfi, 2022: 3). We argue that the potential of transgression should not be confined to the embodied practices of leaders but instead be expanded to capture the unsettling of the political order that is intrinsic to populism. For this purpose, we critically mobilise Jacques Rancière's notion of aesthetics as the 'partage du sensible' to consider the way populism broadly transgresses the rules establishing what can be seen and what remains invisible in politics.

Beyond the embodied performances of particular leaders, we understand that populism is aesthetically transgressive in two senses. First, the discursive articulation of the 'people' makes visible and incorporates into politics what Laclau, after Georges Bataille, called the heterogeneous – marginalised subaltern subjects located outside of the public sphere. Second, populism is aesthetically transgressive when it names the 'elite' in such a way that makes visible the underlying modes of domination that rule the 'partage of the sensible'. From these two sources of aesthetic transgression, one sustains a framework that encompasses Laclau's discourse theory and the contributions of the sociocultural-performative strand in an articulated whole. Moreover, one also acquires tools for an aesthetic judgement that allow for a clearer distinction between emancipatory and reactionary forms of populism, according to the different ways of performing and dealing with transgression.

To develop our argument, the article is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the critical scholarship on populism, highlighting the synergies as well as the differences between the discursive and sociocultural-performative approaches to showcase how the concept of transgressive aesthetics can act as the bridge between them. Following this, in the second part of our text, we critically mediate Rancière's concept of aesthetics and Laclau's comments on heterogeneity as we endeavour to articulate a compelling argument advocating for an aesthetic conception of populism. We explain how by naming the 'people' and the 'elite', populism transgresses the rules guiding the 'partage du sensible', incorporating subalternised subjects into politics and disclosing invisible modes of domination. We also discuss how the idea of a transgressive aesthetics reframes central themes in the critical literature on populism such as the relationship between populism and crisis in its ontic and 'ontological' dimensions, and the opposition between populism and institutionalism. The

third part draws on reflections on aesthetic judgement and queer theory to explain how seeing populism as a transgressive aesthetics sheds new light on the divide between emancipatory and reactionary forms of populism. On the one hand, an emancipatory populism constructs an inclusionary 'people'. Connecting emancipatory populism to queer aesthetic practices, we defend that it serves as a means for subalternised subjects to claim their place in politics, reinvigorating liberal democracy. On the other hand, a reactionary populism mobilises what Arendt called the 'mob'. It involves scapegoating others, reinforcing modes of domination, and threatening liberal democracy. As a whole, this article seeks to offer more than just a synthesis of two theoretical perspectives on populism, it shows a path forward for the study of populism which genuinely captures the interconnection between politics and aesthetics.

Bridging the discursive and sociocultural-performative approaches to populism

The present paper is situated at the crossroads of critical approaches in populism studies and aims to integrate them. However, before delving into the topic, it is important to provide the contextual backdrop of the extensive and dynamic literature on populism from recent decades. Critical scholars engaged in the study of populism often distinguish themselves from what is perceived as the 'mainstream' theories on the subject. Generally, mainstream approaches tend to adopt a negative tone surrounding the word 'populism', viewing it as an inherent threat to liberal democracy (Arato, 2013: 161; Urbinati, 2019: 8). Conceptually, many mainstream scholars doing empirical work embrace the strategic and ideational approaches to populism. The hostility towards populism is clear in the strategic approach to populism, which emerged from the scholarship on Latin American politics to address the role of personalistic leadership in a context with little institutional mediation (Roberts, 1995: 87; Weyland, 1999: 381). The ideational approach, which defines populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 6), sketches a more ambivalent position on the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, but ultimately depicts populism as necessarily moralistic, and concludes that populism in power will always be deleterious for liberal democratic institutions. It is against these anti-populist stances and by adopting a post-foundational stance that critical approaches emerge. They question the negative connotation attributed to 'populism', claiming that populism could – at least in some cases – serve as a catalyst for the radicalisation of liberal democracy and political emancipation.

The single most important influence for critical approaches to populism is the work of Ernesto Laclau. In the lineage of the post-Marxist approach to political hegemony that he developed with Chantal Mouffe and which was more widely expanded by the Essex school of post-structural discourse analysis, Laclau's (2005a: ix) central idea is that populism is primarily a way of constructing political subjects and collective identities. It employs a political logic that discursively and performatively articulates what he calls 'empty signifiers' (Laclau, 1996: 38; Zicman de Barros, 2023a: 4–5). The first empty signifier of a populist discourse is the 'people', a name that works as the point of convergence of a series of unaddressed political grievances, giving shape to a sense of commonality. However, in populism this discursive articulation of the 'people' also relies on a 'negative' foil, from which this 'people' is separated through an antagonistic frontier (Laclau, 2005a: 160; Zicman de Barros, 2023a: 8–9). This 'negative' empty signifier is usually described in the literature as the 'establishment', '*la casta*' or more commonly,

the ‘elite’. Just like the ‘people’, the ‘elite’ is an empty signifier whose meaning is contested but always relies on a similar core. Indeed, the ‘elite’ is performatively framed as the focal collective of powerful subjects embodying what is wrong with the authoritative structures of the political system, the dysfunctioning part of society that ought to be changed. As such, the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ are mutually co-constituted as collective entities that are exclusive to one another, although they are deeply connected through a power asymmetry benefitting the ‘elite’ at the expense of the ‘people’. By investigating the very process of the discursive construction of ‘people’ and ‘elite’, Laclau’s theory provided the foundation of the critical research on populism, fostering a vibrant scholarship that further develops his perspective both empirically and theoretically.

