

# The Chimera of a Populist Ideology: Assessing Populism's Potential Ideological Claims

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*For all our efforts and hubris  
in our striving to be free  
we are all yet humans  
finding what it is to be.*

# Introduction

*A PhD thesis walks into a bar,  
the bartender asks “Who are you and what beer would you like?”,  
the PhD thesis responds: “Draft”.<sup>1</sup>*

Populists are from Mars, non-populists are from Venus, or so it seems.<sup>2</sup> Both in political theory as in ‘real-life’ many have expressed a difficulty in engaging with populists, with vice versa also applying, i.e., populist struggling to make their point to those who oppose them. One can simply turn to examples on social media, where any given post that vaguely touches political concepts such as self-sovereignty or the value of the people receives hundreds of comments responding to one another, in a way that raises doubts about if those writing are listening to one another, or if the two factions that arise (the more populist and the less populist) are even speaking the same language. The instinct in most people, which is reflected in more concrete theories of populism, is that populism is synonymous or associated with demagoguery and the appeal to emotions rather than reason, thus making it impossible to have a reasonable conversation with a populist. It is seemingly the populist’s fault, they do not play by the rules of open and rational dialogue so central to how democracy is standardly understood, and perhaps is to be understood. This project is in no way meant to deny that this is probably true. However, there also seems to be a gap in the literature – as insightful as it is –, and in many ways in real life too, of trying to put oneself in the other’s shoes, which is equally central to how democracy is to be understood. In other areas of study there has been a development of the understanding of political emotions as based on reason, or anyway as having an equally evaluative role in politics as traditional discourse based on reason alone.<sup>3</sup> In incredibly simplistic terms, an opinion of the kind of “People on benefits are lazy” is arguably based more on emotion and prejudice than on reason, eliciting a response of “no, they are not”, culminating in a glorified ‘nah-ah’ / “yeah-eh” loop that is probably not going to achieve great success in terms of democratic open dialogue. However, at the basis of the controversial claim there *might* be a claim of “the system of benefits should not be exploited by those who do not actually need it, but alas this sometimes happens”,<sup>4</sup> which is a much more reason-based opinion and which can lead to more insightful conversations on what a

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I am aware the jokes at the start of each chapter are original to me, but it is possible that for some of them someone else has also independently made them.

<sup>2</sup> Using the structure of a perhaps somewhat outdated quote about differences in gender, ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’, made popular by an homonymous book by John Gray. John Gray, 1992, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Martha C. Nussbaum (2013), *Political Emotions. Why Love matters for Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press or Martha C. Nussbaum (2001), *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Discussion on benefits – or immigrants in the sentence that follows – are used exclusively as examples of potential opinions people might have, it is not my intention here to present these opinions as right or wrong.

government should do in the distribution and checks of benefits and the support and encouragement it should give to those on benefits. Likewise, for a right-wing populist<sup>5</sup> an opinion of the kind “let’s help immigrants, they have suffered enough” could seem as heavily based on emotion rather than reason, but at the basis of it there could be a very rational (as well as emotional) claim of the value of human lives and human well-being. Again, this might not be the case all the time, communication sometimes unavoidably breaks down or might not be too insightful. It could well be the case that the reason-based arguments are nonetheless too far apart and the two debaters just cannot agree on everything, but at least there would be an understanding of what the other’s reasons are, even if one does not agree with them. It could also be the case that someone is totally unreasonable, no matter how hard one tries to justify the other’s opinion in rational terms. However, without really trying to do so, one cannot be wholly exempt from the fault of the communication breakdown. This is of course all rather simplistic and perhaps snobbish. It would be patronising to suggest that one must fill in what someone else says because they believe the other is not capable of expressing opinions rationally, and it would be frustrating to say that if one was not to constantly and blindly put this effort of putting themselves in the other’s shoes they would somehow be in the wrong. Nonetheless, hopefully the spirit of what has been said comes across.<sup>6</sup>

This project is essentially and hopefully the application of this spirit of openness to studies of populism. The literature on the subject is as praiseworthy as it is extensive, to the point that one might be justified in thinking avenues of research have been exhausted. However, it is quite common for works on populism to focus – and perhaps rightly so – on the normatively negative aspects of populism in practice (e.g., populism as demagoguery). Those (excellent) works that do try to interpret what populists might be rationally saying, are still quite focused on the practices of populism, and lack perhaps the *benefit of the doubt* this project is suggesting. What is meant by this is that it might be a different approach to assume that regardless of how populists might behave populism has rational claims, has theoretical worth, presents an ideal of what society should be like, has something that we can engage with, and that is worth engaging with – even if we rationally disagree with those claims. It could well be that this assumption is wrong, but it might also well be insightful to analyse this *best possible* populism, understood here not normatively but in the sense of the *most theoretically possible* version of populism. The belief is that in the chase for this potential chimera we might nonetheless gather insights on it. Even if the chimera does indeed not exist, we will have nonetheless learned more about what it might have looked like, or what similar animals might do. Of course, the project is inescapably normative, even if it is not its main focus. If the *best possible populism* was still eventually seen as incongruous to certain standards of openness to dialogue and reason, then of course that would have even stronger implications for the *average* – and perhaps more probable – *populism*.

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<sup>5</sup> This example refers to someone culturally right-wing, so in this sense seen as anti-immigration, rather than any economic conservatism.

<sup>6</sup> And if not, the argument would suggest the reader put themselves in my shoes and assume I am making a rational argument.



In other words, the general picture of a theory of populism which the literature tends to portray is a pessimistic theory, i.e., a theory which sees populism as not achieving the status of proper ideology.<sup>7</sup> However, this could first of all be dangerously dismissive because populism *could be* a fuller ideology than what is portrayed. A *best possible populism* which is a full ideology and which would thus surpass the critique of pessimistic theories of populism might conceptually exist. Secondly, if we adopted a non-pessimistic theory (i.e., if we understood populism as a fuller ideology) and attempted to shape the *best possible populism*, more appropriate and accurate critique could arise against populism, namely that the best possible populism nonetheless collapses into other ideologies or – if instead it was a unique and distinct ideology – it has its own theoretical flaws.

### *Summary of the project*

In order to carry out this analysis, the project is structured in two parts: a purely theoretical one, and an applied one. The first three chapters – the theoretical part – are dedicated to populism in theory. First of all, the project needs to introduce the topic. A brief history of the term will be presented, from its original idolisation of the figure of the peasant in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, to American provincialism at the turn of the century, through to anti-colonialism in Asian and African countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It will be seen how an interest in defining populism peaked around the 1960's, but the only real consensus various seminal (and insightful) works of the time could achieve seemed to be limited to the acceptance that the term could indeed have various interpretations. Inspired by recent real-life events, there has been a revival in the interest on populism. The real-life historical events that may have inspired the renewed interest in defining populism will not be tackled. This is a choice both for simplicity's and brevity's sake, but also specifically in order to keep the focus of the analysis in this section mainly on the theories of populism. Practical examples of populism will later be seen in the research, but in this initial part of the project the focus is very much on the theoretical level. On this note, the project and more specifically this first chapter will present the current state of the field on theories of populism. A general consensus is that populism is not a proper ideology. Perhaps rightly so, the literature portrays how populism does not have any self-standing ideological claims and that upon reflection populism either has no ideological claims at all or collapses into other, similar, ideologies. Some issues with the literature will be raised, the main one linking with the previously mentioned suggestion to more exhaustively give populism the benefit of the doubt and assume it does have worthwhile ideological claims. The risk in the literature is throwing the theoretical baby out with the bathwater, i.e., populism meriting the status of an ideology but us dismissing it because of certain populist practices that unfortunately suggest otherwise. The importance of this different approach suggested is if populism was indeed dangerous or wrong as much of the literature suggests, engaging with and tackling it is best served by being able to first

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<sup>7</sup> Pessimistic does not hold normative value here nor does it entail an assessment of the value of such theories, it is just to refer to theories that are indeed pessimistic of whether populism is a full ideology.

show all the goodwill in understanding and defending its claims. So far this argumentation refers to this first chapter.

In the second chapter, the project will analyse the definition of 'ideology', and what theoretical criteria can be elaborated to assess whether a belief can be understood as an ideological claim. In brief, an ideology is seen as a body of thought or set of beliefs that expresses a view of what society ought to look like. From this the project suggests the criteria of universalizability of a certain claim in order to assess whether it counts as an ideological claim. These criteria of universalizability build on Kantian universalizability of moral maxims (is there logical contradiction if everyone followed this belief?) and on social contract theorists' State of Nature as well as Rawls' Original Position (does the belief offer some insight of what society ought to look like when pre-political humans are looking to develop a society?). With this in mind, the project then turns to apply these criteria to the various possible ideological claims of populism. From this, it transpires that *if* populism was an ideology its claims would be relating to popular sovereignty and direct representation.

The third chapter will then assess how these potential ideological claims compare to more common democratic theories and ideologies. In this comparison it transpires that either the populism's ideological claims are not distinct from other ideologies, or in order to be unique and distinct they would have to be rather drastic interpretations of majoritarianism, which would encounter their own conceptual and theoretical issues.

Concluding the initial theoretical part of the research, the project then turns in the second part to a more applied approach. The fourth chapter presents the methodology of contextual political analysis. Initially, the benefits of its application will be discussed, primarily those of giving theoretical frameworks stronger validation as well as unexpected insights and of hopefully making the research more relevant by then building on two different types of literature (the theoretical one and that relating to the specific case study). The fourth chapter then delves into defining and noting the guidelines for this contextual methodology. Despite a wealth on definitions of contextual approaches, the project will highlight the main line of thought amongst scholars who use contextualist analysis, namely that context is at least relevant for theory and that theoretical principles can be *generated, refined and revised* by applying them to context. The general guidelines or suggestions will arise from the literature on contextual political analysis and the case selection (of the Vote Leave campaign around the UK Brexit referendum) will be justified accordingly. The fourth chapter will then finally give a brief summary of the history and relevance of the Vote Leave campaign and introduce the case study itself.

The case study will be carried out in Chapter V by looking at what was said in speeches and interviews used as Vote Leave campaigning material. The structure of the theoretical framework as set up in the first part of the project will be schematically analysed through the lens of the context of the case study. The case study will not simply confirm the theoretical framework, but it will give insights by looking at what the theory looks like in real-life.

The result of analyses of the theory and of the context, which will be seen in the final chapter, will paint a seemingly negative picture of populism as an ideology. The project will conclude

that insofar as populism is a full ideology, it risks simply collapsing into understandings of democracy, which would make populism not unique nor distinct, and when it avoids this collapse it is less than an ideology or it is a flawed one. In other words, it will seem that *if* populism was an ideology, its ideological claims would be related to popular sovereignty and representation, but *if* these ideological claims would be unique and distinct in populism from other ideologies, they would be theoretically flawed. So, *if* populism was a distinct ideology, it would be a flawed one. However, the approach taken to reach this conclusion is an insightful one for the literature on populism. The starting point is to almost defend populism as an ideology, only to reach the conclusion that even with the assumption that populism was *more* than the literature would suggest, it would still have issues at a theoretical and conceptual level. Moreover, there are various insights that this approach will give along the way, but to do so we need to now stop summarising what will happen and start the actual research.

## Part One: The Theory

## Chapter I: The best possible populism

*A populist walks into a bar and looks around unhappily.  
The bartender asks "What's wrong, sir?",  
the populist replies "I don't like this establishment"*

This chapter is the starting point for developing a theoretical framework for the *best possible* populism, a theory of populism which sees it as an ideology with distinct and unique ideological claims. Setting up a theory of the best possible populism is then what will later provide insights in its conceptual and normative implications, assuming at least for argument's sake that such a populism could exist.

Before all this, it is however useful to present a brief history of the term 'populism', which is what this chapter provides first. Through this it will be seen how such a term has had various interpretations since its origin, from peasantism in Russia, through American provincialism, to anti-colonialism in developing countries, for example. Following the conceptual vagueness and flexibility of the term, from the 1960's onwards there has been a great development in the literature trying to exactly pinpoint what populism means, best symbolised as an attempt to find the foot (the correct definition of populism) to fit Cinderella's shoe (the term 'populism'). These efforts are mostly regarded as insightful, but alas not greatly successful in their ambitious aim. Secondly, the chapter will look at the more contemporary works on populism, a literature which has received a boost in attention and contributions following a perceived return of populism in the real-life political scene. A general consensus within this literature is presented in the shape of pessimistic theories of populism, i.e., theories that do not see populism as a full (a.k.a. thick-centred) ideology. This leads to the chapter thirdly presenting an critique of pessimistic theories of populism, at least in the way they are defended. Theories which see populism not as an ideology with specific analysable claims may well be ultimately correct, however they might too hastily assume that populism is not much in the first place. On the face of things, there is no apparent reason why populism ought to be treated differently to more commonly accepted fuller ideologies, such as liberalism. Lastly then, this chapter will raise some concerns of the risks of dismissing the best possible populism, which will justify the rest of the project as an attempt to take populism as seriously as possible as a full ideology, giving stronger insights in its potential flaws.

*The first populisms: from Russia with love (for the peasant) to everywhere else*

Bypassing for now whether the ancient Greeks' *demokratia* (etymologically from *dēmos* and *kratia*, meaning thus 'power of the people') could be interpreted as 'populism', the first proper instances of populism as a term could be identified with the Russian Narodism or '*Narodnichestvo*' (народничество) ideology of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the Russian word '*narod*' (народ), meaning 'people' or 'folk', giving its loose translation as 'peopleism', 'folkism'

or indeed 'populism'. Its promoters (the narodniki)<sup>1</sup> were intellectual figures, often from the major cities, who romanticised and idealized the image of the Russian peasant, taking inspiration from the commune of 'the village' as "a political model for the country as a whole".<sup>2</sup> They also advocated the idea of 'going to the people' (хождение в народ, khozhdeniye v narod) for political advice and guidance.<sup>3</sup> This was accompanied by a critique of the elite of the time, said to be enjoying a comfortable life on the back of honest and hard-working farmers and labourers. In short, members of this movement described society as "inevitably distributed in two unequal groups. One of these, numerically very small, was in a privileged position and able to enjoy – to the detriment of the others – all the good things of life. Whereas the second, which made up the great majority, was destined to eternal misery and to labours beyond the scope of human capacity".<sup>4</sup>

Also in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term populism started being used in association to 'the People's Party' (also known as 'the Populist Party') in the USA, seen as a form of agrarian populism. A genuine political party, which most famously ran for the 1892 presidential elections, it enjoyed little electoral success. Its ticketed candidate for those elections James B. Weaver received 8.5% of the votes, with Republican Benjamin Harrison receiving 43%, and a victorious Democrat Grover Cleveland with 46% of the votes. A few years later, the party was disbanded. Amongst other issues, the party's demands ranged "from government ownership of railroads to popular referendums and from monetary inflation to the banning of strikebreakers".<sup>5</sup>

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, populism was most commonly understood as akin to peasantism, with academics and scholars beginning to take an interest in it. Initially, anthropology literature focused around the figure of the peasant, describing how the peasants occupied an intermediate place in society: "peasants are definitely rural – yet live in relation to market towns; they form a class segment in a larger population which usually contains also urban centers, sometimes metropolitan capitals. They constitute part-societies with part-cultures. They lack the isolation, the political autonomy and the self-sufficiency of tribal populations; but their local units retain much of their old identity, integration, and attachment to soil and cults".<sup>6</sup> Soon, political literature started developing from this interest on peasantism into studies on populism. Scholars would go by their studies with the idea that "many of the distinctive characteristics of the populist response are to be understood in the context of 'part/whole' structures of the type analysed by the anthropological students of peasant society".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Or Narodniks.

<sup>2</sup> Müller, 2016, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Franco Venturi, 1960, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, translated by Francis Haskell, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p.450, similar description in William F. Woehrlin, *Chernyshevski: The Man and the Journalist*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.211.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Canovan, 1981, *Populism*, London: Junction Books, p.17.

<sup>6</sup> A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes*, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> J. B. Allcock, 1971, 'Populism: A Brief Biography', in *Sociology*, vol. 5, no. 3, p.380.

In parallel to these developments in literature, there were also changes to how the term populism would be used in practice, as it developed for example from referring to (Russian or American) peasantism to other movements, such as populism of the provincial USA or anticolonialism in Asian and African countries. Seymour Lipset analyses how populism at the time was seen as a response to the tension between 'metropolis' and the provinces, between the centre and the periphery in the developing nations, especially the US. Far from simple peasants, the populist reaction came from the petty bourgeoisie of these peripheries who "not only suffer deprivation because of the relative decline of their class, they are also citizens of communities whose status and influence within the larger society is rapidly declining".<sup>8</sup> This led to "their fear and mistrust of bigness, and the slick and subversive ideas that come out of cities and the big institutions to erode old ways and faiths", becoming "an ideology which centres on the rejection of all things metropolitan".<sup>9</sup>

In parallel to what was happening in the USA (and elsewhere), in the 1960's 'populism' also started to be used in the context of anti-colonial movements throughout the world, in developing countries of Asia and Africa. Populism became associated also with the "underdeveloped Third-world countries emancipatory response to colonialism".<sup>10</sup> Populism became the ideology that embodied "a denial that the 'nation' could be found in existing authoritative institutions and an assertion that the root of the future lay in the 'folk'",<sup>11</sup> a desire to fight off colonial power and rebuild their societies with 'the people' at its core.<sup>12</sup>

Given all these different applications of populism, in the 1950's and 1960's the literature on populism started then to more generally accept a wider understanding of 'the people', in order to encompass all these different types of populism. For example, in 1954 Edward Shils examines how populism has at its core "the belief that the people are not just the equal of their rulers; they are actually better than their rulers"<sup>13</sup>, or William Kornhauser in 1960 arguing that in populism primacy is given to "the belief in the intrinsic and immediate validity of the popular will".<sup>14</sup> It may be noticeable how by then the term 'populism' had thus become rather theoretical and rather versatile, no longer bonded to a specific national context. The various national contexts shared similar senses of the importance of the people (peasants, provincial bourgeoisie, or the oppressed natives) and of the fight against the elite (the economic elite, the social elite, or the colonial power), so there was the assumption that these

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<sup>8</sup> Lipset describes with this not only the American context but French Poujadism, Italian Fascism and German and Austrian Nazism, too. Seymour. M. Lipset, 1960, *Political Man*, Doubleday Anchor, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Lipset in Allcock, p. 373.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Worsley, 1967, *Towards a definition of populism*, paper presented at the 1967 LSE 'To define populism', p.9-10, citation found in Allcock, p.377.

<sup>11</sup> Allcock, p.375.

<sup>12</sup> "Alienated from the indigenous authorities of their own traditional society – chiefs, sultans, princes, landlords and priests – and from the rulers of their modern society – the foreign rulers and 'Westernized' constitutional politicians (and since independence politicians of the governing party) – the intellectuals have had only the 'people', the 'African personality', the 'Indian peasant', etc., as supports in their search for the salvation of their own souls and their own society", Edward A. Shils, 1960, 'The Intellectuals in the Political Development of the New States', in *World Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Edward A. Shils, 1954, 'Populism and the Rule of Law', in *University of Chicago Law School Conference on Jurisprudence and Politics*, vol. 15, p.103.

<sup>14</sup> William Kornhauser, 1960, *The Politics of Mass Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.103.

contexts could be understood under the same label, but applying the label to the contexts would then yield various specific interpretations of populism as a concept, creating unclarity of what it really meant.

*Something worth assessing: the 1960's and 1980's first studies of populism*

A famous milestone for the study of 'populism' came in the shape of a conference organised by the London School of Economics on populism, an attempt to clarify a definition of populism in response to the various interpretations associated with it. Still nowadays, many scholars feel that there was no real agreement on what populism was achieved then, but nonetheless it provided many insights on the matter.<sup>15</sup> The chair of the conference, none other than Isaiah Berlin, famously presented the so-called "Cinderella complex" of populism: "there exists a shoe – the word 'populism' – for which somewhere there exists a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits a limb called pure populism. This is the nucleus of populism, its essence".<sup>16</sup> Berlin elucidated on the various interpretations of populism of the time:

"one is that populism is any kind of movement aiming at the redistribution of wealth, regardless of how it is done; the second is that it must be a movement of protest on the part of the lower classes. The third variant is further restricted to a movement not just of the lower classes in general but of rural lower classes in particular. The fourth interpretation is that populism is a movement which aims at the preservation of a traditional rural way of life. The fifth meaning is that of idolisation of the peasant".<sup>17</sup>

In the conference Berlin also highlighted the possibility of saying that in general terms populism could be "any kind of movement which aims at the preservation or improvement of the condition and freedom of the lower classes".<sup>18</sup> Previously, he had defined populism in even more general terms as "the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture".<sup>19</sup> Quoting this, Ionescu and Gellner – whose work was described as "the only previous [to 1981] general study of populism"<sup>20</sup> – add that "the key word is 'belonging'. Populism is against 'rootlessness'".<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Johann Herder stresses the importance for populism of belonging and participation in some folk-spirit or culture, without which one cannot be fully human.<sup>22</sup> Populism "values this fraternity far above liberty. From this fraternity and this primitivism it

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<sup>15</sup> Müller, p.7.

<sup>16</sup> Verbatim report of the London School of Economics conference on Populism in 1967, available at <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102463/>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022], p.139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.139.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 1965, 'J. G. Herder', in *Encounter*, vol. XXV, in Ghiță Ionescu, and Ernest Gellner, 1969, *Populism: its meaning and national characteristics*, New York: Macmillan, p. 156.

<sup>20</sup> Canovan, 1981, p.4 .

<sup>21</sup> Ionescu & Gellner, p.156.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



is an easy step to intolerance, suspicion, fear of betrayal, and xenophobia".<sup>23</sup> In these terms, then, Ionescu and Gellner conclude that "populism is not about economics, politics or even, in the last resort, society. It is about personality, and about personality in a moral sense, [which is] maimed by the social division of labour. [...] Its essence is romantic primitivism. It is therefore profoundly a-political, and no basis for a sustained political party as distinct from a congerie of social movements".<sup>24</sup>

Building on Ionescu and Gellner's work, in the 1980's Margaret Canovan explains the struggle to find a conclusive definition for populism, by mentioning again LSE's conference: "a conference to define socialism, liberalism, or conservatism would probably have equal difficulty in reaching a conclusion [...]. None of these terms represents a single, unified phenomenon; each stands for a family of related ideas and movements, some of them contradictory to others".<sup>25</sup> Canovan does nonetheless notice that populism is particularly more varied than those other *-isms*. She reckons this is because, unlike the other concepts, "there has been no self-conscious international populist movement which might have attempted to control or limit the term's reference, and as a result those who have used it have been able to attach to it a wide variety of meanings".<sup>26</sup>

Of Canovan's research, it is worth highlighting her summary of possible populist definitions. This serves as a good reminder of the various definitions given above, but also to frame how the literature on populism saw populism, before the more contemporary reprisal of the interest in it. Canovan condensed the potential definitions of populism as a theory of the time as:

1. "The socialism which [emerges] in backward peasant countries facing the problems of modernization".
2. "Basically the ideology of small rural people threatened by encroaching industrial and financial capital".
3. "Basically [...] a rural movement seeking to realize traditional values in a changing society".
4. "The belief that the majority opinion of the people is checked by an elitist minority".
5. "Any creed or movement based on the following major premiss: virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions".
6. "Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard".

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<sup>23</sup> Ionescu & Gellner, p.156

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp.160-162.

<sup>25</sup> Canovan, 1981, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

7. "A political movement which enjoys the support of the mass of the urban working class and/ or peasantry but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors".<sup>27</sup>

In practice, Canovan saw these potential 'theories' as yielding in turn seven *types* of populisms:

*Agrarian Populisms*

1. farmer radicalism ( e.g., the U.S. People's Party)
2. peasant movements ( e.g, the East European Green Rising)
3. intellectual agrarian socialism. (e.g., the Narodniks)

*Political Populisms*

4. populist dictatorship (e.g., Juan Perón)
5. populist democracy (i.e., call for referendums and 'participation')
- 6, reactionary populism (e.g., George Wallace and his followers)
7. politicians' populism (i.e., broad, non-ideological coalition-building that draws on the unificatory appeal of 'the people').<sup>28</sup>

This hopefully gives a good image of what the literature on populism looked like up until more recent times. Of course, this literature is still relevant and insightful, however, it is safe to say that in the last 20 years there has been a rapid increase in the attention given to populism, responding to an (perceived) increased wave of populism on the real-life political field. It is now worth looking at the current state of the field, and highlight some issues with it.

*Populist studies nowadays, a revival*

In the current political theory (among others) academic research, one of the words on everyone's lips seems to be populism. However, a sense of discontent grows parallel to it, with claims that analyses of populism are saturating the field, and with no significant enough progress. This may be due to the interest in populism gaining such quick relevance and momentum given the political climate and changes in Europe (and elsewhere) in the last few years. Perhaps also the research done on populism had initially cast the net too wide, trying too hard to find an overarching and definite description for very different things (e.g., left-wing South American 'populism' and right-wing European 'populism'). That is not to say that these cannot or should not be studied together, rather that initial analyses of populism may have taken their compatibility for granted.

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<sup>27</sup> Canovan, 1981, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.13.

However, it would be harsh to deny the great progress that has been and is being made. As this chapter will discuss, at the very least, ideas have been put forward that populism is not a singularly-defined clear-cut ‘phenomenon’,<sup>29</sup> hence the variety of definitions possible for populism which may be saturating the field. This insight is best exemplified perhaps by the works of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. For them, populism indeed cannot be described as a clear ideology, but as something malleable that can easily transform and take different meanings. This is an idea similar to those of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who argue that populism is based on ‘empty signifiers’. These descriptions of populism (let us refer to them as *pessimistic theories of populism*, i.e., theories which either do not see populism as a full ideology or as an ideology at all; pessimism thus referring to populism’s potential of ticking the box of being an ideology) seem very helpful precisely because they explicitly rely on the unclear nature of populism.

However, this research project will raise some conceptual issues with these pessimistic theories of populism, especially seeing how Mudde and Kaltwasser (henceforth written as M&K) justify their claims by comparing populism to ‘fuller’ ideologies, such as fascism, liberalism or socialism.<sup>30</sup> It will be argued that this comparison is based on the hasty assumption that populism and ‘fuller’ ideologies are morphologically different, which may lead to skewed results.

What follows is initially a presentation of the current understanding of populism, especially in terms of ideology. Then, some issues with M&K’s distinction between thin- and thick-centred ideologies will be raised, with a counter to the potential claim that this difference is due to populism being based on empty signifiers such as that of ‘the people’. Next, a schematic summary will be presented on our potential choices between pessimistic and optimistic theories of populism (in terms of whether they see populism being a full ideology) when trying to conceptually frame populism, followed by the assessment of the risks of picking between the various aforementioned potential conceptual choices, with primarily the warning of the risk run from pessimistic theories of populism being the dismissal of the potentially real (regardless of good or bad) ideological claims made by populism.

### *Thin- and thick-centred ideologies*

It is perhaps best to spend a few words here on what is meant by such terms. M&K’s definition of an ideology is that of “a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society. Simply stated, it is a view of how the world is and should be”.<sup>31</sup> More will be said in the following chapter on ideology as a term, but such a definition should suffice for now. The difference between thin- and thick-centred ideologies

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<sup>29</sup> “Phenomenon” is here used in the loosest possible way, as the project has not yet properly tackled ‘what’ populism is (e.g., an ideology, a movement, a political emotion, etc...).

<sup>30</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, 2017, *Populism: A very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.5-9. Mudde and Kaltwasser hereon forth abbreviated to M&K.

