# From sovereignty to *créolisation*: populist strategies and the Mélenchon-Ruffin split. *A response to Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi*

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# From sovereignty to *créolisation*: populist strategies and the Mélenchon-Ruffin split. *A response to Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article contributes to current debates on left-wing populism in Europe by addressing the strategic tensions between patriotic discourse and so-called 'identity' agendas. It does so by examining the split between François Ruffin and Jean-Luc Mélenchon within *La France Insoumise*, identifying sovereigntist and 'créole' populism. Drawing on Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi's analysis of the Spanish left, we challenge their view that a successful populist strategy requires a national-popular bloc eschewing 'identity' politics. Instead, we argue left-wing populism must integrate anti-racist and queer agendas, exemplified by Mélenchon's appeal to Édouard Glissant's concept of *créolisation*. The article is divided into three parts: first, we critique Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi's sovereigntist framework and its limits in reaching purported 'natural addressees' of populism. Second, we develop a typology of invisibilised sectors – subalterns, precarious, and the mob – to show how potential populist constituencies are diverse and to analyse divergent strategies within LFI: while Ruffin remained tied to precarious white workers, neglecting race and gender, Mélenchon shifted to mobilise racialised subalterns in urban peripheries by addressing systemic racism and economic precarisation. Third, we examine how 'créole' populism redefines the 'people' inclusively, contesting exclusionary nationalism, revitalising radical democracy and offering universalism rooted in diversity.

## 1. Introduction

This article challenges recent arguments that left-wing populism in Europe should centre its strategy on reclaiming patriotic tropes and distancing itself from so-called 'identity' or "minority" agendas. On the contrary, we argue that these struggles should occupy a central place within left populism – not only on normative grounds, but also as a strategic imperative. To develop this argument, we examine the split between Jean-Luc Mélenchon and François Ruffin within the French populist left, particularly in the context of *La France Insoumise* (LFI), and respond to recent studies by Raúl Rojas-Andrés, Samuele Mazzolini, and Jacopo Custodi (2023, 2024). In

a recent article and public interventions, these authors have debated certain limitations faced by left-wing populism in Europe. Aligning with the emerging discursive-performative current of populism studies, they provide an intriguing analysis that combines the discursive construction of 'the people' versus 'the elites' with a sociocultural-performative perspective on the transgressive style of populist leaders. Their argument is developed through an examination of another political split, this time within the Spanish populist radical left, illustrating how diverse strategies have encountered obstacles attributed to elements perceived as cultural elitism. They point to elitism in the embodied performances of certain leaders and, more notably, in the programmes of others that prioritise what they label as 'particularist' agendas – including anti-racist, feminist, and queer politics –while dismissing 'universal' patriotic symbols that could effectively mobilise a broader popular base.

While their analysis is insightful, we identify certain limitations in their argument. The study of the Ruffin-Mélenchon split, which emerged from a shift in LFI's strategy – from a sovereigntist approach, championed by Ruffin, to what we term 'créole' populism, led by Mélenchon – offers an alternative perspective that complicates the conclusions drawn by Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi. Although we also subscribe to the discursive-performative current, our interpretation goes beyond the performative embodiment of 'low' cultural references and transgressive leadership styles to focus on broader aesthetic transgressions involving the mobilisation of marginalised invisible groups into the political sphere. Rather than concentrating solely on the styles of populist leadership, we emphasise the symbolic boundaries that define who becomes visible in public discourse – and how populism can contest these boundaries. This perspective makes LFI a particularly revealing case: its internal debates have explicitly foregrounded not only competing understandings of universalism, but also conflicting views over which constituencies a left populist project should seek to mobilise. Our analysis underscores the variety of contemporary forms of symbolic exclusion and highlights how distinct populist strategies engage different fractions of the invisibilised. Ultimately, we argue that in the French context, appeals to nationalist tropes have shown their strategic limitations – whereas LFI's turn toward anti-racist and gender struggles within a 'créole' populism signals a reinvigoration of its radical democratic project.

This article is structured into three sections. In this introduction, we outline the main arguments of Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi, particularly their claim that populism should distance itself from 'minority' agendas and instead embrace patriotic symbols. The second section traces the transformations of LFI's strategy, presenting a typology of contemporary forms of invisibility and the varied groups they have targeted – subalterns, the precarious, and the mob. We examine LFI's initial sovereigntist stance aimed at attracting far-right-leaning voters, its limitations, and the subsequent shift towards engaging marginalised, precarious workers from the outskirts – leading to the rift between Mélenchon and Ruffin. Finally, the third section discusses the broader consequences of this split for the French radical left and its implications for radical democracy, focusing on Mélenchon's adoption of the concept of *créolisation* – a notion borrowed from Édouard Glissant that reimagines the 'people' as a diverse and open-ended collective shaped by cultural articulation. The passage from sovereignty to *créolisation*, viewed through the lens of mobilising distinct fractions of the invisibilised masses, allows usto revisit tensions between universalism and identity-based politics. The contrast between these

approaches helps show how left populism responds to questions of class, race, national-ism, and political identity in today's Europe – and what is at stake for emancipatory politics.

### 1.1. Which national content for populism?

To study the shortcomings of the radical populist left in Spain, Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi develop an analysis that claims to emerge from the discursive-performative tradition (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021). This school stems from Ernesto Laclau's discursive approach, but seeks to overcome certain limitations associated with his form-alism. Based on Laclau, populism is understood as the construction of an antagonism between the 'people' and the 'elite'. Beyond Laclau, however, discursive insights are articulated with the contributions of authors such as Pierre Ostiguy (2009) on the political performance of populist leaders, emphasising the importance of the style, language and mannerisms of this leadership, which must embody the cultural codes of the 'people' to facilitate identification.