A frequent criticism addressed to the discursive approach is an excessive and increasing formalism in Laclau’s work (Stavrakakis, 2004: 262). According to Borriello and Jäger (2020: 308), as Laclau tried to derive an ontological theory of the political from his ontic reflections on populism, he ended up ‘with a notion of populism undone of any specific content’. To deal with this shortcoming, in parallel to this expansion of this discursive approach to populism, which emphasised antagonism as the key feature of populist politics, other scholars engaged with other disciplines like sociology, rhetoric, and performance studies to demonstrate that there was more to populism than an opposition between ‘us’ against ‘them’ – in general, the ‘people’ against the ‘elite’. Among these scholars, Pierre Ostiguy (2017: 73) argued that populism relied on ‘flaunting the low’, in opposition to the ‘high’ register of practices and discourses dominant in the political elite. Building on Bourdieusian sociology, he argued that politics could not be properly understood by solely relying on the traditional axis opposing left and right and that it needed to be complemented by another opposition: the high-low axis which would capture the cultural component of politics. Mapping ‘ways of *being* and *acting* in politics’, and more precisely ‘ways of *relating* to people’ (Ostiguy, 2009: 5), this new axis distinguishes the ‘high’, that is educated, sophisticated and procedural practices in politics, from the ‘low’, which conversely captures popular, raw and personalistic practices. Adding a Laclauian flair to his early definition, Ostiguy (2017: 84) later defined populism as ‘the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the ‘low’’. This ‘intuitively familiar’ (Ostiguy, 2009: 1) definition was however limited by its lack of engagement with the minimal characteristic of populism in the discursive perspective: the opposition between ‘people’ and ‘elite, which Ostiguy implicitly aligned with respectively the ‘low’ and the ‘high’. While his approach captured a hitherto underexplored facet of populism, Ostiguy ignored the discursive and performative construction of the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’.

To tackle this criticism and bridge Ostiguy’s approach with the work of Laclauian scholars, Benjamin Moffitt chose to include the ‘flaunting of the low’ as one of the core features of what he called the populist style. As such, alongside the ‘appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”’ (Moffitt, 2016: 45) which corresponds to his inclusion of people-centrism and anti-elitism, Moffitt built on, among others, Ostiguy’s formulation of the ‘low’ to coin the original concept of ‘bad manners’, defined as ‘a general disregard for ‘appropriate’ ways of acting on the political stage’ (Moffitt, 2016: 55). Alongside a third feature, which he identified as ‘performance of crisis, breakdown or threat’, these additions to the antagonism between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ substantially enriched the stylistic approach to populism. However, their interconnection remained under-theorised and conceptually inconsistent. Indeed, his definition of what he called the populist style simultaneously included discursive framing (‘appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”’), sociocultural practices (‘bad manners’),

and performative construction ('performance of crisis') which were all different analytical categories without developing the way they were connected. Although their identification and juxtaposition were undoubtedly innovative, Moffitt's three features remained ambiguous in their definition and lacked theoretical elaboration to make them more than descriptive tools to identify populism in action.

As a whole, while their contributions are inspiring, neither Ostiguy's 'flaunting of the low' nor Moffitt's 'bad manners' or performance of crisis sufficiently developed the theoretical implications of connecting their concepts with the discursive core of the antagonism between 'people' and 'elite'. In other words, even though their concepts proved intuitively relevant, their definitions did not justify why these sociocultural and performative elements were fundamentally necessary within the articulation of the 'people' and the 'elite'.

Indeed, while a convergence around a 'post-Laclauian consensus' was recently acknowledged between the discursive and performative approaches to populism, which was aptly named the 'discursive-performative approach to populism' (Ostiguy et al., 2021: 256), this intuitive complementarity remains under-theorised. We argue that one of the main reasons for this lies in the intrinsic limitations of the concepts of 'low' and 'bad manners'. In his article defending a conception of populism as a 'transgressive style', Théo Aiolfi (2022: 1) challenged Ostiguy and Moffitt's concepts for under-developing the purpose of 'flaunting the low', ignoring a range of norm-breaking practices that 'bad manners' could not capture and relying on a normative binary. Starting from the premise that the strategic use of what Ostiguy and Moffitt describe as socioculturally 'low' was to differentiate themselves from other political actors, he made the case for using instead the concept of transgression, defined as 'the violation of a norm of political relevance' (Aiolfi, 2022: 6). This notion of transgression is already present in the work of Ostiguy and Moffitt and other scholars from the performative approach, whether it is directly like María Esperanza Casullo (2021: 77) in her discussion of populist leaders as 'transgressive figures' or indirectly in the work of scholars like Lone Sørensen (2021: 58–59, 139–146) who talks about populism's reliance on 'disruptive performances' or Julia Peetz (2020: 649) who associates populism with 'performances of outsiderness'. More prominently, even Laclau (2005a: 228) mobilised the concept of transgression in his claim that 'the emergence of the "people" as a historical actor is thus always transgressive vis-à-vis the situation preceding it. This transgression is the emergence of a new order'.

