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The Affects of Populism

ABSTRACT: *The current rise of populism is often associated with affects. However, the exact relationship between populism and affects is unclear. This article addresses the question of what is distinctive about populist (appeals to) affects. It does so against the backdrop of a Laclauian conception of populism as a political logic that appeals to a morally laden frontier between two homogenous groups, ‘the people’ and ‘those in power’, in order to establish a new hegemonic order. I argue that it is distinctive of populism that it breaks with the dominating feeling rules by overtly appealing to affects and reclaiming them for the realm of the political. The article explores three groups of affective phenomena: discontent, anger, and fear; empathetic, sympathetic, group-based, and shared emotions; and collective passions of enthusiasm and love. It shows how an appeal to these affects relates to the political logic of populism itself by contributing to the concretization, collectivization, and unification of affects.*

KEYWORDS: populism, emotions, passions, collective identity, Ernesto Laclau

Introduction

The current rise of right-wing populism is often associated with affects (Cossarini and Vallespín 2019a), most prominently, affects from the fear and anger families (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). Here, I use the concept of ‘affect’ as an umbrella term for all kinds of affective phenomena, such as emotions, moods, and passions. In public and media discourse, the equation of populism and affectivity not only serves to explain the success of right-wing populism, it also serves the purpose of criticizing the ideology of populism and discrediting its adherents. This purpose often remains implicit. By unmasking political beliefs and actions as based on emotions, one’s political opponents are to be excluded from the political discourse (Mouffe 2018). Something similar is true of the concept of populism itself whose usage and connotations in public and media—and sometimes even in the scientific discourse (even if not explicitly associated with affects)—are primarily pejorative (see Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart 2011; Laclau 2007; Stavrakakis 2017).

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The strategy of equating populism and affectivity in order to discredit one's political opponents as ineligible discourse partners is problematic for four reasons. First, there is a broad consensus in research on emotions that affectivity is constitutive of rationality rather than in conflict with it (Damasio 1994; de Sousa 1987). Therefore, the political appeal to affects is never problematic per se. One might even argue that all political principles need the support of affects to establish them, ensure their stability over time, and consolidate them in times of crisis (Nussbaum 2013; Walzer 2002). Even more, one might defend the claim that the political is inherently affective 'because it fundamentally deals with what matters to us' and affects are inherently political because they are fundamentally social (Szanto and Slaby 2020: 478). Second, the strategy is problematic because the distinction between 'political' or 'rational' and 'private' or 'irrational' affects is itself inherently political. Recognizing some affects as 'political' and dismissing others as 'private' or 'irrational' is itself a political act that is inextricably interwoven with the existing hegemonic order and power interests (Robin 2006). Excluding political opponents from the political discourse by an (allegedly) politically neutral appeal to the affective foundation of their ideology or its (allegedly) innocent scientific classification as 'populist' masks the political dimension of this act of exclusion (Mouffe 2018). Third, the strategy is in danger of strengthening rather than weakening right-wing populism by providing further evidence for the populist claim that 'the elite' denies the voice of 'the people', ignores their realities of life, and disdains their affects. Finally, it is problematic because it one-sidedly focuses on 'negative' affects and tends to remain silent about 'positive' ones, such as sympathy and love, that are equally important for understanding the phenomenon of populism (Ahmed 2004; Mouffe 2018).

In light of such limitations, there is a need for an analysis of populism that takes seriously its entanglement with affects *in all their variety* without succumbing to the danger of uncritically adopting long-standing cultural prejudices about affects. It demands an analysis of populist affects that disentangles the descriptive question of what is characteristic of populist (appeals to) affects and the normative question of what makes (some or all) forms of populism problematic. It calls for an analysis of the affects of populism that is critical but also self-critical about its own implicit normative political presumptions.

Ernesto Laclau's (2007) theory of populism and Chantal Mouffe's (2018) recent adaption of his theory in her defense of a left-wing populism provide a suitable starting point for such an endeavor. As I explain in more detail below, they do so for two reasons. First, they neutralize the concept of populism by defining 'populism' as a political logic or strategy that creates a demarcation between 'the people' and 'those in power' in order to establish a new hegemonic order; and second, in describing populism as a form of (re)shaping collective identities by the means of affective politics, they revalue political affects. However, despite the significance these authors ascribe to affectivity, the concept and roles of affects remain astonishingly vague in their theories. This vagueness represents the more general tendency in populism research to leave the affective categories it refers to broadly unexplored (Demertzis 2019).

This points to the second field of research that needs to be taken into consideration, namely the philosophical psychology of political affects. Political

affects have received a tremendous amount of scholarly attention in the past decades in philosophy and its neighboring disciplines. The research extends from the conceptual question of what political emotions or affects are (Protevi 2014; Szanto and Slaby 2020; Slaby and Bens 2019), to the distinction of different forms of shared affective intentionality (Salmela 2012), to explorations of specific political affects, including those of populism (Cossarini and Vallespín 2019b; Hochschild 2018; Salmela and Scheve 2017, 2018).

