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Populism as Form and Content

Toward a Holistic Approach

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Abstract

The difficulty of defining populism is well-known. As populism lacks a fully articulated ideological foundation, it tends to assume different shapes according to context. Due to this ideological inarticulation, some scholars have rejected the so-called ideational approach to populism. They instead propose its conceptualization as a political style or discourse. This paper advances an alternative approach. We reject the opposition between stylistic and ideational approaches to populism and develop the idea that the *form* and the *content* of populism are intrinsically related. We argue that the forms populism adopts cannot be understood in merely strategic or stylistic terms: they presuppose and entail specific ideological contents. Only by tracing the relationship between populist form and content can we make sense of populism as a distinctive phenomenon and explain its ambiguous relationship with liberal democracy.

Keywords

populism – political style – discourse – ideology – liberal democracy

* Declaration of conflicting interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.



Le principe détermine les formes; les formes révèlent et réalisent le principe.

GUIZOT

(The principle determines the forms; the forms reveal and realize the principle.)



1 Introduction

Chantal Mouffe recently observed that the field of populism studies is already plethoric, despite being quite young.¹ This may be true to some extent. However, the proliferation of studies on this topic has made it possible to systematize what was, only a few years ago, a fragmentary and dispersed debate. This is to be welcomed, particularly as it applies to the more theoretical literature, which has struggled to deal with so elusive a phenomenon as populism. Thanks to the field's increasing systematization, the various definitional approaches to populism can now be more easily compared and categorized.

Let us take three recently proposed ways of categorizing the definitional approaches to populism. First, Pappas identifies seven conceptual approaches: populism as “movement,” “style,” “ideology,” “discourse,” “strategy,” “political culture,” and finally as an “omnibus concept.”² Second, Moffitt identifies four approaches: populism as “ideology,” “strategy,” “discourse,” and “political logic.”³ Finally, Mudde offers three approaches to populism: the “ideational,” the “political-strategic,” and the “socio-cultural.”⁴

Pappas' and Moffitt's classifications are more fine-grained than Mudde's. It is possible, however, to fold their additional categories into the three that

1 Mouffe, C. *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), 9.

2 Pappas, T.S. “Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition.” In: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. W.R. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

3 Moffitt, B. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), 17.

4 Mudde, C. “Populism: An Ideational Approach.” In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27–47.

Mudde proposes. For instance, in the category of populism “as political culture,” Pappas includes Urbinati’s characterization of populism as “an interpretation of democracy made from within a republican structure.”⁵ This view could also be included in the ideational approach. Under “populism as movement,” Pappas places Dix’s definition of populism as a “political movement which challenges established elites in the name of a union between a leader and ‘the people.’”⁶ This definition overlaps with Weyland’s account (populism as a strategy for conquering power, centered on the creation of an unmediated relationship between leader and supporters), which Mudde characterizes as a political-strategic approach.⁷ Finally, Moffitt’s four categories overlap with Mudde’s: the only difference is that Moffitt locates Laclau’s theory of populism in a category of its own (populism as “political logic”).

The way in which these approaches overlap confirms the increasing systematization of the theoretical debate on populism and the possibility of establishing a constructive dialogue among them. Populism remains an elusive concept, but this systematization may reduce its contestability. In fact, we can go a step further in this process of economization, dividing approaches to populism between those centered on its ideological dimension, on one hand, and those centered on its formal/stylistic dimension, on the other. This is a division between *content* and *form*. The goal of this article is to explore the interrelation of populist content and form, and to propose their integration in a holistic approach to the study of populism.

The first, ideational approach to populism has been defended by scholars such as Canovan, Mudde, Stanley, and Müller. They have identified the following features as characteristic of populist ideology: the reduction of the ideological spectrum to a basic opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite, the defense of a homogenous idea of “the people” and of the paramount principle of popular sovereignty, and ideological “thinness.”⁸

The second approach, which centers on populism’s formal/stylistic dimension, considers how populist ideology is articulated. This includes the

5 Cited in Pappas, “Modern Populism.”

6 Cited in *ibid.*

7 Weyland, K. “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach.” In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 48–72.

8 E.g., Canovan, M. “Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy.” In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds. Y. Mény, Y. and Y. Surel, Y. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 25–44; Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist.” *Government & Opposition*, 39(4) (2004), 541–63; Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach”; Stanley, B. “The Thin Ideology of Populism.” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1) (2008), 95–110; Müller, J.-W. *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

language, symbols, and aesthetics adopted by populists, as well as the ways in which populists perform their political role: for instance, how they interpellate, mobilize, organize, and represent their constituencies. In this category we can include both the general form assumed by populist discourse and its more specific stylistic traits. The general form comprises the division of society into two agonistic blocs, as well as the centrality of the people.⁹ The specific stylistic traits include a simplistic, emotive, and disruptive rhetoric;¹⁰ a penchant for spectacularized forms of actions, which are employed to convey a sense of impending crisis;¹¹ or cultural-social elements, such as a propensity to flaunt the “manners ... ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes” associated with the popular and the native.¹²

We also place within this category the organizational aspects of populism, such as charismatic leadership and plebiscitarian forms of participation.¹³ We do so because we accept Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of discursive articulation, in which the discursive practices of a political phenomenon include both linguistic and non-linguistic elements.¹⁴ In this understanding, the “organisational aspects of populist movements should not be studied independently of populist discourse, but as dimensions of the discourses through which these movements and political identities are constituted.”¹⁵

The distinction between these two dimensions is not completely sharp. Some features of populism can be included in both categories. Charismatic leadership, for instance, has a formal dimension, as it refers to the how-aspect of populism. At the same time, it has an ideological dimension, as it implies a particular political view. Likewise, the same basic distinction between people and elites can be understood in ideological terms (as in Mudde) or simply as a

9 Stavrakakis, Y. “Discourse Theory in Populism Research.” *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16 (2017), 523–34; Katsambekis, G. “Constructing ‘the People’ of Populism: A Critique of the Ideational Approach from a Discursive Perspective.” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 27(1) (2022), 53–74.