However, Aiolfi's work focused primarily on the strategic use of transgression, developing a typology of transgressive performances based on whether they break interactional, rhetorical, or theatrical norms. Furthermore, his article, very much like other recent contributions from the performative scholarship engaging with transgressive practices, tends to suffer from a leader-centric bias that prioritises embodied performances of political leaders to more collective forms of transgression (see also Melito, 2024: 2). While he hinted at the possibility of a deeper use of the concept (Aiolfi, 2022: 6), his article, and empirical work on performing transgression (Aiolfi, 2025: 138–169) remained limited by its focus on embodied performances which constrains transgression within the frame of the way particular political actors mobilise this transgressive style to appear different from others.

The very choice of the concept of style by several authors from the performative approach (Moffitt, 2016: 33; Casullo and Colalongo, 2022: 63; Aiolfi, 2022: 4) has been met with criticism from their peers from the discursive scholarship who argue that it comes with the 'unavoidable connotation' of being 'secondary or superficial' (Stavrakakis

et al., 2017: 424–425). We challenge this claim that the concept of style is synonymous with superficiality, as its use serves as a means for these scholars to analytically distinguish form and content in politics while acknowledging their co-constitutive nature. But while the concept of style has a unique ability to explore the 'tension between collective patterns and individual practices' (Aiolfi, 2025: 52), the performative scholarship tends to use it in a relatively narrow way that equates it with particular performances and strategies of political communication. We believe that introducing the concept of aesthetics can be a way to expand the discussions on the dialectics between form and content that are fundamental to the performative scholarship while also addressing the discursive scholarship's concern of superficiality by considering form beyond the bias of style towards individual politicians.

For an aesthetic conception of populism

In this article, we want to explore the wider consequences of conceiving populism as constructed around transgression, a shift that consolidates the theoretical efforts endeavouring to bridge the gap between discursive and performative approaches to populism. To develop our argument, this part is divided into two moments. First, building on Rancière and Foucault, we demonstrate how, beyond the flamboyant bodily performances of charismatic leaders, the very articulation of the people and the elite that characterises populism is transgressive of the aesthetic order of politics. Second, we discuss some consequences of this understanding in the debates on the links between populism, crisis and institutions. Especially engaging with Laclau, we show how this aesthetic transgression of performatively constructing 'people' and 'elite' produces an 'ontological' crisis that resonates with the ontic level of crisis.

People versus elite and transgressive aesthetics

To accomplish this bridging effort, we must move towards an aesthetic notion of transgression. In ordinary language, the word aesthetics is frequently used to refer to a 'varnish', to a 'cosmetic' dimension of reality that does not touch its core. In other occurrences, it is associated with beauty, or, in a slightly less restrictive way, with artistic expressions. Even authors who deal with the relationship between aesthetics and politics end up reproducing this trend: Mouffe (2013: 88), for instance, tends to associate aesthetics with art – even if she focuses on counter-cultural artistic movements. Rancière's understanding is very different. As he explains by going back to the roots of the word, aesthetics refers to the '*partage du sensible*' – to the sharing or partition of what is sensible (Rancière, 2000a: 12). It relates to one's sensitiveness, the aptitude to be impressed or affected. This encompasses the traditional realm of arts, but by no means is restricted to it (Rancière, 2000a: 27, 71–72). For Rancière, politics is at its core a matter of aesthetics, to what can be seen and what cannot be seen. The visible and the invisible.

Of course, Rancière's idea of aesthetics invites further questions that he did not explore. Rancière's declared hostility towards sociology is well known. He criticised sociologists' patronising pretension of unveiling hidden truths to alienated masses, their dismal determinism, and their 'policing' will to impose their own labels and classifications on social reality (Rancière, 2007a: 239; 2009: 572). Nonetheless, authors such as Federico Tarragoni (2016: 120–124) have argued that this general criticism against sociology is based on an unfair caricature of Bourdieu's work and that one can gain a lot by bridging Rancière's

(2016: 120–124) philosophy with fruitful sociological studies. Furthermore, in contrast to other discourse theorists, Rancière's hostility towards sociology would make it harder for him to think of the dynamics of what elsewhere he called 'regime of visibility' or also 'police order' (Rancière, 2000a: 30–31; 1995: 142). We are referring to the very set of rules – Laclau (1999: 102–103; 2000: 76–77) would call the 'logics' – establishing what can appear and that which is repressed, disavowed, foreclosed, hidden, invisible. All in all, Rancière has difficulties in conceiving of something that will be key in our reflection: that these very rules can be read 'aesthetically'. This is because not every rule is clearly, openly stated. In many cases, it takes part in an implicit grammar. Despite the differences between Rancière and Foucault (Rancière, 1995: 55–56, 2000b: 89–92), the latter is useful here. Foucault not only shows us that the rules – he would call them 'norms' (Foucault, 2004 [1978]: 58) – driving this '*partage du sensible*' have a 'permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing' character (Foucault, 1976: 122–123) but also stresses that they themselves might be ultimately invisible (Foucault, 1975: 189). This does not mean that these norms should be equated with aesthetics but rather that reading them 'aesthetically' allows us to understand the conditions of the very possibility of discourse in society.

The question that interests us the most, though, is how the populist discursive articulation of entities such as the 'people' and the 'elite' can be interpreted as an aesthetic practice – and a practice that might transgress the rules and limits of what or who can be seen.