Bringing these two lines of thought together enables us to bracket our normative assumptions about populism and gain a better understanding of why an appeal to affects is of such crucial importance to populism. At the same time, it promises to fill an important lacuna in Laclauian theories of populism that highlight the importance of affects but leave the category of affect broadly unexplored. My paper accordingly offers a descriptive account of what is distinctive about populist (appeals to) affects. It intentionally brackets both the question of how different forms of populism such as left- and right-wing populism differ from each other in their appeals to affects, and the normative question of how populism or specific forms of populism are to be assessed. In doing so, I do not wish to deny the importance of these latter questions. On the contrary, I believe that a more comprehensive analysis of the affects of populism needs to account for both the unity and plurality of populism. It needs to address both descriptive and normative questions, and the different parts of the analysis need to mutually inform each other. However, here I confine myself to a more modest aim.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the first section, I provide a definition of populism as a political logic drawing on the work of Laclau and Mouffe and situating this definition in the broader context of populism research. In the second section, drawing on contemporary philosophy of emotions, I introduce a basic conceptual distinction in the domain of affective phenomena, namely that between emotions and passions. In section three, I explore the question of what is distinctive about populist (appeals to) affects. First, I argue that the political logic of populism breaks with the dominating feeling rules by overtly embracing affects instead of suppressing or denying them. Then, I take a closer look at three different groups of affective phenomena that are of particular importance to the political logic of populism: individual, group-based, and collective emotions of anger and fear; empathy and sympathy; and the collective passions of enthusiasm and love. I show how an appeal to these affects relates to the political logic of populism itself by contributing to the concretization, collectivization, and unification of affects, and point out how the underlying understanding of political affects is entangled with a specific, namely dissociative, understanding of the political itself.

1. Defining Populism

To address the question of what is characteristic of the populist appeal to affects, we need a preunderstanding of what populism is. Here, I rely on Ernesto Laclau's (2007) and Chantal Mouffe's (2018) theory of populism. I do so for two reasons: first, they neutralize the concept of populism; and second, they highlight the role of affects.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, ‘populism’ is a political logic (Laclau) or discursive strategy (Mouffe) that creates a demarcation between two relatively homogenous groups—‘the people’ and ‘those in power’—in order to establish a new hegemonic order under the rule of ‘the people’. It appeals to a sense of crisis and the feeling that the established hegemonic order has lost its legitimacy. According to this picture, it is not a specific ideological content that defines populism but rather a specific form of doing politics.

Whereas Laclau conceives of populism as a political logic, Mouffe describes it as a political strategy. This might give rise to the misunderstanding that populism is a method that specific agents consciously apply to reach specific political aims. Although this is partly true, it captures only one side of the picture. Populism is also to some extent an anonymous structural feature of how a group of agents feels, thinks, and acts. This entanglement of active, conscious, and agential dimensions and passive, unconscious, and structural ones is more adequately captured by the conceptualization of populism as a political logic—‘style’ (Moffitt 2016: 28–50) or ‘mode of political practice’ (Jansen 2015: 81–86).

Defining populism as a political logic responds to two challenges: first, the already mentioned pejorative connotation of the concept; and second, the ‘multiplicity of the phenomenon’ and “vagueness” of the concept of populism’ (Laclau 2007: 5). The phenomenon of populism is characterized by its ‘chameleonic’ character (Taggart 2000: 4). It is highly context sensitive, occurs in various countries and regions, and in different historical periods (Ionescu and Gellner 1970; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014); it takes various ideological forms, reaching from the left to the right and from exclusionary to inclusionary (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013); it occurs in different organizational forms spanning grassroots movements to highly organized political parties and is socially inhomogeneous. Populism’s multiplicity translates itself into a plurality of scholarly definitions that enumerate different, partly incongruent, and even opposite social and political features (Laclau 2007). Laclau’s definition of populism as a political logic proposes an answer to these difficulties by rejecting the implicit premise that populism is an ideology *at all*. He rejects the assumption that the vagueness of the term ‘populism’ is something to be overcome by a precise definition of the content of populism or criticized as immature. Instead, he opts to take the vagueness of the term ‘populism’ at face value by conceiving of it as a constitutive part of the logic of populism itself. In order to unify people across existing social and political borders, it must operate with simplified and imprecise notions, such as ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’ in order to (re)constitute these very collective identities.

In rejecting the assumption that populism is an ideology, Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory resembles other approaches to populism, for example such as those that conceive of populism as a ‘thin-centered’ rather than a ‘thick ideology’ (Mudde 2004). Roughly speaking, thin-centered ideologies are defined based on a small number of features (Freeden 1996). This means they can be applied to a wide range of cases and explains why they are strongly context dependent. Both kinds of definitions—populism as a political logic and as a thin-centered ideology—share their basic constituents: ‘the people’; ‘the establishment’; a morally laden

frontier between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’; and the idea of a certain form of ‘homogeneity’ of these groups (Rooduijn 2014). Indeed, it even has been stated that a growing consensus on the definition of populism has been achieved in recent years that centers around these key features (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019).

However, the two definitions also diverge from one another in some respects. Most importantly, Laclau and Mouffe conceive of populism as a logic or strategy rather than an ideology. Thereby, it is important to note that conceiving of populism as a political strategy does not imply that it is insincere, as Mudde (2015) suggests. Rhetoric, ideology, and movement or, in other words, political strategy, belief, and action can never be strictly separated (Laclau 2007: 10–13). Conceiving of populism as a political logic allows us to do justice to the performative character of language and symbolic actions by which sociopolitical entities are constituted in the first place. Accordingly, it allows us to conceive of ‘the people’, ‘the establishment’, the morally laden frontier between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’, the ‘homogeneity’ associated with the two groups, and ‘the crisis’ as phenomena that are procedurally constructed and, therefore, always already partly problematic, rather than as monolithic entities or facts (in people’s heads).