10 Taguieff, P.-A. *L’illusion populiste. Essai sur les démagogies de l’âge démocratique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007).

11 Moffitt and S. Tormey. “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style.” *Political Studies*, 62(2) (2014), 381–97; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 43–5; Sutherland, M. “Populism and Spectacle.” *Cultural Studies*, 26 (2012), 330–45.

12 Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach.” In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 79.

13 E.g., Taguieff, *L’illusion populiste*; Weyland, “Populism.”

14 Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2001), 108–11; Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 13.

15 Stavrakakis, “Discourse Theory in Populism Research,” 233.

logic of articulation (as in Laclau). Some approaches do not therefore easily fit into this dichotomic classification.¹⁶

Of course, gains in the extension of a definition are always obtained at the price of less precision. Nonetheless, it is evident that the approaches that focus on these two dimensions are the most influential in the literature, which seems to confirm their overall theoretical consistency. Although the ideational approach has been the hegemonic paradigm so far, its status has recently been challenged by an increasing number of supporters of the formal approach. The criticisms that supporters of the formal approach have raised against the ideational approach do not always assume the form of a complete rejection, but they nevertheless tend to put the two approaches in opposition.¹⁷

However, there is a further and more substantive reason to focus on the form and content of populism. It is not a coincidence that the theoretical discussion of populism has centered on these two dimensions: as we argue in this article, the relationship between these two dimensions is particularly relevant to populism. Indeed, because populism is an ideologically “thin” phenomenon, the formal or stylistic dimension acquires a crucial *political* role in it, in the sense that populism tends to convey its views performatively, through particular styles and forms of action. And this means that its formal dimension cannot be reduced to a mere epiphenomenon, as the ideational approach tends to do. On the other hand, populism is not completely ideologically void either. And this implies that its forms and styles cannot be studied independently from its ideological content, as the stylistic approach (as well as the strategic approach) tends to do.

For this reason, we are compelled to adopt a more comprehensive approach to populism, one that considers the mutual relation of its form and content. Only in this way can we arrive at a better understanding of populism’s political nature and its relationship to liberal democracy, given that these manifest not only in ideological terms, but on the formal or stylistic level, in specific languages, aesthetics, modes of action, and approaches to mobilization.

16 A good example in this respect is Urbinati, N. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

17 Stavrakakis and Katsambekis. “Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA.” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 19(2) (2014), 119–42; Aslanidis, P. “Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective.” *Political Studies*, 64(1) (2016): 88–104; Moffitt, B. *Populism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), Ch. 2; Katsambekis, “Constructing ‘the People’ of Populism”; Ostiguy, F. Panizza, and Moffitt, “Introduction.” In: *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, eds. Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1–18.

The article is structured as follows. First, we critically review the ways in which the stylistic and ideational approaches deal with the relation between populist form and content, explaining why their treatments of this relation are unsatisfactory. Second, we propose an alternative approach to the relationship between form and content, drawing from the tradition of rhetoric and the morphological analysis of ideologies proposed by Freedman. Third, we explain why understanding the relationship between form and content can illuminate populism's contested relationship to liberal democracy. Finally, we demonstrate how the main features of populism can be understood as integrated content and form, or as *content-forms*. We conclude by identifying some directions for future research. We should clarify at the outset that the argument advanced in this article is essentially theoretical. Even though we engage with more empirical literature, we do not focus on any particular case. In the conclusion, however, we briefly show why our approach is relevant not only for the theoretical discussion of populism, but also for its empirical analysis.

2 Current Views on Populism as Form and Content

The relation between form and content is often disregarded, or not explicitly canvassed, in the literature on populism, especially in the more empirical literature. On the other hand, some of the more theoretically-oriented literature has provided important, even if still inadequate, insights into such a relationship. That is especially the case for those contemporary scholars we can include in the formal/stylistic approach, beginning with Laclau and some of his followers, such as Stavrakakis and Panizza, as well as scholars such as Moffitt and Ostiguy, who have advanced theories of populism centered on its performative and socio-cultural dimensions. In all of these cases, we find the key insight that populism's representational style helps to constitute the object it represents – in other words, a “constructivist” understanding of representation.¹⁸ These scholars share the idea that populist style and form do not merely represent a political reality, but actively contribute to creating it. We begin our critical review with these theorists of the formal/stylistic approach, before turning to some significant examples of the ideational (or content-based) approach.

In our view, Laclau provides the deepest assessment of the interconnections between form and content in populism. His influential theory of populism

18 E.g., Disch, L. “The ‘Constructivist Turn’ in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-end?” *Constellations* 22(4) (2015), 487–99.

as a political logic contains the crucial insight that the style of populism is not a mere style. It is instead an intrinsic element of populism, insofar as it is necessary to articulate populism's political content through the logics of equivalence and difference, the development of the popular identity, and the structuring of the symbolic space of society. Laclau understands populism as a constitutive form of representation: a way of representing multiple demands by forging them in a new popular identity, "the people," which aims to become hegemonic.¹⁹ Populism is thus a "political logic" that, in forging this popular identity and structuring the symbolic space of society into two antagonistic blocs, participates in "the ontological constitution of the political as such."²⁰ From our perspective, the most important aspect of Laclau's theory is its claim that the main stylistic features of populism – namely, its ideological emptiness, the emotional character of its discourse, and the role it gives to charismatic leaders – play a crucial role in populism's constitution of the political.

We classify Laclau's approach as a formal theory of populism, given that his theory situates the political importance of populism entirely in its forms.²¹ While Laclau offers important theoretical insights into how populism works, his theory has nevertheless been criticized on several grounds, some of which point precisely to its excessive formalism.²² From our perspective, the problem is that the formalism and generality of Laclau's theory leaves many aspects of the populist logic (or form) unexplored. Above all, it fails to unpack populism's implicit ideological content and thus to fully understand its political impact. We share the view that (as Urbinati put it) populism cannot be understood as "simply a 'style of politics'" or "merely a tool that can be harnessed to reformist or conservative plans." On the contrary, as she argues, "in order to be successful, populism has to transform the basic principles and rules of democracy itself."²³ But to fully understand how populism does so, we need to closely account for the ideological and political significance of populism's articulatory practices – that is, of its style – something that Laclau's theory fails to do.