<sup>31</sup> M&K, 2017, p. 6.

is made within this context. Such terminology, which M&K build on, originates from works of Michael Freeden, who “coined the term ‘thin-centred ideologies’ [which] embraced those ideologies whose morphology, whose conceptual patterns and arrangements, were insufficient to contain the comprehensive solutions for the full spectrum of socio-political problems that the grand ideological families have customarily sought to provide”.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Freeden sees thin-centred ideology as those which “do not formulate a broad menu of solutions to major socio-political issues”.<sup>33</sup>

M&K also see thin-centred ideologies as having a more limited ambition and scope than thick ideologies.<sup>34</sup> This shortcoming of thin-centred ideologies is not only in content, but also in approach. Thin-centred ideologies are seen as having a different level of intellectual refinement and consistency as ‘thick’ ideologies,<sup>35</sup> as well as having a restrictive morphology, where the thin-centred ideology “necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other ideologies”.<sup>36</sup> This is again broadly in line with Freeden’s work, who argues thin-centred ideologies “either restricted themselves to a narrow core, becoming single-issue or at most double-issue political advocacy discourses, or borrowed from, and appended themselves to, other ideologies to thicken out”.<sup>37</sup>

Freeden, however, in his initial works on (thin-centred) ideologies did not discuss populism, and in later works even argues that populism is not thin-centred, nor an ideology in general. Instead it is M&K’s works among the most associated with the argument that populism fits this description of thin-centred ideologies, both in content and morphology. Content-wise, populism is seen as incomplete. Populism may speak of “the main division in society (between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’), and offers general advice for the best way to conduct politics (i.e., in line with ‘the general will of the people’), however, “it offers few specific views on political institutional or socio-economic issues”, which a fuller ideology would need – in M&K’s view.<sup>38</sup> Morphologically-speaking, M&K also see populism as a thin-centred ideology, as it “almost always appears attached to other ideological elements, which are crucial for the promotion of political projects that are appealing to a broader public. Consequently, by itself populism can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Freeden, 2017, ‘After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology’, in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 22, No.1, Routledge, p.2; referring to his previous work from 1998, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Freeden, 2003, *Ideology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> For the sake of simplicity, this research project is using the adjectives ‘thick’, ‘thick-centred’, and ‘full’ interchangeably when describing ideologies, likewise for ‘thin’ and ‘thin-centred’.

<sup>35</sup> Cas Mudde, ‘Populism: An Ideational Approach’, in Cristóval Rovira Kaltwasser, Pail Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.), 2017, *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, hereon forth abbreviated to Kaltwasser et al. 2017, p.50.

<sup>36</sup> M&K, 2017 p. 6

<sup>37</sup> Freeden, 2017, p.2

<sup>38</sup> Mudde in Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 35

<sup>39</sup> M&K, 2017, p. 6

The divergence between Freedden and other works such as M&K's on populism as a thin-centred ideology is twofold. While they both agree that if an ideology relies on other ideologies to fill their status of ideology, for Freedden populism is too thin even for this, as "it is structured so as to rely systematically on other ideological positions".<sup>40</sup> For Freedden, a thin-centred ideology "implies that there is potentially more than the centre, but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive"<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, Freedden is more critical than M&K on populism not being "well-articulated and the product of long processes of measured and reflective political thinking"<sup>42</sup> and not presenting enough "a positive, self-aware, drive, whose transformative alternatives are not predicated on resurrecting primordial social intuitions but on future-oriented change".<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, Freedden classifies populism not as an ideology ("it is emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred"<sup>44</sup>), whereas M&K see it as a thin-centred one; as well as Freedden seeing nationalism as a thin-centred ideology whereas M&K present it as thicker. Nonetheless, using the language and structure of thin-centred vs thick-centred ideologies (with the option for it not being an ideology) is still relevant and helpful for this research and one which will be present throughout, as is often the case too in the literature.

Indeed, many, perhaps most, theories of populism would lend themselves easily to the description of populism as a thin-centred ideology of some kind, or at least not as a full ideology, if even an ideology to start with. Such theories (where populism is not seen as a full or thick-centred ideology, or not an ideology at all) are referred to here as pessimistic theories of populism. The suggestion in this research project is that perhaps these pessimistic theories of populism rather hastily take for granted that populism is not a fuller ideology.

Moreover, adopting a pessimistic theory of populism runs the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as others have argued that populism does instead express a clearer idea of relation between political actors, perhaps a corrupted form of the idea for democratic representation.<sup>45</sup> This is not only a conceptual issue but might also have normative implications on the strategy of how one should go about looking into populism, as a significant risk is to dismiss populism's ideological power and strength, treating it as an incomplete idea. If populism was to be treated as normatively good (as Laclau might)<sup>46</sup> then not taking it as a 'serious' ideology would lead to its unfair dismissal. If instead populism was to be treated as normatively bad (as Urbinati or Müller might)<sup>47</sup>, before being able to challenge it one must

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<sup>40</sup> Freedden, 2017, p.3

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> I am thinking of Nadia Urbinati, 2019, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, or Michael Goodwin and Roger Eatwell, 2018, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, London: Pelican Books.

<sup>46</sup> Ernesto Laclau, 2005 *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, with his idea of populism as an emancipatory force in radical democracy.

<sup>47</sup> Most authors tend to have a negative view of populism. The aforementioned Goodwin and Eatwell, 2018 or Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, 2019, *Cultural Backlash*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press are some examples.

more precisely frame its claims, or at least research more whether indeed there are some distinct ideological claims. M&K talk about populism as 'thin-centred' ideology, not incomplete or corrupt. However, the rest of the chapter will argue that even treating it as 'thin-centred' would run the risk of unfairly dismissing populism.

Initially, we will look at the idea of 'thin-centredness' by looking at the general consensus on how to define populism, which tends to see populism's potential for being an ideology pessimistically. Issues with this view and with pessimistic theories of populism will be then analysed.<sup>48</sup> Lastly, there will be some mentions to normative implications that these issues might have in how one approaches the study of populism, namely the risk run by dismissing potentially important and potentially real claims inherent to populism.

### *Through thick and thin: populism and other ideologies*

The confusion around the term 'populism' is outspoken. Moreover, it is not new. As previously seen, a wealth of literature from the 20<sup>th</sup> century (exemplified best by the famous conference LSE held in 1967) attempted to define 'populism', with rather little success.<sup>49</sup> Then, various interpretations expanded from Russian peasantism, to American agrarian populism and then American provincialism, and to anticolonialism in developing countries. Still nowadays, 'populism' means different things. For example, in the US populism is seen more as egalitarian and 'left-wing' (akin to populist regimes in South America), whilst in Europe it is portrayed as xenophobic and 'right-wing'.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the label of populism seems to have a highly contextual element. Populist ideas, however, will also differ in relation to other factors. For instance, whether a political party identifiable as populist is in opposition or in power radically changes the populist ideas present.

On this, Jan-Werner Müller is quite helpful, as he distinguishes between what populists say (i.e., what they do before getting in power) and what they do (i.e., what they do once in power).<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the left-right/egalitarian-xenophobic debate, Müller argues that roughly all forms of populists share the following:

When not in power populists make the claims of:<sup>52</sup>

-anti-elitism (i.e., 'those in power are ineffective or corrupt and should be replaced');

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<sup>48</sup> Although here we will mainly respond to Mudde and Kaltwasser's works aided by the works of others as mentioned above, it should be made clear what the chronological and logical order of these works is. Indeed, it is more often than not that M&K's works are those which responds to the others. This chapter, however, highlights issues with M&K's approach by also using works to which it is responding. so, it might create a 'chicken and egg' confusion in terms of which work is responding to which. However, the claims made in this research should still hold regardless of who wrote what first.

<sup>49</sup> Müller, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Müller, pp.1-3, or M&k, 2017, pp.2-5.

<sup>51</sup> Müller, p.41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp.2-4 and pp. 25-41.

-anti-pluralism (i.e., ‘the people are sovereign, but those who oppose us or those we do not want are not the real people’), and

-exclusive and direct representation (i.e., ‘only we – the populists – represent the people, in fact we *are* the people and we demand to be in charge’).

When in power populists engage in:<sup>53</sup>

-clientelism (i.e., exchanging material and immaterial favours with elites to gain more political support)

-anti-critics measures (i.e., influencing the media and shutting down those who opposes them by claiming that those opposing are still loyal to the old elite and/or against the people), and

-open justification (i.e., outspokenly carrying out and defending any controversial act as being in the name of the people).

Müller is careful in not making the claim that *all* instances of populism have *all* these features, but it is also less clear which of these are necessary and/or sufficient conditions to warrant calling an instance of a political expression populism. Generally speaking, though through much divergence, most accounts of populism highlight the necessary (albeit unclear for now the extent to which they are sufficient) conditions of the description of populism as:

(i) anti-elitism/anti-establishment;

(ii) some form of exclusive and/or direct representation (akin to anti-pluralism), and

(iii) justification of these views by appealing to the sovereignty of the people.

One can definitely see these elements in Laclau (and Mouffe),<sup>54</sup> who sees populism as “a process by which a community of citizens constructs itself freely and publicly as a collective subject (the people) that resists another collective (the not popular elite) and opposes an existing hegemony with the goal of taking power”.<sup>55</sup> Others also make such claims, arguing that “populist leaders use this anti-establishment imagery in order to ask the people to identify with them, and moreover to believe that their faith in the populist leader will work for their emancipation by avenging them against the other part or parts of the populace— more importantly, that the leaders will do this job for them”,<sup>56</sup> and that “rather than a species

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<sup>53</sup> Müller, pp.44-49.

<sup>54</sup> Ernesto Laclau , *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> In Nadia Urbinati, ‘Political Theory of Populism’, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2019, No.22, p.117.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth M. Roberts, ‘Populism, Political Mobilization, and Crisis of Political Representation’, in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos De la Torre (Lexington: University Press Kentucky, 2015) in Urbinati, *Political Theory of Populism*, p.120.

of direct democracy, populism is a form of ‘direct representation’”.<sup>57</sup> These three conditions (anti-establishment; exclusive/direct representation; campaigning for the sovereignty of the people) seem to be widely accepted as necessary conditions for the identification of populism.<sup>58</sup> The interpretation of populism as a thin-centred ideology is not opposed to this. On the contrary, in the core of such a definition one can easily see those features: “populism [is described] as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.<sup>59</sup> In the description of the ‘pure’ people versus the elite and in the claim that politics should reflect the general will, one can easily find the concepts of anti-establishment, of exclusive representation, and of the importance of the sovereignty of the people.

The innovative aspect of the line of inquiry of populism as thin-centred is precisely in the implications of this ‘thin-centredness’: “unlike “thick-centred” or “full” ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, socialism), thin-centred ideologies such as populism have a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other ideologies”.<sup>60</sup> The very thin-centredness of the populist ideology is perhaps one of the reasons behind why some scholars have suggested that populism should be conceived of as a transitory phenomenon: it either fails or, if successful, it ‘transcends’ itself into something bigger. It is this concept of thin-centredness which the rest of the chapter will now look into.

An important scepticism can be raised here already. It is unclear how to distinguish a thin-centred ideology from a thick-centred one. Those defined as fuller ideologies, such as fascism, liberalism, or socialism, can also easily overlap with others, in similar ways as to how populism is described as transcending into something bigger. Especially in how these ideologies take shape in actual politics, it could be argued that they are never completely separate from other ideologies. One is never *purely* a ‘liberal’, but a conservative liberal, a social liberal, economic liberal, or national liberal, and so on. For the sake of argument let’s say that the most bare-bone liberal ideology may look like the claim in favour of (i) the preservation of the freedom of individuals and (ii) limitation of state intervention, and that mixing this claim with other ideologies leads to the different types of liberalism mentioned. It seems that this process is not so different from how populist claims of sovereignty of the people through what is argued as correct (direct and/or exclusive) representation are argued to mix with other ideologies.

If one was to accept the above, then populism would not quite fit the thinness-thickness debate as put earlier. If the morphology of populism is seen as similar to that of thick-centred

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<sup>57</sup> Nadia Urbinati, ‘A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies’, in *Constellations*, 2015, no. 22, pp.478-480.

<sup>58</sup> It is an important debate to look at whether they are sufficient conditions, which we do not have enough space for here. Some clarity on this will come as the project progresses.

<sup>59</sup> M&K, 2017, p.6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



ideologies, such as liberalism or socialism, then something is wrong. Either populism is also thick-centred, or there is no such thing as a thin or thick-centred ideology.

*Populism as based on empty signifiers, thus not a full ideology?*

A partial response could be gained from the works of Mouffe and Laclau, who argue that populism is an ambiguous term that escapes sharp and uncontested definitions, because it “is not an ideology [at least not a thick-centred ideology] or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content”<sup>61</sup>. Perhaps this leads to another option: Populism is not an ideology, regardless of thick or thin. The difference between liberalism, socialism, or fascism in relation to populism, is that the former are ideologies which have enough ‘content’ to be actuated in a political regime, whilst populism is *empty*, or emptier. To further this point, populism is described as reliant on “empty signifiers”<sup>62</sup>, such as ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, and so on, which hint to universal ideas but in practice do not amount to much more than buzzwords to catch the attention of voters, with very little actual meaning or coherent political views behind them. This could explain how most populist parties that get voted in power arguably fail, seeing as their whole identity and message was based on empty signifiers which then cannot be put into practice. However, the Laclauan approach is much more complex, it is not given justice here. Here, Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) view of ‘empty signifiers’ is re-adapted here in a more negative way. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe introduce this concept of empty signifiers as buzzwords but they also claim that these empty signifiers can helpfully lead people to aim for universal ideas (e.g., of justice) and “can mesmerize the audience and so unite many citizens and groups (and their claims) with nothing more than the art of persuasion”.<sup>63</sup> Thus, populism can be emancipatory and normatively positive, thus it is *politics* at its best. It is moreover “*democracy* at its best, because it represents a situation in which the people constructs its will through direct mobilization and consent”.<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, for Laclau, populism “is a process by which a community of citizens constructs itself freely and publicly as a collective subject (“the people”) that resists another (nonpopular) collective and opposes some existing hegemony so that it can itself take power”.<sup>65</sup> This is ultimately desirable and it is possible precisely because of it being based on ‘empty signifiers’ and constructed myths. However, this positive outcome of this is not yet mentioned here, as for now it is a discussion of populism conceptually rather than normatively, and so Laclau’s or Mouffe’s approaches are greatly simplified.

Perhaps this is one way to defend the idea that there are fundamental differences between populism and these other ideologies, differences which grant populism the title of thin-

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<sup>61</sup> Chantal Mouffe, 2016, ‘The Populist Moment’, in *OpenDemocracy.net*, available at <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/populist-challenge/>> [last accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of July 2020].

<sup>62</sup> Laclau, 2005, pp.230-234, partially in Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, (London: Verso, 2018), p.6, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, p.32

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

centred. However, there are further issues. This attitude may well prove dismissive, again looking comparatively to what are accepted as fuller ideologies.

Indeed, it seems unclear why such concepts as ‘the people’ or ‘the elite’ should be seen as empty signifiers, at least in absolute terms. Or at least these are arguably not any emptier than the concepts in liberalism of ‘liberty’, ‘the governed’, or ‘citizenry’. An answer is that perhaps the concepts in liberalism and populism are both not empty, but liberalism has been studied for longer and therefore we are more aware of what these concepts are. As we saw earlier, Canovan argued that “there has been no self-conscious international populist movement which might have attempted to control or limit the term's reference, and as a result those who have used it have been able to attach to it a wide variety of meanings”, whilst other concepts accepted as ideology, such as liberalism, have undergone this process.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps one could also say that we are comparing populism in practice to liberalism in theory. Indeed, in many instances populist actors are most likely attempting to appeal to the voters by claiming to speak for the undefined and potentially empty signifier of ‘the people’, but in similar ways a liberal figure of kinds may do the same, demanding ‘more freedom’, which is arguably just as undefined and empty. Yet, we know that ‘freedom’ might refer to a wealth of political philosophy on liberty, but we lack a frame of reference of the same extent for ‘the people’.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it would be unfair to dismiss populism on these grounds, simply because we do not know enough about it.

Moreover, all concepts, all words even, are empty signifiers at first. ‘The people’ is as much of an empty signifier as those of ‘positive or negative liberty’ when Isaiah Berlin first introduced them.<sup>68</sup> It is then by the sheer act of meticulously studying them that we assign real or fuller (as opposed to ‘empty’) meanings to them. However, it may well be argued that a key difference is that populism has been studied abundantly and arguably still no universally accepted signifier has been given for concepts such as ‘the people’, whereas a rough general consensus for concepts of ‘liberty’ can be found, hence why one may dismiss the first as empty. However, it seems that studies precisely focused on the meaning of ‘the people’ do yield (albeit various) descriptions of it that are not empty.<sup>69</sup>

#### *‘The people’ as an empty signifier, or not*

Some initially optimistic news to the idea of ‘the people’ being an empty signifier is that no matter what criteria someone gives on who ‘the people’ are they are bound to end up with a paradox on the lines of “who are the people that decide who the people are?”. For example,

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<sup>66</sup> Canovan, 1981, p.5

<sup>67</sup> The concept of liberty is famously associated with Isaiah Berlin, e.g., Berlin, 1969, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press or Berlin, 2002, *Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. For ‘freedom’ in general, see for example David Schmidtz and Carmen Pavel, (eds.), 2018, *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom*, Oxford University Press or Philip Pettit 2001, *A Theory of Freedom*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>68</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 1969, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, pp. 118–172.

<sup>69</sup> Paulina Ochoa Espejo, 2017, ‘Populism and the Idea of the People’ in Kaltwasser et al, 2017, is a great overview on theories on the term ‘the people’, which we are here comparing in terms of emptiness to ‘liberty’.

let's take the interpretations of 'the people' as either the sum total of the citizenry or the democratic electorate. But who decides who is a citizen or a voter? One may answer something on the lines of 'the government', but who decides who the government is? The answer would be 'the citizens or voters', and so on and so forth. There are many paradoxes of this nature highlighted in the literature, slightly differing in scope.<sup>70</sup> Answers to the paradox may yield different results, but the two main ones seem to be a *historical* account of the people and a *hypothetical* account of the people, both of which try to move away from describing 'the people' as a determinate group of people, else one risks getting trapped in those paradoxes. The divergence in accounts could be taken to imply that 'the people' is indeed empty, but one could argue that having different definitions does not make a signifier empty, or if it did arguably the concept of 'liberty', which also can have different definitions, would still be just as empty.

The *historical* account of the people sees 'the people' as indeterminate, but encourages to "think of it as contingent political movements that surge from demands of actually existing groups of citizens who organize to claim their rights from the state, or to redress wrongs done to the poor, the vulnerable, or the oppressed". These popular movements "often become a racial, religious, or national 'us' defined partially by the exclusion of a racially, religiously, or nationally different 'them'".<sup>71</sup> 'The people' represents different groups in different circumstances and "can be reconstructed retrospectively from the history of political struggles" depending on what context you are looking.

The *hypothetical* version, instead, sees 'the people' not as a collection of individuals, but rather "a normative guide that specifies the terms of cooperation within a legal order. [...] 'The people' then, is hypothetical: a counterfactual idealization that allows us to evaluate the legitimacy of legal norms."<sup>72</sup> A middle ground between the historical and hypothetical account could be found in what is named the *procedural* view of democratic legitimacy, whereby 'the people' is seen as "a series of events in which individuals participate, rather than a specific collection of individuals or a disembodied legal procedure".<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> There are many paradoxes of this kind, all with their own different nuances, but roughly revolving around the idea of "who decides who is who?". Some of these are 'the problem of the unit' (Robert Dahl, 1989, *Democracy and Its Critics*, London: Yale University Press, pp.195-197), 'the democratic paradox' (Chantal Mouffe, 2000, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso), 'the paradox of popular sovereignty' (Bernard Yack, 2001, 'Popular Sovereignty and Nationalism' in *Political Theory*, vol. 39, no. 4, Sage, p.522-523), 'the paradox of democratic legitimacy' (Seyla Benhabib, 2006, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 32-36), 'the paradox of politics' (Bonnie Honig, 2007, 'Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory', in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no. 1, pp.2-15), the Boundary Problem (Frederick G. Whelan, 1983, "Democratic Theory and the Boundary Problem," in *Nomos XXV: Liberal Democracy*, eds. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman, New York University Press, pp.13-46) and 'the problem of constituting the demos' (Robert E. Goodin, 2007, 'Enfranchising All Affected Interests, and Its Alternatives', in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 1, p. 40). See Espejo in Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p.755 for a good summary.

<sup>71</sup> Espejo in Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p.758.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.760.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 762.

*No difference between ideologies via empty signifiers*

This brief excursion into the study of ‘the people’ is not for the purpose of pinpointing exactly what ‘the people’ means, but rather to show that the signifiers populism relies on are not necessarily empty, partially countering the claim that if populism meant something we would have figured it out by now. At least, it goes to show that although populism may well be vague – in the sense that there is no general consensus on its definition – but it does not follow from a concept or signifier being vague that it must be empty. Mudde himself acknowledges this: “while the signifier is certainly very flexible, in my ideological approach it is not completely empty: first of all, as populism is essentially based on a moral divide, the people are “pure”; and while purity is a fairly vague term, and the specific understanding is undoubtedly culturally determined, it does provide some content to the signifier”.<sup>74</sup>

However, it still seems unclear why then populism would be seen as different to what are referred to as fuller ideologies, if the same literature<sup>75</sup> rejects the idea that populism is based on empty signifiers (unlike Laclau and Mouffe). If ‘the people’ is not an empty signifier, and neither is ‘liberty’, how are populism and liberalism so different in M&K’s view? The key word for them is morphology, in how populism appears. Perhaps, while in theory signifiers such as ‘the people’ are not empty, in practice they are. The claim that signifiers such as ‘the people’ are used by political agents as a form of demagoguery would not raise many eyebrows. Populism in political discourse could be argued to base itself on signifiers that are in principle not empty, but are used as simple buzz-words which deprive them of their meaning, rendering them emptier signifiers.<sup>76</sup> However, this has two issues. Firstly, it is still not clear why this would set populism and other ideologies apart, as the same process of emptying a signifier could arguably occur with concepts such as ‘liberty’ used as a buzz-word, for instance. Secondly, dismissing populism as not a full ideology because of its morphology in practice would still leave open the risks of not appropriately challenging it theoretically. This point will be further elaborated later on.

*Other options: not an ideology*

On a similar line, one can present other valuable interpretations of populism which would also frame it not as an ideology, bypassing the thin- and thick-centre debate or comparisons with fuller ideologies. As mentioned earlier, the very same author to have coined the term “thin-centred ideology”, Michael Freeden, argues that populism is not an ideology. He presents three criteria which contradistinguish ideologies: “(1) long-standing, relatively durable core concepts and ideas, then (2) a more plural set of adjacent concepts that pull them towards diverse ideological variants, and finally (3) an outer band of looser contingent ideas and events on their peripheries that serve as the interface between happenings in the

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<sup>74</sup> Mudde in Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> Or at least Mudde.

<sup>76</sup> Although a fairly common thought, Weyland is seen here as the main figure for seeing populism as a political strategy. See Kurt Weyland, 2001, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” in *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 1–22.

concrete world and the more general core concepts”.<sup>77</sup> Populism would miss the mark on these. It is not well-articulated enough nor “the product of long processes of measured and reflective political thinking”;<sup>78</sup> it is structured “as to rely systematically on other ideological positions to fill it in”.<sup>79</sup> Substantially and morphologically populism lacks self-awareness and -reflection, and “the truncated nature of populisms seldom evinces such aspirations or potential [...]: it is simply ideologically too scrawny even to be thin!”<sup>80</sup> Instead, Freeden hints at populism more closely fitting the description of *mentalité*, an aggregate of intellectual habits, beliefs and psychological dispositions that are characteristic to a group.<sup>81</sup>

Such an interpretation is by no means optimistic of populism’s chances of being a coherent ideology or theory, but it still holds the door ever so slightly ajar to analyses of populism that go beyond the real-life context (for better or worse). A *mentalité* could have theoretical aspects that hold abstractly, although it is still clear that Freeden’s approach lends itself primarily to analyses of populism in practice. Nonetheless, other interpretations, such as those of Kurt Weyland or Pierre-André Taguieff to name only two, portray populism even further away from the label of ideology, instead seeing it respectively as a political strategy or a rhetoric style, with attached normatively negative assessments.

For Weyland, populism is “best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers”.<sup>82</sup> As in line with previous summaries of the literature,<sup>83</sup> for Weyland populism boils down to the manipulation of the masses by the elites, despite its grassroots discourse.<sup>84</sup> In the end then “even though it is held up as a blow against the corruption of the existing majority, it may well end up accelerating, rather than curing, corruption once in power because it needs to distribute favors and use the state’s resources to”.<sup>85</sup>

Alternatively, populism is not just a strategy deployed by politicians, but part of a rhetorical style of a style of politics. In this sense – as Taguieff suggests – such a style is “one capable of manipulating a whole range of symbolic material and of taking root in a number of different ideological positions, taking on the political coloration of its surroundings”,<sup>86</sup> which is in line with description of thin-centredness. However, Taguieff adds that “inseparably from this, we also present populism as a set of rhetorical operations, deployed through the symbolic use of a number of social representations: gestures of appeal to the people presuppose a basic consensus on who ‘the people’ (*dēmos* or *ethnos*) are, on what they are worth, and on what

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<sup>77</sup> Freeden, 2017, p.5

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

<sup>82</sup> Weyland, 2001, p. 14

<sup>83</sup> See Jan-Werner Müller earlier

<sup>84</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, p.31

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, analysing Weyland’s view

<sup>86</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Populism and Political Science: From Conceptual Illusions to Real Problems’, in *Vingtième Siècle, Revue d’Histoire*, vol. 56, no. 4, SciencesPo Les Presses, 1997, p.4

they want”,<sup>87</sup> which is in some ways reminiscent of the previously mentioned discussion on populism as based on empty signifiers. However, where this for Laclau could serve a positive role for democratisation, Taguieff sees this more as a “tool of illegitimacy”.<sup>88</sup>

However, even with all these very worthwhile alternatives, the question still remains on the extent to which populism holds a different status of ideology or not-ideology in comparison to more readily accepted ideologies such as liberalism or nationalism. Even when this is explicitly addressed, as with Freedman for example, it is still not generally accepted why liberalism or nationalism could not also be a *mentalité*, at least not in some occasions. A similar point could be made of why liberalism or nationalism could not also be – at least sometimes – a political strategy or rhetoric style. It is conceivable that a politician might wave high the liberalist flag not for pure ideological interest but as a strategy to gain vote, or making references to the importance of liberalist ideological claims not because of their ideological worth but as part of that politician’s rhetoric. Of course, these authors mentioned here go into a lot more detail in their views than what could be given justice here, however such uncertainty still remains. Moreover, to further make consensus on this difficult, there is also no agreement on what populism is compared to, as for example Freedman points to nationalism as a thin-centred ideology (though not as thin as populism), while M&K instead see nationalism as a thick type of ideology. Nonetheless, leading from what has been seen so far, it would still be useful to provide a summary of the options for conceptualising populism, to serve as a basis for analysis of what implications such approaches might have, of what risks we might run by taking certain interpretations of populism.

### *Options for conceptualising populism*

Perhaps some of the issues mentioned until now can be summarised by hinting at Giovanni Sartori’s ladder of abstraction.<sup>89</sup> These issues may indeed arise when comparing populism and other ideologies (e.g., liberalism) on different conceptual levels. It seems likely and unsurprising that if one compares the morphology of populism in how it appears in practice with the morphology of liberalism or other ideologies as abstract theories, one will conclude that they are very different.

In any case, building on all these arguments, these seem the options, either:

**(i)** there is no such a thing as a thin-centred ideology

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<sup>87</sup> Taguieff, 1997, p.4

<sup>88</sup> Pierre-André Taguieff, 2002, *L’Illusion Populiste. De l’Archaïque au médiatique*, Paris, Éditions Berg International, p.21

<sup>89</sup> Giovanni Sartori, ‘Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics’, in *The American Political Science Association*, 1970, vol. 64, no. 4, pp.1036-1045, at least in the sense of looking at the conceptual level in which we are operating when discussing populism in relation to when discussing other ideologies.

(a) and populism is like any other ideology (*like* socialism, liberalism, fascism...), which is an option as the *best possible* populism;

(b) but populism is not an ideology (*unlike* socialism, liberalism, fascism...), see Freeden, Weyland, Taguieff;

or (ii) there are such things as thin and thick-centred ideologies

(a) and populism is a thick-centred ideology (*like* socialism, liberalism, fascism...). This would be the most fitting option for a *best possible* populism;

(b) and populism is a thin-centred ideology (*unlike* socialism, liberalism, fascism...), see M&K.

For the sake of convenience, let's group i.b and ii.b under the term of *pessimistic theories of populism*, seeing as they treat populism not as a fully-fledged ideology, with limited scope and content. Conversely i.a and ii.a will be *optimistic theories of populism*. There may be many issues with optimistic theories of populism, however, this section of the research focuses more on the potential negative implications of pessimistic theories.