A broad and critical appropriation of Rancière's understanding of aesthetics adds a new dimension to the notion of transgression. Certainly, one can refer to the transgressive performances of a political leader, as Ostiguy and Moffitt have done. Indeed, a leader who breaks with the established rules of 'proper' behaviour in politics is aesthetically transgressive – they challenge and transform the limits of what can be seen in politics. However, populism does not necessarily depend on identifiable leaders. Recent leaderless 'square movements' have adopted a populist discourse that pits the 99% against the elite 1% (Gerbaudo, 2017: 17; Zicman de Barros, 2023b: 251). Moreover, the earliest movements that embraced the label 'populism' lacked charismatic leadership altogether (Tarragoni, 2019: 25–26; Vergara, 2020: 224–226). Hence, a broader perspective on aesthetic transgression moves beyond leader-centrism, encouraging us to consider what else might undergo 'an exodus from invisibility' (Arditi, 2019: 57). Specifically, it invites one to think more widely about what populism brings into politics. Sørensen (2021: 129, 144) says that populist disruptions perform an 'expository function'. This transgressive disclosure takes place in two combined ways: (1) through the inclusion of political subjects by the discursive construction of an empty signifier – the 'people' – and (2) through exposing the invisible modes of domination by naming a 'negative' empty signifier – 'the elite'.

To understand the first-way populism is transgressive – i.e. how it can bring political subjects into politics – a key notion is Rancière's idea of a 'part of no part' (Rancière, 1995: 31; Rancière 2012 [2006]: 161). The notion of 'part of no part' is intrinsically linked to his reflections on politics and aesthetics – on politics as a matter of visibility and invisibility. For Rancière, the 'part of no part' refers precisely to those who cannot be seen: subjects who are a by-product of the symbolic order but remain ignored at its margins. With the notion of 'part of no part', it becomes clearer how Rancière's understanding of aesthetics is key in bridging the gap between Laclau's work and the performative approaches to populism. Indeed, whereas Laclau (2005a: 244–249) and Rancière (2021: 100–102) engaged in public debates that could lead one to think that their approaches are distinguished, their work is complementary. For instance, that which Rancière names the 'part of no part' is in the vicinity of Laclau's reflections on what he calls 'heterogeneity'.

Such as Rancière's 'part of no part', the idea of heterogeneity in Laclau's work refers to the invisibilised elements that do not fit into the categories structuring the hegemonic discourse. The word 'heterogeneity' to name what does not fit in the symbolic order appears in Laclau's work after 2005, in explicit references to Bataille (Laclau, 2005a: 155–156; 2006: 672).[1] For Bataille (1989 [1933]: 137, 142), the homogeneous is described as what is 'defined and identifiable', or even 'measurable'. The homogeneous is what appears at first sight to social scientists: the dynamics of a well-ruled community, and the main categories taking part in the ordinary production and reproduction of this community (Bataille, 1989 [1933]: 140). By contrast, heterogeneity refers to what is beyond measurement and production. That 'accursed part [la part maudite]' which is 'incommensurable', 'unassimilable' and 'unproductive' and somehow puts production in peril, subverting its ordinary dynamics (Bataille, 1976a [1949]: 17; 1989 [1933]: 142). In a metabolic metaphor, heterogeneity refers to the waste, the residue and the excrements of society (Bataille, 1970c [1930]: 58–59).

In its different names and configurations, this 'real' at the internal margins of the symbolic order has a transgressive dimension. And here, we can understand that although Ostiguy, Moffitt and Aiolfi, in their work on performance studies, have understood something important about populism by emphasising that, in addition to the 'people' versus 'elite' divide, the transgressive style of populist leaders must be taken into account, there is something else to consider. Populist transgression is not only a matter of style, narrowly understood as the expression of the political communication of particular politicians. Transgression includes these micro-political practices, but it must be understood more broadly – as aesthetic. And although an aesthetic transgression can be expressed in the embodied performances of leaders – which might frequently be the case –, it also manifests itself when the discursive articulation of the 'people' mobilises the invisible, the subaltern, the heterogeneous, the 'part of no part'. The call for the 'people' constitutes a political subject by offering a point of affective identification which appeals to isolated and powerless sectors through a counter-hegemonic narrative of obfuscated agency. It allows for the worldless to transgressively erupt in the space of appearances, reshape the limits of the symbolic order and bring dissensus into politics.

That all said, populism is not only aesthetically transgressive for bringing silenced voices into the public sphere in the name of the 'people'. Just as the articulation of the 'people' incorporates invisible subalterns in the symbolic order, the discursive construction of the other, 'negative', empty signifier of the populist antagonism – the 'elite' – also involves bringing something out of invisibility. By naming the 'elite', populism provides a representation of the invisible underlying rules that establish what can be seen and what remains invisible. While populist discourse does not – and cannot – capture the 'real' diffuse and systemic roots of the norms ruling the 'partage du sensible' and silencing marginalised perspectives (Laclau, 2006: 657–658), the discursive articulation of 'elite' offers a symbolic embodiment for what Foucault (1976: 121) called their 'terminal forms'. Whether they take the shape of the 'establishment', the '1%' or '*la casta*', populism gives a face to dominant political norms. It lays bare the modes of domination, exposing their very existence. As such, in parallel to the 'people' serving as a way to foster unity and change, the 'elite' serves as a point of identification for popular mobilisation, acting as a catalyst, an impetus to take action.