Recently, leading scholars of the formal/stylistic approach of populism, such as Moffitt and Ostiguy, have joined forces with followers of Laclau, such as Stavrakakis and Panizza, to present what they call a "performative-discursive" approach to populism. This approach is indebted to Laclau in two ways:

19 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 161–3.

20 *Ibid.*, 67.

21 *Ibid.*, 44.

22 Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy." *Democratization*, 9(2) (2012), 184–208; Brito Vieira, M. and F. Carreira. "Populism and the Politics of Redemption." *Thesis Eleven*, 149(1) (2018), 10–30.

23 Urbinati, *Me the People*, 206.

a) rather than focus on populism's ideological content, it focuses on its discursive and articulatory practices (which, as noted above, include both linguistic and non-linguistic elements) and the ways they construct popular identities; and b) it treats style as a central area of concern, stressing that, especially in the case of populism, "form is also content."²⁴ At the same time, however, these scholars describe their view as "post-Laclauian," because of the way in which it reduces Laclau's formalist emphasis (for instance, by re-introducing sociology into the analysis of populism).

In our view, however, this approach still fails to provide a satisfactory account of the relationship between form and content in populism. Moffitt's work provides a good example in this respect. He has defined populism as a performative political style characterized by a direct appeal to the people against the elite, a deliberate attempt to amplify the perception of an imminent crisis in the audience, and a penchant for what he calls "bad manners."²⁵ These bad manners comprise a "disregard for 'appropriate' ways of acting in the political realm."²⁶ Moffitt stresses that even if the style acts only on the surface, it is not devoid of substantive content. On the contrary, he argues that the populist style is responsible for creating political identities and relations that are essentially different from those created by other political styles (authoritarian, technocratic, etc.). The creation of a movement centered around a perceived unmediated link between the people and the leader, for instance, is one of the specific political contents produced by populism.²⁷ Nevertheless, Moffitt is careful to argue that "populism doesn't need to be understood as an ideology to examine it as a political style."²⁸

But this is the point at which we object, because this effort to downplay the ideological aspect turns out to be an obstacle to a proper understanding of how populist "style and content are interrelated."²⁹ Downplaying populism's ideological aspect makes it difficult or impossible to explain why populist styles and forms (such as direct appeal to the people, the performance of crisis, and "bad manners") are adopted by some actors more than by others, or why some democracies are more populist than others. In order to give more substantive answers to those questions – answers that provide reasons beyond the merely contingent or instrumental – we need to understand how the styles and forms of those actors and regimes dovetail with their ideological content.

24 Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt, "Introduction," 2.

25 Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 38; Moffitt, *Populism*, 26.

26 Moffitt and Tormey, "Rethinking Populism," 392.

27 *The Global Rise of Populism*, 35–7.

28 *Ibid.*, 39.

29 *Ibid.*, 49.

This means that, as we argue in more detail below, we need to understand many of the stylistic features of populism not as merely stylistic, but as artifacts of both form and content. One example in this respect is the way in which Moffitt, along with co-author Simon Tormey, interprets populism's role in the increasingly mediatized public sphere. If populism is so at ease in a context in which simplification, personalization, and dramatization are the dominant traits of politics, it is not simply because, as they argue, it prioritizes stylistic and performative dimensions over ideological ones.³⁰ Rather, this ease depends on deeper political stances and ideological content, such as populism's preference for action over theory, or a plebiscitarian conception of representation, unsympathetic to the liberal conception centered on complex mechanisms of mediation and party politics. Similarly, other key stylistic components of the populist repertoire, such as "bad manners," cannot be properly understood without reference to the ideological dimension: namely, to the principle of popular sovereignty, and more precisely to the idea that democracy harbors an inevitable tendency for elites to become entrenched in a status quo against the people that needs to be periodically disrupted by outsiders. Without reference to the ideological dimension, it is difficult to understand why, for instance, appeal to the people and "bad manners" should co-occur as markers of an identifiably populist style. In these cases, we can better understand these elements and the legitimacy they have within populism by considering them on both the stylistic and ideological levels at once.

Before turning to the ideational approach, we raise one additional objection to the formal/stylistic approach. Those theorists of the formal/stylistic approach (such as Laclau or the "post-Laclaunians") who defend populism as potentially beneficial for democracy are compelled to neatly distinguish right-wing and left-wing versions of populism. In accord with the terms of their approach, they generally do so by specifying these versions' different articulatory practices. So, for instance, these scholars argue that, in left-wing populism, personalist and authoritative styles of leadership can combine with more plebeian and horizontal forms of participation and identification.³¹ That claim may in fact be accurate – but in making it, scholars of the formal/stylistic approach implicitly concede that these forms entail particular ideological contents, and thus that the analyses of populist form and content should always

30 Moffitt and Tormey, "Rethinking Populism," 388; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 74–6.

31 Stavrakakis, Y., A. Kioupiolis, Katsambekis, N. Nikisianis, and T. Siomos. "Contemporary Left-Wing Populism in Latin America: Leadership, Horizontalism, and Postdemocracy in Chávez's Venezuela." *Latin American Politics and Society*, 58(3) (2016), 51–76; Ostiguy and Moffitt, "Who Would Identify with an 'Empty Signifier'? The Relational, Performative Approach to Populism." In: *Populism in Global Perspective*, 47–72.

go hand-in-hand. Furthermore, to the extent that different populist forms and styles are identified, especially to characterize right and left-wing populisms, the question arise as to what all of them share and whether they can be characterized as belonging to populism, or rather, to the host ideology to which it attaches itself (something which requires an analysis of their ideological content).