*Pessimistic theories of populism* are those that see populism as different to ideologies such as socialism, liberalism, fascism, because it is (i.b) not an ideology and/or based on empty signifiers, or because it is (ii.b) a thin-centred ideology. The counterargument to pessimistic theories of populism is twofold: they might be wrong; and even if conceptually right they may say very little about how one should treat populism (and other thin-centred ideologies or non-ideologies in general).

This pessimistic/optimistic distinction made here is not explicitly meant to be parallel to the distinction made in the literature between minimalist and maximalist theories of populism, although links between are inescapable. Whereas the former distinction is presented here in this project simply in specific terms of whether populism is seen as an ideology in theory, the latter (minimalist/maximalist) – which is often seen in the literature – is broadly speaking instead more about recognising populism in practice. Minimalist theories “aim to sharpen the tools of interpretation that will enable us to recognize the phenomenon when we see it. They aim to extract some minimal conditions from several cases of populism for analytical purposes”.<sup>90</sup> Instead, maximalist theories “want to develop a theory of populism as representative construction that has more than a merely analytical function”.<sup>91</sup>

It should also be made clear that pessimism and optimism are here not at all meant in a normative sense, nor a commentary of the value of these theories. This is simply referring to whether the theory portrays populism as a full ideology; in other words how optimistic or pessimistic the theory is towards the possibility for populism to be a full ideology.

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<sup>90</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, p.28

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

*How useful are pessimistic theories of populism?*

Whether pessimistic theories of populism are wrong or not is a bigger debate than what is feasible to deal with here. However, regardless of if pessimistic theories of populism are right or wrong, it would seem unfair to write that pessimistic theories of populism are not greatly insightful. Mouffe and Laclau's description of populism could be argued to be a pessimistic theory (again, pessimistic in terms of whether it ticks the box of being an ideology; earlier it was presented how Laclau and Mouffe are actually optimistic in the more usual sense towards populism in normative terms), nonetheless they dedicate a lot of work in looking at how one should then treat populism, concluding that it can be a useful tool to keep in check the health of a democracy. However, by looking at populism as part of the democratic process, they expand the aspect of their theory which treats populism as not a full ideology, tackling it conceptually in more depth, but also discussing normative implications. This is also present in Urbinati's work, where "an explicit connection of populism to democracy" is seen as "the motor of the maximal theory of populism, which offers not only a conception but also a practical template for the making of populist movements and governments".<sup>92</sup> In other words, option i.b states that populism is not an ideology, but it does not necessarily imply that it cannot be something else which is self-standing and influential. It states what populism is not, not what it is, thus allowing further analyses and insights.

However, for M&K this is not the case. By claiming that the uncertainty and variety in the phenomena of populism is in itself key to its definition and that populism is a thin-centred ideology which can easily transform and take different meanings, no real template for populism is given. A theory of the type ii.a would state what populism is (i.e., a thin-centred ideology), but without great analysis on how one should treat a thin-centred ideology. A fair counter to this could easily be made by stating that this is a starting point on which to build. M&K's (or other pessimistic theory's) scope is to have a pessimistic theory conceptually, but it does not imply that this cannot be elaborated further normatively, even if they do not do so right away. However, there is (at least) one more important question to ask before accepting pessimistic theories of populism, which can be summarised as a "what if?".

*What if populism is something?*

This title is of course provocative, as no-one is claiming that populism is nothing. The enquiry made here is on whether populism is something *more*, such as a thick-centred ideology (if one was to assume the existence of such a thing) based not on empty signifiers but on real meanings. Better put, this research will not even tackle *whether or not* it is something more, but what implications there are in the off-chance that it is something more. This is not an argument about populism conceptually, but about the strategy one might have when looking

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<sup>92</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p.117.



at these matters. For the sake of argument, let's assume the existence of the *best possible* populism, i.e., a full, thick-centred ideology with real meanings. Pessimistic theories of populism would then be conceptually mistaken. However, perhaps more importantly that this, they could bring a big risk: not tackling effectively something which could be detrimental for democracy.

*What if populism is bad and we dismiss it?*

The dangers of populism are outspoken, although perhaps not universally agreed. Populism could run the risk of disfiguring democracy. Some scholars argue so, due to “the fact that it is an ideology based on trust through faith more than trust through free and open deliberation (and thus also dissent) among the followers, and between them and the representative”.<sup>93</sup> Similar claims are those who single-out the anti-pluralist nature of populism as what leads to a prevention of open public deliberation.<sup>94</sup> If this was indeed true, then it is vitally important to study the contents of this (allegedly thick-centred) ideology, in order to better understand where it goes wrong and how to challenge it in terms of content. With a pessimistic theory of populism, however, one does not look at the content, because populism is based on empty-signifiers or because what matters is how populism transforms into other ideologies. Therefore, there is the risk of letting a democracy-hindering content-based ideology run rampant.<sup>95</sup>

*What if populism is good or neutral and we dismiss it?*

A similar argument could be made also if populism was to be argued as normatively good or neutral to democracy. Laclau and Mouffe have highlighted the potential of populism of being an emancipatory force, as “populism can help achieve radical democracy by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo”,<sup>96</sup> which can have a hugely positive effect in certain types or stages of democracies. Populism is argued to be a corrective for democracy, or a “democratization of democracy”.<sup>97</sup> Also, speaking more generally, in the general framework of liberal democracy's free and open exchange of ideas, the claims of populism should be assessed, they are part of the democratic process. So, perhaps, populism can be argued not to be a threat to democracy, perhaps to even be helpful to it. Chapter III will look more closely at the relation between populism and democracy. However, even in this case, pessimistic theories of populism may run the risk of being dismissive of what populism may or may not

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<sup>93</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, pp.117-118.

<sup>94</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), is an example of this.

<sup>95</sup> Which is normatively problematic if we assume we want to preserve democracy as it is. I'm also not implying that populism ought to be shut down, merely that if we wanted to challenge, understand, inform, or gain from its contents, a pessimistic theory of populism does not engage with them sufficiently.

<sup>96</sup> in M&K, 2017, p.79

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., as seen with Laclau, for whom populism based on 'empty signifiers' may actually help this emancipation.

be saying. Even in this case, one should look at the contents of populist claims, and not shrug them off as conceptually undefined and reliant on other ideologies, like much of the literature arguably seem to do.

*What if populism is not something and we give it too much attention?*

An important counter to the claims made to these critiques to pessimistic theories of populism is that a similar risk is being run by adopting a more optimistic theory of populism if indeed populism is not a thick-centred ideology (so, the counter-argument would be ‘what if populism is something less?’). Again for the sake of argument, let’s indeed assume that populism is based on empty-signifiers and/or necessarily transforms and transcends into fuller ideologies. If we were to give a lot of attention to the claims of populism, we may well be, first of all, wasting our time and efforts (as there are no ‘real’ substantial claims being made), and, secondly, somehow by misinterpreting it we might contribute to populism running rampant (which we do not want if we assume it is a threat to a democracy in need of defending). Arguably, this is an equally likely and unwanted risk to that ran by pessimistic theories of populism mentioned earlier.

However, the scope of this research is not to argue in favour of pessimistic or optimistic theories, but to raise the issue that certain pessimistic theories might be based on too hasty comparisons between populism and other ideologies. This last section has been a note on potential normative implications of our research strategy leading from this hasty comparison. Whether there are normative implications of our research strategy if we adopt optimistic theories is important to look into, but goes beyond the scope of this chapter, and does not deny those similar implications of adopting pessimistic theories of populism.

*The project so far*

This chapter has done many things. It first of all introduced a history of the term ‘populism’ in the literature. From Russian peasantism, to American provincialism, passing through developing countries’ anti-colonialism, populism was initially applied to several individual contexts, creating thusly an unclear idea of populism as a whole. From the 1960’s, attempts of finding *the* definition of the concept – the foot (the definition) to fit Cinderella’s shoe (the term ‘populism’) –were as insightful as they were ultimately unsuccessful. Secondly, the chapter saw how given an (alleged) increase of populism in the real-life political scene has stimulated a return to the analysis of populism in current times. Looking at the current literature on the topic, a general consensus comes across of populism as not a full ideology. Fourthly, the chapter focussed on partially assessing the way in which populism has been claimed to be a ‘thin-centred ideology’, which in general applies to other views that look at a very minimal and bare-bone conception of populism. Such views frame populism as something closer to an attitude, perhaps, rather than an ideology with specific analysable claims. This may well be true, but in certain cases mentioned in the chapter this is argued by looking comparatively at what are seen as (more) clearly-defined ideologies, and then seeing what is missing in populism. This leads to the conclusion that populism misses a fuller core of fundamental claims. However, it seems that this approach might well be assuming that

something is missing in the first place, thereby influencing such conclusions. Upon closer inspection, this chapter argued that populism could be claimed to not differ enough (at least not in the terms mentioned) from other ideologies to grant it the status of 'thin-centredness'. This not only has conceptual implications on defining populism, but also implications on how one goes by studying populism. Lastly, this chapter has highlighted the potential risk of dismissing potentially real claims of the *best possible* populism (i.e., a potentially thick-centred populism), and what this risk could imply. It is worth not turning to analysing what the potential ideological claims would be. With the (not confirmed) assumption that populism is *something more* than the current literature suggests, the project will now look at what this *best possible* populism would be.

## Chapter II: Defining populism's potential ideological claims

*A theorist walks into a bar and asks: "Is beer better on tap or bottled?"*

*The bartender replies: "I'd say on tap, would you like one?"*

*The theorist replies: "No, no, I don't drink"*

Having introduced the 'feel' that the current literature has of populism, namely that it is a fairly limited theoretical concept, a thin-centred ideology, or even not an ideology, and having then assessed the potential risks of dismissing populism as such (in case it is something more), it is worth now spending some time analysing what populism would be if it was an (thick-centred) ideology. The initial aim here is not to argue that populism is an ideology with concrete ideological claims, but to treat it as such in order to gain specific insights on its nature. The chapter will do so first of all by looking more specifically at what makes an ideology and will propose a potential method (that of universalizability) in order to assess whether a claim could be an ideological one. Secondly, based on the literature of the previous chapter, this chapter will list the various potential ideological claims populism *could have* – if it was more than a thin-centred ideology. Thirdly, having presented a method for assessing whether a claim is ideological, and having then presented the potential claims populism has, the chapter looks at applying the two together, to gain insights on which (if any) of those claims could be understood as ideological, rather than simply practice-based claims. This will allow for a stronger awareness later in the research that insofar as populism is a thick ideology, it is not unique and distinct enough to not collapse into other ideologies related to democracy, and that the only ways to avoid this collapse would either make populism less than an ideology or a theoretical flawed one.

It is not too controversial to state that populist leaders, or at least those who vote them, seem convinced of their ideas and ideological claims. Countering populism by claiming that it lacks ideological claims strong enough for it to gain the status of a thick-centred ideology is one approach, which is also the most common one in the current literature on populism. However, it is worth taking another approach which could be more convincing, namely tackling populism 'from within'. If we were to assume that populism is a full ideology with genuine ideological claims, it would be possible to more unbiasedly discover and question those ideological claims. Ultimately, if we assumed and tried to defend the *best possible* populism but we are still left with theoretical issues, this can be an even stronger point of critique than whatever one can conclude from the starting point that populism does not amount to much ideologically.

In the normative discussions that might follow from a theory of populism in relation to democracy there are three possible scenarios:

- I) One or more of the populist ideological claims are found to clash with the standards of democratic dialogue; therefore, populism is bad for democracy (regardless of how populism is put in practice);
- II) No ideological claims clash with the standards of democratic dialogue but how populism is put in practice does;
- III) No ideological claims clash with the standards of democratic dialogue and how populism is put in practice also does not clash with these.

By assuming that there are ideological claims in populism and by analysing them independently of populism-in-practice, we gain significant insights of the three scenarios above.

Kirk Hawkins, who spurred the creation of the *Global Populism Database*, is one of many to have cautious recommendations when discussing populism. One of his answers to how to respond to populism is “to avoid giving in to populism’s tendency to polarise. It is natural to feel threatened if populists accuse you of being an ‘enemy of the people’, but responding in-kind risks losing the very thing worth defending: civil discourse and liberal democracy. It can also play into populists’ claims of elite conspiracy. We should defend democratic institutions, but we should do so without attacking populists”.<sup>1</sup>

He also suggests that perhaps the “most important recommendation” is to “take seriously the populist frustrations. Populism responds to grievances with what the American historian Richard Hofstadter called a ‘*paranoid mentality*’. But those concerns are often real and have a basis in liberal democratic values and understandings of equality and fairness. If politics appears to benefit some at the expense of others, those at the losing end will feel like the rules of democracy have been broken”.<sup>2</sup>

This is akin to how experts suggest how one should to interact with conspiracy theorists.<sup>3</sup> Psychology professor Sander van der Linden of Cambridge University, specialising in how individuals’ belief systems change with misinformation, argues that confronting people with hard evidence or “telling people that they don't know what they're talking about, or that they're wrong, is not the best way to go about it”, as it just “creates more defensive responses”.<sup>4</sup> Rather than convincing the other of one’s own opinion, the starting point should be the other’s world view. In van der Linden’s examples, “changing the minds of climate deniers is impossible without affirming – to some extent – their worldview”,<sup>5</sup> approaching people in terms of where they are at. A general description among scholars that look at conspiracy theories suggests that conspiracy theorists end up stuck in “self-sustaining belief

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Hawking, 2019, ‘Don’t try to silence populists – listen to them’, in *The Guardian*, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2019/mar/09/dont-try-to-silence-populists-listen-to-them>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Not that I am suggesting that conspiracy theory believers and populists are on the same level.

<sup>4</sup> Meryl Thomas and Marco Silva, 2022, ‘Climate change: Hot to talk to a denier’, in *BBC*, available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-61844299>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

bubbles from which other voices have been filtered out”.<sup>6</sup> Any challenge from outside the bubble is “dismissed either as ‘fake news’ or as part of the conspiracy”, which is labelled as the self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most clear recommendation on trying to engage with conspiracy theorist from within the bubble is the rather scarily named idea of ‘cognitive infiltration’, which is the idea that “government agents, acting either anonymously or openly, should enter Internet chat rooms, social networks or real-space groups”<sup>8</sup> and should attempt within this context to “undermine percolating conspiracy theories by raising doubts about their factual premises, causal logic, or implications for action, political or otherwise”.<sup>9</sup> Without having to be so drastic, there is the general suggestion that instead of ‘externally’ simply presenting one’s truthful narrative to conspiracy theorists again and again, it is a better strategy to understand and approach a conspiracy theory ‘internally’, starting instead from its foundations. An example of this is for example given as Gerald Posner’s book on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.<sup>10</sup> Instead of simply repeating the established narrative of the events, “over the course of five hundred pages Posner carefully, patiently and systematically dismantles every major Conspiracy Theory about the assassination”, starting with and then challenging the various potential claims that conspiracy theorists were making about it.<sup>11</sup> In a similar way then, it may be helpful to approach the question of what populism is with the starting point being to seriously look at the ideological claims being made by populists, and to not start with the assumption that these are – at least not inherently or theoretically – wrong.

Generally speaking, the parallel between populism and conspiracy theories is an interesting one. Certain behaviour which may be stereotypically associated with the average populist does not differ in many respects to how a climate change denier might act, for example. Scholars of climate change politics have suggested how climate scepticism arose as a conservative counter-movement against environmentalism which would “erode confidence in the science on which environmental concerns were based by arguing that the scientists had become politicised and were using their research, or allowing it to be used, to advance an anti-corporate political agenda”.<sup>12</sup> This is comparable perhaps to the stereotypical populist attitude towards the governmental and intellectual elite, seen as corrupt and manipulative of the people’s interests for their own agenda. Moreover, suggestions can be made that individuals turn to populism in a struggle for identity, creating an image of ‘the people’ (as opposed to ‘the elite’) upon which they reflect a need for belonging. This would also be parallel to ideas about climate change deniers, where “in an era of intense ideological division,

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<sup>6</sup> Quassim Cassam, 2019, *Conspiracy Theories*, Cambridge: Polity p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>9</sup> Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, 2009, ‘Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures’, in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol.17, pp.224-225. The effectiveness of such a strategy is perhaps usurpingly put into question by other scholars as it may create even more distrust by conspiracy theorists towards those outside their bubble.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Posner, 1994, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, London: Anchor Book, found in Cassam, p.64.

<sup>11</sup> Cassam, p.64.

<sup>12</sup> Clive Hamilton, 2010, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, Allen&Unwin, p.104.

rejection of global warming had for some [...] become a means of consolidating and signalling their cultural identity, in the way that beliefs about patriotism, welfare and musical tastes do".<sup>13</sup> Clearly, although it is an interesting source of inspiration for further research, this goes way beyond the scope of the project here. The main focus here is populism in theoretical terms, but it was worth pointing out that the project's approach of taking the *best possible* populism as a starting point, rather than assuming populism is wrong to start with, could make any potential criticisms more accessible or understandable.

*Ideology-as-thought*

If populism had genuine ideological claims, what claims would these be? To answer this, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by ideological claims, and thus by ideology. As with many terms in political philosophy, there are a number of interpretations. A rather comprehensive analysis can be summarised in the table that follows made by John Gerring with all possible differences in analyses of 'ideology' in political philosophy and science:<sup>14</sup>

A Comprehensive Definitional Framework		
1. Location	(b) Subordinate	(c) Abstraction
(a) Thought	5. Function	(d) Specificity
(b) Behavior	(a) Explaining	(e) Hierarchy
(c) Language	(b) Repressing	(f) Stability
2. Subject Matter	(c) Integrating	(g) Knowledge
(a) Politics	(d) Motivating	(h) Sophistication
(b) Power	(e) Legitimizing	(i) Facticity
(c) The world at-large	6. Motivation	(j) Simplicity
3. Subject	(a) Interest-based	(k) Distortion
(a) Social class	(b) Non-interest based	(l) Conviction
(b) Any group	(c) Non-expedient	(m) Insincerity
(c) Any group or individual	7. Cognitive/affective structure	(n) Dogmatism
4. Position	(a) Coherence (internal)	(o) Consciousness
(a) Dominant	(b) Contrast (external)	(p) Unconsciousness

For the purpose of the research done in this chapter, ideology is firstly taken to be 'located' in thought, along the lines of the "traditional, common sense, approach" which sees ideology

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<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, p.108. Hamilton's work could be used to further compare what drives people to populism with the psychology of climate change deniers. His book cited here provides excellent analysis of the psychological reasons that drive people to deny climate change and the psychological coping mechanisms which allow them to defend their position against all criticism.

<sup>14</sup> John Gerring, 1997, 'Ideology: A Definitional Analysis', in *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, Sage Publications, p. 967. This chapter will only discuss the 'location' of ideology, which does not do justice to this interesting table, please refer to the original source for more on definitions of ideology.

“as a set of beliefs, values, principles, attitudes, and/or ideals – in short, as a type of political thinking”,<sup>120</sup> rather than a way of behaving or way of carrying out discourse.

It is important to clarify here that this is not a question of *what* ideology is, but *where* one can see it best. In most if not all its definitions, ideology is seen as a set of beliefs. The debate tends to be in how one can most accurately analyse what these beliefs are, with the options being in thought (e.g., ‘what does the populist think of the concept of representation?’), in behaviour (e.g., ‘who does the populist vote?’) or language (e.g. ‘why does the populist keep talking about the elite?’).

The interpretation of ideology-as-thought matches that in the discussions of the previous chapter, where for example Mudde and Kaltwasser’s definition of an ideology was seen as “a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society. Simply stated, it is a view of how the world is and should be”.<sup>121</sup> Ideology is here understood as foremostly a set of ideas, it is thought. What this chapter is looking at are the ideological claims of populism, so also focused on ideology as a set of ideas and beliefs, ideology-as-thought. That is not to say that ideology cannot indeed be described as or is devoid of behavioural or linguistic context. Indeed, it could well be that “ideologies direct, or at least influence, political behavior”,<sup>122</sup> however it seems a step too far to claim that “it is impossible, therefore, to study ideological phenomena as purely ideational”.<sup>123</sup> The opposite would also hold, namely that it is impossible to study ideological phenomena as purely behavioural, given that political behaviour is claimed to be directed, or at least influenced, by ideologies.

In terms of the idea of ideology-as-language, some argue that “the rules, regularities, and principles of any ideology [...] derive not so much from [the values and beliefs of ideologists] but rather from the linguistic norms in which they are embedded”. So, for example, “conservatives [...] might be defined as those who evaluate the political world with a particular set of linguistic symbols, rather than those who believe in God, family, and country”.<sup>124</sup> Applying this to populism does have some appeal. A populist could have terms such as ‘the people’, ‘the elite’, ‘the will of the people’ in their lexicon, and interpret political life using primarily these terms. It is here not important if they actually believe in the importance of the will of the people or that the elites are corrupt, what matters is that this is the language they know, and the language they use to explain to themselves and others what is going on politically. This can be a fruitful avenue of research of the nature of populist ideas, yet again this goes beyond the proper aims of this project, which is trying to analyse populism whilst giving it as much worth in terms of ideas and ideological claims as possible. Nonetheless, more often than not, the focus in definitions of populist ideological claims (the beliefs) tends to be at the very least influenced by analyses of populist behaviour and language. Of course, that is the case, as it is hard to detach oneself from what we see and

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<sup>120</sup> Gerring, p. 967.

<sup>121</sup> M&K, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Gerring, p. 967.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.



hear in the real world. When thinking of any ideological claim, or any belief, we innately see what happens in the real world and try and distil it to a higher level of the ladder of abstraction. However, following what was written on how to approach someone with a radically different worldview, it may be useful to make inferences on populist ideological claims not from our perspective of the real world, with our biases of how we experience populist behaviour and language, but from the populist's perspective. As mentioned, populists seem convinced of their ideas and ideological claims, which presumes that they would also be convinced that they have ideas and ideological claims in the first place, not just in terms of behaviour and language, but as a self-perceived coherent set of beliefs.

### *Negative interpretations of ideology*

The picture drawn so far of ideology is of (at least) thought relating to (at least) political relations. This is true too for political theory or political philosophy, however ideology has a more definitive normative nature to it (how things ought to be). For the purpose of this project it could be argued that a political theory can explain, for example, how a certain political mechanism like distributive justice looks like (regardless of whether it should be implemented or not), a political philosophy might explain what justice is, ideology is instead more motivated on why such ideas of justice ought to be implemented. As seen previously, this is broadly consistent to how ideology is mostly understood within the literature on populism: ideology a body of normative ideas about the human nature and society as well as the organization and purposes of society. Nonetheless, it is clear that just on these terms there can be significant overlap between ideology, political theory, and political philosophy. Moreover, these terms are and can often used interchangeably, referring simply to a plethora of hues for any set of thoughts relating to political relations. This distinction as written here is presented with no illusion of introducing a breakthrough of classification of these concepts, but as a stopgap explanation to why this project often refers to 'ideology' rather than other terms. This is because in the search for the best possible populist theory one is trying to give as many different strengths to this set of thoughts of political relations, therefore it having also a normative element would be yet an extra important element for this best possible populism, i.e., the most theoretically coherent and possible. A set of thoughts that not explains what certain political relations look like (what was referred to here as political theory) and what they mean (political philosophy) instinctively seems only improved if one adds a further normative dimension to this. This is what is referred to here as 'ideology', for the lack of a better word perhaps.

This definition as presented for now is bound to raise eyebrows. Surely it is far too flattering for such a contested concept as ideology. Indeed, seminal works have been highly critical of ideologies, so now claiming that ideology can be so theoretically full and multileveled seems exaggerated (but this is precisely the point, as we will see). Indeed, in (especially but not limited to) less recent times "'ideology' was almost always used pejoratively. It was, as the philosophers used to put it, a 'boo-word', [...] describing something as 'ideological' or saying

that something was an 'ideology' was a way of condemning it"<sup>125</sup>. Michael Oakeshott's works can be a good example for negative conceptions of ideology. Oakeshott's understanding of ideology is not too far off from what has said already. It is still a "set of related abstract principles [which] supplies in advance of the activity of attending to the arrangements of a society a formulated end to be pursued, and in so doing it provides a means of distinguishing between those desires which ought to be encouraged and those which ought to be suppressed or redirected".<sup>126</sup> For Oakeshott, ideologies present abstract ideas (which can vary from the simple idea of 'freedom' to more complex systems of ideas like 'liberalism') and suggest political activity is "the enterprise of seeing that the arrangements of a society conform to or reflect the chosen abstract idea".<sup>127</sup> The crux of the criticism is that this relies on such principles being premeditated, "the understanding of what it is to be pursued is independent of how it is to be pursued".<sup>128</sup> However, Oakeshott is sceptical that this is really how ideologies are formed, after all our understanding of political activity is always context-dependent, the real political world is inevitably our starting point. Ideology as the sets of belief of what goals to pursue cannot be premeditated and independent "from the manner in which people have been accustomed to go about the business of attending to the arrangements of their society. The pedigree of every political ideology shows it to be the creature, not of premeditation in advance of political activity, but of meditation upon a manner of politics".<sup>129</sup> Political activity comes first, political ideology only follows after, so "far from a political ideology being the quasi-divine parent of political activity, it turns out to be its earthly stepchild".<sup>130</sup> This not only has the implication that those abstract ideas that are ideology hold less theoretical value, but also may further inform theories of populism which see how ideological claims can be used strategically by political actors for personal gain.<sup>131</sup>

On a similar line one can also find a more classical critique of ideology in Karl Marx, though his precise interpretation of ideology is greatly up to debate. Nonetheless, it is clear enough that ideology seen as this normative set of abstract thoughts about political relations only gets us so far as it is precisely too abstract, it cannot be understood without some element grounded in the actual real-life political relations: "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour".<sup>132</sup> So, whereas ideas ought to come from the material to the abstract, not the other way (the way that ideologies work):

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<sup>125</sup> Henry M. Drucker, 1972, 'Marx's Concept of Ideology', in *Philosophy*, vol. 47, no. 180, Cambridge University Press for Royal Institute of Philosophy, p.157

<sup>126</sup> Or at least that is what ideology purports to be, Michale Oakeshott, 1962, *Rationalism in Politics*, Shenvall Press, p.116

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.118-119

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> As seen in Chapter I, Müller, Weyland, Taguieff, Freedden...

<sup>132</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works, 1845-1847, vol. 5, New York: International Publishers, 1976, p.36

*"If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking".<sup>133</sup>*

Not only for Marx is this a flaw in conceptual terms, but it also has negative effects in practice. Similarly to what was hinted to during Oakeshott's analysis, ideologies could then be used rather strategically by political actors, only for Marx this is seen more explicitly in relation to class struggle. Abstract political ideas that are given theoretical independence by ideologists (of the ruling class) end up justifying and expressing the conditions of existence of such class, these ideological claims are then "held up as a standard of life to the individuals of the oppressed class, partly as an intelligent or recognition of domination, partly as the moral means for this domination. It is to be noted here, as in general with ideologists, that they inevitably put a thing upside-down and regard their ideology both as the creative force and as the aim of all social relations, whereas it is only an expression and symptom of these relations".<sup>134</sup> Ideologies thus serve as ways to mislead the non-dominant class and further cement the dominant class, in a manner reminiscent here to negative interpretations of populism seen in the previous chapter.

#### *Why see the best possible populism as an ideology*

Such negative interpretations of ideology raise the question of why this project would present the best possible populism as an ideology. To summarise, negative interpretations of ideology tend to be focused on their real-life impact or on the neglect of real-life in the abstract formulation of ideas. The response to this is twofold, without actually arguing that such criticisms do not hold.