It is this combination that makes Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory of populism an apt starting point for the present endeavor to develop a critical theory of the affects of populism: it neutralizes the concept of populism, but in accounting for the performative dimension of language and symbolic action, it still opens up a space for criticism. Accordingly, it is not the alleged truth of their theory that justifies my point of departure, but pragmatic and practical reasons. This shows that even the choice of this seemingly neutral starting point is not politically innocent.

As Laclau and Mouffe point out, affects play a crucial role in the political logic of populism. First, populism must start from the concrete situation of ‘the people’ that it wants to address and mobilize against ‘the establishment’. Second, it must construct a new political identity, namely that of ‘the people’. Accordingly, it must take the individual or private affects of the people seriously, and it must mobilize group-based, collective, or shared affects in order to (re)constitute the collective identities of both ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’. However, despite the significance that Laclau and Mouffe ascribe to affectivity, the concept of affective phenomena remains astonishingly vague in their theories. The question of what kinds of affects—feelings, emotions, passions, etc.—and what type of affects—fear, anger, love, etc.—we are dealing with remains open. To the extent that Laclau and Mouffe explain their concept of affects, they rely on the Spinozian and Freudian tradition. In the following, I draw on recent research on political emotions and passions in the analytic tradition to sharpen their concepts and deepen our understanding of the role of affects in the political logic of populism.

2. The Conceptual Domain of Affective Phenomena

Before we can turn to the question of why affects are pivotal to the political logic of populism, it is necessary to introduce a basic conceptual distinction in the domain of affective phenomena, namely that between emotions and passions. As indicated

above, I use the concept of affect as an umbrella term to denote all different kinds of affective phenomena, such as (bodily) feelings, emotions, moods, passions, and the like. Within the domain of affective phenomena, the most important distinction for the present purpose is that between emotions and passions. According to a widely held view in contemporary philosophy of emotions, emotions are concern-based, evaluative-representational, motivational, occurrent affective states of mind (Deonna and Teroni 2012; Helm 2001; Roberts 2003). As occurrent affective states of mind, emotions have a specific phenomenal character. Anger, for example, involves a feeling of hostility or antipathy toward its object (Cherry and Flanagan 2018; Nussbaum 2016; Pettigrove 2012). Moreover, emotions are intentionally directed toward an object. We are angry *at something* or *with someone*. This object is represented as being in a certain way. Thereby, it is characteristic of emotions that they involve the ascription of an evaluative property. For example, we *blame* the government for ignoring our needs. The evaluation in question is based on our concerns—that is, on what we take to be important, what we attribute worth and value to. In the case of moral anger, this is typically a normative demand that we experience as violated. Finally, emotions come with characteristic action tendencies: in the case of anger, a desire for retaliation, redemption, or recognition.

As occurrent affective states of mind, emotions are bound to the specific situation we are in. Concerns are usually more enduring than emotions. They are affective attachments to specific objects (Roberts 2003). These objects might belong to different metaphysical categories. It can be material or abstract objects (e.g., a charismatic political leader or one's nation), values (e.g., equality), or normative principles (e.g., popular sovereignty). Concerns give rise to a number of different emotions (e.g., anger when the normative principle of popular sovereignty we are committed to has been violated); simultaneously, they are partly constituted by emotions (Helm 2001). If a person claims to love her nation but does not show any affection when her nation is doing well or badly, respectively, we have *prima facie* reasons to doubt her love.

Our concerns can be of differing degrees of importance to us. They can be relatively encapsulated, transient, and contingent or central to our web of mental states, enduring, and constitutive of our 'practical identity' (Korsgaard 1996: 101). The latter are 'passions' (Roberts 2007). They are concerns that make us the person we are and bestow our life with coherence, continuity, or meaning. For example, being committed to the ideal of emancipation makes me the person I am, who I take myself to be, and who others take me to be; moreover, it is a description under which I value myself. Losing or abandoning my commitment accordingly would both endanger my (and other's) capacity to understand myself and lower my self-esteem (Tietjen 2020). The fact that a threat to one's descriptive and evaluative self-conception might express itself in aversive feelings does not imply, however, that *overall* changing oneself is always a bad thing.

3. Populist (Appeals to) Affects

Conceiving of populism as a political logic or strategy that constructs a morally laden 'frontier' between two 'homogenous' groups—'the people' and 'the establishment'—

and evokes a sense of ‘crisis’ in order to overcome the existing hegemonic order helps us shed light on why an appeal to affects is relevant for the efficacy of the political strategy of populism *at all* and why particular affects—namely individual and collective emotions of anxiety and anger, empathy, and sympathy, and the collective passions of enthusiasm and love—are thereby of pivotal importance.