We can now turn to the ideational or content-centered approach, focusing on two important cases: Mudde and Urbinati. Mudde's work typifies the downplaying of populist forms in the ideational approach. As he puts it, the "thin" ideology of populism can attach to a wide range of forms. Populism might entail charismatic leadership or a "low" political style, but it can just as well be found in their absence, provided that the central ideological requirement (opposing the "pure people" to the "corrupt elite") is met.³² We disagree: it is just because populism is "thin" that its forms matter more. In the case of "thicker" ideologies, such as socialism or liberal democracy, one could look to foundational texts, intellectual traditions, or contemporary discourse in order to discern their key commitments. But in the case of populism, the comparative absence of those texts and traditions, and the comparative thinness of populist discourse, means that its forms take on a disproportionate role in conveying its content. That content is conveyed not ideationally but performatively, in the ways in which populism engages, acts, and argues in a given political context.

Nor is it the case that populism can attach to just any set of formal features. For instance, as Ostiguy argues, Mudde's people/elite binary inevitably centers populism on the question of authentic representation: "The key issue here is about connection with, and representation of, the 'authentic,' 'deserving,' and 'neglected' people of 'this place.' The moral indignation ... is that 'the people' have been hurt, damaged, ignored, 'unrepresented.'"³³ And this explains why populists are prone to endorse a specific form of representation – representation as embodiment rather than representation as mandate. The ideological content of populism thus *implies* certain forms: the authenticity constraint means that its formal menu is not, as Mudde suggests, unlimited.

Urbinati's work, on the other hand, represents an interesting case for a different reason: unlike Mudde, she pays considerable attention to the relevance of styles and forms, and especially of rhetoric, in populism. But at the same time, she does not link those styles and forms to populism's ideological dimension.

32 Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," 30; Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62.

33 Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 92.

In her most recent book, for instance, Urbinati observes that rhetoric is essential to the legitimacy of populist movements: belief in their claim about the leader's capacity to fully incarnate the people, and to maintain the promise of redemption and purity once in power, only comes about as a result of "relentless propaganda." Thus, as she argues, populism draws deeply from the "craftwork of persuasion." If these claims testify to Urbinati's view of the importance of populist forms, other comments indicate her objections to a strictly formal approach. For instance, she criticizes Laclau's theory of populism on the grounds that populism is not a neutral instrument to be used either for progressive or reactionary ends, but in fact entails a specific and dangerous view of democracy. At other points, however, Urbinati still downplays the difference between populism and other ideologies and movements: for instance, by arguing that, in democracy, "populist style is ubiquitous," and therefore that "it is difficult to distinguish between populist rhetoric and party rhetoric."³⁴ That may be the case, but it leaves some key questions unanswered: does populist style play a distinct role in populist movements, and if so, why?

Again, these are the kinds of questions that can only be answered by explicitly considering the *interrelation* of populist form and content.

3 Form and Content in Rhetoric and Ideology

On the whole, a significant number of populism's key features grow out of the interrelation of its formal/stylistic elements and its ideological content. This is why we argue that it makes sense to conceive of these features neither as strictly stylistic, nor strictly ideological, but as content-forms.

Our approach to the study of populism through the integration of content and form draws on a number of important precedents. One of these is the tradition of rhetorical analysis which, despite its origins in classical antiquity, turns out to be highly relevant to the contemporary analysis of populism. In fact, rhetoric, as both discipline and practice, has long been intimately concerned with the interrelation of *res* and *verba*: things and words, or content and form. This concern is one of the essential through-lines of the rhetorical tradition.³⁵

34 Urbinati, *Me the People*, 118, 137, 151, 206, 103.

35 Ballacci, G. *Political Theory between Philosophy and Rhetoric: Politics as Transcendence and Contingency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), Ch. 3; Goodman, R. *Words on Fire: Eloquence and Its Conditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 31–41.

In that tradition's canonical thinkers, such as Cicero and Quintilian, we find the idea that content and form cannot be considered separately. In Cicero's most famous work on rhetoric, for instance, he has his mentor Crassus object to a suggestion that one participant in the dialogue should discuss the content of speeches and another should discuss their style, because the proposal "divided two things that cannot exist separately." Crassus insists that "the words cannot have any basis if you withdraw the content, and the content will remain in the dark if you remove the words."³⁶ For Cicero (and the humanistic tradition of rhetoric that followed him), style cannot be considered as a mere ornament to pre-given and separate content, since it crucially contributes to the creation of that content.

This longstanding rhetorical view of the relationship between form and content can be usefully applied to the analysis of political ideologies, via the more recent work of Freeden and Finlayson.³⁷ In Freeden's morphological approach to the study of ideology, ideologies are seen as "distinctive configurations of political concepts" that create "specific conceptual patterns" having "core" and "adjacent" content, as well as "peripheries," through which they interface with the public. The aim of the theorist is precisely that of reconstructing such patterns, including how the core and periphery are interrelated.³⁸ In this respect indeed is crucial to realize that, as Finlayson puts it, "[a]n ideology is a set of propositions but also a set of reasons for accepting them and a conception of what counts as a good reason. It cannot embrace every single reason or mode of argument. Those it does embrace are part of what it is."³⁹ In this sense, then, the communicative style an ideology employs is part and parcel of what that ideology is. In the more expansive sense proposed by such scholars as Laclau and Mouffe, or Moffitt and Ostiguy, we can consider an ideology's *verba* in a broader sense: not only words and modes of argument, but also its

36 Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator [De oratore]*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3,19-20.

37 Freeden, M. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Finlayson, A., "Ideology and Political Rhetoric." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, eds. Freeden, L.T. Sargent, and M. Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197–213.

38 Freeden, M. *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 79; Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, 124–6. The relationship Freeden proposes between core and periphery is not perfectly analogous to the relationship we propose between content and form, because, for Freeden, "periphery" refers both to an ideology's "marginal" ideational content and to the means by which political contestation shapes an ideology over time. This second sense is closer to the sense in which we use "form."

39 Finlayson, "Ideology and Political Rhetoric", 199.

mobilization patterns, its performative elements, and its aesthetic affinities.⁴⁰ Through these discursive and non-discursive practices, ideologies relate to social contexts and attempt to shape the social and political world.⁴¹

Developing a full account of an ideology, then, requires the holistic assessment of a set of interrelations: core and periphery, ideology and modes of communication and mobilization, or content and form. To be sure, according to this model, form and content are interrelated in all ideologies; populism is not unique in this regard.⁴² Where it is distinctive, we argue, is in the degree to which its form and content are tightly bound to one another, or more precisely, the political weight that forms and styles have in populism. This is the most significant contribution that the scholars of the formal/stylistic approach have made to the study of populism: to explain how these formal/stylistic mechanisms are essential for populism to produce its political effects.