Firstly, a similar move can be made as to the one about the best populism, namely that it does not actually have to be true, but by assuming such a utopic definition one can also learn some limitations of it. Here too then, given that the objective is the same (to see populism's limitation even in its best form, which may or may not be a possible form), one can take the best possible ideology. If it was possible for abstract ideas to come from above onto the material, guiding it purely without them being used strategically, the benefits would be undeniable. Indeed, the criticism is focused mainly on this not being factually possible (or at least not in a way that does not allow negative consequences on the material). However, if we were to assume it was possible, even if this was indeed not possible, one might still gain

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<sup>133</sup> Marx and Engels Collected Works, vol. 5, p.36

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.420

insights on issues populism as an ideology might have in abstract terms too, even as the best populism as a best ideology. The starting point for this project is of difficulties of communication between populists and non-populists. While it is still of course a worthwhile endeavour to analyse the practical and conceptual implications and issues of populist discourse (if one ignores the material), as well as now the practical and conceptual implications and issues of ideological discourse (if one ignores the material), an insight of this project is to analyse whether populism has conceptual issues even if its purest, most context-independent, abstract terms. That is not to say that such terms are possible or correct, there is no denial that context matters, but simply to gain different insights by assuming (without necessarily accepting) these hypothetical abstract terms.

Secondly, precisely because context matters in the formulation of ideologies and thus in the formulation of the best possible populism, the insights which will come through such an analysis of populism as ideology in the most abstract terms will then be also analysed through context. The second part of the project will indeed apply the methodology of contextual political analysis to the case study of the Vote Leave campaign around the UK's Brexit referendum. However, unlike the Marxist criticism of philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, this is not a simple explanation of the context because of the ideology. In this analysis the context is very much the guiding force, as we shall see. For now, it suffices to say that for all the (overly)abstract analysis of populism as an ideology, which should provide some insights, there corresponds an analysis where context is instead king. In the rest of the chapter then, the focus will be on how exactly talk about populism and ideology in such abstract ways, presenting initially a method (universalizability) in order to extrapolate ideological claims as abstractedly and context-independent as possible, and then using such tool in order to gain insights on populism.

### *Universalizability of ideology*

Previously, this research has highlighted some scepticism of gaining insights on populism by seeing its differences from 'fuller' ideologies, such as fascism, liberalism or socialism. The question that follows is what requirements would an ideology need to be 'fuller', and what would populism look like if stretched to fit these requirements.

Various analyses exist that discuss whether ideologies are sets of beliefs that relate to political systems and institutions,<sup>135</sup> to power dynamics in society,<sup>136</sup> or to society in a wider sense.<sup>137</sup> In any case, the consensus seems that an ideology is a set of beliefs that guide one's

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<sup>135</sup> Martin Seliger, 1976, *Ideology and Politics*, London: George Allen & Unwin, in Gerring, 968.

<sup>136</sup> Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren P. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, 1960, *The American Voter*, New York: Wiley in Gerring, p. 968.

<sup>137</sup> Harold Walsby defining the topic as "the complete system of cognitive assumptions and affective identifications which manifest themselves in, or underlie, the thought, speech, aims, interests, ideals, ethical standards, actions, in short the behaviour of an individual human being". 1947, *The Domain of Ideologies: A Study of Origin, Structure and Development of Ideologies*, Glasgow: William MacLellan, p 145. Robert Wuthnow also defines ideology as "a subset of culture, the only difference being that the term ideology represents shared meanings"., in Gerring, p.969.

understanding and judgement of some kind of political and/or social relations, in how we do and/or should interact with one another. An example of this would once again be M&K's definition of ideology as "a body of normative ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organization and purposes of society. Simply stated, it is a view of how the world is and should be".<sup>138</sup> Two requirements can be extrapolated from here which seem like necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) conditions to whether something counts as an ideology: ideology is first of all a set of beliefs about socio-political relations; and secondly it guides one's understanding of how these socio-political relations are expressed in the real world and/or how they should be expressed.

For example, being an anti-vaxxer is not an ideology, as the socio-political element is negligible (does opposing vaccines by itself really embody a general understanding and judgement of socio-political relations? If so, doesn't everything?), or at the very least there is no great guidance there on how to structure society or politics, apart from 'don't take vaccines'. Populism, however, would definitely have a political or social element. The concept of 'the people' is surely a socio-political one, so too that of 'representation', perhaps 'the elite' too, and so on. In populism there are some beliefs about the social or the political, and how these should look like, giving populist a guide to how they should shape society and politics. Therefore, populism could be argued as an ideology following these criteria. Similarly, an ideology accepted as 'fuller', such as liberalism, fits these requirements too.

However, there is a more contentious clarification of how ideological claims should be a guide to understand how socio-political relations do or should work, in order for these to be classified as ideological claims. This research puts forward the idea that some level of universalizability of some of the beliefs that make up an ideology is required. This Kantian concept of universalizability (essentially the categorical imperative test) is not meant in the original terms of moral acceptability, where a maxim would be morally acceptable if it still made sense if everyone did it.<sup>139</sup> For example, if in Kantian ethics one was to tackle the morality of lying in order to borrow money that one has no intention of paying back, it would do so by universalizing it (what if everyone lied when borrowing money?) and assessing whether there is a logical paradox in that universal case.<sup>140</sup> In this example, if everyone lied when borrowing money, the loaner would know that the loanee would be lying, and the whole concept of borrowing and promising would crumble. Therefore, lying to secure a loan "could never hold as a universal law of nature and be consistent with itself, but must necessarily contradict itself".<sup>141</sup>

Rather, this project proposes to use this as a tool to climb the conceptual ladder of abstraction when looking at ideologies and their claims. It seems that the sets of socio-political beliefs that are accepted as ('fuller') ideologies, are those which have claims that are to some extent

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<sup>138</sup> M&K, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>139</sup> "That supreme principle, which Kant calls the categorical imperative, commands simply that our actions should have the form of moral conduct; that is, that they should be derivable from universal principles", Christine M. Korsgaard, 1997, introduction in Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, trans. by Mary Gregor, pp. x-xi

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., pp. xviii-xix

<sup>141</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:422, p.32

universal, distinct from but applied to the contexts of the real world. Let us take for example Rawls's 'difference principle' as an ideological claim for some type of liberalism:<sup>142</sup> a just basic structure of society is one which arranges social and economic inequalities in a way that they are to the greatest advantage of the least well off representative group.<sup>143</sup> Clearly, this is a belief that fits both our initial requirements for ideological claims, because it relates to socio-political relations, and because it serves as a guide for the liberal in the real current world as to what they should strive towards in shaping those socio-political relations. This ideological claim (the difference principle) is however also to some extent universalizable, both in terms of 'what if everyone thought that?' and in terms 'what if someone thought that in the *State of Nature*?'. The reasoning is as follows:

-What if everyone believed the difference principle? There would not be any performative logical contradiction in this case. If everyone believed this maxim, the maxim would still make logical sense, if anything it would be easier to achieve....

-What if someone believed the difference principle in the *State of Nature*? The State of Nature is here understood as the hypothetical dawn of civilisation. This term was introduced by social contract theorists, indicating "the condition of human beings prior to or without government" from which human beings try to pull themselves out "by agreeing among themselves to accept some form of political authority".<sup>144</sup> In the hypothetical moment when individuals are agreeing on what form of political system to pull them out from the apolitical original condition, would it still make logical sense to hold the belief of the difference principle? Such an ideological claim (the difference principle) would need to provide some guidance if it was to count as an ideological claim. Indeed, the difference principle would make sense in the State of Nature as a goal of what socio-political should look like, a goal toward which to strive.

It must be made clear that these questions are nothing more than a helpful tool in order for us to picture what this universalizability looks like, to make it easier for us to apply it, but they are not unique or flawless. A whole wealth of literature is available on the State of Nature, for example, or to how subjectivity may be nonetheless inescapable when looking at things so universally and this project does seek to add onto it, but simply take this interesting concept as a visualisation of what universalizability looks like to aid the application of this universalizability tool. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this chapter's aims (i.e., to identify the most context-independent ideological claims) it is enough to use such questions and concepts as examples and to offer some guidance and a sense of the type of thing we are looking when we are applying universalizability in order to pinpoint populist ideological claims.

Also, it is worth re-stating that the concept of universalizability does not entail moral acceptability, but merely logical possibility. Fascism would also be an ideology in these terms, as it would be logically possible for everyone to hold, for example, the belief in the same natural social hierarchy, or for those in the State of Nature to aim to develop their socio-

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<sup>142</sup> This is not at all to say that Rawls intended for this to be used as an ideological claim. This is just an example, a way to showcase how this universalizability would work.

<sup>143</sup> John Rawls, 1971, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 266.

<sup>144</sup> Ted Honderich (ed.), 1995, *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 851.

political world with that natural social hierarchy as a guide.<sup>145</sup> Universalizability is here used to see whether a claim would be an ideological claim, and thus whether a set of beliefs (i.e., potential ideological claims) would be an ideology.

An opposite example could be McCarthyism, the anti-communist political repressive movement of the early Cold War in the US.<sup>146</sup> Arguably, if one was to interpret McCarthyism as solely anti-communism, it might fit the first initial criteria of it relating to the socio-political but it does not give much guidance towards what socio-political relations should be like. In the State of Nature, would it make sense to think of building a society guided entirely on the claim "Communists are bad"? Its only potential ideological goal would be to avoid communism, but that is not exactly saying what socio-political relations should look like, at most it is stating what they should not look like, which is of limited insight. A step further still would be to argue that McCarthyism fails to be universalizable because it is logically impossible for everyone to be McCarthyist, or logically impossible to base society on McCarthyist claims in the State of Nature. For the former, if everyone was anti-communist, there would be no such thing as communism, thus arguably also no such thing as anti-communism.<sup>147</sup> For the latter, communism would not exist in the State of Nature, so it would be logically impossible to base a society simply on the base of being against a non-existing concept. However, no-one is simply anti-communist. McCarthyism has always combined itself with other, 'fuller', ideologies, such as Conservatism. These criteria are helpful to explain why something like McCarthyism does not count as an ideology, whilst something like Conservatism does. Conservatism arguably passes the test of universalizability, in the interpretation of the ideology favouring free market and private ownership, rather than the interpretation of the ideology of keeping the status quo (this would not be universalizable, as there is no such thing as the status quo in the state of nature). At best then, the idea of "communists are bad" could be an ideological claim only if it was accompanied by some kind of idea of what indeed one could strive towards in a society, but by itself it is not enough to be classified as an ideology. Arguably, the claim of 'socialism/communism is bad' may imply the claim that – say – 'capitalism/conservatism is the way to go', which according to the criteria suggested would instead count as an ideological claim. However, the most relevant

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<sup>145</sup> It is technically logically possible for those who would suffer from such a hierarchy to nonetheless believe in it. In other words, for example, a woman could hold the belief that men should have a higher social status than women. This would not make it correct or morally right, but it would not necessarily be logically impossible.

<sup>146</sup> A good source on this is Ellen Schrecker, 2004, 'McCarthyism: Political Repression and the Fear of Communism', in *Social Research*, vol. 71, no. 4, pp. 1041-1086.

<sup>147</sup> There is a nuanced difference between anti-communism and the aforementioned fascist hierarchy in terms of universalizability in order to be ideological claims. A fascist hierarchy might be one associated with, say, white supremacy, namely that white people should have a superior social status to all other races. It is unlikely but it is not logically impossible for someone other than white to hold this belief too, believing that they themselves should have a lower social status. Again, this would be an incorrect belief and a morally despicable one, but it is not logically impossible for this belief to be universalizable. However, if that social hierarchy of white supremacy instead expressed a belief that a specific race should not exist, rather than that it should have lower social status, this would not be logically universalizable. One thing is to accept a lower social status without logical contradiction, but another thing is to deny one's own right to existence, which would be logically contradictory. In a similar sense, McCarthyism as purely anti-communism would not be universalizable.

aspect of McCarthyism seems the focus against communism. If 'capitalism/conservatism is the way to go' would be the McCarthyism claim, then it would have collapsed into capitalism/conservatism; McCarthyism still would not have itself enough to count as an ideology. In other words, such a capitalist/conservative claim would be ideological, yes, but not unique nor best represented by McCarthyism.

### *Populist ideological claims*

Following analyses of what populism could mean in the literature and having now presented some newly suggested criteria to assess whether a claim could be seen as ideological, the project turns to assess what populism's potential ideological claims could be. First of all, a brief summary is presented of all the possible claims populists might make and secondly each claim is assessed in terms of their universalizability and their potential to be the *something more* we are looking for populism to count as an ideology. The potential claims are as follows:

**-Anti-elitism:** The elite are "bad", those being most often the current political officials, but could also be interpreted as the promoters of modernization or industrialization (in the case of agrarian populism<sup>148</sup>, or class-struggle populism<sup>149</sup>), or more broadly the economic elite or intellectual elite. In the case of populist movements within anti-colonisation, the elite would then be interpreted as the foreign colonial influence and the non-foreign political actors that may personally gain from it.

**-Purity of the people:** The people are "pure", where the people could be the citizenry in general, or could be interpreted in terms of class (the peasants or the working class) or in ethno-cultural terms (those who share a certain nationality, ethnicity or history).

**-The importance of the will of the people:** whoever is intended as 'the people', it is clear that populism claims that their will is what matters in political decisions. Any political agent's objective is to effectuate the will of the people.<sup>150</sup> When it comes to making political decisions, the will of the people can by definition not be wrong.

**-Direct representation:** modern liberal representative democracy is unnecessarily bureaucratic, or those in power have too much freedom and cumbersomeness in 'interpreting' the will of the people. Instead, populist voices suggest a more direct version of democracy, with a recurring implementation of such things as referendums (direct democracy), or more ideally with a populist figure head who happens to instinctively know

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<sup>148</sup> Margaret Canovan, 2005, *The People*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p.13.

<sup>149</sup> Andreski's summary of theories of populism in Isaiah Berlin et al., 1967, *To Define Populism*, LSE Conference, available at <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102463/>> [last accessed 30th of Nov 2022], p.5.

<sup>150</sup> Kornhauser concludes that, in a populist democracy, primacy is given to "the belief in the intrinsic and immediate validity of the popular will", William Kornhauser, 1960, *The Politics of Mass Society*, London: Routledge, p.103.



already the will of the people and should be allowed to have the full, unmediated powers to effectuate it (the populist leader / dictator).<sup>151</sup>

**-Exclusive representation (/anti-pluralism in representation):** The directedness of representation in populism is justified not just for ease or effectiveness (like with direct representation) but also because the populist leader is the only one that can understand and effectuate the will of the people. Whereas the previous claim could be open to multiple options as representatives of the people, exclusive representation implies that only one representative exists, all other representatives do not really know the will of the people.<sup>152</sup>

**-Homogeneity/ Anti-pluralism:** Within the citizenry there is only one will. Opposing individuals either do not exist to start with (they are not 'the people'), or are wrong and should conform to the real people. The former case is that of homogeneity of the people, the latter of the primacy of the will of the majority.<sup>153</sup>

### *Claims ideologized*

Applying then the insights gained on what would count as an ideological claim, what follows are these claims identified in theories of populism seen through the lens of whether they could give populism the status of an (thick-centred) ideology:

**-Anti-elitism** as an ideological claim: In a similar vein to McCarthyism earlier, it is hard to claim that anti-elitism holds by itself ideological worth. In its most generic terms (i.e., the elite as 'anyone in charge') it is impossible to universalize this, or rather it might at best collapse into the concept of anarchy. If everyone constantly thought those in charge should be removed, there could not be anyone in charge. With the exception of anarchy (which is not the populist claim), it would not be logical for everyone to be opposed having someone 'in charge'. Moreover, in terms of guidance, let us imagine the State of nature once more: anti-elitism would not give great guidance on what kind of society to aim for. It would at most give a guidance of what society should not be like, i.e., do not have a too powerful elite, but it would not be much to go on. This may hold less if one thinks of a specific type of elite: the rich, the industrials, or the foreign power, for example. However, again like with McCarthyism, populism would then collapse into other ideologies, namely socialism and agrarianism, the elite as the rich or the industrials, and the concept of national sovereignty for the elite as the foreign power, which belongs to many if not most political ideologies.

**-Purity of the people** as an ideological claim: a whole literature on human nature could be unleashed here, especially when applying such an idea to the state of nature. The whole idea of 'the State of Nature' is immediately associated to figures such as Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau to mention a few, who gave through it an account of human nature. On one end of the spectrum you may have Hobbes, whose view of human nature was – it is safe to say –

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<sup>151</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, 2016, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.2-4, 25-41.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

rather pessimistic, with everyone seeking their own interests and preservation egoistically trying to dominate one another,<sup>154</sup> hence the need to set up a political system to ensure everyone's safety.<sup>155</sup> On the other side, one may find the Rousseauian idea that the pre-political man is rather pure and equal,<sup>156</sup> but with the introduction of property and hence 'civil society' inequalities are created and purity is lost.<sup>157</sup> Somewhere in between may sit Locke's view of human nature, which sees reason as its primary characteristic, but nonetheless society is formed to better serve everyone's interest.<sup>158</sup> Essentially, saying that the people are 'pure' does not necessarily entail by itself a clear view of what society should look like, as for example a Rousseauian interpretation might claim that society ruins man's purity,<sup>159</sup> whilst a Lockean one may say it aids it. A populist with their claim of 'the people are pure' would presumably be inclined more towards a Lockean sense, with society – or at least Government – seen as an aid to the people.<sup>160</sup> However whilst Locke justifies the purity of human nature because it is primarily driven by reason,<sup>161</sup> it is unclear 'why' the people would be pure for populism. Perhaps it also due to some characteristic of human nature such as reason, however another option seems to fit better with populism. Whereas in Locke reason is what might make human nature pure, in populism it seems that the existence of the people precedes reason and purity. In Locke as we have imagined it,<sup>162</sup> reason is what would make people pure, and because of this people are entitled and make democratic decisions, so schematically this would translate to something like:

Reason → Purity of the People → democracy

If the people were to make a clearly irrational democratic decision, e.g., *let's make eating pears illegal* (because of something wrong or rationally inconsequential, e.g., *because we believe that all pears are poisonous, or because 'pears' is an anagram of 'spare', so we should spare them from being eaten*), in this framework it would not be justifiable to put such a

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<sup>154</sup> The famous 'homo hominis lupus' or 'the war of every man against every man', David P. Gauthier. 1969, *The Logic of Leviathan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.17-20

<sup>155</sup> Gauthier, pp.105-112

<sup>156</sup> Hence the trope of the 'noble savage', which is in itself not Rousseauian but inspired by the Swiss's ideas. Honderich, *Oxford companion to Philosophy*, p. 376-377.

<sup>157</sup> John W. Gough, 1936, *The Social Contract: A critical study of its development*, Oxford: Clarendon, pp.154-155. Rousseau's idea on pre-political man was of course more complex than this and was less utopistic than, for example, Locke's.

<sup>158</sup> "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society", Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse On Equality*, part ii, available at:

<<https://aub.edu.lb/fas/cvsp/Documents/DiscourseonInequality.pdf879500092.pdf>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022], p.23. Starting from the establishment of property, what followed were "vices and disorders, vanity, jealousy and selfassertion, violence and outrage", Gough, pp.154-155.

<sup>159</sup> At least a society which has the concept of property. His work definitely inspired socialist/communist thought which followed him, but analyses of whether Rousseau's ideas were intended to imply some kind of socialism/communism goes beyond the scope of this research.

<sup>160</sup> Paul Kelly, 2007, *Locke's Second Treatise of Government: A reader's guide*, London: Continuum, pp.95-98

<sup>161</sup> Kelly, pp.37-38, 83-85

<sup>162</sup> He does not necessarily talk of purity in human nature, but of a human nature which is peaceful and rational.

decision in place, as clearly the reason on which this all is based has failed. A government assessing the people's demand to ban pears could reject this democratic decision because of its lack of foundation in reason. This is what our current liberal representative democracy looks like, a government listens to the people, but also makes judgement calls on what is possible, what is reasonable and what is ultimately best for the people, which may not align directly to the people's will.<sup>163</sup> The people can be wrong. The possible schematic summary of how the process of decision-making about pears could be has two options, as follows:

-*The people are right*: Reason (pears good) → Purity of the People (therefore, we want pears) → democratic interpretation (no ban on pears)

-*The people are wrong*: Reason (pears bad) → Purity of the People (therefore, we want ban on pears) → democratic interpretation (still no ban on pears), i.e., the representatives decide not to ban pears despite the people's will, because it does not make sense.

In populism, however, it could be argued that the people are intrinsically entitled to any belief, and their decision is ultimately right not because it is based on reason, but simply because it is what the people want. The people are pure because they are the people, not because of any specific characteristic such as reason, and thus whatever they want is reasonable. In the case of the pears then, because we have created a democratic system around the people, the people are inherently correct, so if the people want a ban on pears then it must be the reasonable thing to do. The people cannot be wrong. The schematic process thus is as follows:

-Pure will of the people (we want pears) → Reason (therefore, pears good) → democracy (no ban on pears);

-Pure will of the people (we want ban on pears) → Reason (therefore, pears bad) → democracy (ban on pears),<sup>164</sup> i.e., the representatives decide to ban pears following the will of the people, even if it does not make sense.<sup>165</sup>

The distinction between the schematic process under Lockean terms and now under populist terms is important for two reasons. One relates perhaps closer to discussion around the importance of the will of the people, which will be assessed in the next section of this chapter. The other one is to aid us in seeing if the claim of 'the people are pure' is universalizable and if it could be an ideological claim. In the first case, where reason is given as an example to why the people are pure, one can argue this fits our criteria. First of all, there is no reason why it would not be logically possible for everyone to think reason is what makes people pure. Secondly, it would give some insights when setting up a society in the state of nature. Any political system one would then want to set up would be aiming to preserve and encourage

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<sup>163</sup> This assumes the idea of representatives as *trustees* rather than *delegates*, which will be analysed further in the next chapter.

<sup>164</sup> "Since they are the people, they cannot be wrong; since the people are sovereign, they cannot lose". Paulina Ochoa Espejo in Federico Finchelstein and Nadia Urbinati, 2018 'On Populism and Democracy', in *Populism*, vol. 1, no. 1, Leiden: Koninklijk Brill, p. 27.

<sup>165</sup> Or rather, it does not actually make sense, but it makes sense for the people, so it must make sense for the representatives too.

the use of reason. This is what Locke's work is essentially about. Government is set up for the citizenry to flourish with their reason. In any case, Locke aside, that the people are pure because of their reason would be a useful claim when laying the basis for a society. For example, one could think of setting up political institutions in a way that allows for public forums to exist to discuss political choices or focus on the importance of education, with the idea that people are driven by reason and this would allow for that capacity for reason to thrive. Therefore, the claim that people are pure due to them being naturally predisposed to reason would be universalizable and could be an ideological claim.

In the second – the populist – case, this is less clear. For clarity, we are focusing here not on the claim that a government should follow the will of its people because the people are pure, but solely on the claim that the people are pure. More specifically, we are dealing with the claim that the people are conceptually inherently pure, not necessarily because of a specific characteristic of their nature (e.g., reason). This passes the first universalizability test: it is logically possible for everyone to think this. However, it is not particularly insightful on the second criteria of universalizability, that of the usefulness if this was an objective at the dawn of society. It would not give great insight on what a society would aim towards, except maybe for the idea that the people should exist, which is not particularly informative. Building a society which preserves the purity of the people in these terms would be quite easy, given that the people's purity is intrinsic no matter what the society looks like. Unlike with the Lockean conception of reason above, there is no great clarification of what a political institution would have to look out and aim for.

This takes a different turn if 'the people' really refers to a group of people, rather than everyone. In some cases the (pure) people are seen as the peasants or the working class, for example. This has tricky implications about the others (the elite: the politicians, the privileged industrials, the upper class, etc...), with the options being that they are not people – or at least not *the* people –, that they are seen as lacking whatever characteristic makes the people pure (e.g., do not have reason) or – the more likely populist explanation – have a corrupted human nature. Some issues in terms of ideological potential of seeing only a group of people as the people or only some people as the pure people will be seen when looking at anti-pluralism/homogeneity later in the chapter. However, something can be said here already in terms of purity. A claim along the lines of 'the peasants are pure because they work hard' or 'because they are in close contact with nature' could have ideological worth. One could be guided with this if setting up a society, aiming to create social institutions that promote hard work in the first case and a bond with nature in the second. However, it is clear that with such claims peasantry is seen as an example of what one is aiming for, there is a possibility to work hard or to be in close contact with nature without being a peasant, but a peasant embodies this the clearest and is thus used as a noble example. It is not that one is pure simply because they are a peasant, but indirectly because by being a peasant one also attains the desired qualities. However, with the people as described in populism *in general*, this is not the case: the people are pure because they are the people, not because of some characteristic in their nature. This is much more limited in guidance and thus not much of an ideological claim by itself.

**-The importance of the will of the people** as an ideological claim: This is a particularly interesting point of discussion. This would pass the test of being an ideological claim. It is universalizable in the terms previously discussed, as it is logically possible without contradiction for everyone to hold such a view, plus it would serve as a useful basis for understanding how a society should look like. When setting up a new society in the state of nature, it is a useful guide to follow the claim that the new system should in some way respect the will of the people. Granted, it may not be in itself a complete view of a political system, as it does not necessarily specify how the will of the people can practically be understood and put into practice, however it is a good start; it would count as an ideological claim.

However, the question is whether this is unique to populism and what implications it would have if not. To think of the will of the people and its importance as an ideological claim can quite quickly collapse to discussing democracy and its importance. On the face of things, democracy is indeed the system whereby the people have decision-making power (indirectly by picking representatives or more directly by holding referenda, for instance), so it does not seem controversial to see this as akin to the ideological claim discussed. If indeed the claim of the importance of the will of the people potentially found in populism and the ideological claims of some form of democratic ideology were one and the same, then this would not help populism's case of having ideological status. If the main ideological claim of populism would essentially just be the basis of an 'ideology of democracy',<sup>166</sup> then populism would not be saying anything new, different or insightful.

However, already one might see issues to pick apart in what has been written so far here. This interpretation assumes that the/an ideology of democracy would supersede that of populism, however it should be clarified why the opposite could not be the case. An initial answer could be a historical one. 'Democracy', definitely as a term and potentially as a concept, arguably predates 'populism', thus if their claims are one and the same, it would be redundant to use a secondary term, 'populism' in this case. Regardless, it seems quite a statement anyway to claim that democracy and populism hold the same ideal and are the same. A more in-depth analysis of the difference between democratic ideals and populist ones is needed, especially in how they relate to concepts of representation, sovereignty and indeed the will of the people. This would require more space than this chapter can account for, but the chapter that will follow is dedicated to tackling this question.

Another answer to ideologies of democracy superseding that of populism could be that usually the former are better defined and go beyond the simple claim of "the will of the people is important". However, as things stand now in this research we are still analysing all other possible claims of populism, so it would be unfair right now to justify that the potential

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<sup>166</sup> There are multiple ideologies that present a democratic ideological claim. The term 'ideology of democracy' here could either be interpreted as a single over-arching democratic ideology, with its only claim being that the will of the people should be actuated; or alternatively as any other specific democratic ideology (parliamentary democracy, direct democracy, sortition...). Either interpretation would still allow the issue to arise of whether populism's claim would be 'original' enough for it to count as a different ideology.

ideology of populism *says less* than ideologies of democracy. Again, in the rest of the project more can be said on comparing democratic and populist ideals. For now, however, in our search of what ideological claims populism could have that would grant it ideological status, we can conclude that – unlike the other claims analysed so far – the “importance of the will of the people” could be an ideological claim. It *could* be a populist ideological claim.

**-Direct representation** as an ideological claim: This follows similar lines of the debate in the previous section. In itself, direct representation can be universalized in the two criteria suggested earlier in the chapter, despite the term representing a spectrum of directedness in representation. Direct representation could be interpreted as a system of the kind of the Athenian general assembly, or a more modern interpretation of a system which promotes the implementation of such things as referenda. In any case, all these shades of direct representation are universalizable: it is logically possible for everyone to hold a belief of the kind, and it would give guidance on what kind of political system to implement in the State of Nature. According to the criteria of what counts as an ideological claim, direct representation could be an ideological claim in populism. However, again, the question is raised on populism's ‘monopoly’ on such a claim. Other ideologies might be better suited to represent direct democracy as a claim, with populism perhaps not really adding much to it. If populism was *adding* something to the concept of direct democracy it might be on the lines of direct representation ‘*under the figure of a leader*’. This might be an ideological claim more unique to populism. However, this might just be the concept of ‘exclusive representation’, which has its own issues in universalizable and ideological term, as the chapter will analyse next. In any case, the next chapter will also analyse how populism's ideological claims involving direct democracy are flawed in respect to representation, regardless of a potential universalizability here.