Understood in this way, aesthetic transgression not only captures the embodied performances of particular leaders but also accounts for the discursive challenge that populism poses to the political status quo. As such, the idea of aesthetic transgression

becomes the common denominator between what the discursive school of populism examines – i.e. the articulation of the antagonism between the people and the elite – and what scholars from a performative perspective are concerned with – that is, the specific features related to the style of the leaders who mobilise populism. It thus connects these two strands of critical scholarship by showing that they tackle different aspects of the same transgressive phenomenon.

Aesthetic crisis and institutions

Whereas the argument that populism involves an aesthetic transgression bridges the gap between discursive and performative approaches by showing how the articulation of the antagonism between 'people' and 'elite' relies on transgression, it also solves an issue with Moffitt's framework. As we have indicated, whereas Moffitt's approach is insightful, the three features he associates with populism – (1) the 'people' versus the 'elite', (2) 'bad manners' and (3) the performance of crisis – end up being simply juxtaposed, and may even seem rather arbitrary. By moving beyond the stylistic idea of 'bad manners' and giving the notion of transgression a central role in populism, we integrate these three dimensions. First, as we have seen, the idea of populism as transgressive aesthetics allows us to grasp that the very articulation of the empty signifiers 'people' and 'elite' is transgressive. Furthermore, this broader understanding of aesthetic transgression illuminates the connection between populism and the performance of crisis.

Moffitt was not the first to connect populism and crisis. Indeed, associating populism with crisis is commonplace in political studies (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 12). On this topic, however, three perspectives stand out. The first, traditional approach was adopted by authors like Kenneth Roberts (1995: 113, 2015: 141) and Kurt Weyland (1999: 395), who present populism as being caused by economic or political crises. To some extent, the second perspective presented by Moffitt reversed this traditional approach. He has defended that populism is not – or at least it is not only – a by-product for a crisis, but instead should be thought of as actively producing crises. As Thomás Zicman de Barros and Miguel Lago say, Moffitt's reflections allow us to understand a new populist proverb stating that 'the best way to weather the storm is to be the storm' (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022: 9). Inspired by Gramsci's (1978 [1934], Q13 §17) comments that economic crises do not determine political crises, Colin Hay (1995: 74) had developed the opposition between 'failure' and 'crisis' – which correspond, respectively, to any structural issue within a system and the symbolic mediation of these failures. Building on this, Moffitt (2016: 120) claimed that populism relied on the choice of a specific failure that would be performatively turned into a crisis within the populist articulation of politics.

As some have interpreted it, Laclau developed a third approach to crises from a post-foundational perspective (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 16). Not far from the distinction between failure and crisis, he taught us that every crisis has two dimensions: an ontic dimension and a so-called 'ontological' dimension (see also Howarth, 2004: 268). When one talks about an 'economic crisis', a 'political crisis' or even a 'sanitary crisis', one is referring to the ontic dimension of a crisis. A crisis that has a given object, a crisis that to a large extent can be symbolised. There is something more in a crisis, though – and here Laclau's notion of dislocation is key (Laclau, 1990: 39; Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 15). Whereas dislocation appeared in Laclau's work before his reflections on subalternity and heterogeneity, it already grasped something of the *malaise* caused by this *extime* 'real' always latently troubling the symbolic order (Biglieri and Perelló, 2011: 54–56). In this

sense, the idea of dislocation shows an 'ontological' dimension of crisis – to recall the expression used by Myriam Revault d'Allonnes (2012: 53): an 'endless crisis' that marks a world without foundations. There are anguish-provoking 'ontological insecurities' in modernity (Steele and Homolar, 2019: 215). As such, populism emerges as a way to deal with dislocations, providing an ontic content to cope with an 'ontological' discontent (Stavrakakis et al., 2018: 16).

From our understanding of the transgressive aesthetics of populism, the notion of crisis gains a new contour, bridging performative and discursive approaches in another way. From Moffitt, we take the idea that populism produces crises. From Laclau, we understand that this crisis has an 'ontological' dimension. In a nutshell, we argue that crisis and transgression overlap – that crisis is a consequence of populism's aesthetic transgression. The 'ontological' crisis emerges because the populist articulation of the 'people' versus the 'elite' transforms the symbolic order, messing up the points of reference through which one used to interpret the world (Zicman de Barros, 2024: 8). The transgressive irruption – or 'disruption' – of the heterogeneous in the public sphere performs 'an insurrection at the level of ontology' (Butler, 2004: 33). And something equivalent takes place when one names the underlying invisible rules that guide the 'partage du sensible'. Indeed, the connection between ontic and 'ontological' dimensions of crisis gets even clearer if one thinks of the act of naming the 'elite'. In brief, the ontic crises that Moffitt says populism produces – the 'spectacularization of a failure' (Moffitt, 2016: 120) that names a wrong and brings up new problems to be debated in the political arena – are aesthetically transgressive in themselves, and always have 'ontological' implications. All in all, by transgressing and unsettling the rules of what can be seen in politics, populism transforms the frame through which one 'reads' reality. This explains why populist outbursts are frequently experienced as surprising and disquieting.

These comments on populist aesthetic transgression and crisis also help one to rethink another common trope in populism studies: the opposition between populism and institutionalism. Anti-populist scholars have frequently stressed that populism threatens liberal democratic institutions (Arato, 2013: 161; Urbinati, 2019: 8). From a more sympathetic position towards populism, Laclau (2005b: 45) himself used to claim that the populist logic would be at the antipodes of the logic of institutionalism. From the idea of politics as a matter of aesthetics, we believe these claims can be reassessed. Drawing on Foucault's (1975: 189) idea that modes of domination themselves can be tacit and invisible, an aesthetic perspective understands institutions beyond buildings with staff and stamps. Institutions are more than branches of government and codified laws. Institutions are the written and unwritten rules of society, rules establishing what can appear and what cannot appear in politics. Therefore, as a transgressive force, populism would indeed be able to challenge the institutions by taking these rules out of invisibility by naming them, and by transforming the limits of the symbolic order – by transforming the rules of the game.