As we argued in the previous section, however, this approach also has its own limitations, in particular in that it neglects to fully articulate the political content implicit in those forms and styles and to connect it with the ideological dimension of populism. This neglect may be motivated by a desire to avoid inscribing into these formal/stylistic mechanisms ideational content that instead derives from a “host” ideology with which populism may combine in a given instance (as in right- or left-populism).⁴³ But the almost exclusive focus on form comes at a price. The forms and styles associated with populism are dealt with almost as freestanding entities. As a result, this approach is unable to explain such key questions as what populist forms and styles have in common beyond contingent co-occurrence, and why some political actors use them more than others.

40 See also Eklundh, E. “Excluding Emotions: The Performative Function of Populism.” *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 13(1) (2020), 107–31.

41 Freeden, M. *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 79. It should be noted here Freeden has argued against the idea that populism can be considered an ideology, even a “thin” one, on the grounds that its ideological core is too slim and inconsistent. Nonetheless, we argue that this issue is mitigated once the ideological content of populism’s forms and styles is taken into account. Freeden, “After the Brexit Referendum: Revisiting Populism as an Ideology.” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22(1) (2017), 1–11.

42 E.g., on liberal form and content, see Finlayson, “Ideology and Political Rhetoric,” 200.

43 The neat separation between form and content, and the strict focus on the former, we find in the formal/stylistic approach can also be understood as a critical reaction to one point Laclau elaborated in his early work: the subsumption of discursive and non-discursive elements, ideology and forms of articulation, under the category of “discourse.” The difficulty of working with such a broad concept may be also a reason why some post-Laclauians broke away from this position and more clearly separated form and content, in order to better focus on the former. Our thanks to one of the reviewers for drawing our attention to this point.

On the other hand, our holistic approach does not render irrelevant the distinction between ideology and articulatory practices, or between form and content. Rather, it emphasizes the interrelation of form and content and assumes that this relationship can take on different configurations in different temporal and social contexts. Unlike the formal/stylistic approach, a holistic perspective on populism thus enables one to recognize the mutually constitutive relationship of form and content, and to treat this relationship as a problem to be explored and understood rather than flattened out.

Our approach has a similar advantage over the purely ideational approach. One of the important contributions of the ideational approach has been its attention to the ways in which populism can become attached to other, thicker ideologies. Nevertheless, when one is limited to the study of populist content at the expense of form, “it is hard to imagine what a ‘pure’ populism would look like.”⁴⁴ In contrast, one of the greatest benefits of our holistic approach lies precisely in its capacity to provide a more articulated account of populism in itself, in a way that is analytically prior to its hybridization with right- or left-wing ideologies. An approach that integrates form and content, as we show in the next two sections, is crucial to understanding populism and its relationship with liberal democracy.

4 Liberal Democracy and Populism: Proceduralism, Representation, and the Democratic Principle

To think about the nature of populism is, almost inevitably, to think about its relationship with democracy (and with liberal democracy in particular).⁴⁵ In this respect, thinking of populism in terms of the interactions of form and content is important not only because it helps to fill in the lacunae of the isolated approaches, but also because it helps us to understand that key relationship.

The relationship between populism and democracy has been aptly characterized as constitutively ambiguous, involving both dependence and hostility. Populists are the first to denounce the representativeness deficit in contemporary liberal democracies. At the same time, their own political existence depends to a large extent on the recurrent crises that liberal democracy engenders. These crises are related to the intrinsic tension between the normative foundation of democracy – the ideal of popular sovereignty – and the fact that it confers on the demos only a mediated access to rule. The differences between

44 Moffitt, *Populism*, 44.

45 See Urbinati, “Democracy and Populism.” *Constellations* 5(1) (1998), 110–24.

the liberal and populist models of democracy become clearest in their disparate formal responses to this tension. If liberals often respond to this tension through the forms of proceduralism and rule-bound deliberation, populists respond with forms that they consider more authentically democratic, including personalism, the appeal to the emotions, and “bad manners.”

While the study of populism cannot be restricted to its formal aspect, for the reasons we give in the previous section, understanding these institutional and discursive forms is nevertheless essential to clarifying the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. In our framework, it is just because populists prioritize the ideological *content* of popular sovereignty that they are impatient with the *forms* of liberal proceduralism and propose their own counter-forms.

Since Rousseau described the paradox of creating a political community out of a simple population (*Social Contract*, Book II, Ch. 3 and 7), democratic theorists have struggled with the tension between the people as a “political principle” and the people as a “sociological principle” (in Rosanvallon’s terms). The former principle is the claim that sovereignty belongs to the people, taken as a unified subject; the latter refers to society in its concrete, historically given complexity. The response these thinkers gave to the question is that establishing such a link is the function of representation.⁴⁶

This is one reason why representation has become so central in the architectonic structure of modern democracy.⁴⁷ The people should be represented because they do not exist as a political subject *a priori*. They can express their collective will in democracy through a process of representation mediated by free elections. Free elections produce temporary interpretations of the popular identity and, through a set of procedures and mechanisms of control, permit the legitimate exercise of the *volonté générale*. The process of figuration by democratic representation always leaves a remainder, however, because it is a process that needs to find a difficult compromise between two extremes: an ultimately inapprehensible sociological reality at one end and a normative, abstract idea of a disembodied democratic community at the other. The impossibility of creating the perfect figuration of the people constitutes, for Rosanvallon, the original “deficit of figuration of modern politics,” as well as the origin of its recurring crises of representativeness.⁴⁸

46 Rosanvallon, P. *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 37, 469. See also Lefort, C. *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 9–20.

47 Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 464.

48 *Ibid.*, 227.