Understanding how left-wing populism failed, however, requires explaining what would have made potential success possible. Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi (2024a, 8) seem to adhere to the hypothesis that we are living or have lived through a 'populist moment'. This hypothesis suggests that traditional left-wing parties, by aban-doning the working class and adopting policies similar to those of the right, especially in relation to austerity, have left the 'popular majorities' helpless. In a scenario that some describe as 'post-democracy', although democratic processes formally remain in place, the political options available are not sufficiently diverse, with all parties implementing similar austerity policies. This abandonment of the working class in the post-democratic context would have contributed to the increase in electoral abstention. As Chantal Mouffe (2018), 19–21) argues, however, the repression of authentic political debate in the post-democratic environment and the abandonment of the working class tends to generate an inevitable backlash. The 'populist moment' feeds on the vacuum of alternatives, which favours the rise of 'outsider' movements that articulate a discourse of the revolt of the 'people' against the 'elites'.

According to the authors, the Spanish populist left consciously exploited this dissatis-faction, this 'populist moment', creating parties that abandoned the traditional rhetoric of antagonism between left and right and adopted an anti-system discourse that framed the political struggle as a dispute between those 'below' and those at the 'top', in the name of 'popular sovereignty'. This strategy aimed to broaden their militant base and attract a large number of voters. Mouffe (2018, 6), among others, believes that this left-wing populism was vital because, in certain contexts, this invisibilised mass could be attracted to far-right movements.

Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi (2024a), 3, 16) argue that the failure of the populist strategy of the radical left in Spain was due to its inherently elitist style, which 'short-circuited' its discourse. According to them, this elitism prevented the left from mobilising the 'natural addressees of their appeals' (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024a, 17). In its various fractures, elitist elements would not only have survived but flourished. They implicitly distinguish two mistakes of the Spanish radical left: an elitism of

*form*, and an elitism of *content* – though the interplay between these two dimensions may merit further reflection.

On the one hand, the authors claim that some groups on the populist radical left would have been guilty of their form of communication, which was too marked by an academicist style, of a university intellectual left that, in the end, despite speaking of the 'people' against the 'elites', could not eliminate its elite habitus in words and gestures. This claim is supported by their analysis of the Twitter communication of a leader from an influential wing of the Spanish radical left, which revealed that 7.94% of a sample of tweets displayed performances of intellectualism – a 'small [but] not negligible' percentage (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024a, 9–10). While questions remain about whether this method effectively captures elitist habitus or whether the percentage is representative of such intellectualism, the more pressing issue lies in their theoretical framing, which leans almost exclusively on Ostiguy's concept of populism as flaunting of the socio-cultural 'low'. Ostiguy's framework suggests that populism relies on the performative mobilisation of signifiers and practices that would resonate with the popular class, like speaking in an accessible language and dressing plainly. However, recent developments in the performative scholarship complicate this narrow focus on the 'low'. María Esperanza Casullo's (2021, 78–80) concept of synecdochal representation is particularly relevant to this case study, as it highlights how populist performances involve a hybridisation of 'low' and 'high' elements. While performances of the 'low' are important, a populist leader must also display exceptionality to justify their role as a representative. This aligns with Moffitt's (2016, 55) discussion of the dual challenge faced by populist leaders in balancing extraordinariness and ordinariness, and Théo Aiolfi's (2022, 10) call for a more nuanced understanding of populism as a 'transgressive style' that resists reductive associations with buffoonery.

However, the question of elitist performances in terms of *form* is not the main focus of our analysis. We are more interested in their criticisms of another current within the Spanish populist left. For them, there has been another elitist turn on the Spanish left, linked to its *content*. For Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi (2024a, 6) populism is about a logic of equivalences that simplifies the political space. Drawing on a specific interpretation of Laclau (Zicman de Barros 2023, 40), this simplification is understood as implying ambiguous discourses capable of appealing to the majority of the electorate (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024b, §4).

Developing this point, the authors claim that the failure of the Spanish populist left was due to the growing adoption of a discursive content incompatible with populism: 'minorities' or 'identity' demands. According to Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi, these activists '*favoured a discourse that privileges particularism over universalism*', which notably '*demands a high level of cultural capital for the electorate to even be able to engage with it*'. In other words, there would have been an abandonment of '*any aspiration to represent the whole instead of the part*' (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024b, §27). To evoke a term that the authors use without further criticism, the mistake of this current was to become 'woke' (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024a, 14, 16). There would have been a fragmentation of the discourse, moving away from the original ambition of representing a social majority.

As well as espousing particularist 'minority' agendas, the Spanish populists would have committed another elitist slip: they distanced themselves from patriotic references.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's ([1930] 1996, Q2 §25) critique of '*the most superficial cosmopolitanism and anti-patriotism*' of some sectors of the left, Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi (2024b), §35) indicate that to achieve a 'universalist' appeal, populist discourse should take on a 'national-popular' character (Gramsci [1930] 1996, Q3 §63; [1934] 1992, Q21 §5). While acknowledging the conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017), they argue that in practice it is 'difficult to politically conceive "the people" not as "people-nation"' (Custodi 2023, 78). The principle here is that, to speak to the people, it would be necessary to use their language, to appeal to the 'people's common sense' (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2024b, §13). This would mean recovering discursive elements which are easy to assimilate, such as national symbols. Mouffe (2016a), §23) herself had already stated the importance of appealing to a 'left-wing patriotism'. As Custodi (2021, 709–10; 2023, 213) has said, patriotic discourse has historically been a very important element of populist strategies. In a recent article, he states:

> [...] the popular classes, particularly those with lower levels of education, tend to be more 'nationalised' in their culturalisation process. This means they are more responsive to symbolic and cultural elements related to national belonging compared to those with higher educational or class backgrounds, who tend to be more culturally cosmopolitan. (Custodi 2024, §7)

An appeal to patriotic tropes and a rejection of 'identity' or 'minority' agendas: these are very important ingredients in the authors' programmatic recipe for populism, the abandonment of which would have sealed the fate of the Spanish left. While this approach offers an intriguing perspective, it is not without its risks. Even Custodi (2024), §34) acknowledges the potential pitfalls of a nationalist strategy, though he does not explore these in depth. Our aim in the rest of this article is to address some of the blind spots in this perspective by highlighting both strategic and ethical concerns.