Emancipatory versus reactionary aesthetic transgressions

As we have argued, the articulation of the 'people' against the 'elite' that includes subjects that could not appear in politics and exposes underlying modes of domination is transgressive. A question remains, however, on the normative and ethical implications of this transgressive articulation. While some mainstream authors present populism as inherently exclusionary and undemocratic (Arato, 2013: 156–160, 2019: 466; Urbinati, 2019: 4–5), others argue it is fundamentally inclusionary and radically democratic (Biglieri and

Cadahia, 2021, 40; Tarragoni, 2019: 26–30; Vergara, 2020: 237–241). Laclau and Rancière seem to indicate that populism can take both forms. However, both have grappled with the challenge of distinguishing between emancipatory and reactionary expressions of the 'part of no-part' – and, by extension, populism itself. Laclau (2004: 135) acknowledges that, from a post-foundational perspective, there may be a lack of 'adequate theoretical resources' to make such a distinction. Similarly, Rancière (2021: 101) argues that it is not always possible to draw a clear-cut line between these two forms of populism. Despite these theoretical challenges, both thinkers remain committed to an emancipatory project and recognise that making this distinction is essential for envisioning the possibilities of radical democratic politics.

We argue that our aesthetic approach helps navigate the ambiguity between emancipatory and reactionary forms of populism in two interconnected ways: by situating the issue within the realm of aesthetic judgement and by using queer aesthetics to evaluate whether a transgression remains faithful to questioning established identities or ultimately reinforces them. While Rancière connects aesthetic and political judgement, it was Hannah Arendt (1961: 222) who laid the groundwork for extending the logic of aesthetic judgement into the political realm. For Arendt, such judgements are not mere expressions of subjective taste but are rooted in a 'community sense' – grounded in shared sociability and attentiveness to the plurality that defines society (Arendt, 1989 [1970]: 70–74). Although her contributions to aesthetic criticism were fragmentary, they provide important insights into how judgement operates in political and social contexts – and, as we will see, they resonate with key ideas in queer theory.

Building on the idea of aesthetic-political judgement and its links to queer theory, this section will be divided into two parts. First, it will discuss how queer aesthetics, by challenging fixed identities and norms, helps us understand emancipatory transgressions and their role in creating a more inclusive, radical democratic populism. Second, it will examine how the mobilisation of the heterogeneous can also take reactionary forms, using transgression to reinforce exclusion and social hierarchies.

Emancipatory transgressions

How can one judge whether the transgressive aesthetics of a populist experience is emancipatory? And why might queer theory be helpful in addressing this question? It is important to stress here the transgressive dimension that inhabits queer theory from its inception. The very etymology of queer, from the German *quer*, evokes what is transversal, transpasses and transects. No wonder the prefix *trans*-, so central to queer theory, is also present in transgression (see also Devenney, 2020: 92; Biglieri, 2021: 461). The transgression that inhabits queer theory and queer aesthetics, with emancipatory potential that goes far beyond gender studies, is that which troubles the categories through which one reads reality. Queer transgression shows the aporias of our discourses, what does not fit, and transpasses the borders defining our own identities, challenging them (Butler, 1990: 186). A challenge that is made in the name of inclusion and equality, constantly creating openings for marginalised subalternised subjects to enter the public sphere.

The embrace of the uncanny, which is central to queer theory, finds echo in the aesthetic-political judgements of Arendt, Rancière, and even Bataille. Arendt (2005 [1953]: 1:385; 1978 [1971]: 384–85) values aesthetic experiences and artworks that could be called sublime. She is interested in experiences that provoke a tension between the familiar and the strange, unsettling the 'community sense' and making it more inclusive and

open to plurality. Arendt's idea of a 'right to have rights', the fundamental claim asserted when the worldless – those excluded from the space of appearances – irrupt into the public sphere, closely aligns with the transgressive character of queer aesthetics (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 199; Butler, 2015: 77, 80). The appearance of marginalised groups challenges the existing boundaries of the symbolic order, demanding inclusion in ways that ultimately reshape the space of appearances itself.

Rancière explicitly highlights the disruptive potential of art to break down given hierarchies. He had already declared his enthusiasm for the idea of 'queerising' his theory, and indeed his focus on the continuous disruption of stable identities and norms – whether through art or political action – closely aligns with queer theory's emphasis on the constant questioning of identities (Rancière, 2008: 29). Not far from Arendt, he understands that politics properly speaking only exists as such when the 'part of no part' irrupts in the public sphere, bringing forward a claim for equality (Rancière, 1995: 63–64, 127, 2004: 299).