**-Exclusive representation (/anti-pluralism in representation)** as an ideological claim: To be clear, this would be a claim such as “Only I represent the people”, with the focus being on that exclusivity (where “I” could be a single political figure, a party, organisation, or any other political actors). All other representative options are for varying reasons seen as not legitimate. The universalizability proposed as a criteria for valid ideological claims could quite easily be argued as lacking. The sheer concept of exclusivity implies that others do not have it, so it is logically impossible for everyone to accurately think of themselves as the only to do something. Moreover, in terms of guidance in the original position, it would not seem particularly insightful in shaping a society to use exclusive representation as one of its founding claims. A society in which every individual claimed that they and only they had legitimacy of governance would not achieve any meaningful level of society.

What has been written so far has of course been discussing if everyone thought of *themselves* as having exclusive representation. However, it is a different story for everyone to claim that a specific group or individual has exclusive representation. It is much more universalizable to claim that, for example, an anti-immigration pro-labour rights party represents the people. This is universalizable in the sense that it is possible for everyone to think this without logical contradiction, and that it would give useful insight into what type of society to aspire to.

However, the insightful part is primarily the anti-immigration and the pro-labour rights aspects, to which the exclusive representation is a means or in some form secondary.

Already in Kant's idea of universalizability in his moral philosophy, hyper-specificity is a way of bypassing his criteria and making anything morally permissible. A Kantian maxim of 'it is wrong to lie' is based on the idea that it is logically impossible for everyone to lie, because then no one would believe anyone, hence lying is not universalisable. However, it is universalisable to claim that 'everyone called Stefan Michele Barratt is allowed to lie', because there would be no real logical contradiction if everyone thought that. However, it is clear that this is cheating the system. This is the same if we were to hyper-specify who might be claimed to have exclusive representation. The issue at the base of this is that we are trying to think of these concepts in abstract and ideal ways, rather than looking at specific examples of these concepts in practice. We are here assessing whether exclusive representation in itself can be an ideological claim, not at specific occurrences in which some other ideology also has exclusive representation. In these terms then, there are doubts on the universalizability of exclusive representation, and thus also on it counting as a proper ideological claim.

**-Homogeneity/Anti-pluralism** as an ideological claim: It is ironic to consider the permissibility of homogeneity as an ideological claim in terms of *what if everyone believed in it*. In such generic terms, by the very nature of everyone hypothetically holding the belief of homogeneity as something to aspire to, homogeneity would have already been to some extent achieved, and thus would be not logically contradictory, and in turn that would allow the strive for homogeneity to pass the universalizability test of whether it counts as an ideological claim. However, it would not meet the second criterion, that of it providing meaningful guidance when setting up a society (in the State of Nature, aka the Original Position), at least not in such generic terms. As of now we are yet to clarify what in populism would make people homogenous. If this was in terms of a specific ethno-cultural sub-group of the whole seen as the whole, this would not be universalizable: essentially, it is not logically possible for someone not in that sub-group to think of themselves as not existing. This is assuming that a level of ethno-cultural plurality in society is unavoidable. Hypothetically, if there was a society which was 100% constituted by a specific ethno-cultural group, then this might be universalizable in terms of 'what if everyone thought that', but it is doubtful how much guidance this knowledge would give, and even if there would be enough guidance, then it is certainly doubtful that such a 100% ethno-culturally homogenous society exists. In other words, the populist belief in homogeneity in ethno-cultural terms might be an ideological claim in highly specific context that probably would not actually exist. Maybe in some kind of hypothetical isolated small tribe whose whole identity revolves around homogeneity could ethno-cultural homogeneity be an (universalizable) ideological claim, but it seems highly doubtful for the modern democratic societies we most commonly deal with. If instead the homogeneity was seen in terms of popular will (everyone thinks the same politically), this would also have universalizability issues: it may be logically possible for everyone to think this, but it would not be very insightful in the state of nature. It is fairly limited and circular to claim that all people have the same belief, that belief being that they all have the same belief. By itself it does not give particular insights into how to organise society. Even if the claim became 'everyone *should* think the same' (rather than *does*) and that any society would have to be

established in a way that everyone is encouraged to think the same, this only has very limited guidance, it does not say enough of what this society would actually have to look like. Overall then, it seems that homogeneity is not properly a potential ideological claim of populism.

*The claims of this chapter*

This chapter has been key to our analysis of populism as an ideology. The first part of the chapter discussed what makes an ideology. Following literature on the definition of ideology, as well as the various interpretations of the term given in the literature on populism, a strategy has been proposed in order to assess whether a belief could be considered an ideological claim. This is based on the general argument that ideologies are sets of ideas or beliefs, which paint an ideal picture and give guidance of what society should look like to those who follow the specific ideology. Elaborating on this, it was suggested that in order to assess whether a belief could be an ideological claim, it would have to be universalizable, both within society and within pre-society. The former form of universalizability is whether it is logically possible for everyone to hold the analysed belief; the latter instead analyses whether the belief would make sense in the State of Nature, by which it is meant whether it offers some general guidance to how society should be established. The second part of the chapter then turned to applying these newfound insights on ideology to the potential beliefs that populism entails, in order to assess whether these could be ideological claims. Based on the previously seen literature on populism six potential claims were identified: anti-elitism; the purity of the people; the importance of the will of the people; direct representation; exclusive representation; anti-pluralism. Each of these claims was then analysed in terms of whether they hold up to the universalizability standards suggested for something to be an ideology. For various reasons, most fell short of the requirements. However, those beliefs more closely associated with representation (i.e., the importance of the will of the people and direct representation) seemed to instead be universalizable and thus potentially meriting the status of ideological claims. However, it was noted how such claims are also closely associated to the sheer concept of democracy. Thus, it was suggested that perhaps populism would indeed collapse into other ideologies (of democracy), stimulating further inquiry into whether populism shows a unique understanding and belief in these claims, or whether it is any different in the insights it provides. In other words, it might seem that if populism was to be an ideology, it would just be the ideology of democracy, and thus would actually be a redundant term in political theory. However, this need not be the case. More analysis is required on how populism and democracy differ or coincide in relation to concepts of representation and sovereignty. This is what the chapter that follows is all about. For now, this chapter has shown how populism *could* have some ideological claims, those being the belief on the importance of the people, and the similar belief in popular sovereignty.



### Chapter III: Populism, representation, democracy

*A democracy theorist walks into a bar,  
the bartender asks: "what would you like to drink?",  
the democracy theorist replies: "I'll have whatever most people get".*

From the analyses done so far, it seems that the claims which could make populism count as a fuller ideology are also the ones closest to those one might more commonly associate with democracy. It is therefore useful to spend some time in the research on the differences between how some theories of democracy and theories of populism relate to concepts such as representation and popular sovereignty, often used synonymously to democracy and its forms. Here already, it should be made very clear that democracy is a big topic of discussion in political theory, which far exceeds what this project can present in a few pages. Therefore, there is no illusion that this chapter could possibly provide a comprehensive analysis of or a contribution to such complex democratic themes. Nonetheless, at least a simple and sketched out conception of democracy is needed in order to highlight comparatively some features of populism.

This chapter will initially give a description of what (liberal) democracy is and the role of representation within it. The main idea to come from the chapter's humble introduction of democracy is that of two pillars that constitute liberal democracy that – although intertwined – could be considered here as separately as possible in order to gain insights in populism's ideological priorities: the purely democratic pillar, essentially the rule of the majority; and the liberal pillar, essentially the safeguarding of the individual rights. Using then this framework of analysis, the chapter will look at how populism differs from liberal democracy in the way it relates to representation and popular sovereignty, essentially by how it champions the purely democratic pillar above everything else. This seems to give populism ideological (and practical) worth but doubts are raised whether this ideological claim (the rule of the majority) is best labelled as populism, or whether it is already a pre-existing ideology. Finally, some normative issues are raised with such an interpretation of populism building on the literature on populism, these issues being in ideological terms, practical terms, or both.

#### *What is democracy?*

Starting off, more clarity needs to be made on what is meant by democracy here. Defining democracy is of course a rather complex endeavour which has its own field of study and its own literature. This goes well beyond the scope of our research, however a brief summary of some definitions of democracy can aid setting up a framework of what is meant by democracy in this project and more exactly what we are comparing populism to. Again, what follows will barely scratch the surface on the topic of democracy, but it is merely a small glimpse of

democratic theories, which should nonetheless suffice in gaining insights on populism's relation to concepts of representation and self-sovereignty.

As is commonly known, the etymology of the term is that of power/rule (*kratos*) of the people (*dēmos*). However, as we have already encountered, there can be a variety of interpretations on what counts as the *dēmos*, or the extent or manner in which they can have power. The concept of democracy has indeed a long tradition, going back to the classical world as seen in its etymology, but the Greeks themselves – where initial formulations of democracy are said to originate from – had themselves considerable doubts as to its effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Plato famously detested democracy as “the rule [...] of opinion over knowledge” while democracy was for Aristotle a necessary condition for good government, but was far from a sufficient condition.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the etymology of the term ‘democracy’ “alludes to the idea of self-government of the people”,<sup>3</sup> at least to some extent. In more recent history, the idea that a government must be based on the will of the people has arguably prevailed over every other possible institutional option. The will of the people is thus the name of the game for democratic legitimation and interpretations of democracy could essentially boil down to US President Abraham Lincoln's words that government is nothing more and nothing less than "government of the people, by the people, for the people".<sup>4</sup> In more specific theoretical terms perhaps, democracy might best be defined “as the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule”,<sup>5</sup> where the former restates that the power of political decision-making is held by the people and the latter states – as a solution to the plurality of political opinions in said decision-making process – that the most widely held opinion amongst the people should take some form of priority in the decision-making process (with varying degrees of limitation, depending on the type of democracy).

A lot of literature is available to justify why democracy is a worthwhile political system. For the sake of brevity, however, it would be perhaps unwise to delve into the merits of democracy. Populist themselves do not seem to take issue with the ideas of popular sovereignty and majority rule. Rather, they pride themselves as best representatives of these ideals. In the comparison between populist ideals and democratic ideals it is therefore not too necessary to spend time justifying that democracy is important and worth protecting. Moreover, the overall focus of the project is on populism and whether it is an ideology, not necessarily why populism may or may not be normatively bad for democracy.

Thinking of democracy one tends to picture politics and political institutions, however that need not be the case. Democracy can refer “very generally to a method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastiano Maffettone, 2019, *Politica: Idee per un mondo che cambia*, Mondadori, p.43

<sup>2</sup> Berbard Crick, 2002, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, p.1

<sup>3</sup> M&K, 2017, p.79.

<sup>4</sup> Maffettone, 2019, p.43, Lincoln quote from his Gettysburg Address, 1863, available amongst other at [abrahamlincolnonline.org](https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org), <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm> > [last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug 2023]

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

decision-making process”,<sup>6</sup> this being not only how decisions are made at a ‘government level’, but also for example amongst a group of friends deciding where they want to go for dinner (or decision-making in “families, in [...] firms, as well as states and transnational and global organization”).<sup>7</sup> Self-governing (‘a group of friends is free to decide where to go for dinner’) and majority rule (‘they should go where most of them want to go’) are intrinsically present throughout our lives and not only on a governmental level. The example of the friends going for dinner also hints at some limitations to self-governing and to majority rule this chapter will encounter, for example that the group of friends’ freedom in choice for dinner might be limited by their knowledge of which restaurants in town are good, or that they ought to take into account individual friends’ dietary requirements or budget.

In more specific terms, Seymour M. Lipset described democracy in a complex society “as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials”.<sup>8</sup> In agreement with how democracy has been described here previously, Lipset also sees democracy as “a social mechanism for the resolution of the problem of societal decision-making among conflicting interest groups which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence these decisions”.<sup>9</sup> However, Lipset specifies that the way the population can fulfil their influence is “through their ability to choose among alternative contenders for political office”.<sup>10</sup>

As Lipset himself points out “this definition implies a number of specific conditions:

(a) a "political formula," a system of beliefs, legitimizing the democratic system and specifying the institutions – parties, a free press, and so forth – which are legitimized, i.e., accepted as proper by all;

(b) one set of political leaders in office;  
and

(c) one or more sets of leaders, out of office, who act as legitimate opposition attempting to gain office”.<sup>11</sup>

This is clearly a much more specific description of democracy than just self-governing plus majority rule, as it assumes the presence of some party system, or in general some kind of representative role being fulfilled. Of course, that is what Lipset meant by his specification of democracy ‘in a complex society’, some kind of representative democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Christiano, 2022, ‘Democracy’, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>> [last accessed 25th Oct 2022].

<sup>7</sup> Christiano, ‘Democracy’.

<sup>8</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, 1959, ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy’, in *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 53 no.1, American Political Science Association, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Lipset, 1959, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

*What is representative/liberal democracy?*

Indeed, more commonly than not, references to democracy in the real world<sup>12</sup> are references to representative *liberal* democracy, which deserves its own description. Looking at the liberal element, Mudde and Kaltwasser describe the “main difference between democracy (without adjectives) and liberal democracy” as that “the latter refers to a political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and the protection of minorities”.<sup>13</sup> On a similar line of thought, some have introduced the idea of liberal democracy as based on two pillars: a pure liberalism pillar and a pure democracy pillar.<sup>14</sup> The former would be “the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty” (synonymous to minority rights), the latter “the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty” (synonymous to popular sovereignty and implying majority rule).<sup>15</sup> This idea of pillars should not be taken too critically, it is mostly used here as a helpful image to symbolise two elements that come into play in discussions around populism in relation to democracy. The main point to be made here is that these two pillars are in this chapter described almost as separate entities, but in truth this is an exaggerated simplification. As we shall see, there are doubts on whether liberalism and democracy can be so divided. A completely illiberal democracy is not really a democracy, nor would it make sense to talk of a pure liberal that denies democracy. Therefore, it is important to note that some overlap or intertwining between the two pillars is unavoidable. However, given that the research for now is focused on looking at the most abstract possible ideological claims, it will give some insights in the relation between populism and liberal democracy to use such a metaphor of the two pillars, taking them at separate as possible, with the understanding that they nonetheless cannot be completely separate.

The democratic pillar is quite self-evidently part of democracy. It is uncontroversial to see a link between democracy and the ideas that the people are sovereign and that the best way to gauge a people’s will is by looking at the majority. The liberal aspect, however, needs perhaps more introduction and justification. Someone to use in this endeavour is perhaps Ronald Dworkin who, amongst others, presented the idea of democratic authority (self-government and the majority rule) as necessarily limited to some extent. For example, Dworkin points out that when a judge looks at the American Constitution they must have constraints of history and integrity, without which judges would have “absolute power to impose their own moral convictions on the rest of us”:<sup>16</sup> “constitutional interpretation must take into account past legal and political practices” and “judges may not read their own

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<sup>12</sup> As opposed to in democratic theory.

<sup>13</sup> M&K, 2017, p.79.

<sup>14</sup> Stefan Rummens, ‘Populism as a Threat to Liberal Democracy’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy (eds), 2017, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, (Oxford University Press), hereon Kaltwasser et al., p. 696.

<sup>15</sup> Chantal Mouffe, 2000, *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, p.2-3

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Dworkin, 1996, *Freedom’s Law: The Moral Reading of the America Constitution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press., p.11

convictions into the Constitution [...] no matter how much that judgment appeals to them, unless they find it consistent in principle with the structural design of the Constitution as a whole”.<sup>17</sup> There necessarily are constraints within democratic proceedings. Indeed, “democracy is justified by appeal to a principle of self-government”, however “self-government cannot be realized unless all citizens are treated as full members of the political community, because, otherwise, they are not able to identify as members of the community. Among the conditions of full membership [...] are rights to be treated as equals and rights to have one’s moral independence respected. These principles support robust requirements of non-discrimination and of basic liberal rights”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, liberal democracies work with the majority rule in mind, however they are also “characterized by institutions that aim to protect fundamental rights with the intention of avoiding the emergence of a ‘tyranny of the majority’”.<sup>19</sup>

Liberalism is of course a wider concept, with different interpretations, and it can transcend its relation with democracy, even with politics. Take John Stuart Mill for example, starting with “the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity”,<sup>20</sup> Mill’s arguments lead to the idea that liberty for each person is not only simply a political matter, but a substantive moral good: “to give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to lead different lives. [...] Having said that the individuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which [...] can produce well-developed human being [...] what more can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be? or what worse can be said of any obstruction to good, than that it prevents this?”<sup>21</sup> In a way, Mill’s works also introduced a different understanding of liberalism (New Liberalism), with ideas like that “the principle of individual liberty is not involved in the doctrine of Free Trade”,<sup>22</sup> or raising questions about the connection between personal liberty and private property.<sup>23</sup> New liberals indeed build on this to be more favourable towards Governmental control on the market than previous classical liberalism. In this light can the aforementioned ideas of Dworkin be understood.<sup>24</sup> Extrapolating from this, through the various interpretations liberalism can have, the picture can be painted of the liberal pillar in liberal democracies understood as the attempt to ensure that every individual may lead their unique lives without interference of matters such as the tyranny of the majority. This conceptually allows for some limitation of the pure will and freedom of the people (the democratic pillar), in order to best achieve each individual’s fundamental right for freedom. Again, the image of the pillars should be re-iterated to be an approximation for the sake of

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<sup>17</sup> Dworkin, p.10-11

<sup>18</sup> Christiano, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> M&K, 2017, p.79.

<sup>20</sup> A quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt’s *Sphere and Duties of Government*, which is used as the opening for Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), Batoche Books, p.5

<sup>21</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 59

<sup>22</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p.87

<sup>23</sup> John Stuart Mill, 1963, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mills*, John M. Robson (ed.), University of Toronto Press, vol. 2, pp. 204–210

<sup>24</sup> Though his work is labelled as ‘egalitarian liberalism’.

simplicity of discourse. Liberalism in most of its forms does not deny some degree of democratic proceeding, and viceversa, but for the sake of analysis of populism in relation to liberal democracy, it is helpful for now to abstract and separate as much as possible the two pillars from each other, to better understand populism's ideological priorities.

The democratic pillar is also something to look closer to, as there is plenty of literature with different interpretations of (liberal) democracy, especially given that literature on liberal democracy at points relates more closely to concepts of deliberative democracy and others of representative democracy. Their aims are all rather comparable, that is to present a version of democracy that indeed keeps best the balance between the two aforementioned pillars. Nonetheless, it is worth delving into these varying conceptualisations of liberal democracy, in the hopes of further understanding what they have in common, and thus what are the bases of democracy, which we can then in turn compare with populism.

### *Deliberative democracy*

The so-called deliberative model of democracy comes from the works of Jürgen Habermas, amongst others.<sup>25</sup> This outlook focuses on a “kind of procedural understanding of law and democracy [which features] the intersubjective, dialogical aspect of judicial legal argumentation; the deontological character of basic rights in contrast to other values; and a nonpaternalistic understanding of the role of the Supreme Court in safeguarding the discursive quality of legislative decision making”<sup>26</sup>, which can be understood within the aims of the project here as more generally a communicative understanding of popular sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> By this it is meant that “the laws of the democratic state should be based on the will of the people and that the will of the people itself should be generated on the basis of actual processes of reasonable deliberation between free and equal citizens”.<sup>28</sup> The “desired political rights”, in this understanding of democracy, “must guarantee participation in all deliberative and decisional processes relevant to legislation and must do so in a way that provides each person with equal chances to exercise the communicative freedom to take a position on criticizable validity claims”.<sup>29</sup> Political discourse – which may result in a majoritarian outcome – is not just a legitimating force “in the sense of an authorization to occupy positions of power; on the contrary, ongoing political discourse also has binding force for the way in which political authority is exercised. Administrative power can only be exercised on the basis of policies and within the limits laid down by laws generated by the democratic process “.<sup>30</sup> The pillars of democracy mentioned above are here also noticeable.

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<sup>25</sup> Habermas' work more often refer to this as 'deliberative politics', as for example Jürgen Habermas, 1992, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, transl. by William Rehg, 1996, MIT Press, pp.287-328

<sup>26</sup> William Rehg, translator's notes, in Habermas, 1992, p. xxix-xxx

<sup>27</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.700.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Habermas, 1992, p.127

<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 1996, *The Inclusion of the Other*, eds. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff, 1998, MIT Press, p.244

The balance between the two is further explained through Habermas, as “in contrast with pure democracy, deliberative democracy emphasizes that the demos should not be understood as a singular collective, but should properly be understood as a pluralistic community consisting of free and equal citizens with inalienable rights. In contrast with pure liberalism, deliberative democracy stresses, however, that these inalienable rights can never be prepolitical. Citizens enjoy their liberty rights only to the extent that they are granted these rights by the demos as the sovereign ruler”.<sup>31</sup>

In more practical terms, deliberative democracy “affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives”.<sup>32</sup> Both “are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizens give in return “. The first and most important characteristic of deliberative democracy is then “its reason-giving requirement. The reasons that deliberative democracy asks citizens and their representatives to give should appeal to principles that individuals who are trying to find fair terms of cooperation cannot reasonably reject. The reasons are neither merely procedural (‘because the majority favors the war’) nor purely substantive (‘because the war promotes the national interest or world peace’). They are reasons that should be accepted by free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation”.<sup>33</sup> It should be added that this understanding of democracy is not so absolutist, not every single issue requires constant deliberation: deliberative democracy does account for many other forms of decision-making,<sup>34</sup> which could include (and more often than not does include) features of representative democracy.

Having representants that the people somehow choose has come to be seen as a viable – yet admittedly not perfect – way of balancing the two pillars of liberal democracy, with the representants having the role of interpreting and enacting the will of the majority in a manner that keeps the whole system fair for everyone. In modern societies, representants adhere to various constitutions, both national (e.g. the country’s constitution and pre-established laws) and supranational (e.g. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), which provide a framework within which the majoritarian will has to be understood and perhaps adapted.

Historically however, the way representation came to be initially served a different purpose. Representation “at least as a political idea and practice, emerged only in the early modern period and had nothing at all to do with democracy. Take England, for example. The king, needing additional revenue beyond that from the royal estates and traditional feudal dues, required each shire and borough to send a delegate to commit the locality to special additional taxes. So, representation was imposed as a duty from above, a matter of royal convenience and administrative control. As the practice was repeated, it gradually became

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<sup>31</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.697.

<sup>32</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, 2004, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, Princeton University Press, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

institutionalized”.<sup>35</sup> Representation thus “was born both as an institution for the containment and control of power (the chief of the church or the king) and as a means of unifying a large and diverse population. [...] Representation originated when a given community delegated some members to represent it before the pope or the court of the king, with powers to bind those who appointed them”.<sup>36</sup> Representation proved to be an exceptionally efficient method for both “unification (of the multitude) and subjection (of the represented to the decisions made by the chosen delegates)”.<sup>37</sup> This merger between unification and subjection is essentially the predecessor of the merger between the liberal pillar and the democratic pillar in liberal democracy. The biggest development of representation from its origin into modern times is who holds the power of sovereignty. Whereas initially representation was part of a system which held some kind of chief as an authority in power, nowadays with democracy “the locus of power becomes an empty place”.<sup>38</sup> An empty place of power is not synonymous to power belonging to no one.<sup>39</sup> The people (not to be intended as the majority) are still theoretically and indirectly in power. The symbolical emptiness “refers, rather, to the fact that the will of the majority should never be identified with the will of the people as a whole. In a democracy, no single party and no single politician can claim to embody or represent the will of the people as such”.<sup>40</sup> The place of power “cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it”.<sup>41</sup>

Understandably, democratic representatives are commonly spoken about in terms of them being ‘in power’, however this is more of a colloquial expression than a theoretical claim. In ideological terms, in a liberal democracy no one individual or group occupies the place of power, except perhaps ‘the people’, understood in very broad and liberal terms.<sup>42</sup> Representatives are in power in the sense that they have the honour of serving the people, actuating the people’s will, which is here not the same concept as the will of the majority.

Hannah Pitkin is a key author in analysing the role of representatives in democracy. She famously makes the distinction between representatives as *trustees* and as *delegates*.<sup>43</sup> Representatives as trustees “rely on their own independent judgments in carrying out their duties. Norms of trusteeship are supported in recognition that, given a natural division of democratic labor, officials are in a much better position to make well-reasoned and well-informed political decisions than ordinary citizens”.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to this, “representatives who

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<sup>35</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 2004, ‘Representation and Democracy: Uneasy Alliance’, in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Nordic Political Science Association, p. 337. It will be interesting to keep this in mind later on in the project when Vote Leave campaigners are seen as claiming that the UK invented democratic self-government.

<sup>36</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, 2018, ‘On Populism and Democracy’, in *Populism*, vol. 1, no. 1 Leiden: Koninklijk Brill, p.725

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.726

<sup>38</sup> Claude Lefort, 1988, *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey, (Polity Press), p.17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.225-227.

<sup>40</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p. 702.

<sup>41</sup> Lefort, p.17.

<sup>42</sup> Meaning ‘the people’ as a whole and not as the majority.

<sup>43</sup> Pitkin, 1967.

<sup>44</sup> Christiano, *Democracy*.



act as delegates defer to the judgments of their citizens”.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, even with representatives-as-delegates – who have to more strictly follow the will of the people – there is no tyranny of the majority, as the delegates have to take into account everyone’s will. This of course is impossible. Within a people there are many varying opinions and wills, inevitably incompatible at times if not explicitly opposing. This has implications on the general balance between the liberal and the democratic pillars in liberal democracy. Not only one has to balance the two pillars, but within the pillars themselves there is a lot of balancing needed. Not only the democratic pillar relies on interpretation (which can be misunderstood) and reconciliation (seemingly impossible) of the multifaceted people’s will, but all this must then also be subjected to liberal checks as to avoid the tyranny of the majority.

In other words, Urbinati – also having followed the historical journey of representation – points out that “when the parliament became the place of representative politics, it [...] acquired the character of an agora of ideas that was primed to bring social dissension at the core of the state”.<sup>46</sup> This is not necessarily negative, as “the unifying element was entrenched in the constitutional moment, a grammar that would allow pluralism to emerge without disrupting effects and actually play a stability function”.<sup>47</sup> Urbinati notes how Carl Schmitt had defined this as liberal representative politics and that even he “argued (rightly) that political representation both exalts advocacy of interests and allows their temporary mediation in majority decisions”.<sup>48</sup> On the face of it, this seems like a solution to keep the balance of the pillars in place. Indeed, Schmitt did value the deliberative democratic ideal of open discussion, where “discussion means an exchange of opinion that is governed by the purpose of persuading one’s opponent through argument of the truth or justice of something, or allowing oneself to be persuaded of something as true and just”.<sup>49</sup> However, the “development of modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality”.<sup>50</sup> Schmitt was thus ultimately very critical of representative democracy, as it “produced a situation in which all public business has become an object of spoils and compromise for the parties and their followers, and politics, far from being the concern of an elite, has become the despised business of a rather dubious class of persons”.<sup>51</sup>

The constant compromising necessary has been argued to have devalued the deliberative or representative ideals of democracy, leading to at times ideals being used more as bargaining chips, rather than actually assessing those ideals with the reason desired by deliberative democracy (just see how often a party might ‘give up on a certain policy’ to create a coalition with another party radically opposed to that policy proposal in exchange for support on other policy proposal). Moreover and in light of this, this system has also been criticised for its alleged vulnerability for the representatives to then use such necessary compromises to their own individual interests. Pitkin herself concedes that “despite repeated efforts to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Nadia Urbinati, ‘Populism and the Principle of Majority’, in Kaltwasser et al., p.726.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.726.

<sup>49</sup> Carl Schmitt, 1923, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, transl. by Ellen Kennedy, 1988, MIT Press, p.5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.4.

democratize the representative system, the predominant result has been that representation has supplanted democracy instead of serving it. Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather, administers – passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them”.<sup>52</sup> And here one can see populism creeping back into the conversation.