Critics of populism, such as Urbinati, Müller, or Rosanvallon, see in populism a distortion of democracy. For them, populism oversimplifies the process of representing and articulating the will of the people and reduces the symbolic space of society to a realm to be conquered. Populism responds to “the need for representation of the unity of society” in the proto-totalitarian way of providing an “imaginary fiction of the *people-as-one* ... which eliminates the need for the laborious democratic construction of temporary interpretations of this common identity ... and which disregards the idea of otherness at the heart of democracy.”⁴⁹ Faced with the conundrum of finding a balance between the two basic but contradictory figurative tasks of democracy – representing the unity of the people and offering a detailed picture of the people’s sociological diversity – populists opt to give absolute priority to the former.

This, according to the critics above, is populism’s distortion of democracy. From another perspective, however, populism can be seen as a positive response to liberal democracy’s crises of representativeness. These crises occur when the gap between the people as principle and the actual people is perceived as too wide: when the work of symbolic integration that representation should guarantee fails and the locus of power comes to be perceived as too far away, or on the point of disappearing behind a set of anonymous procedures.

Many critics of populism tend to underestimate this sort of crisis, as they see procedures and mechanisms of mediation as instruments that avoid making democracy anti-liberal. Populists tend instead to decry these procedures and mechanisms: they see in them elements that irremediably contribute to voiding the very idea of popular sovereignty. And it is because of populism’s capacity to intervene in such constitutive aporias of liberal democracy that its defenders see in it a redemptive form of politics to be deployed in periods of democratic crisis,⁵⁰ or even the only possibility for radicalizing democracy and re-activating the political.⁵¹

So in critiquing liberal forms of proceduralism and mediation, populists also give shape to their ideology’s thin and inchoate content: the prioritization of popular sovereignty. These opposed responses to democracy’s intrinsic tension represent the clearest point of contrast between liberalism and populism. But to further elucidate populism’s relationship to liberal democracy, we need

49 Abts, K. and S. Rummens. “Populism versus Democracy.” *Political Studies*, 55(2) (2007), 405–24.

50 Canovan, “‘Trust the People!’ Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy.” *Political Studies*, 47(1) (1999), 2–16; Vergara, C. “Populism as Plebeian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Empowerment.” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28(2) (2020), 222–46.

51 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 47; Laclau, “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics.” *Critical Inquiry*, 32(4) (2006), 646–80; Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

to explore in more depth the connections between its formal/stylistic aspect and its ideological content. These connections have not been considered adequately, either by liberal critics of populism or those democratic theorists who defend it. The former generally disregard the relevance of the styles and forms of populism and end up offering an overly stylized ideological assessment of populism as liberal democracy's foe; the latter do not pay enough attention to the anti-democratic nature of some forms of populism.

5 Integrating Form and Content

As we have seen, democracy's intrinsic tension derives from the question of how – that is, through which procedures, styles, and forms – popular sovereignty should be represented and exercised. Populist criticism of liberal democracy focuses on two aspects of this question. The first is proceduralism, which for populists leads to a depoliticization of the public sphere and a demeaning of the democratic principle. The second is representation, which populists understand to concern the creation of a direct link between the people and the leader who is taken to embody them.⁵² By analyzing the political content of populist articulatory forms, as Laclau and others have begun to do, we can better understand the nature of populism.

That is our aim in this section. Without any claim to exhaustiveness, we will explore some formal/stylistic aspects of populism in order to demonstrate how they inevitably entail – even if not always explicitly or coherently – ideological positions. These aspects are more accurately seen not as a set of stylistic features, but as content-forms, in which style and ideological content are integrated. If “how an ideology makes arguments is part of what it is”⁵³ – and if, as we have argued, the integration between core and periphery is especially close in the case of a “thin” ideology such as populism – then we must look to populism's content-forms to understand how its ideological concepts take shape. As a practical guide to the study of populism, the holistic approach, and its emphasis on integrated content-forms, might be summed up in two warnings that we hope to exemplify here: first, do not overlook populism's formal/stylistic features; second, do not stop with them, but consider the ideas that they embody.

52 Ardit, B. *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 51, 63–7.

53 Finlayson, “Ideology and Political Rhetoric,” 200.

One of the most characteristic features of populist rhetoric is the imprecise, elusive, and simplistic character of its discourse.⁵⁴ This feature is far from being a sign of inconsistency or irrationality. It is instead politically meaningful, because it is required to put the logic of populism in motion. This logic is the construction of “the people” through the inclusion of as many heterogeneous social instances as possible. In Laclau’s terms, the signifier of “the people” should remain empty, in order to allow as many democratic demands as possible to identify with it and gather around it. Every element of the equivalential chain has the possibility of attributing its own meaning to the empty signifiers. Their meanings are therefore overdetermined. Laclau interprets this emptiness as involving a radically democratic potential, because it allows for the mobilization of as many unattended social demands as possible.⁵⁵ The inclusion of different social instances in the equivalential chain does not require a deep change in their identities or strong persuasion. Instead, each instance can attribute the meaning it wants to the empty signifier around which the chain is formed, to the extent that identification operates mostly at symbolic and affective levels.

The emptiness, vagueness, and inarticulation of populist discourse can be a strategic asset, at least in the short term.⁵⁶ In more substantively democratic terms, these elements can also have a positive effect to the extent that they make it possible to keep the play of (re)signification open. The problem, however, is that these features inevitably imply a strong decisionism. The cacophony of different meanings within the populist subject must be reduced to uniformity when the moment to make decisions arrives. In other words, such an inarticulate and multiple set of identities, when identified together as a political subject, must find a univocal singularity. Because of the cacophony of meanings, this act of stabilization can only be performed by the leader of the chain through a decisionist act – a monological act of naming – rather than through an enlarged process of deliberation.⁵⁷

Decisionism can be ascribed to all ideologies: as action-oriented and partisan interpretations of the world, they are inevitably involved in a struggle over the legitimate meaning and use of political concepts. Decisionism is especially