3.1 Affective Politics

In the introduction of my paper, I pointed to the fact that in the context of the so-called ‘affective turn’, the dichotomy between rationality and affectivity has been questioned, and a new consensus has been established that both faculties are not opposed to each other but rather mutually intertwined with or even constitutive of each other. More specifically, in social and political science, there is a growing consensus that ‘[p]olitics, in all its forms, is about emotions, and various political parties, ideologies, and movements, mobilize a variety of emotions, while impregnating their discourse with given affective signifiers’ (Cossarini and Vallespín 2019a: 5). How, against this verdict, can we understand the claim that populism is a form of affective politics? Clearly, it cannot be distinctive of populism that it appeals to affects whereas nonpopulist parties, ideologies, and movements do not do so. Rather, populism is distinguished by the fact that it appeals to affects *in a different way*; it breaks with the dominating ‘feeling rules’, that is, with those rules that tell us which affects in which intensity to have and display in a certain—in this case public and political—context (Hochschild 1979).

The dominating feeling rules that make up the backdrop against which populism operates are dictated by the old cultural logic of a dichotomy between affectivity and rationality. This dualistic logic contrasts the political as the realm of reason, deliberation, moderation, cultural and religious neutrality, and self-control with the private as the realm of an unmediated display of emotions, passionate commitment, spontaneity, and cultural and religious identity. Populism breaks with this logic by embracing and defending the side of affects and reclaiming them for the realm of the political. Accordingly, the political logic of populism *overtly embraces* affects instead of *suppressing* or *denying* them (on this and the rest of the paragraph, see Moffitt 2019). Compared to other political logics, it more overtly, explicitly, frequently, creatively, and effectively engages with the affective dimension of human existence. In practical terms, populist affects are expressed in a variety of different phenomena. For example, populists politically present themselves as private persons or display ‘bad manners’, such as using slang, swearing, being politically incorrect or overtly passionate. It is this overt appeal to affects and the breaching of the dominating feeling rules that is characteristic of populism as affective politics.

By displaying a contrast between ‘those in power’—represented by the figure of the rational, emotionally neutral, dispassionate, detached technocrat—and ‘the people’—emotionally and passionately involved citizens—populism contributes to the construction of a frontier between ‘the establishment’ and ‘the people’ and, thereby, to the construction of these very political identities themselves (Moffitt

2019). Moreover, the overt appeal to affects and the violation of the dominating feeling rules is linked to the sense of crisis whose evocation is another key feature of the political strategy of populism. In moments of crisis, we cannot submit ourselves to protracted processes of political deliberation and decision-making and the slowly grinding wheels of bureaucracy, or so the logic goes. Instead, crises demand an immediate, determined collective endeavor to overcome them. This kind of endeavor, in turn, is associated with the domain of affect and, more precisely, with that of shared affects, which (even more than individual ones) historically have been associated with the irrationality and violence of revolting mobs (Laclau 2007: 21–64).

The fact that the logic of populism is dependent upon the dichotomy between rationality and affectivity and the political and the private gives rise to the question of whether in a different world, where the realm of politics is identified with the realm of affects, and the hegemonic form of politics is a politics of emotion, populism might take the opposite form—namely that of a detached and dispassionate engagement. At first glance, this might seem to be a highly speculative and hypothetical question. Yet, having examples like Donald Trump in mind, we might wonder whether we might be living in a time in which exactly this transition to another hegemonic political logic is taking place in which the overt display and appeal to affects is the norm rather than the exception.

If we take for granted that affective politics is still an antihegemonic movement, another implication of the introduced analysis is the fact that established parties and antipopulist theorists might try to counteract populism by themselves embracing affectivity as an integral part of politics—as is indeed increasingly being done, for example, by liberal theorists such as Michael Walzer and Martha Nussbaum (Walzer 2002; Nussbaum 2013). Even more strongly, Chantal Mouffe argues that right-wing populism can only be combated by a left-wing populism that manages to mobilize equally strong—yet different—collective affects (2018).

The different ways in which liberal and radical democrats determine the role of affects in the domain of the political point us to how the understanding of political affects is interwoven with a specific understanding of the political itself. Most relevant for the present context, two models of the political can be distinguished: the associative and the dissociative (Marchart 2007: 38–44). The associative model, prominently represented by Hannah Arendt, sees commonality, public deliberation, and collective action as the basis of the political; people associate through what they have in common. The dissociative model, going back to Carl Schmitt, by contrast, identifies the distinction between friend and enemy as key to the political and underlines the importance of conflict; associations are built *through* dissociation. Accounts such as Nussbaum's (2013, 2016) mirror an associative model of the political in that they highlight the role of positive ('associative') emotions such as love and compassion and are rather critical of negative ('dissociative', antagonistic) ones. By contrast, Mouffe's (2018) account represents and defends a dissociative model. Unlike Schmitt's model, the divide between friend and enemy is thereby internalized into the society itself. Even if both liberal and radical democrats such as Nussbaum and Mouffe thus embrace affectivity as an integral part of politics, they still call for a different set of

emotions and passions. Which emotions and passions these are in the case of populism and that they include but are not limited to antagonistic political emotions will become clearer in the following.

The claim that populists overtly embrace rather than suppress or deny their emotions and passions implies that *prima facie* all emotions and passions can be used within the context of a populist framework and therefore can become ‘populist emotions’ or ‘populist passions’. However, as I will argue in what follows, some emotions and passions are of particular importance for the political logic of populism because they are particularly suitable to evoke a sense of ‘crisis’ and to construct a morally laden ‘frontier’ between the ‘homogenous’ groups of ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’.