#### *Populism against the model of the pillars*

Many have seen this contingent combination of a liberal and a democratic pillar as problematic, as it presents “paradoxical tensions between the universalistic logic of the liberal pillar and the majoritarian logic of the democratic pillar [that] can never be fully eliminated”.<sup>53</sup> In more general terms, “populism and liberal democracy embody antagonistic and irreconcilable understandings of the concept of democracy”.<sup>54</sup> Understanding liberal democracy in terms of the liberal pillar (against tyranny of the majority) and the democratic pillar (self-government and majority rule) allows us to portray populism as the champion of the democratic pillar, which some see paradoxically combined to liberalism and the liberal pillar.<sup>55</sup> Populism is seen by scholars as thriving off “the tensions that are inherent to liberal democracy, which tries to find a harmonious equilibrium between majority rule and minority rights. This equilibrium is almost impossible to achieve in the real world, as the two overlap on important issues”.<sup>56</sup>

In the kindest possible interpretations of populism, there could still be the idea that a proper balance between the two pillars should be preserved. Populism can be argued to have the capacity to play an important role in this, as “in circumstances where the liberal pillar has become too dominant, a rise of populism can reinvigorate our democratic system by “bringing back the disruptive noise of the people”.<sup>57</sup> Even Mudde and Kaltwasser, who are famously critical of populism, have analysed moments in which populism can have a positive influence on democratization.<sup>58</sup> Indeed they present a schematic summary of various stages of democracy, and the democratization or de-democratization processes that can occur. In the summary, which follows, one can see various contexts where populism might actually have a positive impact:<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Pitkin, 1967, p.339.

<sup>53</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., while describing Mouffe’s input on the matter, p. 696.

<sup>54</sup> Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, 2007, ‘Populism versus Democracy, in *Political Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2, quote found in Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.696.

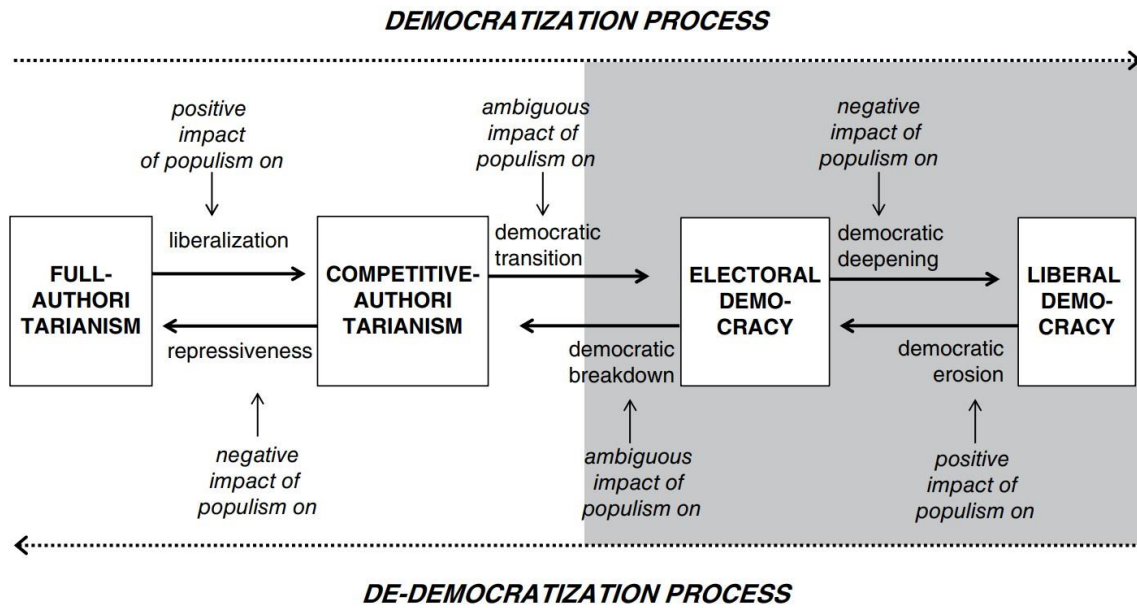
<sup>55</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.696.

<sup>56</sup> M&K, 2017, p.80.

<sup>57</sup> Benjamin Arditi, ‘Populism, or, politics at the edges of democracy’, in *Contemporary Politics*, (Routledge, 2003), vol. 9, no.1, p.26-27.

<sup>58</sup> M&K, 2017, p. 79-96.

<sup>59</sup> Table on populism and democratization process M&K, 2017, p. 87.



9. Populism can have positive and negative effects on different political regimes. In fact, populist forces can trigger episodes of institutional change that might well lead to both democratization and de-democratization.

This model goes to show that populism “is not external to representative democracy”.<sup>60</sup> However, populism “does compete with it about the meaning and use of representation as the way of claiming, affirming, and managing the will of the people”.<sup>61</sup> This can be helpful in instances in which representation is absent or being mistreated. Urbinati argues that it does so by imposing itself “as a form of ‘direct representation’ or the representation of the people as a collective one that a leader constructs without or outside the intermediation of political associations (traditional parties), at times by creating new movements that better allow his direct relation with the audience”.<sup>62</sup> It is interesting now to see if and how populism may clash with democracy despite still holding certain ideals typically associated with it. Urbinati phrases this as: “How can we deny that populism is democratic or a form of democratic politics given that it does not question the golden rule of democracy and is actually a radical affirmation of it?” or “What puts populism and democracy in tension although they rest on the same principle and claim to be government by the people?”.<sup>63</sup>

Urbinati argues how populism “aims at a more direct identification of the represented with the representatives than free elections allow because it sees representation primarily as a strategy for embodying the whole people under a leader, rather than regulating the political dialectics among citizens’ plural claims and advocacies”.<sup>64</sup> Thus, in a bid to ‘simplify’ the liberal democratic process, populism arguably aims to tip the scales between the two pillars, favouring the pure democratic pillar (self-government and majority rule) over the liberal one (avoidance of tyranny of the majority).

<sup>60</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.725.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.34.

<sup>63</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.721.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p.726.

Following the analysis of potential ideological claims in the previous chapter, it could be seen that the general potential populist ideological claim is that “nothing should constrain ‘the will of the (pure) people’”.<sup>65</sup> Populists “will criticize violations of the principle of majority rule as a breach of the very notion of democracy, arguing that ultimate political authority is vested in ‘the people’ and not in unelected bodies”.<sup>66</sup> In order to focus on the primacy of the pure democratic pillar the liberal pillar makes way. Accordingly, populism rejects “the notions of pluralism and, therefore, minority rights as well as the ‘institutional guarantees’ that should protect them”.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, some national-populist right-wing leaders speak explicitly of illiberal or non-liberal democracy, with no quote being quite as apt in showing this as one from Hungary’s Viktor Orbán: “the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc... But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead”.<sup>68</sup> The idea of illiberal democracy is potentially an interesting alternative at first, however, this can have incongruences. Some form of liberalism needs to be present even within such an illiberal scenario. Indeed, in the aforementioned words of Orbán, there is no rejection of liberalism (“*it does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom*”),<sup>69</sup> instead the nation is seen “not [as] a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed [...with] a specific, national, particular approach”.<sup>70</sup> This does in theory not deny the liberal pillar, this is not the claim for a pure democratic pillar. What Orbán calls illiberal democracy here is still technically a liberal democracy (to some extent), just a less-liberal one, but not completely illiberal. If, however, in practice one could achieve a completely illiberal democracy the case could be made that it is no longer a democracy, with similar issues as we will see ideological issues with populism in relation to majoritarian rule implying some level of acceptance of the existence of the minority. It could be said that a the concept of a purely illiberal democracy (not less-liberal, following what Orbán described) is paradoxical or contradictory. One could also look again to the discussion of applying universalizability in order to assess ideological claims (as seen in Chapter II): assuming the illiberal maxim would be – and this is simplifying – something on the lines of ‘not everyone should have freedom of speech’ / ‘for the sake of the collective some people ought to be forced to go against their will’... first of all, it is unclear how much guidance this would actually give society, and secondly, even if it did, it would still encounter the same issues that anti-pluralism did in Chapter II, where its non-universalizability was argued to prevent it from being a coherent ideological claim. Less-liberal democracies would be a more possible scenario in practice, however, if this has other issues if what is meant by

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<sup>65</sup> M&K, 2017, p.79, in accordance to the previous chapter’s identification of the potential claims being that of ‘the importance of the will of the people’ and direct representation.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.79.

<sup>68</sup> Viktor Orbán’s speech at the XXV Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp in Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő) on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2014, translation available at <<https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>> [last accessed 20<sup>th</sup> Aug 2023]

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

this is some form of anti-pluralist democracy, as is what most likely transpires also in Orbán's speech above.

Hopefully it should be clear by now that essentially "populism is not against democracy",<sup>71</sup> if anything it embodies a system which is the most extremely democratic possible. As seen, populism is rather to some extent "at odds with liberal democracy",<sup>72</sup> even if it cannot be completely illiberal (while claiming to still be democratic). Given that both traditions hold the importance of popular sovereignty – that the will of the people should be followed –, it might be helpful to focus on the difference between them being what is meant by 'the people', and how to effectuate their will. "For populism, the people should be understood as a homogeneous community with a shared collective identity. For liberal democracy, in contrast, the people should be understood as an irreducible plurality, consisting of free and equal citizens".<sup>73</sup> Correspondingly, the pure democratic pillar – as understood in populist terms – "understands the democratic people in terms of a homogeneous body with a singular will, whereby, in the famous phrase of Rousseau, the minority is mistaken in its understanding of the *volonté générale* and can therefore be 'forced to be free' by being subjected to the will of the majority".<sup>74</sup> Despite the democratic pillar also being present in conceptions of liberal democracy, the liberal democratic understanding of the demos is of "a pluralistic community of free and equal citizens".<sup>75</sup> The populist collectivistic understanding of the demos is deeply at odds with the liberal democratic understanding of the demos.<sup>76</sup>

The various potential populist ideological claims assessed in the previous chapter can now be seen as interconnected to some extent. Populism arguably "conjures up a collectivist image of the homogeneous identity of the people, the People-as-One",<sup>77</sup> showing homogeneity/anti-pluralism as an ideological claim. However, "this image" is taken "as the sole reference for legitimate policy-making",<sup>78</sup> justifying thus the importance of the will of the people through their homogeneity. Moreover, "this means that populist parties and leaders make an exclusive claim to represent and embody the will of the people and, thus, feel entitled to impose this will upon society at the expense of the ideological diversity which is constitutive of the liberal democratic regime".<sup>79</sup> In a rather simplistic summary then, the people are a homogenous group and those who represent their will are given exclusive legitimisation by the ideal of self-sovereignty (effectuating the will of the people). In such a manner then are the potential populist ideological claims intertwined. However, if not for the homogeneity of the people, a similar ideological structure holds for liberal democracy. Effectuating the will of the people is a primary drive of political action and gives legitimisation

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<sup>71</sup> M&K, 2017, p.95.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>73</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.697.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.702.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.697.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.702.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.706.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

to some representatives, the difference between the two models being that the representatives have a much less absolute role in liberal democracy. They have a less absolute role both in the sense they are accountable for what they do and thus can be replaced in a practical sense if they make a mistake, but also that they have no exclusive special relation to the people, they do not claim to be the only to be able to fulfil that role, so can be replaced in ideological terms too. Another key difference between populist and liberal democratic systems is that in the latter there is the aforementioned liberal framework representatives have to work within, making sure to avoid the tyranny of the majority. This liberal framework is for populism instead a hinderance and limits righteous self-governance.

#### *Issues with uniqueness and distinctness of such a populist ideology*

The justification of the differences between populism and liberal democracy are nonetheless not solely ideological. Christiano notes that there are two general ways of assessing democratic success: “on the one hand, we judge democratic decisions from the point of view of the quality of the outcomes. We concern ourselves with whether the outcomes are just or whether they are efficient or protect liberty and promote the common good. This is sometimes called the substantive or outcome dimension of assessment of democratic procedures. On the other hand, we evaluate the decisions from the point of view of how they are made or the quality of the procedure. We are concerned to make the decision in a way that includes everyone who by right ought to be included and that is fair to all the participants. Here we may think that the method by which the decisions are made should be intrinsically fair”.<sup>80</sup> These ways of assessing democratic procedures correspond loosely to the two pillars of liberal democracy, with the substantive dimension parallel to pure democracy (is the will of the people being effectuated?), and the quality of the procedure parallel to pure liberalism (is everyone treated fairly?). In practical terms too, populists show an understanding of democratic process from a substantive dimension rather than a quality of procedure. They “criticize the poor results of the democratic regime, and, to solve this problem, they campaign for a modification of the democratic procedures”.<sup>81</sup>

#### *The flaws of a potential populist ideology*

Having assessed some key differences between liberal democracy and what an ideology of populism would look like, it is now worth asking why preferential treatment as the best representation of democratic ideals is given to the former, seen as the standard, while the latter is seen as something to go against. Indeed, most authors on populism describe it negatively, especially in comparison to liberal democracy. Pierre Rosanvallon proposes a conception of populism as “a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy”.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Urbinati’s conception is of it as a “transfiguration of

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Christiano, 2004, ‘The Authority of Democracy’, in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol, 12:3 (Blackwell), p. 266.

<sup>81</sup> M&K, 2017, p.95.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.

the fundamental elements of representative democracy”.<sup>83</sup> Roughly speaking the critiques to how populism relates to such democratic concepts can be grouped into three general categories: (a) the purely ideological ‘issue’ that the concept of majority rule implies the existence and respect of electoral minority, which populism however neglects; (b) the ideological and practical ‘issue’ that populism bypasses democratic rules to the point that no one could reason with them; (c) the more *speculative* arguments of populism in practice, such as that it is all just a political strategy for the power-hungry leader to gain political influence. What follows is a more detailed description of these issues.

*Issues with populism and democratic features summarised*

*(a) Ideological: Majority implies minority*

Looking at populism as an ideology has highlighted how important for a populist ideology the rule of the majority is. This is given both by the importance of the will of the people and by anti-pluralism. In contrast with the liberal pillar in place to avoid the tyranny of the majority, populism sees the liberal framework a hinderance and a limit for righteous self-governance. Majoritarianism is described by some as shadow holism, with the “assumption that the cohesion of the whole has priority over the minority’s claim”.<sup>84</sup> Thusly, “the majority treats minority views as an obstacle rather than a physiological component of the political game”.<sup>85</sup> This results from an “invocation of a majority — actual or imagined — as if it were the whole people”<sup>86</sup> which translates easily into the “assumption that the cohesion of the whole has priority over the minority’s claim”.<sup>87</sup>

Most scholars see issues with this, as we will see. Even those who argue or admit that such populist claims – or populism in general – may be beneficial present benefits that may indeed be true but that refer to quite specific scenarios in practice, which does not necessarily justify populism as an ideology in general. For example, as previously analysed with Laclau or with the table from Mudde and Kaltwasser,<sup>88</sup> the most common instance of populism mentioned as positive for democracy is as a radical democratization in an authoritarian society. This, however, does not necessarily make it an ideology. Moreover, this benefit is rather limited, for as soon as a more democratic society is set in place the positive impact of populism on democracy fades away.

The majoritarian aspect is key to the conception of populism as an ideology, yet it is also its downfall on an ideological level. While other responses to populism highlight issues in its real-life enactment of it (e.g., populist behaviour causing discrimination), there are issues on an ideological level too. The liberal tradition would suggest that populism neglects an essential constituent of majoritarian rule, namely that majority rule can only exist with respect to the minority. Liberal rights “should be seen not as constraints limiting the sovereign power of the

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<sup>83</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.34.

<sup>84</sup> Nancy L. Rosenblum, 2008, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*, (Princeton University Press), p. 51.

<sup>85</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser, p.729.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenblum, p.48.

<sup>87</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.729.

<sup>88</sup> See footnote 59 for the table on populism and democratization process in M&K, 2017, p. 87.

people” – which is what a populist ideology would do – but rather “as the conditions of possibility of democratic rule in the first place”.<sup>89</sup> A somewhat simplistic yet insightful initial point is that conceptually, not necessarily politically, for a majority to exist there must also be a minority. Perhaps this is simply a linguistic bias, but the word majority implies some kind of comparison or relation to a minority. As a concept, the term ‘100% majority’ is essentially the term ‘unanimity’, it would not quite make sense to describe it as a majority. Claiming that Lionel Messi is the best football player of all time or ‘not so tall’ only makes sense if there are other football players or people to compare him to: if he was the only person on Earth he would either be both the best and the worst footballer (/the shortest and tallest) or neither.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, in the case of a 100% majority, that majority is either also the minority or it is conceptually not a majority. In any case, linguistically and conceptually for there to be a majority there has to be a minority. In cases without a 100% majority then a minority is more obviously noticeable, so the point also stands.

A similar outcome comes in political terms too, with the relation between the two pillars described as inherently and inescapably interlinked. For Habermas, human rights “themselves are what satisfy the requirement that a civic practice of the public use of communicative freedom be legally institutionalized”.<sup>91</sup> Democracy has a basis of rights that need be respected. Even with the idea of pure democracy or a majoritarian system, there is at first a fairly liberal atmosphere. If not for reasons of fairness, even for more practical reasons such as getting to know what the majority is. The most common way of assessing the majoritarian will (the will of the majority of the people) is through elections. Populism is not necessarily against elections, as we will see. Definitely the idea of majoritarian rule as a way to achieve self-governing of the people is not against elections or referenda of some kind. The idea with majoritarian rule is that the will of everyone is registered or heard in some fair way, subsequently everyone’s preferences are ‘counted up’ and the preference which registers as the most common is the one which is implemented. This system relies on the liberal idea that the expression of people’s will be free, fair and respectful. If it were not so, the results on what the majority preference is would be skewed. Let’s assume a situation were 60% of people have a certain preference A, whilst 40% have preference B, and a referendum is held to choose between A and B. A is truly the preference of the majority and is what should be carried out according to majority rule. However, due to some form of repression people with preference A cannot express themselves freely. Because of this, the perceived preference for A drops, and B suddenly seems to be the preference with a highest popularity, and register more votes than it would actually under a fair system. There is still a ‘perceived’ majority but that is not the true majority that majoritarianism requires and promotes. The majoritarian ideological claim is based on the fact that people are fully able to express their preference. People in a majoritarian society agree to majoritarian rule with the agreement they be taken seriously and that if their preference nonetheless does not ‘win’ that is still fair because they had a chance to express it. This is reflected going back to Habermas, who writes that human

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<sup>89</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.701.

<sup>90</sup> A comparative analysis could be done too on whether it is called football or soccer.

<sup>91</sup> Habermas, 1996, p. 259.



rights are what “make the exercise of popular sovereignty legally possible”.<sup>92</sup> They are not to be understood an external constraint that is to be imposed on the practice of popular sovereignty, but as an enabling condition of it.<sup>93</sup> Rosenblum echoes the points above with “the concept of majority assumes the right of existence of a minority”.<sup>94</sup>

However, majoritarianism, or better said the majoritarianism in populism, is a response to the concern that the liberal pillar be too burdensome to any meaningful fulfilment of the will of the people. If one has to take into account everyone, it seems impossible for any decision to be made as a society; “since the minority is as much part of the people as the majority, the democratic process is an open-ended process in which the ‘will of the people’ necessarily remains fragmented and elusive”.<sup>95</sup> Pure liberalism without respect for popular self-governing would hardly be democratic either. However, fragmentation of the will of the people is not automatically problematic, “it simply reflects the fact that a democratic society is a community consisting of an irreducible plurality of free and equal citizens with diverging views and opinions”.<sup>96</sup> Through this fragmentation there can be unity in how everyone partakes and is united in the democratic process. The plurality present in the liberal democratic demos “should not be mistaken for the pure diversity characteristic of ‘pure liberalism’. Society does not consist of a loose collection of atomized individuals born with a set of prepolitical natural rights. A democratic community is a genuine unity in the sense that its members are united by the democratic process itself as a process through which they jointly interpret, elaborate, and realize the basic rights they grant each other as free and equal citizens”.<sup>97</sup> Through this interpretation of the demos as a unity-in-diversity liberal democracy can be a normatively coherent regime and ideology. When taken individually, the pillars of ‘pure liberalism’ and ‘pure democracy’ can “represent ideologies which are deeply at odds with liberal democracy’s basic procedures and core values”.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, a perspective such as the above is possible in which the liberal and democratic pillars are then “not incompatible at all, but represent, rather, inseparable or ‘co-original’ aspects of a regime which aims to preserve and protect human freedom”.<sup>99</sup>

If populism was to be a coherent ideology in terms of majoritarianism and the importance of popular sovereignty, it cannot credibly have both the ideological claim of homogeneity and the claim of majoritarian rule. If conceptually populism had the ideological claim of homogeneity (or anti-pluralism) then the claim of majoritarian rule would be redundant or not conceptually possible. If majoritarian rule would be an ideological claim of populism then that is only possible with more respect to the minority than its ideological claim of homogeneity would imply.

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<sup>92</sup> Habermas, 1996, p. 259.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Rosenblum, p.51.

<sup>95</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.697.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.702.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.697.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

*(b) Bypassing democratic rules to the point that no one can reasonably argue against them / Ideological and in practice*

On a similar note, there is another issue with populist anti-pluralism, one which is both on an ideological and on a practical level. One of the potential ideological claims assessed in the previous chapter was anti-pluralism in representation. Whereas the previous section related to homogeneity/anti-pluralism amongst the people, there is also the potential claim of anti-pluralism in who is legitimately allowed to represent the people. This is essentially the claim of exclusive representation. Exclusive representation assumes or is at least linked to some level of homogeneity amongst the people too, however the effect it has on democratic proceedings merits a section on responses to it of its own. Assuming that populism “conjures up a collectivist image of the homogeneous identity of the people, the People-as-One”,<sup>100</sup> populism then “takes this image as the sole reference for legitimate policy-making. This means that populist parties and leaders make an exclusive claim to represent and embody the will of the people and, thus, feel entitled to impose this will upon society at the expense of the ideological diversity which is constitutive of the liberal democratic regime”.<sup>101</sup> This has the element of the suppression of the liberal pillar seen in this chapter, but let us focus now on the exclusive claim to representation. The issue stems from the fact that the outcome of representation is already assumed before the expression of the majority will. The image of the people-as-one is already shaped before any democratic expression of representation and so too has it already been decided who should be the representative before the expression of such a will occurs. Back to the example of a society which has to show their will between preference A or B, let’s say through an election or referendum. In populist terms, the perceived majority precedes the actual voting. In the campaigning leading up to the vote an image of the people-as-one in favour of preference B is already presented, with an accompanying representative championing it. Anyone claiming to represent the people willing for preference A is portrayed as misinformed or malicious, because the majority and the representative have already been assumed (and they are for preference B). Before the vote, the perceived majority (or after the vote the actual majority if indeed more people want B) “purports to be the ‘authentic’ people and eventually rules as an ‘holistic party’ or as if it were the only good majority and as if the opposition does not belong to the ‘authentic’ people,”<sup>102</sup> with this reflecting both in terms of the people with the other preference or anyone else claiming to be a representation for the other preference.

The best possible conception of populism as an ideology is that it is the champion of the ‘pure democratic’ pillar, with benefits in instances where an emancipation of democracy is required. However, in these terms, for populism elections or voting in general, which are key to the pure democratic ideal, “seem to be like a ritual to collect and reflect votes in order to validate a permanent truth that exists outside of specific electoral decisions. Elections show but do not create the majority; they work as the revelation of a majority that is said to already exist”,<sup>103</sup> which is rather undemocratic. The populist majority “is not one majority among

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<sup>100</sup> Rummens in Kaltwasser et al., p.706.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.23.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

others but the “good” majority whose legitimacy is not merely numerical but primarily ethical (moral, social, and cultural) and also even theological and thus autonomous from and superior to procedures”.<sup>104</sup>

The reason why all this is undemocratic and problematic is because essentially it implies a breakdown of communication needed in a democracy, even a majoritarian one. Populist forces “are problematic for democracy in the sense that they utilize a moral language whereby the possibility of reaching agreements is extremely difficult, if not impossible”.<sup>105</sup> Even within the context of majoritarianism, there necessarily needs to be a democratic consensus and openness in understanding what the majority wants. This is not possible if an individual or party claims exclusive representation. In practical terms, in a complex society the majority’s will still needs to be interpreted and multiple people may represent it or debate together on how to put that will in practice. For example, one might reliably gather that the majority of people of a given society wants greener energy and wants to be less reliant on fossil fuels. It is quite unlikely that a representative can gather highly specific data on what the majority thinks that looks like. Does that mean building more wind farms or instead installing more solar panels? How many of them? And at what cost? Would the majority still want greener energy if it somehow meant that unemployment would go up 1%? What about 10%?<sup>106</sup> In a democratic (majoritarian too) society all these implications need to be openly discussed, especially if there are representatives. An individual representative claiming they are the only legitimate representative cannot have all the answers. Or rather, cannot have all the right answers.<sup>107</sup>

Even in the essentially impossible case that the people’s will could be measured extremely precisely – so say the majority of people want 84 new wind farms in some exact locations, whilst accepting X, Y and Z conditions about employment – this still does not legitimise only one representative. Anyone can represent this majoritarian will, even someone who had initially opposed green energy but is now accepting the results of the majority. Moreover and more importantly, others are still legitimately entitled to question the results, for example someone may have doubts on the way in which this majoritarian will was measured. Still within the context of majority rule, they should not be branded as against the people, but for the people, as they are making sure the whole process was and remains fair for the people.

The anti-pluralist aspect of populism at the representation level (a.k.a. the claim of exclusive representation), “signifies a calcification of procedures and a substantializing of the democratic process in the illusion that this reshaping will make the will of the people less of a matter of mediation among various and conflicting interests and parties, and more one of reassertion of an organic body that already exists and that the person of the leader brings to the surface and embodies”.<sup>108</sup> Analysing Aristotle’s critique of demagoguery, Urbinati writes

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<sup>104</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.23.

<sup>105</sup> Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, ‘The Responses of Populism to Dahl’s Democratic Dilemmas’, in *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 3, Political Studies Association, p.12.

<sup>106</sup> This is not to suggest that greener energy causes unemployment. It is just a hypothetical, feel free to replace those two with any other two policy areas.

<sup>107</sup> Where ‘right’ in the majoritarian context is the most common answer believed by the people.

<sup>108</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.24.

that "demagoguery was certainly the worst among the forms democracy could take because it exploited free speech by putting it at the service of unanimity or the appeal to the whole, rather than a free and frank expression of ideas and thus the appeal to a majority vote".<sup>109</sup> For Urbinati Aristotle's comments on demagoguery are also applicable to how populism manifests itself.

*(c) More speculative arguments: Populism as an empty rhetoric for the leader to gain power / Purely practical*

So far, the issues brought up are negative implications or contradictions that populist claims might have in ideological terms. These issues are independent of those who hold the belief. Anyone might fall for these fallacies if they believed in these populist ideological claims. The last types of issues that this chapter will present are less ideological and more related to what populism looks like in practice. The difference is that in practice people who adopt a populist ideology could be argued to have alternative motives. Whereas the previous issues are not necessarily context-specific, populism also gets criticised as a political strategy or rhetoric style, regardless of true belief in the ideology.

Urbinati is one of many to suggest that "the 'thin ideology' of the politics of morality" – which essentially could be any combination of the potential ideological claims assessed in this research – "hides a clear strategy for power-conquering that has intolerant ruling at its constitutive core".<sup>110</sup> This strategy has a two-fold agenda: it could either be undertaken by people who genuinely believe in majoritarian rule and 'pure' democracy (so, with 'good' intentions)<sup>111</sup>; or by people wishing to get into power for personal reasons or gain, such as a desire for power, fame or money, regardless of any belief in those potential ideological claims (so, with 'bad' intentions). A combination is of course plausible and arguably likely, with someone genuinely and rather arrogantly believing that the good (in their eyes) cause of 'pure' democracy can only be achieved if they had all the power.

Indeed, a lot of the literature on populism understandably assesses the role of the leader and at time suggests there is a general agenda for political agents to use the populist rhetoric and ideology to gain power. Many populist movements have been argued to aim for the empowering of the populist leader, exhibiting "a strong reservation and even hostility to the mechanisms of representation, in the name of one collective affirmation of the will of the electors or the people under a leading figure".<sup>112</sup> Representation is seen "primarily as a strategy for embodying the whole people under a leader, rather than regulating the political dialectics among citizens' plural claims and advocacies".<sup>113</sup> Populism is seen further as seeking to "implement [an] agenda through state power, [entering] a direct competition with

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<sup>109</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.728.

<sup>110</sup> Finchelstein and Urbinati, p.25.

<sup>111</sup> Good intentions in the sense that they believe something is just and positive for society and want to help achieve what they believe is a good cause.