Bataille's work also anticipated insights from queer transgressive aesthetics in its challenge to fixed identities and normative boundaries. In a dozen articles on aesthetic criticism, he valued uncanny artistic experiences, embracing the grotesque, the formless and the abject to challenge conventional notions of beauty and harmony (Bataille, 1970a [1929]: 210). By focusing on disproportion and decomposition, Bataille (1970b [1930]: 253; 1970a [1930]: 255) celebrated aesthetics that were unsettling and provocative, deliberately disrupting traditional forms. Overall, heterogeneity was a source of excitement for him, as he saw homogeneity as tedious, dull, monotonous and automatic. True human existence, he argued, could only be realised through the passionate, heated and tumultuous movement of the heterogeneous (Bataille, 1970e [1939]: 228).[2]

Oliver Marchart's reflections on 'conflictual aesthetics' offers a useful framework for understanding the role of transgression in emancipatory queer populism. He distinguishes between an 'aesthetics of conflict', which draws clear lines between 'us' and 'them', and a 'conflicting aesthetics', which destabilises these very boundaries (Marchart, 2019: 23; Zicman de Barros, 2022: 81). Queer aesthetics aligns with this 'conflicting aesthetics', encompassing practices that do not 'fit', of 'non-belonging' (Yates, 2024: 10–11) – sublime practices that not only trouble the symbolic order but invite one to welcome this 'trouble', constantly questioning who belongs in the political community.

This transgressive character of queer 'conflicting aesthetics' often leads them to be perceived as threatening (Butler, 2024: 1). The mere presence of subalternised sectors – workers, black and indigenous people, women and non-binary gender minorities – who dare to transgress norms and move out of invisibility is inherently shocking. By stepping into the public sphere as the 'people' – and 'giving a name to obscurity', that is, the 'elite', – they are seen as an 'unknown and dangerous force' (Bataille, 1989 [1933]: 142; see also Gramsci, 2021 [1934], Q25 §1). Their irruption is often experienced as 'violence, excessiveness, delirium, madness' (Bataille, 1989 [1933]: 142), even when, 'objectively', no violent means have ever been deployed. However, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, emancipatory populism does not undermine liberal democracy. Instead, it radicalises it by exposing its blind spots and extending its inclusiveness in the name of the 'people' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xv; Mouffe 1995 [1991]: 20).

This queer 'conflicting aesthetics' generates a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony – a form of hegemony that questions its own foundations, refusing to settle into a new stable order. By embracing queer aesthetic transgression, emancipatory populism – which, inspired by Mark Devenney (2020: 92), one might call trans-populism – fosters a

form of radical democratic politics that remains open to plurality, continuously reshaping the contours of the political community. This invites an ongoing process of challenging established norms and creating new spaces for inclusion, resisting the temptation of closure and certainty.

Reactionary transgressions

While queer theory and aesthetics provide us with tools to judge the emancipatory potential of transgression, it is important to recognise that the inclusion of the 'part of no-part' does not always lead to emancipation (Laclau, 2005a: 246–247; Rancière, 2021: 102). As Rancière, (2007b: 99; 2008: 29) observes, the entry of the part of no-part into politics carries with it the constant risk that its inclusion will merely lead to the counting of those who were previously uncounted, to their assimilation into the police order (see also Butler, 2024: 134–36). In this process, what appears to be a transgression may end up reinforcing the established order. Moreover, reactionary populist movements can also mobilise the power of the heterogeneous to destabilise the existing symbolic order, but doing this without an openness to plurality, a willingness to embrace the uncanny – central to queer aesthetics – or to broaden inclusion and challenge hierarchies. Instead, they reinforce exclusion and consolidate existing power structures.

Lasse Thomassen (2005: 301) has pointed out that 'normatively, there is[n't] anything inherently progressive about heterogeneity'. Thomassen reminds us that, in Marx's tradition, heterogeneity is associated with the lumpen – a social group excluded from the relations of production that was seen as 'a regressive force and as the foundation for the conservative discourse of Bonapartism' (Thomassen, 2005: 301). Taking up Marx's expression, which referred to the lumpen as the 'refuse of all classes' (Marx, 1979 [1852]: 149; Arendt, 1967 [1951]: 107), Arendt called this group the mob. The mob is described as excluded both from society and from political representation, emerging violently in the political sphere (Arendt, 1967 [1951]: 108). Moreover, the mob tends to fall into the temptation of the 'strong man' or the 'great leader' (Arendt, 1967 [1951]: 107). It fosters resentment and moral panic among its members towards an antagonistic other (Arendt, 1967 [1951]: 107, 392).

Even Bataille (1970d [1933]: 161) defined fascism as 'total heterogeneous power [*pouvoir hétérogène total*]'. As he admitted, Bataille, 1976b [1958]: 461) flirted with fascism for its mobilising power. Soon, however, he ended up conceding that the fascist leader's mobilisation was limited (Bataille, 1947: 521–522). Reactionary forces develop in the tension between enjoying the transgression of the law and ultimately reaffirming this law (Bataille, 1987 [1957]: 68; Butler, 1990: 103–104; Foucault, 1976: 61–62). All in all, the fascist leader is a heterogeneous actor in a movement towards homogenisation, trying to reunify the community, and producing new exclusions – new heterogeneities – to be repressed (Bataille, 1989 [1933]: 145–148, 153–154).

Judging these practices from the perspective of queer theory, one can say that reactionary transgressions invert the logic of queer transgression. In other words, to the extent that it questions the established symbolic order, reactionary populism is counter-hegemonic. However, it is not faithful to its counter-hegemonic character. To reappropriate Gramsci's expression, it is a 'revolution-restoration' (Gramsci, 1978 [1934], Q13 §27), a form of 'reactionary revolt' (Palheta, 2022: 25) that seeks to install a reinforced close hegemony. In a pure expression of an 'aesthetics of conflict' (Marchart, 2019: 23), the mob's discourse tries to trace thick and solid lines separating 'us' from 'them'. As such, it seeks to

reaffirm modes of domination and social hierarchies and attempts to silence other underprivileged subalternised subjects. This policing of boundaries contrasts starkly with the openness to indeterminacy found in queer aesthetics.