3.2 Concretization: From Vague Affects to Specific Emotions

As mentioned in the introduction, the two affective phenomena that are most frequently associated with populism are the emotions of fear and anger or, more generally, emotions from the fear family, such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, powerlessness, helplessness, or anticipated shame, and emotions from the anger family, such as anger, rage, outrage, resentment, ressentiment, indignation, antipathy, envy, or hatred (Salmela and Scheve 2017; Demertzis 2019). This is in stark contrast to Nussbaum’s view on political emotions. Although generally appreciative of political emotions, Nussbaum is highly critical of antagonistic emotions, such as fear and anger (2013: 314–77, 2016). More generally, populism is associated with feelings of discontent, dissatisfaction, frustration, grievance, and sorrow (Demertzis 2019). In the political logic of populism, the appeal to these three different classes of negative affects fulfills the threefold function of: first, creating a feeling that something is going wrong; second, creating a sense of who is responsible for what is going wrong; and third, creating a sense of urgency.

Appealing to the affects of discontent and frustration creates a *general* sense that something is going wrong—that one’s desires are not being fulfilled or are not likely to be fulfilled (Roberts 2003, 216–17). More precisely, discontent expresses a dissatisfaction with one’s own situation or the situation at large and/or with how one is being treated. In creating a sense that something is going wrong, the appeal to the affects of discontent and frustration or, even more generally, to suffering and grievance contributes to evoking a sense of crisis. However, these affects are vague and general. In order to become politically effective, they must be given a more concrete shape and a more specific content.

An appeal to the affects of discontent and frustration leaves open the question of not only *who* is to be blamed for the situation but also *whether* there is a particular person, group of persons, or structure to be blamed for it *at all*. This dimension of responsibility attribution is added via an appeal to angerlike emotions. Moral anger is commonly conceptualized as an emotion that involves ‘judging that its object (*a*) has wrongfully harmed someone or something of value or (*b*) has failed to care about someone or something in the appropriate way. It involves some level of felt hostility and antipathy toward its object. And it involves the desire to lash

out at its object or to see that object hurt' (Pettigrove 2012: 357–58). Populist anger in the first place is directed at those in power, 'the establishment' or 'elite' that is held morally responsible for the perceived grievances such as one's lack of employment or one's country's economic decline. This implies that the factors in question are at least partly perceived as controllable (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). The judgment in question is a *normative* one. It presumes that the frustrated popular demands are justified and that, therefore, the government's unresponsiveness to them is morally blameworthy (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). In other words, by appealing to emotions of anger rather than only to frustration, 'lacks' are turned into 'demands' and 'requests' are turned into 'claims' (Laclau 2007: 74, 86).

The appeal to emotions of fear and anxiety fulfills yet another function—namely that of creating a sense of urgency and impending danger. As Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve point out, only in some European countries is there 'a correlation between the proportion of immigrants and asylum seekers within [...] [the] country and the success of right-wing populist parties', while in others 'this correlation is absent'. Moreover, 'there does not seem to be a robust association between unemployment levels and the popularity of right-wing parties within a country'. Finally, 'populist right-wing parties do not derive their support entirely from people most negatively affected by globalization' (2017: 569–70). Fear and anxiety can explain these findings since they might account for the fact that support for populist parties can be mobilized not only by present grievances and sufferings but also anticipated ones. Appealing not just to evils that have already occurred but to 'subjective and intersubjective perceptions of threat and vulnerability' (2017: 570) too makes perfectly sense in the logic of populism because doing so enables a greater number of people to be mobilized. Moreover, it helps foster a sense of urgency since there is still something that is at stake, whereas, in the case of anger, the evil has already occurred, which is why anger motivates punishment rather than prevention.

In a recent study, Guillem Rico, Marc Guinjoan, and Eva Anduiza have defended the claim that 'populist attitudes are driven by feelings of anger, rather than of fear' (2017: 444). However, their study is exclusively based on data from Spain, where the effects of the economic crisis have been particularly severe and a large segment of the population has been suffering from them (Salmela and Scheve 2018). In their discussion, the authors hypothesize that anxiety could be related not to populism but to specific ideologies, namely political conservatism and the radical right. However, Greta Thunberg's (2019) statement illustrates that an appeal to fear is not necessarily bound to a conservative or right-wing ideology but can also, for example, be attached to progressive or left-wing environmentalism: 'I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire. Because it is'. It is the idea of a *crisis* that the appeal to the emotions of fear and anxiety speaks to and evokes. This idea is not bound to any specific ideology, but rather to criticism of the hegemonic social and political order irrespective of what this order looks like.

The emotions of anger and fear need not be strictly separate from each other. Fearing a threat to oneself might be a reaction to the fact that one observes others

already suffering from the evil in question; and the felt uncertainty that is constitutive of the emotion of anxiety might itself give rise to anger toward those deemed responsible for the uncertainties in question.

3.3 Collectivization: From Individual to Collective Emotions

In the previous subsection, I argued that, by appealing to the emotions of anger and fear, populism concretizes the originally vague affects of discontent and frustration and, thereby, takes an important initial step toward turning them into motives for political action. A second important step besides the ‘concretization’ of affects is that of ‘collectivization’, that is, of turning individual and private emotions into empathetic, sympathetic, group-based, and shared ones.