<sup>112</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., referring to Yves Mèny and Yves Surel, p.725.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.726.

constitutional democracy over the meaning and expression of the people and [putting] into question a party- democracy's conception of representation".<sup>114</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the importance of research in how populist ideas of representation may be used in practice to promote individuals, the research in this project is attempting to clarify whether populism can have an ideological status, its potential flaws or merits as an idea. There is much to say about what populists do in practice, and what may motivate them, but the focus so far in this project is less on the practical and the real world. Regardless of what populists aim for in practice, this research has highlighted issues on a conceptual and ideological level. Even if a populist (or someone 'using' populist ideas) had the best possible intentions, there are still logical incongruences in the thought, which would not grant populism the status of an ideology, or at least not a coherent one. Nevertheless, no research on an ideology can be completely devoid of context, no matter how abstract the way of looking at the ideology is. Moreover, looking at some specific context-dependant examples can confirm or elaborate certain suggestions done at a conceptual level. The rest of the project will aim to do this, looking at a case study, attempting to ignore potential individual motives of populist political actors to focus on what ideas or what ideology they are potentially trying to express.

### *Enough theory?*

This chapter has focussed on the differences between how theories of democracy and theories of populism relate to concepts such as representation and the rule of the majority, often used synonymously to democracy and its forms. Liberal democracy as we know it in modernity has been seen here as a system based on two intertwined 'pillars': a 'pure democracy' pillar, by which the will of the majority must be effectuated, and the 'liberal' pillar, by which any majoritarian will cannot be oppressive towards the democratic minority. Naturally, the caveat must be re-iterated that this chapter cannot be considered comprehensive on these themes of democracy, but that the aims here have been to more humbly present a very slimmed down bare-bones description of liberal democracy to give just a sense of what one could compare populism to. In these terms, populism can easily be seen as the ideology championing the importance of the 'pure democracy' pillar, holding the will of the majority (seen as 'the people') above anything else including the democratic minority (thus, encompassing anti-pluralism). Whilst this could give populism the status of (thicker-centred) ideology, questions are raised to the originality of an ideology in these terms, suggesting that perhaps *if* populism was to be *something more*, it may just end up being something like majoritarianism or the ideology of direct democracy, and not a unique, 'new' ideology. Finally, the chapter presented some issues that such an interpretation of populism would have in relation to representation, both at the theoretical and at the practical level, namely that populism might neglect the existence of a minority that conceptually must exist,

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<sup>114</sup> Urbinati in Kaltwasser et al., p.721.

that populism may prove impossible to reason with, and that perhaps populism is simply a rhetoric style in order for political actors to promote their own personal interests. In other words, the possible options for populism as an ideology are that: (i) it is not an ideology to start with; (ii) insofar as it is a full ideology, it nonetheless risks collapsing into other already established ideologies; or (iii) insofar as it could be a full ideology that does not collapse into other ideologies, it may be theoretically and ideologically flawed.

This first half of the project, these three chapters, have undoubtedly been rather theoretical. Populism has been specifically analysed fairly abstractedly from context. The current theories of populism have been presented, the potential ideological claims have been highlighted, and its relation to theories of democracy and representation have been analysed. The rest of the project will attempt to somewhat change this approach, in an attempt to gain insights on populism using other methodologies, not just the rather philosophical methods associated with political theory. The aim is to look at a specific case study associated with populism (the Vote Leave campaign in the UK), and analyse the theoretical framework in this first half of the project within the given context.

## Part Two: The Case Study

## Chapter IV: Contextual political analysis and setting up the case study

*A contextualist walks into a bar,  
the bartender asks: "what would you like to drink?",  
the contextualist replies: "it depends".<sup>1</sup>*

All chapters so far have been rather theoretical, looking at populism in theory, populism as an ideology, what general claims populists might make, and so on. However, it is rather common and common-sensical in political theory and political science to opt for a more mixed approach. Issues about the relevance of one's highly theoretical work can be answered by looking at how that theory relates to or explains real life examples. Similarly, doubts on the accuracy of someone's theory may lead a theorist to give further validation of it by using more practical cases. In general, there is then also the benefit that one's research can advance knowledge in two different fields, the more theoretical field of research one is looking into, and the more practical dimension of the literature on the specific real-life example one looks at. For example, constructing a theory on minority rights whilst looking at the example of the various North American policies on treatment of Native Americans provides a bifold contribution to the literature(s): the literature on theory of minority rights in general, and the literature on public policy in North America in practice. With this in mind, this research project aims to gain further insights on the theoretical framework so far developed. It will do so by looking at the Vote Leave campaign in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum in the UK, a seemingly good real-life occurrence of populist themes. The theoretical framework in previous chapters will be seen through the lens of what the Vote Leave campaigners have said, in the sense that it will be analysed whether and how the potential ideological populist claims are present in the Vote Leave campaign, and what implications this might have on re-evaluating the theory. This makes the research one of contextual political analysis and it will (hopefully) then be both constructive on a theoretical level for the understanding of populism, as well as insightful for the literature on Brexit.

In order to carry out such a case study, it is of course necessary to clarify a few things, which is what this chapter will do. First of all, the methodology – identified as contextual political analysis – needs to be described. After some initial description of it, it will appear that the literature on this methodology presents various options, i.e., various *types* of contextualism. The second aim of this chapter is then to introduce the various potential contextualisms and some of their similarities or differences. In an attempt to cut through the Gordian knot of all the possible definitional options for contextualism, this chapter will then bypass the simple labelling of which contextualism will be used and will clarify what kind of contextual research the case study will have, regardless of its proper name. Thirdly, the chapter will analyse why this methodology is appropriate for this case study, and why this case study is appropriate for the methodology. In other words, the pros and cons of both the methodology and the case

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<sup>1</sup> Or, "it depends on what you have".



study selection will be discussed. Lastly, this chapter will set up the case study itself, giving a brief description of the context (a brief history of the Vote Leave campaign) and elucidating further how the case study specifically will be carried out, namely by analysing twelve speeches and interviews of the Vote Leave campaigners within the structure of the theoretical framework on populism's potential ideological claims from the previous chapters.

### *What is Contextualism?*

First, the methodology of this research ought to be clarified. Looking at literature on for example liberalism and/or multiculturalism, there seems to be a shift towards analysing the blurred line between theory and practice. When developing a theory of – say – justice, after having sketched out a theoretical framework it can be insightful for the theorist to then look at more specific cases to see what such framework looks like in practice. The key is that this type of research would then inform in some shape or form the theory.

This is based on an arguable assumption that “‘forms of wisdom’ may be ‘embedded’ in existing practices, norms and institutions”.<sup>2</sup> In particularly simple terms, according to this shift in methodology if it may have taken the course of centuries for a society to develop a certain way of going about socio-political matters (e.g., justice), it may be rash to assume that an individual scholar can by themselves develop a better theory of justice in a single lifetime. Better said, both have (or could have) value and can gain insights from each another. It is all well and good for a theorist to be in their ivory tower thinking about justice in abstract terms, but surely looking at how people (in the broadest meaning possible) relate to justice in the real world is not irrelevant to understanding justice in theory.<sup>3</sup>

A way of doing so is called the contextual approach, which as the name suggests recognises the importance of context(s) to theoretical developments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, there is much debate on how to conduct a contextual analysis, and in more general terms its use and usefulness. One of the better known figures associated with the term is Joseph H. Carens, who explicitly refers to his methodology as contextual, as seen in titling his book “Culture, Citizenship, and Community: A *Contextual* Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness”.<sup>4</sup> The use of the term ‘contextual’ in the subtitle is not done lightly, stating in the book that it is there written “because [the] project is profoundly shaped by [his] sense of how much we learn as theorists by confronting the abstract with the concrete and by inquiring into the relationship between the theoretical views we espouse and actual problems, practices, and debates in political life”.<sup>5</sup> The strategy for this is “to move back and forth between theory and context, articulating intuitive judgements about cases in terms of theoretical principles and critically assessing theoretical formulations in light of their

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph H. Carens, 2000, *Culture, Citizenship and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, p. 13; or Joseph H. Carens, 2004, ‘A Contextual Approach to Political Theory’, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 7, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Likewise, however, it is also not irrelevant for how people relate to justice in the real world to be informed by experts dedicating their lives to the study of justice.

<sup>4</sup> Carens, 2000, ‘contextual’ not highlighted in the original.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

implications for particular cases”.<sup>6</sup> A prime example of this type of research for Carens is Michael Walzer’s works, where “Walzer is not opposed in principle to general theoretical formulations but he is very sensitive to the blinkers they can impose and to the ways they can embody, in disguised form, moral insights that grow out of, and are only applicable to, particular contexts”.<sup>7</sup> Walzer’s book *Spheres of Justice*<sup>8</sup> is for Carens “filled with examples of social practices that are either neglected by, or in apparent conflict with, conventional theories of justice but that, upon reflection, raise issues of justice and seem morally justifiable”.<sup>9</sup> There is a “variety and variability of the social goods with which a theory of justice must be concerned. Once we see the richness and complexity of [...] the different ways in which different communities understand goods, value goods, and think various goods ought to be distributed, we will no longer imagine that it is possible to construct an adequate theory of justice without beginning from and returning to the actual practices of particular societies”.<sup>10</sup> Walzer may be chronologically one of the firsts theorists to have brought such a methodology to mainstream literature, however, his works are not the only example of this approach. Indeed, “much of the political theory of multiculturalism seems to be of the contextual variety”.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst this, Will Kymlicka’s works on a liberal version of multiculturalism are of a contextual nature. Massively simplifying a much more complex work, there is the starting point of the theoretical framework of the liberal ideal of state neutrality on matters of (minority) group culture and identity. Looking, however, at real-life policies in most liberal states, there are varying degrees of recognitions for forms of culture and identity, going against what would be expected in the theory of liberal neutrality.<sup>12</sup> One may be tempted to assume that the practice is wrong, however Kymlicka sees this as an opportunity to adapt and develop the theory instead. On a similar topic to Kymlicka, Carens gives the example of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which can be interpreted as the liberal theoretical framework of protection of everyone’s rights regardless of ethnicity, religion and so on (essentially the idea that within the liberal State everyone is to be treated equally). This seems like a universally agreeable theoretical framework. However, Carens points out how there is some discontent amongst some aboriginals about how the Charter may apply to them. Given our starting point of the liberal theoretical framework, one would assume that the Charter and its ideals would be shared by and desirable to all. The issue (/the context) is that the Charter cannot itself be an abstract and theoretical philosophical formulation of moral principles, but always an interpretation of those principles. The Charter is but “a set of legal concepts and categories” – perhaps the closest possible thing to theory in practice – “that will be interpreted and applied by particular people (not, need it be said, aboriginal people), people selected and trained in certain ways (and not others), people attuned to certain

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<sup>6</sup> Carens, 2000, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Chandran Kukathas, 2004, ‘Contextualism Reconsidered: Some Skeptical Reflections’, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 7, no. 2, Springer, p.215.

<sup>12</sup> Carens, 2004, p. 121.

considerations (and not others), people taught to regard certain forms of communication (and not others) as intellectually respectable and relevant”.<sup>13</sup> So, by looking at this context it becomes apparent that “the Charter is not something that directly translates abstract individual rights into social realities. It is not applied liberalism, pure and simple, but liberalism applied in and through a set of legal institutions with their own distinctive norms, practices, interpretations, and modes of reasoning”.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly for showing how contextual methodology works, by looking at this context we gain insight on the theory too, as it transpires then that a State can never truly be neutral on issues such as minority rights. The original egalitarian liberal theory can then be modified to be less rigid and less focussed on State neutrality, and instead accommodate for minority group rights to some extent.<sup>15</sup>

Similar examples of contextual analysis, again starting with the theory of liberal State neutrality, are analyses of instances such as “the ban on religious dress burdens religious individuals, as in the case of Simcha Goldman, a U.S. Air Force officer, who was also an ordained rabbi and wished to wear a yarmulke out of respect to an omnipresent God”.<sup>16</sup> According to Air Force Regulation 35-10 “headgear will not be worn [...] except by armed security police in the performance of their duties”,<sup>17</sup> thus preventing Goldman’s use of the yarmulke. Let us assume for the sake of simplicity that such regulation was a reflection or enactment of our starting theoretical framework that the State should show neutrality on religious matters, treating everyone equally by stating no one – regardless of what religion – can wear religious attire.<sup>18</sup> This may be justified in theory as an attempt to avoid symbolic power and oppression: imagine if a Jewish individual (or any non-Christian for that matter) would work in a workplace full of crucifixes and paintings of Jesus on the walls, they might be understandably uncomfortable to express their own religiousness; thus, the theory had been developed to avoid this by not allowing any religious attire or imagery in public workplaces. However, by looking at the individual case of Goldman v. Weinberger and the various arguments that transpire from it we gain different insights that can provide feedback to the theory. Goldman’s claim was that such regulation meant to show equal respect to all religions<sup>19</sup> went against the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment of the US Constitution which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”.<sup>20</sup> Looking at this case, one can then analyse

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<sup>13</sup> Carens, 2000, pp. 191–192.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kymlicka’s conclusion, in Sarah Song, 2020, ‘Multiculturalism’, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>> [last accessed 30th of Nov 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Goldman v. Weinberger, 1986, Official Citation 475 US 503, available at <<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/475/503/>> [last accessed 30th of Nov 2022].

<sup>17</sup> USA Air Force Regulation 35-10, in Song, ‘Multiculturalism’.

<sup>18</sup> The Air Force Regulation banning headgear might have probably been more concerned with matters of security rather than religious oppression, but let us assume otherwise for the sake of argument.

<sup>19</sup> Again, let us assume that is what the Air Force Regulation’s aim was, for sake of argument.

<sup>20</sup> First amendment of the USA constitutions, available at <<https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/#:~:text=Congress%20shall%20make%20no%20law,for%20a%20redress%20of%20grievances>> [last accessed 30th of Nov 2022].

how in theoretical terms too religion may subject its believers to certain “intrinsic burdens”,<sup>21</sup> such as that believers dress in a certain way. However, “burdens on believers do not stem from the dictates of religion alone; they also arise from the intersection of the demands of religion and the demands of the state (“extrinsic burden”). Individuals must bear intrinsic burdens themselves; bearing the burdens of the dictates of one’s faith, such as prayer, worship, and fasting, just is part of meeting one’s religious obligations. When it comes to extrinsic burdens, however, liberal multiculturalists argue that justice requires assisting cultural minorities bear the burdens of these unchosen disadvantages”.<sup>22</sup> This is far from the original starting theory of State neutrality and treating everyone equally. This is thus an example of how looking at specific contexts can inform theory.

An initial scepticism towards contextualism is its originality or uniqueness. With the point of contextualism being encouraging theorists to “explore actual cases where the fundamental concerns of the theory are in play”, Chandras Kukathas – amongst others – puts forward the question “is this so far from what most theorists do?”<sup>23</sup> which gives good reason to have to further present here contextual methodology.

#### *Which contextualism?*

As is the case with many things in political analysis, there are many interpretations of the concept of contextualism and much debate around them. There are at least seven explicitly named contextualist approaches, which are not necessarily independent of one another and may well overlap but whose focuses have subtle differences:

-*Methodological* contextualism, whereby context “is relevant [...] in the formulation and critical testing and modification of the theory”.<sup>24</sup> This is arguably along the lines of John Rawls’s method of reflective equilibrium.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, all other forms of contextualism (here following) fall under this umbrella, but with some variation between them in terms of how exactly context relates to theory.

-*Applicatory* contextualism, by which “context co-determines what implications general principles have for particular cases or kinds of cases”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Jones, 1994, “Bearing the Consequences of Belief,” in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 2, no.1, pp. 24–43, in Song, ‘Multiculturalism’.

<sup>22</sup> Song, ‘Multiculturalism’.

<sup>23</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.218.

<sup>24</sup> Sune Lægaard, 2015, ‘Multiculturalism and contextualism: How is context relevant for political theory?’ in *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 264.

<sup>25</sup> Tariq Modood and Simon Thompson, 2017, ‘Revising Contextualism in Political Theory: Putting Principles into Context’, in *Res Publica*, vol. 24, no.3, Springer, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Lægaard, p.266.

-*Theoretical* contextualism, according to which “context determines the content of political theory”<sup>27</sup>. In other words, “the interpretation of a context is a way not just of formulating principles but also of justifying them as appropriate for this specific context”.<sup>28</sup>

-*Semantic* contextualism, which is what Walzer’s methodology is described as in his earlier works and could be summarised as “a strong form of theoretical contextualism” on the lines of relativism.<sup>29</sup> Looking at what distributive justice requires in theory, Walzer argues that “all distributions are just or unjust relative to the social meanings of the goods at stake”.<sup>30</sup> Context is the content of political theory (as opposed to the ‘determines’ in Theoretical contextualism).

-*Institutional* contextualism, which is what Carens’ approach may be described as. A combination of methodological and applicatory contextualism, “rather than focus on the meanings of social goods, Carens conceives of context in terms of concrete practices and institutions”.<sup>31</sup>

-*Relational* contextualism, which is what David Miller’s work is seen as, perhaps best described as a form of applicatory contextualism, given that here too “context and principle are co-determined”.<sup>32</sup> However, in relational contextualism, context “is to be characterized in terms of relationships [between people] from which the requirements of justice can be inferred”<sup>33</sup>

-*Iterative* contextualism, which firstly sees that theory “requires something other than what local norms say, [nonetheless] what is required is likely to be intimated by the relevant context”.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, “the theorist’s principles are *generated, refined and revised* in the process of applying them across a range of different contexts, in the encounter with a number of different sets of norms”.<sup>35</sup>

It would take a whole research project of itself to give these definitional nuances of contextualism the attention they deserve. What has been presented here is a very sketched out summary of a much wider debate, to raise awareness that there are these differences. In an attempt to cut through this definitional Gordian knot, what follows is a

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<sup>27</sup> Where the content stands for “the scope, function and normative standards” of political theory. This *theoretical* contextualism is closely associated with what Laegaard also calls *political* contextualism when looking at the methodology within Bhikhu Parekh’s works. Laegaard, pp.267-270.

<sup>28</sup> Modood & Thompson, p.2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Walzer, 1984, *Spheres of Justice: In Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, New York: Basic Books, p.8-9.

<sup>31</sup> Modood & Thompson, p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.3. Contextual practice as “the pursuit of intimations” is a term coined by Michael Oakeshott, 1962, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, London: Methuen. More contemporary understandings of context intimating theory can be found in Modood’s and/or Thompson’s work.

<sup>35</sup> Modood & Thompson, p.16.

description of what general approach the case study (that will follow in chapter V) will undertake, without too much attention given to what precise label of contextualism it falls into, although upon reflection it would probably fit more closely to *methodological* or *iterative* contextualism.

Thinking of context as intimation<sup>36</sup> of theoretical principle seems a safer approach for the aims of this research. Given that “part of the goal of the [contextualist] movement between practice [...] and theory is to bring those relevant but obscured considerations into view and to find ways to include them in our theories, thus making the theories better”,<sup>37</sup> this can also occur without having to make a stronger connection between context and theory. Practical considerations are useful to theory even if they are only ‘relevant’, without having to form a defence of context as determining/co-determining/being the theory. Looking at context that is relevant to the theory can be useful. According to Carens, “examples perform a crucial clarifying function for theory”.<sup>38</sup> However, here already is a difference from a lot of political analysis methodology, as examples clarify theory “even better [...] when they come from real cases rather than from the imagination of the theorist adept at inventing hypothetical examples”.<sup>39</sup> This is because “real cases are richer, more complex, and ultimately more illuminating”,<sup>40</sup> even without having to claim that context is more than just intimation of more abstract concepts.

#### *Pros and cons of contextualism in this project*

Despite Carens’ interpretation being labelled *institutional* contextualism, his general framework for a contextual approach to political theory could still apply to contextualism in general. Carens argues that there are five interrelated elements to a such a contextual approach to political theory:

- i. As clear by now, “it involves the use of examples to illustrate theoretical formulations.
- ii. It entails the normative exploration of actual cases where the fundamental concerns addressed by the theory are in play.
- iii. It leads theorists to pay attention to the question of whether their theoretical formulations are actually compatible with the normative positions that they themselves take on particular issues.
- iv. It includes a search for cases that are especially challenging to the theorist’s own theoretical position.
- v. It promotes consideration of a wide range of cases, and especially a search for cases that are unfamiliar and illuminating because of their unfamiliarity”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Following what was labelled as *iterative* contextualism.

<sup>37</sup> Carens, 2004, p.127.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>39</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.218.

<sup>40</sup> Carens, 2004, p.120.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

Context here “is relevant, not (only) in setting out the kinds of cases which political theory addresses, but also in the formulation and critical testing and modification of the theory”.<sup>42</sup> Benefits of such a contextual approach are that it clarifies the meaning of abstract theoretical formulations, it can provide access to insights that occur in practice but are not yet present in the theory, and it encourages theorists to expand their outlook to what may be less familiar to them. Perhaps a distinguishing positive feature of contextualism as understood in this research is that of specifically looking for cases that might not seem a straightforward confirmation of the theory. According to this contextualist feature, a theorist should look not just at “cases where one knows one’s intuitions are at odds with one’s theory but to look for cases where one is not sure what one’s intuitions are, cases that one can see are relevant but that are different from the examples that informed the construction of the theory in the first place”.<sup>43</sup> Looking at an ‘unfamiliar’ case – here understood as those that go against the theorist’s intuition – may give “greater awareness of the hidden and limiting presuppositions of our theories [...] I think there is a lot to be gained by multiplying unfamiliar narratives if we can draw out the implications of these narratives for familiar theoretical positions”.<sup>44</sup>

However, for all the advantages this approach might have because of the richness and complexity of real-life cases, “real world examples also have serious disadvantages for the theorist precisely because they are rich and complex”.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, questions are raised about how actually insightful real-life cases can be, based on the scepticism that theory and practice relate to one another at all: Kukathas, initially quoting Isaiah Berlin, argues that “we are a variable and inconstant species who not only want different things, but also change their minds [...] both individually and collectively. [...] As life has to go on, decisions are nonetheless taken about what is to be sought or attempted or implemented. We are, unquestionably, a practical species. Although theoretical reflection may sometimes precede practical action, it is seldom more than just another input in the process that leads to decision”.<sup>46</sup> The critique can be reworded to a warning that looking at context may be an unreliable way to achieve the theorist’s goal, may that be taking inspiration for, formulating, adapting or re-formulating their theory. In other words, a case that seemingly confirms a theory may be doing so not because the theory is actually correct, but because of any number of reasons at play with the unpredictability of human nature and the complexity of (the) context. Moreover, not only might it be unreliable in terms of being misleading, contextual analysis may also simply be ineffective. Kukathas again mentions a contextual research done by Odile Verhaar and Sawitri Saharso looking at minority cultural rights and the use of headscarves in the Netherlands.<sup>47</sup> The conclusion of this research was “that contextual approaches to discourse did not result

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<sup>42</sup> Laegaard, p.264.

<sup>43</sup> “For example, India is a democracy, but when contemporary democratic theorists in Europe and North America write, how often do they ask themselves whether their ideas apply in India?”, Carens, 2004, p.126.

<sup>44</sup> Carens, 2000, p.5.

<sup>45</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.218.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.215.

<sup>47</sup> Sawitri Saharso and Odile Verhaar, 2002, ‘Hoofddoeken in Holland, Een verkenning van een contextuele benadering van een multicultureel conflict’, in *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy*, vol. 3 and Saharso and Verhaar, 2004, ‘The Weight of Context: Headscarves in Holland’, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 7, no, 2, Springer.

in any greater convergence of different positions. Nor did it yield conclusions that were more open to the claims of minority culture".<sup>48</sup> In normative terms too, "it seems that the contextual approach, to the extent that it was at all distinctive, came with the disadvantage that it made social criticism more difficult, since it pushed discussion inwards, suggesting that matters should be left to be argued out by those who belonged to the context".<sup>49</sup>

However, what perhaps Kukathas does not give enough attention to is that Verhaar and Saharso are still positive about the use of a contextual approach. Their main issue with contextualism is indeed focused more on the normative use of the results of the contextual research (as in, once the theory has been analysed and modified through the context). However, for them the limit of the contextual approach "rests rather on a different level. Even though the solution suggested in the case discussed takes into account the wishes and interests of all parties involved, it is nonetheless not yet acceptable by all. [...] [The approach] pretends to be more suitable in generating solutions that are acceptable to all parties, but assumes a willingness to compromise by those involved. This shows that achieving compromises, of which the contextual approach promotes the benefits, [...] is likely hard to achieve".<sup>50</sup> This suggests more that the difficulty lies in, once a theory has been analysed through practice, how to *apply* that 'practice-inspired' theory into practice once again. In other words, the methodology is still insightful for the re-shaping of the theory, but it does not necessarily mean that then this theory can be effortlessly put into practice. Ultimately, for Verhaar and Saharso "whether or not it promotes social stability, a contextual approach makes us attend to otherwise neglected perspectives and thus yields greater normative insights".<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, they also understand it is not so straightforward. For all its merits of taking into account insights and perspectives that would otherwise go ignored, it comes at the cost that "a contextualists' approach generates *more* solutions",<sup>52</sup> highlighting once more the need and desire to find the right balance between the richness of cases being insightful and the same richness being too complex.

In the end Kukathas, despite his doubts on contextualism, wonders if "perhaps all this is overstating matters".<sup>53</sup> Indeed, against some of the forms of contextualism seen previously, a contextualist does not have to necessarily make claims on the (co-)dependency or (co-)determination of context and theory. A contextualist's claims could arguably be "more modest than this, for all contextualism asserts is that fine-grained analysis of particular issues from a perspective that is close to the problem at hand might yield better insights and even

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<sup>48</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.225.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.225.

<sup>50</sup> My own translation of "Een beperking van de [...] contextuele benadering ligt veeleer op een ander vlak. De in de besproken casus voorgestelde oplossing houdt weliswaar meer rekening met de wensen en belangen van alle partijen, maar is daarmee nog niet voor alle partijen acceptabel. [...] De benadering [...] pretendeert beter in staat te zijn om oplossingen te genereren die voor alle partijen acceptabel zijn, maar vooronderstelt een bereidheid tot compromis van de betrokkenen. Dit wijst erop dat het sluiten van compromissen, waarvan een contextuele benadering de voordelen benadrukt, [...] vermoedelijk moeilijk te realiseren is". Saharso & Verhaar, 2002, p. 294.

<sup>51</sup> Saharso and Verhaar, 2004, p.179.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.193.

<sup>53</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.224.



practical solutions than reflection from afar".<sup>54</sup> This is suddenly not such a big claim to defend, as it is not necessarily looking at the nature of the relation between context and theory, just suggesting that at times real-life cases can be insightful for theory. The contextualism in this project will be a rather modest one along these lines, however a new perspective on contextualism can arise from here, one which draws from literature on (political) discourse analysis, applying it to contextualism. It is clear but not explicit the understanding that within contextualism one is constantly dealing with interpreting discourse. The multiculturalist examples of contextualism are also example of interpreting the language used in certain policies on minority rights and interpreting that language in order to gain insights on the various theoretical meanings and implications. It should be then at least briefly noted how discourse relates to context and theory.

*A brief defence of discourse as context (or relevant to it)*

So far, the terms 'discourse' and 'language' have been used almost interchangeably, however this is far too simplistic. A more accurate (but still somewhat basic) statement would be to say that "discourse is basically the social use of language in social contexts".<sup>55</sup> Looking at the literature on political discourse analysis, it transpires that discourse can have various meanings, it can be "(a) signification as an element of the social process; (b) the language associated with a particular social field or practice [...]; (c) a way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective".<sup>56</sup> No matter which option is 'more correct', it is still the claim of political discourse analysts that by looking at political discourse "we may typically expect overall meanings related to political systems, ideologies, institutions, the political process, political actors, and political events".<sup>57</sup>

With political discourse analysis, one can make "theoretical reflections on the local semantics of political discourse", given that "politicians will tend to emphasize all meanings that are positive about themselves and their own group (nation, party, ideology, etc.) and negative about the Others".<sup>58</sup> So by looking at the language used, one can better grasp what potential biases or ideas those political actors are expressing. A famous example of this can be the classical pair of whether a political actors refers to someone as a *terrorist* or a *freedom fighter*.<sup>59</sup> This is not just about terminology, there are all kinds of political rhetoric strategies that allow for inferences to be made about the theoretical framework a specific political actor thinks in. For example, looking at syntax, "active sentences will associate responsible agency with (topical) syntactic subjects, whereas passive sentences will focus on objects (e.g. victims) of such actions and defocus responsible agency".<sup>60</sup> A more specific example of this could be that by comparing the newspaper headlines 'Eleven Africans were shot dead...' and 'Police

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<sup>54</sup> Kukathas, 2004, p.224.