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- 54 Moffitt and Tormey, “Rethinking Populism”; Kreis, R. “The ‘Tweet Politics’ of President Trump.” *Journal of Language and Politics*, 16(4) (2017), 607–18; Block, E. and R. Negrine. “The Populist Communication Style: Toward a Critical Framework.” *International Journal of Communication*, 11 (2017), 178–97.
- 55 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 3–4, 17–8, 67–9; 167.
- 56 Aslanidis, “Populism as a Collective Action Master Frame for Transnational Mobilization.” *Sociological Forum*, 33(2) (2018), 458.
- 57 See Urbinati, *Me the People*, 163.

relevant to populism, however, because of the decisive role played by ideological inarticulation. Freedden argues that the role of decisionism in a given ideology is, in fact, directly proportional to its level of ideological inarticulation. The less an ideology is articulated, the less it can play the role of “converting the inevitable variety of options into the monolithic certainty which is the unavoidable feature of political decision, and which is the basis of the forging of a political identity.”⁵⁸ We can likewise say that, although decisionism is a problematic issue in all constructivist theories of representation, as Laclau’s theory shows, it is particularly problematic in populism. In populism, the work of construction involves the creation of an identity as extensive as “the people.”

Populism’s inherent decisionism dovetails with an adjacent ideological element often highlighted by liberal scholars. This is an understanding of sovereignty as a monolithic bloc: an understanding that derives from the idea that the will of the people is univocal, is easily identifiable, and manifests itself in an exacerbated form of majoritarianism.⁵⁹ Majoritarianism in turn can be understood as a form of “shadow holism”: that is, as a form of anti-pluralism expressing the conviction that commanding a majority entails a “morally compelling claim to speak for the great body of the people.”⁶⁰ This understanding of sovereignty clearly contrasts with the decentered form that liberal democracy has come to develop, which manifests itself in a more fluid view of how majorities and minorities should interact. What is important to underline here, however, is not decisionism as such, but how – as we argue above – it derives from some key formal/stylistic aspects of populism.

Discursive ambiguity and inarticulation, and the associated decisionism, can also be found in other thin-centered ideologies, such as ecologism or feminism. These features perform the same function in other ideologies as they do in populism: aiding the enlargement of the base of support. In these ideologies, nonetheless, the initially thin conceptual furniture and ideational density have usually thickened over time, in order to become more viable and appealing to the electorate.

This process does not occur in populism.⁶¹ Populism, as Moffitt and Tormey note, has not developed a “widely global populist movement ... or a ‘Populist International’ and it has not produced any key philosopher or theoretician”

58 Freedden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 76–7.

59 Urbinati, “Populism and the Principle of Majority.” In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 571–89; Ferrara, A. “Can Political Liberalism Help Us Rescue ‘the People’ from Populism?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 44(4) (2018), 463–77.

60 Rosenblum, N.L. *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 37, 55.

61 Freedden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 486; Freedden, “After the Brexit Referendum”, 2.

(with the exception, we may add, of Laclau and Mouffe). In Moffitt's and Tormey's view, therefore, "it makes little sense to conceptualize populism as an ideology."⁶² But as we argued in the second section, this approach fails to fully unfold the interconnection between populism's ideological and formal dimensions. Even if we conceive of populism as a political style, it is undeniably a style with a relevant and specific, even if usually implicit, political and ideological content.

For instance, features of populism such as the preference for theory over action and a strong emotive character are clearly more than formal or stylistic features, because they also entail a particular, even if inarticulate and vague, political vision. They are, at the same time, important items in populism's ideological repertoire, which clearly put populism in opposition to the reflective and deliberative character of liberal democracy.⁶³ Such an opposition is confirmed by the attitude populists normally take to the principle of justification, which lies at the core of liberal democracy. Populists often act in a way that implies that their vision of society and right to represent the whole people are so obvious that they do not require any justification.⁶⁴ This posture perfectly dovetails with populist Manichaeism, decisionism and a certain degree of anti-intellectualism. As a phenomenon based on a Manichean view of society, populism normally exhibits an urgent desire for immediate, resolute responses, and an impatience for extended reflection and complicated procedures.⁶⁵

At the formal/stylistic level, this ideological stance is reflected in several articulatory practices: for instance, in the attitude of "flaunting the low."⁶⁶ Populists are fond of displaying proximity to everything associated with popular or common-sense wisdom, language, and tastes. These are promoted by populists as being inherently just and opposed to the theoretical and technical expertise, or the aesthetic sophistication, of the elites.⁶⁷ This popular, anti-elitist style obviously has a strategic aim: it is fundamental for the process of identification and differentiation through which populists try to divide society into two blocs. At the same time, however, it clearly entails a certain ideological position. Something similar might be said of populism's predilection for crisis narratives. Lacking more complex ideologies' theoretical and institutional filters, populism tends to immediately translate every event or idea to

62 Moffitt and Tormey, "Rethinking Populism," 383–4.

63 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 64.

64 Wolkenstein, F. "Populism, Liberal Democracy and the Ethics of Peoplehood." *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18(3) (2019), 330–48.

65 Müller, *What Is Populism?*; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 12.

66 Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach."

67 Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 57–62.

the center of its ideological imaginary, as Freeden has noted, creating a state of sustained emergency and mobilization.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the ideological stance of populism cannot be fully understood without focusing on another key stylistic feature: the populist preference for discourse and action aimed at eliciting a strong emotive response. The significance of the emotional component of populism is widely recognized in the literature.⁶⁹ If the basic ideological assumption of populism is that the people have been wronged by the elites, then its discourse can only be one of resentment and rage. The emotional dimension of populist discourse derives largely from this resentment, in the context of a generalized distrust and anxiety regarding social status and solidarity. But populism's emotional charge also has a positive side. Canovan calls this positive side the "populist mood":⁷⁰ the hopeful enthusiasm that derives from the sense of empowerment and redemption conveyed by a movement claiming to restore justice against those who have betrayed the authentic people. Populism can therefore also be read as a kind of utopianism – but of a peculiar kind, because the contours of its promised land cannot but be vague in comparison to those of more articulated ideologies. With this emotional intensity, and the force of a narrative sold as common-sense wisdom, populism compensates for the absence of more articulate reasons to justify its hyperbolic representative claims.