Strategically, as we will argue in the second section, the notion of 'natural addressees' of populist discourse neglects the plurality within 'popular majorities'. We contend that rejecting nationalism while embracing 'minority' agendas could be a more effective strategy for mobilising marginalised social sectors. Ethically, as we will discuss in the third section, the claim that 'identity' demands represent a 'particularism' incompatible with the 'universalism' of the national-popular bloc – and that the latter should be prioritised – neglects the fact that critiquing 'universalism' has been central to the radical democracy project often associated with populism.

## 2. Data and methods: the Ruffin-Mélenchon split

To respond to Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi, we will analyse another split: the rupture between François Ruffin and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the French radical left. We believe that the divergences between these two currents open doors for thinking about the role of 'minority' struggles, universalism, the diverse character of 'popular majorities', and radical democracy.

For this study, we draw on a historical reconstruction of LFI, notably from qualitative, interpretive analyses of publicly available spoken and written statements by central figures – especially Mélenchon and Ruffin. In line with the discursive-performative

tradition, our aim is not to produce a systematic or exhaustive corpus, but to identify salient and emblematic interventions that illustrate strategic and rhetorical shifts (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 188–89). The examples discussed were selected for their visibility, relevance, and resonance within political and media debates from approximately 2015 to 2025, primarily from televised interviews, speeches, and public events available through widely circulated media outlets and platforms. To be more specific, we mobilise the analytical framework of discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007,103–33) to engage with the discursive and performative articulation of the 'people' that emerges from Mélenchon and Ruffin's statements. Indeed, discourse theory foregrounds performative, symbolic, and affective dimensions of political communication, which includes attention to antagonistic framing, appeals to the 'people', and transgressive rhetorical styles. We will not focus on the details of LFI's internal disputes and organisational squabbles. We know that the Ruffin-Mélenchon split is also due to power struggles within a very centralised and 'de-institutionalised' party-movement, whose structure is shaped to Mélenchon's designs (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 92, 118). This topic, however, has already been dealt with by other authors. For our current study, we will focus on the ideological dimension of the split.

This section is divided into three parts: firstly, we present LFI and its first strategy, which we classify as sovereigntist populism, aimed at attracting captive far-right voters. In the second part, by pointing out the limits of this strategy, we complexify the idea of 'natural addressees' of populism and present a typology of forms of invisibilisation: subaltern, precarious, and the mob. Finally, we show that the LFI leadership realised the limits of emulating the nationalist discourse aimed at the mob and changed course to try to attract the subalternised precarious.

### 2.1. Sovereigntist interpretation of left-wing populism and its crisis

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, founder of LFI, has openly embraced the 'populist moment' hypothesis, though he avoids using the term 'populism' due to its negative connotations. He has extensively discussed the concept, notably in a 2012 debate with Laclau and Mouffe in Argentina (Mélenchon 2012). Later, during one of his election campaigns, he even invited Mouffe to join a parade. In 2016, Mélenchon established LFI as a populist party in dialogue with social movements, aiming to reach a broader electorate than his previous party, the *Parti de Gauche*. He believed that, in a France marked by the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande – and then Emmanuel Macron –, *dégagisme*, a demand for real change, was the order of the day.

To capture this mood, Mélenchon (2016, 308–09) has declared that it was necessary to break with the conventions of political decorum. Exemplifying synecdochal representation, he combined a rare erudition with impassioned speeches and an embodied performance of indignation that often unsettled upper social strata (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 60, 98–99, 214). What's more, he didn't seem too far removed from Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi's interpretation of the content that should mark a populist movement. Patriotic symbols, such as the tricolour flag and *La Marseillaise*, should be recovered because they are 'the bedrock on which many people build their political thinking' (Mélenchon 2016) – and, in the French case, they are also 'revolutionary symbols' (Mélenchon 2015a, 01:19–01:36). These

'common denominators' were key, according to him, to moving from the foolish goal of 'reuniting the left' to the populist project: 'federating the people' (Mélenchon 2016).

However, the French approach to reclaiming patriotic references for 'federating the people' diverges from the Spanish populist experience (Cervera-Marzal 2023, 75). The diagnosis of the populist radical left in Spain was that there was a large contingent of voters who had historically voted for the left, but had become abstentionists. In the French case, the reading was different: the space for *dégagisme* was not free, but had to be contested with the far-right. The hypothesis here is that of the *gaucho-lépenisme* (Laclau 2005, 88): because the far-right parties arrived earlier, they would have been able to attract a disenfranchised left-leaning electorate, fooled into voting for reactionaries by the lack of any other anti-system option. Speaking the language of the people, therefore, was a mechanism to seduce and mobilise those whom Mélenchon called '*fachés pas fachos* [angry, not fascists]' (Mélenchon 2018, 17:40–18:05; Cervera-Marzal 2021, 258).

François Ruffin, an activist, journalist and award-winning filmmaker who was elected for the National Assembly in 2017, followed a line close to Mélenchon's, and even more intensely. In a conversation with Mouffe in 2018 reproduced by Manuel Cervera-Marzal (2021, 262), Ruffin also reclaimed the term 'populism', which for him also involved an appeal to an electorate that had been captured by the far-right. A militant from the north of France, a rural and peri-urban region where communists once dominated electorally, but where the far-right is currently very strong, Ruffin early on sought to understand the causes of the 'malaise' of what he seems to assume are populism's 'natural addressees': the 'little white people'.