In appealing to frustration, anger, and fear, as I have shown, populism appeals to frustrated normative demands. As Laclau and Mouffe note, it is thereby characteristic of the political strategy of populism that these demands are not uniform but manifold (Laclau 2007: 72–83; Mouffe 2018: 59–78). In other words, populism appeals to our *individual* or *private emotions*.

At the same time, populism asks us to accept the grievances and sufferings of other people as basically equivalent to our own (Laclau 2007: 72–83). Even if they are based on different private concerns that might or might not overlap with our own private concerns, they still have three features in common with our own affects, or so the political logic of populism suggests. They are reactions to *unfulfilled* demands, the demands are *legitimate*, and the failure to fulfill the demands is to be attributed to ‘those in power’. In this regard, populism appeals to what Laclau calls a ‘feeling of vague solidarity’ (Laclau 2007: 74). In terms of philosophy of emotions, the affective ties in question can more precisely be captured as empathetic and sympathetic emotions. Populism invites us to take others’ perspectives and feel with them. In this regard, it activates empathetic feelings understood as ‘feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with [. . .] [one’s] own situation’ (Hoffman 2000: 30). Moreover, it activates sympathetic feelings. It not only invites us to feel with others, but also invites us to make their standpoint our own: to recognize the legitimacy of their emotions, of the concerns on which their emotions are based, and of the political demands to which their emotions give rise. Empathetic and sympathetic emotions can be direct reactions to the emotions of another person. We feel *with* (and for) someone. But they can also be reactions to the situation of another person regardless of whether the other person feels a specific emotion or not. We feel *for* someone.

Politically, feeling for others has a solidary and emancipatory potential. It allows people to address the needs and demands of others whose affects have been corrupted by (what is taken to be) an unjust or oppressive hegemonic order. In doing so, such feeling for others can function as a catalyst for the affects of the underprivileged and oppressed. At the same time, as with all claims of representation, feeling on behalf of others can be misused as an instrument of power and oppression. The fact that populism involves an appeal to empathetic and sympathetic emotions accordingly does not imply any clear normative judgment.

Empathetic and sympathetic emotions are crucial to both the political logic of populism and to social movements in general (Jasper 1998). On the one hand, empathetic and sympathetic emotions contribute to the formation of a group by establishing affective ties between the group members. On the other hand, empathy and sympathy partly reflect already existing ties between group members. We do not empathize or sympathize with just anyone; we primarily do so with those close to us or with whom we identify. Answering the question of with whom to identify is a crucial ideological task. Inclusionary forms of populism will ask us to identify with a greater number of people than exclusionary ones. However, both inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism are bound to a dualistic logic of ‘we’ versus ‘they’, which implies that ‘we’ cannot be everyone. Therefore, it is characteristic of the political logic of populism that the empathetic and sympathetic emotions to which it appeals are restricted to a certain part of the community—the part identified as ‘the people’ as opposed to ‘those in power’ (Laclau 2007: 80–82). Although in other forms of politics, empathetic and sympathetic affects might also *factually* be restricted to a certain group, in the case of populism, this restriction is not merely a factual one but one inherent in the antagonistic logic of populism itself, thereby mirroring the dissociative model of the political underlying the political logic of populism.

The populist logic does not just ask us to feel for *specific others*. It also asks us to feel discontent, anger, and fear for others *as members of a specific group* and to feel emotions on behalf of this group itself (Gaffney et al. 2018). ‘We’ are angry about what ‘they’—‘the establishment’, ‘the elite’—do to ‘us’—‘the people’. Group-based emotions are not necessarily tokens of emotions that supplement our individual, empathetic, and sympathetic emotions. Rather, the social dimension infuses the emotions that we have anyway. In being angry about my own precarious economic situation as a member of a specific group, ‘the people’, I am at the same time angry about our, ‘the people’s’, economic situation; in being angry about how you as a member of the people are being treated, I am at the same time angry about how we, ‘the people’, are treated.

However, the appeal to what Laclau calls a vague feeling of solidarity and what I have specified as empathetic, sympathetic, and group-based emotions is not enough to constitute the collective identity of ‘the people’ (Laclau 2007: 74, 93). Strongly collective emotions are also needed. Emotions can be ‘individual’ or ‘collective’ to different degrees (Salmela 2012). Whether and to what extent an emotion is collective or shared depends on two factors. The first condition for emotions to be shared is that they are based on shared concerns. The second is the synchronization of the individual affective responses; there must be some direct or indirect feedback mechanism between the individual members’ feelings. Concerns can be shared to different degrees. The weakest form is that of converging private concerns. My fear as a precariously employed academic and your fear as a freelance artist are both based on our individual concern for our own well-being. The strongest form is that of group members’ collective commitment to a concern. By being a member of the group, ‘the group members adopt the concern as *theirs* and socially commit themselves to each other as well as to the group to uphold the concern’ (Salmela 2012: 40). It is this collective commitment to a shared concern that gives rise to

strongly collective emotions. The collective entity of 'the people' is only being constituted if this last step of collectivization is performed. 'The people' is constituted by strongly collective emotions of discontent, anger, and fear, and by the concerns that these emotions constitute and are based on—for example, a concern for economic welfare, equality, justice, popular sovereignty, or radical democracy.