The role of the emotions in populism illustrates its distance from liberal democratic ideals and thus the relation between its form and content. Liberal democracy has rationalism at its roots and is based on the ideals of pluralism and consensus through reasoned debate. Populism, conversely, vindicates the Schmittian view that politics entails conflict, partisanship, and decisionism and thus that it cannot dispense with the extra-rational. From the perspective of articulatory practices, we have just seen the importance of the emotions in defending populist claims and mobilizing populist constituencies. We must add to this the role the emotions play in the mechanisms of identification and differentiation through which, as Laclau argues, the populist subject is created: first, in the affective investment in the empty signifier around which develops the unity of the people and the leader who symbolizes such unity; second, in the creation of a superficial form of solidarity, held together by anti-establishment resentment.

68 Freeden, "After the Brexit Referendum," 5–6.

69 E.g., Cossarini, P. and F. Vallespín, eds. *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity* (London: Routledge, 2019).

70 Canovan, "Trust the People!," 9.

Resentment in particular plays a predominant role in populism. Resentment is here understood both as socio-political resentment motivated by moral indignation and envy, and also as a wish for vengeance (Nietzsche's *ressentiment*). Populists employ resentment by heightening the perception of threats to the traditional way of life⁷¹ and by emphasizing its moralistic overtones to mobilize the people against the establishment or some minority group.⁷² But resentment is also deeply embedded in populism's political vision: not only in its Manichaeism, but also in the hopeful "populist mood," in which a lament for the current state is accompanied by a promise of healing and justice. This promise can be presented as imminent precisely because it remains vague and inarticulate.⁷³

Finally, the dialectic between form and content can be seen at work in a further feature of the populist style, related to resentment: populism's "bad manners."⁷⁴ This stylistic trait has an important legitimizing (and, thus, ideological) function for populist movements to the extent that it can be displayed as a sign of authenticity, spontaneity, and courage in questioning the status quo and reclaiming sovereignty for the people. Arditi aptly compares this style to the behavior of "the awkward dinner guest":⁷⁵ the guest who gets drunk, displays awful manners, and poses inappropriate questions to the other guests. The awkward guest embarrasses the other guests not only with the violation of norms, but also with the sense that these questions reveal issues that the well-mannered guests would rather keep hidden.

No doubt this is an incomplete analysis: there is far more to be said about the political meaning of important formal/stylistic aspects of populism, and about how populism's ideological positions entail specific styles and forms. But our aim has been to show how, through a holistic analysis, it is possible to create an ideal type of populism which offers insights unavailable to the stylistic or ideational approaches, taken in isolation. In this respect, it is important to clarify that the ideal-typical picture of populism we have developed includes features that not all real instances of populism share to the same extent, if at all. For instance, features such as anti-intellectualism, or a monolithic understanding of sovereignty, are certainly much more common in right-wing rather than left-wing populism. Nonetheless, rather than providing a minimal definition of populism that can travel everywhere, we have prioritized developing a

71 Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 45.

72 Brito Vieira and Carreira, "Populism and the Politics of Redemption."

73 Ibid.

74 Moffitt and Tormey, "Rethinking Populism," 392.

75 Arditi, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism*, 78.

conceptual map that can bring to the fore the overall coherence of populism and the constitutive relation between its formal/stylistic aspects and its ideological dimension.

6 Conclusion

In sum, we have argued that a wide range of the distinctive features of populism grow out of the interrelation of populism's forms and ideological content. They cannot be conceived as solely stylistic *or* solely ideological: they are better understood as populism's content-forms.

As we have argued, if the question of the relationship between form and content is significant to politics in general, in populism it becomes particularly relevant, because populism's defining qualities include simplification, the rejection of elaborated ideas and the embrace of dramatized action. It is in this regard a reactive and "parasitic" phenomenon that lives off the recurrent crises of liberal democracy.⁷⁶ It needs the support of more articulated ideologies to survive. And yet, we should not be led to believe that there is nothing coherent or substantive behind populism's inarticulate ideology. The coherence of populism can emerge only through a combined analysis of form and content.

The kind of holistic approach we have proposed has implications for both theoretical and empirical studies of populism. Regarding the former, our approach highlights the peculiar way in which populism links popular forms and styles to ideological/institutional elements related to the principle of popular sovereignty and representative government. This, in turn, helps to explain populism from a historical perspective: to identify what is specifically modern about it, and thus to differentiate it from historical demagoguery. Empirically, an important question for further research concerns the political and ideological effects that populist forms and styles can have in the mid-to-long term. These forms and styles can change the political landscape in a populist direction even when employed for merely strategic reasons, because ideological content inevitably comes with them. In other words, our holistic approach predicts that if traditional parties increasingly adopt populist forms and styles, the effects of that choice will not be confined to the stylistic dimension of politics: it is likely to have substantive policy effects, as well.

Beyond this prediction, the holistic approach would also entail some concrete guidance to political actors grappling with the phenomenon of populism,

76 Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 135.

regardless of their normative orientation toward it. Liberal democrats and other anti-populists would be well advised to consider that, as the holistic approach implies, they are unlikely to “beat populists at their own game.” From this perspective, to strategically adopt elements of the populist style in the interest of success in electoral competition with populists is short-sighted, because to do so is necessarily to legitimize and disseminate populist ideas. Conversely, those who stress populism’s redemptive potential might take as a starting-point the elements of populist style that already have a hold in traditional politics. If hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, then (from the redemptive populist standpoint) mainstream politicians’ use of people-versus-the-powerful framing and invocations of a crisis of democracy are the tribute that the elite pays to the people, and might be exploited as such – as important concessions that the populist worldview is essentially accurate.

Finally, the approach we propose here can help scholars to address the question of the relationship between right-wing and left-wing populism. The nature of this relationship is one of the main points of disagreement between those who see populism simply as a threat to democracy and those who identify in it a redemptive potential. In comparison with isolated approaches, a holistic approach to populism as form and content can produce a more sophisticated analysis of what these two versions of populism share and what they don’t – and, more broadly, a view of populism *simpliciter*, prior to its hybridization with other ideologies. It can therefore provide a more consistent basis on which to explain the differences between populism’s right and left manifestations.

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