To attract these voters, Ruffin cultivated the image of a simple, common man and embraced a rhetorically transgressive and conflictual style (Aiolfi 2025, 150), exemplified by anti-elite campaign slogans like '*Les faire plus chier que le Front national* [piss them off more than the Front national]'. Furthermore, Ruffin sees a left that has turned its back on a context of deindustrialisation and deteriorating labour relations. His main criticism was of what some would call 'progressive neoliberalism' (Fraser 2017, 46): the left that, instead of fighting for transformations in labour relations, began to focus on societal issues. He strongly criticised moralistic talk about anti-fascism as pointless, if not counterproductive – further stigmatising this electorate and nudging it towards the far-right (Ruffin 2018, 22). As early as 2011, he wrote a book in which he presented his 'protectionist drives': for him, the left should return to the antagonism between workers and the rich who are responsible for economic decline, while reclaiming some form of 'protectionism', a 'solidarity protectionism', as a tool to protect workers and combat the negative effects of globalisation (Ruffin 2011).

Mélenchon consistently argued that the true enemy of the people was not foreigners, but the elites, and indeed believed that his conception of French nationality had inclusive aspirations (Kleinberg 2023, 271). However, this attachment to sovereignty,[1] an ambiguous relationship with the topic of immigration, and a growing hostility to the European project caused concern among some sectors of the left (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 258–61). Another point of contention was his constant reluctance to engage in debates about racism and his tepid support for the struggles of racialised religious minorities. Very critical of wearing the headscarf in public, he stated in 2015 that 'we have the right not

to like Islam [. . .], that's part of our freedoms', rejecting the very concept of Islamophobia (Mélenchon 2015b, 30:42–31:01; Kleinberg 2023, 18).

Similar concerns have been raised about Ruffin. In his quest to attract a captive far-right electorate, he has over the years neglected, not to say rejected, so-called 'minority' issues. This has been demonstrated in various media interventions. Despite claiming to be against laws banning the headscarf, Ruffin said with some disdain that he wouldn't attend the March against Islamophobia because he had to play football (Ruffin 2019b, 24:38–-25:58). Commenting precisely on Spain, he said that the left should speak beyond its 'fan-base', suggesting that it was not convenient for LFI to repeat its Spanish counterparts and introduce bills that would guarantee and expand trans people's rights, as this would end up 'dividing society' (Ruffin 2023, 18:20–22:48).

At first glance, LFI's strategy of 'sovereigntist' populism would have paid off. The electoral success of Ruffin's campaign for congress in 2017 is partially due to an important number of far-right voters who would have chosen him in the second round against the Macronist candidate (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 264–65). The street demonstrations of the following years also seemed to prove the strategy correct. In the same way that the *Indignados* in Spain inspired the populist left in that country, the outbreak of the *Gilets jaunes*, with their spontaneous use of French flags, patriotic symbols, and cliché references to the French Revolution, at first seemed to confirm the hypothesis of the 'populist moment' that animated LFI. The movement 'fascinated' Mélenchon (2019, 18:05–19:05) and was the subject of a documentary film directed by Ruffin (2019a).

In subsequent years, however, this hypothesis was re-evaluated within LFI, particularly among its leadership. The party's leaders began to recognise the limitations of appealing to patriotic symbols and competing for the same electorate as the far-right. Part of this rethink is due to the frustrating outcome of the 2019 European elections. The party, which had hoped to benefit from the momentum created by the *Gilets jaunes*, did not perform well (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 251–52). Above all, the party was confronted with the limits of its sovereigntist strategy.

## 2.2. Typology of forms of invisibilisation

The crisis of sovereigntist populism strategy is at the root of the Ruffin-Mélenchon split. To analyse their stances, we believe that it is essential to discuss another dimension of the so-called discursive-performative approach to populism – a dimension that focuses on how populism mobilises invisibilised sectors into politics. Like Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi, we also belong to the discursive-performative tradition. In contrast to them, however, we have complemented the analysis of the performances of populist leaders with a reflection on who populism mobilises (de Barros and Aiolfi, 2025, 8). We understand that populism is transgressive not only in the flaunting of the 'low' of its leaders. In fact, it is necessary to overcome leader-centred approaches. There is transgression in the simple fact that populism incorporates marginalised, invisible sectors into the public sphere. Sectors that Laclau (2005, 140) would call, based on Georges Bataille, 'heterogeneity'.

A key concept for understanding the idea of 'heterogeneity' is that of the mass. The notion of mass has a long history in political thought, appearing in various traditions, including Marxism and psychoanalysis (Marx [1852] 1979, 187–189; Zicman de Barros 2024, 6). Despite different interpretations, the mass is generally understood as an

unorganised, marginalised entity, lacking the symbolic representation needed to act as a political subject. The mass is marked by disorganisation, absence of solidarity, and exclusion from political processes. Jacques Rancière's notion of aesthetics as the '*partage du sensible*' (Rancière, 2000, 12) helps explain how politics is shaped by disputes over visibility in the public sphere. The mass, in this sense, consists of those excluded from visibility – what Rancière (1995, 31) calls the 'part of no-part'. Populism, by mobilising the mass, enacts an aesthetic transgression, bringing into politics the invisible.

Yet, the mass is far from a uniform group. This misunderstanding – often found in the works that assume there are 'natural addressees' for populism – fails to recognize that the targets of populist appeals are, in fact, heterogeneous in the literal sense of the word. In fact, it is more accurate to speak of masses, in the plural, composed of distinct fractions with differing social and economic conditions. Building on this critique, recent studies on the aesthetic transgressions of populism, informed by thinkers who have explored the issue of visibility in politics, have led us to develop a typology of contemporary forms of invisibility. We identify three categories, which can often overlap: the subaltern, the precarious, and the mob (Zicman de Barros 2024, 10).