It is characteristic of the strongly collective populist emotions that they reflect not only a concern for a specific matter of political import but also a concern for the existence and well-being of the collective entity of 'the people' itself. Take the example of a left-wing populist party as envisioned by Mouffe. This party, and more generally the collective entity of 'the people', is partly constituted by its commitment to radicalizing democracy. I, as a member of this party, and 'the people' feel anger in the face of democratic exclusion. My anger is based on our collective commitment to the ideals of radical democracy. At the same time, in the background of my anger, there is, first, a concern for the party as the entity that defends the concern in question and that is partly constituted by it; second, a concern for 'the people' in the name of whom the concern is held and defended; and third, a concern for the community as a whole of which 'the people' is a proper part.

As Thomas Szanto and Jan Slaby observe, political emotions (properly speaking) always involve a 'double affective-intentional focus' on a 'specific matter of political import' and on 'the political community itself' (Szanto and Slaby 2020: 482). Accordingly, in this regard, populist affects cannot be special. However, they are special insofar as they appeal to a concern for the collective entity of 'the people' itself. It is integral to the idea of the collective entity of 'the people' that this entity is more than the sum of its parts (Laclau 2007: 77). Translated into the terminology of affect, this means that the affective tie to 'the people' needs to transcend the affective tie to those concerns for matters of political import that, on the level of content, define 'the people'. It is as if the collective entity of 'the people' developed its own concerns (Laclau 2007: 89). This is not true of all political logics. On the contrary, an individualistic logic allows the members of a community to form coalitions of interests but rejects the idea of collective entities as proper parts of this community. Collective emotions of political agents of this kind look different than those of populists. My emotions as a liberal individualist can still involve a reference to the community as a whole as well as to those with whom I share my concerns. However, our emotions lack a reference to a collective entity as a proper part of the community that has a life of its own. Our shared interests and concerns constitute neither a collective entity of the kind of 'the people' as an object of positive identification, nor an antagonistic collective entity of the kind of 'those in power'.

The transformation of individual or private grievances, anger, and fear into strongly collective ones demonstrates how, in the political logic of populism, associations are built through dissociation and yet develop an existence of their own that transcends their purely antagonistic character. This will become even clearer in the next section in which I turn to the collective passions of enthusiasm and love.

3.4 Unification: From Interests to Radical Investment

My analysis of the affects of populism in the previous two subsections was focused on individual, empathetic, sympathetic, group-based, and collective emotions of frustration, anger, and fear. Although the affects in question can constitute positive affective ties between group members, they primarily unify the people by what they oppose. As we have seen in Greece, the antiestablishment feelings of populism can be so strong that these feelings even allow coalitions to be built between populist parties from opposite political camps such as SYRIZA and ANEL (Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser 2016). However, the fact that it is characteristic of populism that all established parties are an object of negative identification (Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019) does not mean that there are no positive objects of identification at all. Indeed, indirectly I have already touched upon these objects of positive identification. First, in appealing to collective emotions of ‘the people’ and ascribing political significance to them, populism appeals to a commitment to the principle of popular sovereignty that it presents as undermined by the hegemonic social and political order. This appeal to the endangered principle of popular sovereignty is inherent to the political logic of populism itself. Therefore, it is characteristic of all popular movements and parties regardless of their ideology. Second, as I have pointed out, all emotions are based on concerns. Only against the backdrop of such concerns can we understand why a person feels discontent, anger, or fear. She feels discontent when her needs remain unfulfilled, anger when her normative principles are violated, and fear when what she desires and values is endangered. However, as the people’s sorrows, fears, and angers in the first place are manifold, so are the concerns on which they are based. Moreover, they can be relatively encapsulated, transient, and contingent. In order to bring about collective emotions and constitute the collective identity of ‘the people’, their concerns have to be transformed into collective passions—that is, affective attachments to objects that are constitutive of ‘the people’s’ identity. So, how does populism transform the numerous individual, and not necessarily enduring, concerns of the people into enduring shared passions? How, in other words, does it affectively unify the people?

It does so by appealing to both enthusiasm for abstract political principles and ideas, such as popular sovereignty or national identity, and love for specific political entities, such as one’s nation or a charismatic political leader (Laclau 2007: 93–100; Mouffe 2018: 70–78). Both enthusiasm and love are passions. They are affective attachments to objects that develop over time and are constitutive of a person’s or collective’s identity (Frankfurt 1999, 2004; Helm 2012; Rorty 1987; Velleman 1999). It is characteristic of the passions of enthusiasm and love that they attribute a positive, final value to an object—that is, a value that is not derived from any other value ascriptions. The objects of (political) enthusiasm and love belong to different metaphysical categories. We love particular persons or objects and are enthusiastic about ideas, values, or principles. Love involves a desire for the well-being and flourishing of one’s beloved, and enthusiasm involves a desire to defend and promote the idea about which one is enthusiastic. The abstract and the concrete are two parts of the

dialectic of human existence (Ricoeur 1986). Accordingly, they are mutually entangled. Abstract principles such as the idea of justice are and need to be embodied by concrete political entities such as one's constitution, nation, or a charismatic political leader (Nussbaum 2013). And the other way around: concrete entities need to represent abstract political values and principles in order to become figures of political identification.