It is important to stress that when reactionary populism refers to a 'negative' empty signifier such as 'elite', it also disruptively exposes some invisible rules structuring the 'partage du sensible'. But while it may point at dysfunctions of liberal democracy, reactionary populism not only relies on the process of scapegoating that the mainstream literature mistakenly associates with all forms of populism, it also creates a connection between excluded sectors and the 'elite'. Whether these outgroups are directly framed as the 'elite' itself, which is for instance the case in the conspiratorial tropes of antisemitism, or whether the 'elite' is framed as passively complacent or actively complicit in enabling these outgroups to threaten the homogeneity of the 'people', far-right political actors have understood the appeal of populism's transgressive aesthetics to further their reactionary agenda.

Destabilising the 'partage du sensible' this way thus aims to rehabilitate ideas banned from the public discourse like racism, islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, and so on. Often without explicitly advocating for their return, reactionary politicians connect these political taboos of liberal democracy with the established hegemony to slowly undermine the norms upon which they rest and thus erode their public acceptance. By doing so, reactionary populism threatens the very foundations of liberal democracy, praising the mob as alleged 'taboo-breakers' who fight for 'free speech' against 'thought police' and 'political correctness' silencing their voices (Mondon and Winter, 2020: 75, 81, 92). Once again, however, this exodus from invisibility is not emancipatory, as the rules they question are precisely those loosely keeping far-right discriminatory discourses at bay (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022: 102–109). All in all, the mob's transgressive character is limited. Its appeal to transgression ends up only feeding the fantasy of the triumph of the will of those who limitlessly do whatever they want, however they want, whenever they want, disregarding others.

Whereas there might be a grey zone in the frontier between distinct expressions of populism, drawing on queer theory, we have sought above to provide elements for a differentiation between emancipatory and reactionary aesthetically transgressive articulations of the 'people'. On the one hand, in the case of emancipatory populism, one is dealing with subalternised subjects that enter and reshape the space of appearances to welcome new beginnings, a constant questioning of naturalised social hierarchies. It does not challenge liberal democracy but seeks to radicalise it. On the other hand, reactionary populism aesthetic transgression reinforces the discourse of the mob, seeks to build gated communities, and represses vulnerable subjects.

Conclusion

This article attempted to consolidate the discursive-performative approach to studying populism. By relying on Rancière's concept of aesthetics, we argued that a possible way to connect the discursive and the performative strands was to claim that populism involves a transgressive aesthetics. For Rancière, aesthetics is a matter of what can be seen and what remains invisible – and, as we claim, populist discourses would transgress the limits of this regime of visibility and invisibility.

The idea of aesthetics allowed us to move beyond stylistic features such as Ostiguy's 'flaunting of the low' and Moffitt's 'bad manners' and give a more central position to the

idea of transgression. Beyond the transgressive style of populist leaders, we argued that populism is transgressive in two ways. First, the articulation of the empty signifier such as the 'people' brings subaltern subjects into politics, breaking with the norms of what or who can appear in the public sphere. Second, by naming the 'elite', populism denounces the invisible 'grammar' of domination: it challenges the sedimentation of modes of domination by 'giving a name to obscurity'. This understanding also allows us to grasp how populism is related to the idea of crisis because, by transgressing the norms of what can be seen, populism transforms the way one interprets reality, triggering an 'ontological' crisis.

The article concludes with a necessary differentiation between emancipatory and reactionary expressions of populism. Although less clear-cut in political practice, this distinction is fundamental and necessary to understand the way populism affects democracy. On the one hand, we argue that emancipatory populism involves a 'conflicting aesthetics' that constantly troubles the symbolic order to incorporate subaltern sectors, radicalising liberal democracy. Recovering and being faithful to the very root of the word transgression, one is dealing with a queer trans-populism whose aesthetic practices challenge identities and inequalities. On the other hand, we claim that ultimately reactionary populism is not committed to its transgression. It is aesthetically transgressive to incorporate the discourse of what Arendt called the 'mob' – a reactionary discourse that reinforces modes of domination.

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Notes

1. In addition to Laclau's references to Bataille, it is likewise possible to glean insights for an aesthetic theory of populism from his reappropriation of Gramsci's notion of subalternity (Gramsci, 2021 [1934], Q25 §1, 4; Laclau 2001: 9–10), also linking it to Marx's theory of the masses (Marx, 1976 [1847]: 211) and subaltern studies (Spivak, 1988 [1985]: 271). The ideas of heterogeneity and the 'part of no-part' also find correlates in Arendt's (and Heidegger's) idea of the 'worldless' (Arendt, 1978 [1971]: 19, 29; Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 115, 118, 201), Butler's concept of the 'abject' (Butler, 1990: 23; 1993: 3; 1998: 284–285), and even Lacan's notion of the real (Biglieri and Perelló, 2011: 60; Lacan, 2006 [1969]: 224).
2. Bataille's keenness would even rouse Foucault, who otherwise seemed rather sceptical and hopeless towards the idea of emancipation (Foucault, 1963: 755–756; 1976: 210–211).

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