The association between mass and subalternity dates back to Gramsci ([1934] 2021, Q25 §5), who distinguished subalterns from the proletariat. For Gramsci ([1930] 1996, Q3 §48), the proletariat is an organised class capable of articulating a hegemonic project, while subalterns are unorganised groups lacking the symbolic and political resources needed to constitute themselves as political subjects. Spivak (1985) builds on this, highlighting how groups marginalised by gender, race, and other markers have historically been subalternised – rendered invisible, or their voices perceived as noise or threat. In the French context, this category includes, for example, racialised populations in the banlieues, undocumented migrant workers, women whose voices have been stifled before they could be formed, and queer youth from working-class or immigrant backgrounds. At best, these groups form 'subaltern counter-publics' with shared discourses and identities that cannot assert themselves in the public sphere (Zicman de Barros 2024, 11).

Amid the increasing disorganisation of the global proletariat, driven by market deregulation and the flexibility promoted by contemporary capitalism, a new form of invisibility has emerged: precarisation. This phenomenon is not solely economic but also has significant subjective consequences (Arendt [1958] 1998], 255–57). The erosion of social safety nets and the transformation of labour relations – weakening collective bonds, identities and bargaining power while temporary and informal contracts become the norm – deprive the precarious of symbolic resources that would allow them to appear in politics (Zicman de Barros 2024, 12–14). This diffuse condition affects a wide range of actors, including gig economy workers, informal employees, rural and peri-urban labourers displaced by deindustrialisation, and young people relegated to internships or short-term contracts.

A third form of invisibilisation relates to what Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt, respectively, termed the 'lumpen' or 'mob'. Distinct from the poor, they are described by both as 'the refuse of all classes' (Marx [1852] 1979, 149; Arendt, [1951] 1967, 155), comprising *déclassé* and resentful segments on the fringes of society. Historically, their reactionary discourses were confined to the margins of the public sphere. However, these 'non-subaltern counter-publics' can grow in both number and significance (Zicman de Barros 2024, 14–15), with the potential to construct new rigid hegemonies aligned with

authoritarian projects. It pursues a paradoxical form of inclusion that reinforces modes of domination and excludes others. In contemporary France, this includes certain segments of the white working class in rural and peri-urban zones attracted to far-right narratives, as well as online communities structured around misogynist and racist ideologies.

As noted above, these three categories can overlap. Often and growingly, precarious workers also belong to subalternised groups. Furthermore, the mob discourse may attract an increasing number of precarious workers. It is through the interaction of these categories that we will examine the Ruffin-Mélenchon split.

### 2.3.  Different strategies

The Ruffin-Mélenchon split contributes to deal with the contemporary challenge of understanding how these forms of invisibility coexist and intersect, shaping the way in which the 'part of no-part' breaks into the political scene.

Staying true to LFI's original discourse, Ruffin presents the sort of precarious workers as the main concern of his political action. However, his view of who these precarious people are is specific. He draws support primarily from an industrial and rural electorate and believes that they are leaning towards the mob discourse. To win them over, therefore, he must not be completely hostile to the mob, using frames such as sovereignty that he believes will resonate with them. Moreover, his strategy is one of active silence on race and gender issues, overlooking struggles that are central to subaltern groups but which he sees as repulsive to the white precarious working class.

Meanwhile, while Ruffin remained committed to the original strategy, the party's leaders gradually recognised its limitations. Over time, LFI, led by Mélenchon, shifted both its political analysis and its strategy for mobilisation. As Manuel Bompard (2024a, §7), LFI's national coordinator, explained, they realised that the chances to win over far-right voters were minimal. As Cervera-Marzal (2021), 260–61) would say the '*faché pas facho*' strategy was destined to fail. Indeed, Éric Fassin (2017, 55) argues that the *gaucho-lépenisme* hypothesis is not supported by historical evidence. Yes, the far-right has indeed gained support among workers over the years, but particularly those who were already right-leaning or from new generations lacking strong ideological ties. While the aim of drawing the latter toward emancipatory positions is certainly well justified, achieving this in the short term appears challenging. Research also shows that most far-right-leaning voters are currently deeply committed to racist rhetoric (Fassin 2017, 73). Although some polls indicate that around a quarter of Le Pen voters had Mélenchon as their second candidate, in practical terms few voters on the far-right were likely to be swayed by the *insoumis* message focused on economic issues (Cervera-Marzal 2021, 259–60). Moreover, as Kleinberg (2023, 269) contends, rather than winning over far-right voters, Mélenchon's emphasis on nationality – despite attempts to challenge and redefine French national identity in more progressive terms – unintentionally reinforced entrenched fantasies of exclusivist nationalism.

In this context, LFI shifted away from targeting precarious rural 'little whites' drawn to far-right, mob-like rhetoric. Instead, it adopted a similar strategy to its Spanish counterpart, focusing on abstentionists frustrated with traditional politics (Mélenchon 2024e, §9). As Bompard points out, the abstentionists are a much larger group than the far-right swing voters, with abstention rates in France reaching historically unprecedented levels.

Most importantly, this abstention is also asymmetrical, as various surveys show that those most likely to abstain are left-leaning voters (Bompard 2023, §14–15; 2024, §12). Moreover, Bompard (2023, §18–19) argues that, given the French electoral context, even a small increase – estimated at less than 2% – in turnout among this abstentionist electorate could secure victory for the left. Electorally speaking, this strategic reorientation of LFI towards abstentionist voters is still too recent to yield definitive results, and its effects are difficult to isolate from other contributing factors. Nonetheless, it appears promising. LFI recorded an improved performance in the 2024 European elections, and the left-wing coalition achieved a surprising victory in the 2024 snap legislative elections – accompanied by a significant rise in voter turnout (Bompard 2024a, §17–18).