The appeal to the passions of enthusiasm and love is not unique to populism. For example, in her theory of political emotions, Martha Nussbaum defends love—especially the love for one's nation—as an important affect of liberal democracy (2013: 204–56). Similarly, Michael Walzer tries to reintegrate the passion of enthusiasm into liberal theory (2002). What is characteristic of populism as a political strategy, however, is the fact that it appeals to enthusiasm and love *understood as attitudes of 'radical investment'* (Laclau 2007: 93–100). What does this mean?

Both enthusiasm and love allow there to be other objects of similar or higher value. By contrast, radical investment is an attitude that totalizes the value of the object to which it is affectively attached. It becomes more important than any other value and incorporates any other value into itself. Through the appeal to the affective attitudes of enthusiasm and love, the originally meaningless or 'empty' concept of 'the people' becomes filled with meaning. It becomes symbolized by principles (for example, the idea of national identity) and objects (for example, a charismatic leader) that embody the unity and totality of popular demands. By collectively committing ourselves to the principles and objects in question, we constitute the collective identity of 'the people'. The content of what we commit ourselves to—for example, the idea of radical democracy or national identity—thereby is dependent on both the context and ideology of the movement or party.

However, despite their claim to unity and totality, the objects and principles in question can never fully capture all popular demands because, as outlined above, they are not only manifold but might also be partially incongruent or even opposed to each other. Accordingly, the alleged unity and totality remain a fiction. This points to a second characteristic feature of attitudes of radical investment, namely the fact that they ask us to believe, feel, and act *as if* the unity and totality of our demands were indeed given to us (Laclau 2007: 110–17). On the epistemic level, they ask us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the principle or object in question. On the affective level, they ask us to feel intense, hot, and deep emotions if the object of our affective attachment is doing well or badly, respectively. Finally, on the practical level, they ask us to invest all our power of will and energy to secure the well-being of what we love or to promote the idea we are enthusiastic about. It is these attitudes of radical investment as opposed to partial forms of political love and enthusiasm that are distinctive of the political logic of populism.

What is characteristic of populism is thus not simply the fact that it is based on a dissociative rather than associative paradigm of the political, according to which associations are primarily constituted through dissociation rather than through commonalities. In addition, the kinds of associations themselves differ from those in other paradigms of the political in their emphasis on collective identities that

are partly defined in antagonistic terms and partly in terms of objects or ideas that mythologically embody the unity and totality of the collective's concerns.

Conclusions

Enriching Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's theory of populism with the insights of contemporary (philosophical) theories of affects has allowed me to identify four characteristic features of the populist appeal to affects.

- (1) Populism breaks with the dominating feeling rules, which tell us that the political is the domain of reason, deliberation, moderation, and cultural and religious neutrality, whereas the unmediated display of emotions, passionate commitment, spontaneity, and cultural and religious identity belong to the realm of the private. Populism reverses this logic by actively embracing affects and reclaims passions for the realm of the political. Doing so contributes to the construction of both a frontier between 'those in power' and 'the people' and the evocation of a sense of crisis that demands quick, decisive, and collective action.
- (2) In appealing to the affects of discontent and frustration, populism creates a general sense that something is going wrong. By appealing to the affects of anger and fear, this vague affect is turned into more concrete emotions. The moral emotion of anger identifies 'the establishment' as the entity to be blamed for the perceived grievances and sufferings. The emotion of fear enlarges the addressed audience by additionally appealing to those who have not yet been hit by the effects of the crisis. Moreover, it contributes to creating a sense of urgency because there are still (further) dangers to be warded off. None of the three types of affects is bound to any specific ideology.
- (3) Populism appeals not only to individual emotions of discontent, anger, and fear, but also to empathetic, sympathetic, group-based, and shared ones. In doing so, it contributes to the construction of the collective entity of 'the people'. It is thereby characteristic of the populist appeal to empathetic and sympathetic emotions that these emotions are restricted to a proper part of the community, 'the people'. This is true of both inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism even if the former asks us to identify with a larger number of people. Moreover, it is distinctive of populist appeals to strongly collective emotions that they ask us to be concerned not only with a specific matter of political import and community as a whole but also with the existence and well-being of the collective entity of the people, which forms a proper part of the community and as a collective entity develops its own concerns.
- (4) Finally, it is characteristic of populism as a form of affective politics that it appeals to the strongly collective passions of enthusiasm and

love as attitudes of radical investment. This distinguishes it from both political strategies in which enthusiasm and love remain partial and political strategies in which they remain less than strongly collective. In the political logic of populism, the appeal to the collective passions of enthusiasm and love fulfills the function of positively defining the collective identity of 'the people'. As attitudes of radical investment, they involve a tension between the claimed unity and totality of popular demands on the one hand, and their plurality and partial incongruence on the other. This tension is not contingent but inherent to the political logic of populism itself.

As outlined in the introduction, in this paper I have bracketed the questions of how different forms of populism differ in virtue of their appeal to affects and how populism or different forms of populism are to be evaluated. Numerous insights presented in this paper invite us to reconsider these questions. For example, it is worth taking a closer look at the questions of how left- and right-wing populism differ in their appeal to fear and anger, and how the appeal to empathetic and sympathetic feelings is used and misused by populists. These reflections in turn will allow us to refine our answer to the question of what is distinctive about populist (appeals to) affects.

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