Regardless of its electoral viability in the long run, this strategic shift marked a significant change in LFI's target demographics. While abstentionists are a diverse group, various polls indicate that they are disproportionately poor, less educated, young, and working class. Most importantly, although some abstentionists come from 'little white' precarious backgrounds, many are from immigrant communities (Fassin 2017, 56–57). Referring back to the typology outlined earlier, LFI's strategy started to focus on a substantial segment of these left-leaning abstentionists – a demographic where precarisation intersects with subalternity. They are largely non-white and marginalised populations from the *quartiers populaires*—working-class suburbs often excluded from the political sphere (Bompard 2023, §10). Mélenchon made this new direction explicit in a debate at the Institut La Boétie – LFI's think tank – where he stressed the importance of focusing on these marginalised communities:

> Of course, who's going to say otherwise: we need to reach out to *déclassées* rural areas. Who's going to say otherwise? But the bulk of the troops that will help us win are the *quartiers populaires*, where 80% of people vote for us in the 1st round, but only 30% actually go out to vote. If we can raise the turnout to a level equal to that of the rest of society, we've won! That's why the priority is to convince them that politics is worthwhile. (Mélenchon 2023b, 21:36–22:12)

His stance became even clearer on 7 September 2024, during a march, when he bluntly stated it in a conversation with a fellow protester that was inadvertently recorded by the media:

> We need to mobilise young people and the *quartiers populaires*. Forget everything else, we're wasting our time. These are the masses of people who have an interest in left-wing politics. (Mélenchon 2024b, 08:00–08:17)

This strategic shift in the electoral focus implied a change in discourse. These groups, facing multiple entangled forms of invisibility, could not be reached through nationalist rhetoric. Instead, LFI's strategy required adopting an explicitly anti-racist stance. As Bompard (2024b, §9) argues, far from being a secondary, cosmetic issue, racism has direct material impacts on the working class, whose large racialised component cannot be ignored. One is dealing here with systemic racism, which operates not only through overt discrimination but also through insidious barriers that deny racialised citizens equal access to living conditions, dignity, and recognition. Embracing anti-racism marked a clear departure from earlier efforts to appeal to a nationalist electorate. As Cervera-Marzal (2021, 285) observes, the party began to exclude some of its more vocal 'sovereigntists', while topics such as anti-Islamophobia emerged in Mélenchon's speeches.

Mélenchon (2024d, 41:35–47:05) and Bompard (2024a, §7–10) later denied that they were abandoning rural voters. However, they stressed that any appeal to this constituency must focus on the common challenges shared by precarious subjects in rural and urban areas, while emphasising an economic agenda that steers clear of far-right rhetoric to avoid alienating the party's urban subaltern precarious base. Indeed, as Mélenchon increasingly prioritised the subaltern, he became unapologetically dismissive of the far-right-leaning mob. He even firmly rejected the notion of '*fachés pas fachos*', making it clear that those who voted for the far-right bore a moral responsibility for supporting racism:

> It's true that sometimes I, like others, have made the mistake of thinking that you could vote *facho* [fascist] when you were just *faché* [angry]. No! Anyone who votes *facho* takes on the moral responsibility of voting for racism, of voting against the unity and indivisibility of the French people!. (Mélenchon 2024c, 1:10:24–1:13:15)

Mélenchon's change in strategy was not without internal dissent. Ruffin was displeased and eventually broke with the party during the 2024 legislative elections. He accused Mélenchon of dividing the country by focusing too much on racial issues and appealing only to a specific segment of France. He even suggested that the Mélenchon was 'ethnicising' French politics (Ruffin 2024a). In contrast, Ruffin, who was committed to the movement's original positions, argued that his aim was to appeal to the whole nation (Ruffin 2024a, 2). Furthermore, Ruffin criticised the party for abandoning its working-class roots in favour of minority and cultural agendas, suggesting that this shift brought it uncomfortably close to the aforementioned 'progressive neoliberalism'.

## 3. Discussion: *Créolisation*, universalism and radical democracy

The case of the French populist radical left offers a counterpoint to Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi's analysis of Spain. It challenges the idea that there are 'natural addressees' of populist discourse, and that to attract them it is necessary to appeal to nationalist tropes and reject 'minority' or 'identity' agendas that are seen as elitist. Efforts such as Ruffin's to win back the white precariat to the left are entirely justified. The long-term trend of working people voting for the far-right should not be regarded as irreversible, and it is crucial to reject the view – held by Fassin and others – that racism is simply the cause rather than a consequence of their alignment with the far-right. However, mimicking far-right nationalist tropes has not only failed to attract these voters, but it has also proven ineffective in mobilising abstentionists. In the French case, abstentionists appear to be mobilised not by nationalist discourse but by anti-racist struggle.

Beyond questions of strategy, the French case prompts a re-evaluation of Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi's interpretation of the relationship between the particular and the universal in populism and its link to a radical democratic project. Following the authors, one could ask whether Mélenchon's pursuit of a subaltern electorate through anti-racist discourse is not actually elitist or particularist – thereby challenging the very populist nature of LFI. Is LFI not, in this case, veering towards a form of intellectual elitism, as exemplified in France by Sandrine Rousseau's Green Party, whose discourse is very much focused on so-called 'identity' politics? Is populism now primarily being performed by figures like Ruffin, or even Fabien Roussel, national secretary of the French Communist

Party, who has gained notoriety for celebrating barbecues and other 'low' cultural references?

We argue otherwise. In fact, if we might talk in terms of form, it was Ruffin (2024b, 06:00–06:09) who had increasingly distanced himself from LFI's earlier populist, conflict-driven style, advocating instead for an end to 'brutalising' political life and promoting 'reconciliation'. Conversely, while Mélenchon (2024f, 20:55–21:54; 2025, 39:15–41:27) and his cohorts have very recently made efforts to perform respectability, they have largely retained a populist style. Following the significant expansion of LFI's parliamentary group in 2022, *insoumis* congresspeople have frequently and primarily transgressed interactional norms (Aiolfi 2025, 141), being often accused of fostering '*bordélisation* [disruption]' in a hung National Assembly through an apparent strategy of 'permanent conflict' aimed at provoking chaos and crisis (Moffitt 2016, 120).

Furthermore, the *insoumis* continued to proclaim themselves the tribunes of the 'people' against the 'elites'. But this discursive antagonism assumed a different shape, with its aesthetic transgression arising from the mobilisation of other marginalised invisible sectors. This shift, we contend, not only preserved LFI's populist character but redirected it firmly towards the tradition championed by Laclau. For Laclau, populism served as a path to radical democracy – a concept he developed with Mouffe, focusing on denaturalising hierarchies and inequalities and constantly integrating excluded groups (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 176–192). Taking a clear stance against mob discourse, which reinforces exclusion within a closed vision of the 'people', Mélenchon's new approach redefined the 'people' through an open and inclusive identity.

To understand the radical democratic character of Mélenchon's new populism and how it relates with the debate on universalism and particularism, we must consider a concept he introduced into French public discourse: *créolisation*. Custodi (2024), §27–29) briefly mentions Mélenchon's references to *créolisation* in positive terms, as a new form of conceiving the nation. While one can discuss whether *créolisation* tries to reshape the identity of the people or the nation – these things can indeed interweave –, Custodi leaves unexplored how *créolisation* implies precisely embracing 'minority' politics, with radical democratic implications. Mélenchon (2020a, 30:00–31:45) first reappropriated the idea of *créolisation* in a 2020 speech launching the Institut La Boétie, drawing on a concept originally developed by Martinican writer Édouard Glissant, who passed away in 2011. Initially introduced timidly and applied sporadically, the concept gradually became central to *insoumis* populism. The success of this approach soon dispelled any hesitation, as the 2022 presidential and legislative campaigns – and especially the unexpected results of the 2024 elections – confirmed Mélenchon's full commitment to *créolisation* as a defining feature of his populist rhetoric. His vision for a Sixth Republic, a long-standing goal, took on new dimensions: it would be a 'créolised' republic, and his populism, no longer sovereigntist, emerged as decidedly 'créole' (Zicman de Barros 2021, §3).

For Glissant (2001, 3; 2009, 25), *créolisation* signifies the encounter not just of subjects, but of cultures, the consequences of which are unforeseeable and unpredictable. According to him, *créolisation* transcends biological *mestizaje* and encompasses the endless integration of languages, values, and imaginaries in a way that fosters fluid identities open to diversity. Originating in colonial contexts of violence and oppression, *créolisation* emerges at the grassroots (Glissant 1992a 2011, 15), as a phenomenon of

resistance and reinvention, capable of subverting colonial logic. It is expressed literarily through cultural traces and créole languages, symbolising a poetics of ambiguity and discontinuity. Far from being culturally elitist, *créolisation* does not demand extensive cultural capital to be understood. It is not abstract, codified, intellectualised. Its expressions arise from the grassroots, often dismissed as inferior or 'dirty' rather than linked to any notion of high culture, which they actively defy. This rhizomatic dimension of *créolisation* explains why Mélenchon mobilises it to talk about 'metropolitan' France. Although the term 'créole' is typically associated with colonised overseas territories, Mélenchon (2020b, §1) draws on Glissant's concept to argue that *créolisation* is already an integral reality in the European territory of France, shaped by ongoing cultural encounters that continually produce new identities. For Mélenchon, *créolisation* is not a programme to be implemented, but a lived reality – what remains is for society to fully acknowledge and celebrate it.

Mélenchon's embrace of *créolisation* is radically democratic because it denaturalises the implicit hierarchies and inequalities of a central tenet of French political culture: 'republican universalism'. Rooted in the French Revolution, republican universalism is a doctrine that emphasises formal equality and the rights of citizens as abstract autonomous subjects, detached from social identities or group affiliations (Rosanvallon 2004, 12–14). Aiming to be 'colour-blind', this doctrine envisions elected representatives as serving the nation as a whole, free of particular interests, and designs public policies focusing on common traits shared by all citizens. Not far from Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi's perspective, its goal is to speak to 'the whole instead of the part'. Mélenchon's early nationalism was anchored in this 'republican' conception of the nation, which he initially interpreted as inherently inclusive (Kleinberg 2023, 271). However, as he later acknowledged in his discussion of *créolisation*, this perspective faces inherent limits.

Mouffe (2016b), §15) herself had claimed that Mélenchon's original appeal to republican universalism 'gave [her] hives'. He eventually grasped a point that Laclau (1991, 24) had himself identified: appeals to 'universal' values are, in reality, particular perspectives that become hegemonic. In France, this is evident in the vicissitudes of concepts such as *laïcité*, a key element of republican universalism (Kleinberg 2023, 18, 156). While originally intended to protect citizens from the imposition of an official belief, *laïcité* has evolved into a doctrine that polices the customs and practices of ethnic and religious minorities under the guise of an overarching 'neutrality' (Mondon and Winter 2017, 36; Kleinberg 2023, 18, 154–55). This supposed universalist neutrality, however, was constructed on a foundation of secularised white, male, heterosexual Christianity, to which others were expected to assimilate. By disregarding its own historical contingency, French republican universalism not only fails to confront exclusionary dynamics affecting marginalised groups but actively reinforces them, becoming a tool for the far-right to rally the mob in defence of a rigid French identity (Mondon 2015, 407). Even at its most inclusive, republican universalism struggles to address structural racism (Mondon 2023, 336).

That said, Mélenchon's (2020b, §6) critique of republican universalism through the lens of 'créole' populism does not call for its outright rejection or a celebration of the isolated particularisms of subaltern sectors. Glissant (1992a, 21; 1992b, 14) himself rejected praising an essentialised rigid 'créole' identity, and was highly critical of a view in which particular identities merely coexist without mutual enrichment. Mélenchon's aim with *créolisation* was to rethink republican universalism by challenging perspectives that

strictly oppose it to 'particularist' subaltern 'identity' agendas. To assert that France is 'créolised' – the outcome of a complex and often violent historical encounter, yet also a site of promise, innovation, and the perpetual redefinition of identity – is to advocate for a different kind of republican universalism. This vision challenges the contradictions within hegemonic republican universalism, not in the name of sectarianism, anti-secularism, 'separatism', 'woke', or 'Islamo-leftism', as critiqued by the government and far-right voices, but in favour of a more inclusive and genuinely universal republicanism (Mondon and Winter 2017, 32). This vision does not deny the radical equality of all citizens or the secular nature of the state, but instead reaffirms them in a broader, more inclusive sense. It aims not to reject republican universalism but to resignify it, reclaiming a concept that has often been dominated by conservative interpretations.

In affirming universality through *créolisation*, Mélenchon has edged close to invoking Hegel, referencing the idea of a 'concrete universal' (Mélenchon 2020a, 30:30–31:45; Mélenchon 2023a, 2024c). Although there are undoubtedly centuries-old controversies about how to interpret Hegel (Glissant 1969, 38; 1997, 142), he can be read through a radical democratic lens. Unlike an abstract universal – which posits a formal equality that often conceals the standpoint of dominant groups – a concrete universal emerges from within particular social experiences. It is through these experiences that the limits of abstract universality are exposed, and from which a fuller, more inclusive universality is claimed. Universality is thus realised not by erasing difference, but by mediating it – recognising specific identities and conflicts as constitutive of a shared political horizon. Denouncing abstract universalities that naturalise social hierarchies in the name of a 'concrete universal' is not far from Rancière's (1995, 63–64, 127) idea that the 'part of no-part' claims a universal equality that exists in principle but not yet in practice. Despite his criticism of Hegel, Laclau (2000, 61–62) seems to agree with this radical democratic reading of the heterogeneity that challenges the symbolic order not to overthrow it, but to point out its blind spots through immanent critique.

This framework calls for a radical democratic reading of Gramsci. Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi present Gramsci as a universalist critical of 'minority' movements. Yet this reading obscures the hegemonic contingent dimension of universalism and overlooks Gramsci's very idea of subalternity. From a radical democratic perspective, Gramsci's national-popular is a means for the subalterns to build a new counter-hegemony in an inclusionary way. In a similar spirit, *créolisation* and radical democratic populism define the 'people' in an open, transforming way, constantly reimagining this identity to incorporate those previously invisible. Unsurprisingly, Mélenchon (2024a, 2:03:18–2:04:47) has enthusiastically linked *créolisation* with queer theory, a framework that extends beyond gender to challenge all fixed identities and binary thinking in pursuit of inclusion and emancipation (de Barros and Aiolfi 2025, 11–13).

## Conclusion

France and Spain have distinct histories and social fabrics, yet this article uses the case study of French politics to challenge a key argument made by Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi in their study of the Spanish radical left. They contend that an effective populist project must rely on patriotic tropes with a 'universalist' appeal, steering clear of

so-called 'identity' politics, deemed overly particularistic. According to these authors, such an approach is necessary to mobilise the 'natural addressees' of populist politics.

Our study of the various currents of French populist radical left frames populism as a transgressive aesthetic that brings historically invisible groups into the political arena, rejecting the notion of 'natural addressees'. Instead, marginalised groups encompass diverse categories – subalterns, the precarious, and the mob – that often overlap. The split between Ruffin and Mélenchon, we suggest, arose from two divergent strategies: one we term sovereigntist populism, which focuses on mobilising the 'little white' precarious rural working class attracted to far-right, mob-like discourse; and another we call 'créole' populism, which prioritises the mobilisation of subaltern precarious groups from urban outskirts. In the French context, patriotic appeals have proven ineffective for both strategies. While we acknowledge Ruffin's efforts to bring the white working class back to the left, we argue that patriotic rhetoric – even when framed in more inclusive terms – has been ineffective and risks inadvertently normalising the far-right. Conversely, the non-white subaltern precarious are mobilised through anti-racist struggles rather than nationalist discourses.

We argue that the 'créole' populism strategy, centred on the subaltern precariat, not only holds promise as an electoral approach but also reorients populism toward a radical democratic politics. Far from being 'particularistic' or 'woke' elitist, the concept of *créolisation*, inspired by Glissant, celebrates grassroots cultural encounters to denaturalise entrenched social hierarchies and modes of domination. This vision calls for a universal equality that has yet to be realised, reimagining an inclusive 'people' with open borders.

## Note

1. We use the terms 'sovereignty' and 'sovereigntist' not in the narrow sense of state authority or nationalist foreign policy, but as part of a broader theoretical framework. This perspective engages with a philosophical critique of sovereignty as the fantasy of a self-sufficient, autonomous subject, and invites reflection on the boundaries between 'us' and 'others'. Of course, this broader discussion lies beyond the immediate scope of this article and cannot be fully developed here (Zicman de Barros 2025, chapter 6).

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