<sup>55</sup> Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, 2012, *Political Discourse Analysis*, London: Routledge, p.81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>57</sup> Teun van Dijk, 1997, 'What is Political Discourse Analysis', in *Belgian Journal of Linguistic*, vol.11, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

shot and killed 11 African demonstrators', one can see how "using the passive form puts the (syntactic) agents of the killings, 'police' in less focal position".<sup>61</sup> Moreover, it could be also noted that the second headline also gives a more dynamic and complete identification of the victims as demonstrators, rather than solely African.<sup>62</sup> These examples show that the way language and political discourse are set out can "indirectly contribute to corresponding semantic stress on specific meanings, as a function of the political interests and allegiances of the speaker or writer".<sup>63</sup>

This is all consistent with the various contextualist interpretations and understandings. Where context is seen as at least relevant to theory, so too is then discourse at least relevant to context, which makes discourse then at least indirectly relevant to theory. Moreover, the contextualist claim in this project is that context is at least an intimation of theory, i.e., within a context we may see hints or traces of the theoretical framework. The same may apply to political discourse as an intimation of context, if not of theory directly. In other words, in the example of the headlines of the police shootings, if we were looking at the theoretical framework around the morality of the police system, one can make the claim that by looking at the language used in the first headline ('Africans shot' rather than 'police shot Africans') the author may have had a preference towards siding with the police (which is the context we are looking at). From this, we can then gain the insights on the theoretical framework that at times some people may justify police brutality.<sup>64</sup> The example of the passive form may not be the most obvious case of language giving insights on context, but it is definitely an example of the types of things political discourse analysis looks at too. Of course, had the newspaper headline used racial slurs or explicitly condemned the demonstrators in some way, it would be much clearer to then claim the author sided with the police, and to then make inferences of what theoretical claims are at play here. But again, this are just to give a sense of how a case study can be both contextualist and based on political discourse analysis. In the case study that follows, some theoretical implications in the Vote Leave speeches will be outspoken and obvious (e.g., "the EU is built to keep power and control with the elites rather than the people" in Gove 20/02 is clearly stating the idea of anti-elitism), while other are based on more nuanced analysis of their rhetoric which can nonetheless give theoretical insights ("it is mad" Johnson 26/05, or "it is insanity" Stuart 13/04 could be argued to show a claim of exclusivity on representation through the monopoly of rationality).<sup>65</sup>

An even stronger claim could be made that political discourse is not simply relevant or insightful for context and theory, but that discourse *is* the context. Language is inescapable.

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<sup>61</sup> Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress and Tony Trew, 1979, *Language and Control*, London: Routledge, p.98.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>63</sup> van Dijk, p.34.

<sup>64</sup> I am in no way claiming that then this is a justified theoretical claim. The contextualist would not take such a claim for granted, it would be their task to then interpret it more holistically, by for example claiming that theoretically police brutality could be accepted in the most extreme circumstances but as the specific context (where police brutality was not justified) shows the implementation of it should be extraordinarily rare. Again, this is just to showcase the methodology used, it is in no way delving into the ethics of policing.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson speaking in regards to more countries joining the EU, while Stuart refers to thinking Europe can change.

When one looks at a political context, one inevitably looks exclusively at political discourse and language. While this is an appealing line of inquiry, it does also open up a can of worms, which this chapter had trying so hard to keep closed, namely the various potential interpretations of the relation between the nature of context and the nature of theory. Only that now there are even more worms in the shape of the various possible interpretations of the relation between the nature of (political) language, the nature of (political) context, and the nature of (political) theory.

In a similar strategy as previously seen, for the purposes of this research, it suffices to say that discourse is at least relevant to or an intimation of context, which in turn is at least relevant to or an intimation of theory. What this allows for is framing contextual political analysis and political discourse analysis as at least compatible, allowing thusly to gain insights from both literatures and approaches. With all this in mind, the next section will look at why the case study chosen (Vote Leave campaign) is appropriate for a contextual analysis as previously seen and what goals there are for it.

#### *Why Vote Leave as a contextual analysis*

The theoretical framework developed in previous chapters attempted to elucidate what potential ideological claims populism would have if it was to be considered an ideology.

These potential claims can be summarised as:

- 1) Anti-elitism
- 2) Purity of the people
- 3) Importance of the will of the people
- 4) Direct representation
- 5) Exclusive representation
- 6) Homogeneity of the people (anti-pluralism)

Of these, those which seems to potentially have the most ideological worth were those related to representation and popular sovereignty, namely claims 3 and 4, that the will of the people is the primary concern for political action and that this popular will ought to be effectuated with the least representation possible. Following from this, the potential populist ideology's interpretation of representation and popular sovereignty were seen within the context of democratic theory. Whereas the ideology embodied in the liberal democratic systems we are accustomed to in the West strive to keep the balance between the liberal pillar and democratic pillar, the potential populist ideology would prioritise the purely democratic pillar (matching the potential ideological claims of 'the importance of the will of the people' and of direct representation). This raised some issues:

a) Conceptual issues: Respect for the concept of a democratic minority (within majoritarian rule)

b) Conceptual and practical issues: Populism as claiming monopoly of reason, making reasonable argument impossible

c) Practical issues: Populist political actors' motivation (e.g., the power-hungry leader)

The next step is then to assess how these claims and issues are reflected in real life, following the guidelines given by contextual political analysis. First, let us assess whether the case selection suggested fits within this methodology. Contextualism's recommendations, as previously seen in the section on this methodology, will now be presented once more alongside a note on whether the case study suggested matches these recommendations:<sup>66</sup>

i. The use of real-life cases to illustrate theoretical formulations:

The real-life case in this research will be the Vote Leave campaign, or more precisely the language used by its members (or those closely associates to it). The theoretical formulations are those mentioned previously, relating to populism's potential ideological claims and ideological relation to representation and popular sovereignty. In terms of the recommendation of using real-life cases to illustrate theoretical formulations, the choice of case study is thus appropriate.

ii. The case selection has the fundamental concerns addressed by the theory in play:

Even if one did not know too much about the Vote Leave campaign, they would still probably recognise it as populist to some extent, with representation and popular sovereignty as core issues. At the very least, it famously has concepts such as the importance of the will of the (British) people, anti-elitism (the EU being the elite), or a general championing for representation at its core. The fundamental concerns addressed by the theory are thus visibly at play in this case study.

iii. The case study leads theorists to pay attention to the question of whether their theoretical formulations are actually compatible with the normative positions that they themselves take on particular issues.

The normative aspect of the project is almost secondary, which is not to say that it is not important. The primary focus of this project is to assess the extent to which populism can be seen as an ideology. Of course, this has normative implications: arguing that populism can or cannot be an ideology would give it a different status in political dialogue. In other words, populism may for example be seen as having valid and valuable ideological claims that should be given more attention to as an idea, whilst if its potential claims would be seen as either incoherent or collapsing in other ideologies then populism is less desirable in discussions on a theoretical level. Nonetheless, some issues arising from the implications of the potential ideological claims have been mentioned already in the project (the conceptual and/or practical issues). For these, the case study is useful and still fits criterion iii. for the contextual methodology. The various theoretical formulations will be seen through the lens of the case

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<sup>66</sup> Carens, 2004, p. 118. See footnote 41

study. These formulations are both those labelled 1 to 6, as well as the issues labelled a to c, which are those with more outspoken normative implications.

- iv. The cases are ideally challenging to the theorist's own theoretical position and
- v. Contextualism promotes consideration of cases that are unfamiliar and illuminating because of their unfamiliarity.<sup>67</sup>

These two criteria are here (greatly) simplified together as a guidance to choose cases that go against the theorist's intuition, because they do not instinctively seem to reflect the outcome of the theoretical position, or the theorist simply does not know enough about the case to say whether it instinctively seems to reflect their theoretical position. Alas, the Vote Leave campaign is not unfamiliar, however it is at odds with the theoretical position, which is arguably the more important aspect of the two. Firstly, it is not an unfamiliar case for various reasons. The Vote Leave campaign is known by most. Failing that, Brexit in general is a world-wide famous case. It is far from an obscure case that very few scholars have analysed, like what Carens does in his book where he assesses minority group rights by looking at Fijian society. Moreover, even if Vote Leave and Brexit had not gained world-wide attention, there is the inescapable fact that I am British,<sup>68</sup> so it still would not be an unfamiliar case to me. Not only am I aware of the case, I – like an especially large number of the population – have a personal opinion on Brexit, arguably the most polarising and significant political event to have happened in the UK for quite a while. This could of course be an issue in terms of bias. However, it is important to restate the goals of this case study. It is not to normatively assess the Vote Leave campaign, at least not primarily. The aim is to gain insights from the case study in terms of the potential ideological claims of populism, for which I have no strong emotional response. To put this into perspective, Nazism is an ideology. Whilst I have a strong opinion against Nazism, I do not dispute or have a bias towards its status as an ideology: it is an ideology I do not support, but I would still claim it is an ideology. Despite any opinion I may have of the Vote Leave campaign, that should not influence too much seeing what claims of the Vote Leave campaign could be ideological. This by itself is not a normative step. The bias would lie in normatively assessing those claims. Moreover, if I nonetheless did have an opinion that would make me biased towards analysing which Vote Leave claims are ideological and populist, that strangely would actually be in my favour, for that would be nothing more than a case study challenging my perspective, in line with criterion iv. Secondly, a further reason why this case selection is challenging to the previously-stated theoretical framework is due to the very nature of the Vote Leave campaign. It is an uncommon instance of a populist group explicitly not running for office or trying to retain power.<sup>69</sup> Vote Leave was not directly connected to a political party. This greatly contrasts with some key features of the theoretical framework, which saw for example exclusive representation as a potential claim of populism. There is also no real figure of the populist leader. Of course, in the group

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<sup>67</sup> These five criteria have been paraphrased from Carens, 2004, p. 118.

<sup>68</sup> Which occasionally elicits the response "nobody is perfect". To clarify, for what it is worth, I am a dual British-Italian national.

<sup>69</sup> Uncommon also due to its fame and popularity.

there were politicians involved who benefitted from the publicity, but it certainly would be an unusual (though not unreasonable) way for the figure of the power-hungry leader to gain power.<sup>70</sup> Soon after the Brexit referendum, the Vote Leave group did disband, or rather was replaced with the quieter Change Britain pressure group which in turn disbanded following the UK withdrawal from the EU in 2020. This winding down of the group(s) seems to suggest that its mandate had expired and that the campaigners genuinely wanted Brexit, it was not a move to improve the power status of the group.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the group transcended the stereotypical left-wing spectrum of political actors. Other populist cases are associated much more closely to a clear right- or left- wing ideology (and party). However, the Vote Leave campaign was comprised of a variety of political colours as noticeable already with its board members, with famous Conservative figures such as Michael Gove or Boris Johnson alongside Labour's Gisela Stuart serving as chair of the group, with Lib-Dem, DUP and industry figures thrown in the mixture too. For all these reasons, the case study seems to be at odds with some facets of the theoretical framework on populism, whilst nonetheless being a fairly clear instance of populism. According to the contextualist recommendations, this would make it a suitable case study for the methodology.

The Vote Leave case selection also seems appropriate for contextual analysis of the issues seen in the previous chapter:

a) Conceptual issues: Respect for the concept of a minority (within majoritarian rule)

The Brexit referendum is a famous example of majority rule, not only in terms of how it was phrased (in-or-out) but especially in its results. With a result 51.9% in favour of leaving the EU (48.1% to stay), the margins were so small between the two, but nonetheless the slimmest of majorities won and their will was effectuated (the UK eventually left the EU). Admittedly, this may seem as unrelated to the Vote Leave campaign itself, but nonetheless the campaign showed at the very least a conditional majoritarian rule (*if* the majority vote 'leave' in the referendum then we should leave). As the case study will see, there is also a claim to be made that Vote Leave showed levels of exclusive representation and/or perceived homogeneity of the will of the people, whereby anyone wanting to remain was seen as non-existent or wrong. All this hints that the Vote Leave campaign would be a good case in order to contextually analyse the idea of the majoritarian rule, and where it might go wrong.

b) Conceptual and practical issues: Populism as claiming monopoly of reason, making reasonable argument impossible

As the case study will also see, the Vote Leave campaign has received a lot of criticism for the rhetoric and political strategy used. The case study will elucidate some hunches that the Vote Leave campaign treated those who wished to remain or figures from the EU as corrupt, untrustworthy or simply wrong. Moreover, the campaign often gets criticised for having

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<sup>70</sup> In any case, it goes beyond the scope of this research to infer and analyse whether gaining power was the only drive for some campaigners. Nonetheless, at the very least, it does seem unlikely that every single person involved in the campaign was using it to promote themselves, not caring about the actual content of it.

<sup>71</sup> Again, the individual political actors may well have benefitted from this.

spread fake news, or having twisted certain facts in a deceiving way.<sup>72</sup> On the face of it then, Vote Leave seems like a good fit in analysing populist closedness to open democratic dialogue and populists' attempts to gain the monopoly of reason in public discourse.

c) Practical issues: Populist political actors' motivation (e.g., the power-hungry leader)

The case selection is interesting on this on various levels. Firstly, although figures which well deserve an analysis as populist leaders such as Gove, Johnson or Farage were famously associated with the Vote Leave campaign, Vote Leave was fairly leader-free. Moreover, given the nature of the group, there was no real outlook of winning power *as a group*. Vote Leave was always singularly focused on the Brexit referendum, as soon as that occurred the group disbanded.<sup>73</sup> In other words, it was no political party aiming to go into power. This makes this case study particularly interesting, as it does not quite match the expectations previously set up by the theoretical framework of the previous chapters. Of course, it could well be said that the individuals that made up the Vote Leave group had their own motivations to do so. It is safe to say that, for example, Boris Johnson's outspokenness in the Vote Leave campaign greatly benefitted his career, which even led him to become Prime Minister and complete Brexit negotiations himself. However, it goes beyond this project to analyse all the individual's motivations for being active in the Vote Leave campaign. For the aims and ambitions of this project, it would be speculative to try and gain insights from individuals' motivations. Nonetheless, the fact that the Vote Leave group itself was seemingly not aiming to gain power is – as far as contextualism is concerned – a great reason as to why this case study would be particularly insightful on this issue associated with populism.

*A brief history of Vote Leave*

Of course, it is impossible to mention Vote Leave without discussing first Brexit and its referendum. Brexit is the most important and controversial topic in modern British politics. It confronted – and still confronts – Britain with a series of questions and debates about its identity, society, political economy, trade, security, international position, constitution, legal system, sovereignty, unity, party politics and the attitudes and values that define it.<sup>74</sup> Not only is it complex in content, but it is also difficult to know where (or rather when) to start. Some scholars argue that the Brexit referendum is located “in a much longer story of Britain's (and before it, England's) efforts to face what David Cameron called Britain's ‘European question.’ It was [...] the latest chapter in a thousand-year story of conflict and cooperation”.<sup>75</sup> Without

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<sup>72</sup> For example, the famous Vote Leave bus, suggesting that the never-confirmed 350 million pounds that the UK allegedly sent to the EU weekly could be used to fund the NHS instead. Jon Stone in *The Independent*, available at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/vote-leave-brexit-lies-eu-pay-money-remain-poll-boris-johnson-a8603646.html>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>73</sup> With an unassuming transformation into Change Britain to make sure that Brexit actual would occur, which also disbanded after achieving its ‘aim’.

<sup>74</sup> Tim Oliver, 2018, *Understanding Brexit: A Concise Introduction*, Policy Press, p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Brendan Simms, 2016, *Britain's Europe: A thousand years of conflict and cooperation*. Penguin Books, in Tim Oliver 2019, ‘Brexitology: delving into the books on Brexit’, in *International Political Review*, Springer, p. 8.

having to go that far back, one can rest assured that Euroscepticism in the UK has been around ever since the EU has been around. The ever first national referendum in the UK (1975, predating Thatcher's time as prime minister) also was on pretty much the same issue as the most recent referendum: "Do you think the United Kingdom should stay in the European Community (the Common Market)?"<sup>76</sup> Thatcher was then famously sceptical towards European ambitions of federalisation and integration.<sup>77</sup>

It is not necessary for this research to detail the history of exactly how and why Euroscepticism in the UK came to be or how and why it gained political prominence, but it is enough to say that throughout the years a growing Eurosceptic pressure was such that there were serious suggestions in the 2010 general elections of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, a referendum which did not materialise.<sup>78</sup> Building on this, in the lead-up to the 2015 general elections the then Prime Minister David Cameron called for a referendum on EU membership to be held if the Conservative party would be successful in the upcoming elections.<sup>79</sup> This was widely speculated to be not necessarily for ideological reasons, but as a way of appeasing the Eurosceptic members of the Conservative party and of pulling in voters that would have otherwise voted for more explicitly Eurosceptic parties, such as UKIP.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, Cameron has often claimed that also with the gift of hindsight holding the referendum was still the right thing to do.<sup>81</sup>

In any case, the Conservatives won the election (thanks to the UK's first-past-the-post system) with a vote share of 36.9%<sup>82</sup> and thus the promised referendum was called for the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2016. In October 2015, Vote Leave was formed as a campaigning group in favour of leaving the EU<sup>83</sup> and soon after it became the official campaign in favour of the 'leave' vote.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> With 67% in favour of staying.

<sup>77</sup> Her 1988 Bruges speech being a famous example, available at <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>78</sup> David Cameron, 2012, 'We need to be clear about the best way of getting what is best for Britain', in *The Telegraph*, available at <<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/EYahB>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>79</sup> David Cameron's famous EU speech at Bloomberg, available on the Government website <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>> or full version on <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Prime\\_Minister\\_David\\_Cameron%27s\\_EU\\_Speech.ogg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Prime_Minister_David_Cameron%27s_EU_Speech.ogg)> [both last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>80</sup> Tim Bale, 'Why David Cameron called the 2016 Referendum – and why he lost it', in *UK in a Changing Europe* website, available at <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/why-david-cameron-called-the-2016-referendum/> or Kim Janssen, 'Fateful O'Hare Airport pizza meeting sealed Brexit vote deal: British media', in *Chicago Tribune*, available at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-brexit-ohare-pizza-20160624-story.html> [both last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>81</sup> Sarah Lyall and Mark Landler, 2019, 'David Cameron Is Sorry. Really, Really Sorry' in *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/world/europe/david-cameron-brexit-sorry.html> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>82</sup> Vote share was: Conservatives 36.9%, Labour 30.4%, UKIP 12.6%, Lib-Dem 7.9%, SNP 4.7%, Greens 3.8%, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>83</sup> Laura Kuenssberg, 2015, 'EU referendum: New 'exit' group launches its campaign', in *BBC News*, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-34482936> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>84</sup> Jon Stone, 2016, 'Vote Leave designated as official EU referendum Out campaign' in *Independent*, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/vote-leave-designated-as-official-eu-referendum-out-campaign-a6982491.html> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].



Since the start of the group, Vote Leave was “made up of Conservative, Labour and UKIP MPs and donors”.<sup>85</sup> Notable figures of the Campaign Committee included Dominic Cummings, Campaign Director and former government adviser; Conservative MPs like Michael Gove (Co-Convener), Boris Johnson, Steve Baker, Iain Duncan Smith, Priti Patel, Dominic Raab; Labour MPs like Gisela Stuart (Co-Convener and then Chair), Ian Davidson, Frank Field; other MPs like UKIP’s Douglas Carswell, DUP’s Nigel Dodds, Lib-Dem’s Paul Keetch, as well as other figures such as lobbyist Matthew Elliott, former director-general of the British Chambers of Commerce John Longworth, and a handful of business founders or chairmen, like JML founder John Mills.

In the lead-up to the referendum, fierce campaigning led by the Vote Leave group brought a lot of attention and criticism. For example, it transpired that “key figures working with the official campaign for Brexit planned to pump out controversial pro-Leave advertisements to millions of voters via Facebook the day after the Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered in June 2016, despite an agreement by all sides to suspend national activities out of respect”<sup>86</sup>, which many found both deeply insensitive towards Jo Cox and unfair on democratic proceedings in general. Moreover, in 2018 – after the referendum –, the Electoral Commission also found that Vote Leave broke electoral law by overspending.<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, the Vote Leave campaign’s tactics and language are commonly and informally labelled as populist, amongst other things. Focus points of the campaign were, amongst others, immigration and the NHS, with famous slogans being “Take back control” [of immigration] and the infamous controversial big red bus with “We send the EU £350 million a week, let’s fund the NHS instead” written on its side.<sup>88</sup>

In any case, the referendum took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2016 with the wording “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”, with a result 51.9% in favour of leaving the EU (and thus 48.1% to stay), an unachievable result had it not been for the Vote Leave campaign. Quickly afterwards, the Vote Leave campaign group quietly disbanded,<sup>89</sup> with the much less dominant group ‘Change Britain’ being founded

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<sup>85</sup> Kuenssberg, ‘EU referendum: New ‘exit’ group launches its campaign’.

<sup>86</sup> Carole Cadwalladr and Toby Helm, 2018, ‘Anger over use of Brexit ads in aftermath of Jo Cox murder’ in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/28/anger-brexit-ads-after-jo-cox-murder-beleave-vote-leave> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>87</sup> Laura Kuenssberg, 2018, ‘Vote Leave broke electoral law, Electoral Commission expected to say’, in *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-44704561> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>88</sup> Controversial because no proof had been given as to the alleged weekly amount to the EU, and because it led to the assumption that the NHS would receive £350 million a week if Leave won, an impossible promise. Jon Stone, 2018, ‘British public still believe Vote Leave ‘£350million a week to EU’ myth from Brexit referendum’ in *Independent* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/vote-leave-brexit-lies-eu-pay-money-remain-poll-boris-johnson-a8603646.html> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>89</sup> Nick Cohen, 2016, ‘There are liars and then there’s Boris Johnson and Michael Gove’ in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/25/boris-johnson-michael-gove-eu-liars> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

as its successor.<sup>90</sup> This group was set up “to make sure Brexit actually happened”.<sup>91</sup> What followed the referendum were some tumultuous years for British politics. Cameron immediately resigned as PM, Theresa May replaced him and had the (arguably impossible) task of negotiating Brexit with the EU<sup>92</sup> whilst at the same time trying to keep power within her own country, and eventually Boris Johnson came to power and concluded May’s negotiations, with the UK officially leaving the EU on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2020.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, Brexit and the tactics used by the Vote Leave campaign remain a deeply divisive, relevant and regular topic of discussion for the UK today.

### *Why and how this case study is carried out*

There are various benefits of the case selection, some of which have already been detailed. A main benefit of this case selection is what is above, namely in short that it is an unusual case of populism which is multi-party in nature and lacks the figure of a populist leader. As mentioned too, it is an appealing case for me personally, who by the sheer nature of being British may be able to pick up various cultural nuances or references more easily than with some political event in another country I do not have any particular insight in.

A further reason for this case selection is that the Vote Leave campaign instinctively seems populist. It is not too controversial to claim that there are populist elements in the debate around Brexit and most people would somewhat instinctively agree, or would not need extensive persuasion, that the Vote Leave campaign was at least to some extent populist. A further benefit which has not yet been mentioned is a degree of ‘self-definition’ of the Vote Leave campaign: comparatively to other political movements or parties, the Vote Leave campaign greatly aids the research by gathering themselves the speeches and articles they identify with.<sup>94</sup> Where usually it may be difficult to pinpoint a certain speech to a certain movement, the website for Vote Leave presents itself with a list of fifty-three key speeches, interviews, and op-eds which fit their cause and ideology. Essentially, if one is presented with a Boris Johnson interview from 2016, it may be hard to pinpoint whether he is speaking as the Mayor of London, as the MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, as a Vote Leave campaign sympathiser, as a member of the Conservative party and so on. This makes it difficult to then make the claim ‘people in London think X’, or ‘people in Uxbridge think X’, ‘the Conservatives think X’, or for the purposes of this research “the Vote Leave campaign claims X”. However, by the Vote Leave presenting such an interview on their own website as an example of their campaign, it makes it much easier to assume they identify with what is said. Moreover, even

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<sup>90</sup> Peter Walker and Toby Helm, ‘Boris Johnson backs Brexit pressure campaign Change Britain’ in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/11/boris-johnson-backs-brexit-pressure-campaign-change-britain> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>91</sup> Change Britain program overview, primary source no longer available, secondary source available at <https://www.europeansources.info/record/change-britain/> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>92</sup> With unclear public expectations of what such ‘a Brexit’ would or should look like.

<sup>93</sup> Although there was a transitional period set until the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2020.

<sup>94</sup> Vote Leave website, ‘Key speeches, interviews and op-eds’, available at [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/key\\_speeches\\_interviews\\_and\\_op\\_ed.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/key_speeches_interviews_and_op_ed.html) [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

if a speech was not directly intended as a Vote Leave campaign speech, these are nonetheless all speeches that were used as part of the campaign. This makes it uncontroversial to then use what is said in these speeches as part of the Vote Leave campaign as a whole.

Of the fifty-three speeches, interviews and op-eds listed on the Vote Leave campaign website,<sup>95</sup> a dozen has been selected for a more detailed analysis. The reason for this smaller selection was above all because some material was simply no longer available online, but also because the twelve speeches analysed were the most representative, renowned or just seemed more insightful and appropriate for further analysis on populism. In the next chapter these speeches will be analysed, not just in terms of language but of content too, trying to gain insights of what theoretical claims a populist might be making. Of course, the assessment of content is done through an analysis of language. Language is inescapable. However, the focus of this discourse analysis will be very much on what potential ideological claims the Vote Leave campaigners could be expressing through the language. The speeches analysed are:<sup>96</sup>

- Dominic Cummings's interview on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2016. Hereinafter shortened to (C) for 'Cummings'
- Michael Gove's "Statement from Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Justice, on the EU Referendum", 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2016. Shortened to (G1), for 'Gove 1'
- Gisela Stuart's "Brexit is the left-wing choice: the Labour Party has mislaid its radical roots", in Prospect Magazine, 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2016. (S1)
- Gisela Stuart's interview "Backing Brexit does not make you a 'bad' person, says Vote Leave head Gisela Stuart" in the Independent, 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2016. (S2)
- Gisela Stuart's "exposing the risks of staying in the EU", 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2016 (S3)
- Michael Gove's "The Facts of Life Say Leave", 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2016. (G2)
- Boris Johnson's 'liberal cosmopolitan case' speech at the headquarters of the Vote Leave campaign, 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2016. (J1)
- Boris Johnson's statement on immigration statistics, 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2016 (J2)
- Michael Gove, Boris Johnson and Gisela Stuart's statement on NHS funding, 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2016. (GJS1)
- Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, and Gisela Stuart's "on the Risks of Remain", 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2016. (GJS2)
- Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Gisela Stuart and John Longworth, "Voting to stay in the EU is the risky option", 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2016. (GJSL)

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<sup>95</sup> Vote Leave website, 'Key speeches, interviews and op-eds'.

<sup>96</sup> All available on the Vote Leave website, link above. If the website itself does not provide a transcript of the speech or interview, it will provide a direct link to it.

- Thirteen Government ministers and senior Conservatives’ “Leave Ministers commit to maintain EU funding”, 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2016. (M) for ‘Ministers’

For what it is worth, it may be interesting to highlight that in the analysis of these dozen speeches almost 500 quotes have been identified as potentially interesting. In a rough categorisation of these around 120 of quotes were seen as relating to anti-elitism, 130 to representation, 50 to appeal to emotions, 50 to mockery, 50 to national pride, and 30 to appeals to rationality, and the rest was categorised under ‘other’. These numbers are not to be taken too seriously at all. There was no rigorous methodology in this categorisation, so no solid argument can and should be made based simply on these ‘statistics’, but it may provide a ‘feel’ for what the case study might be dealing with. Using this material, the next chapter will try to analyse the theoretical framework seen in previous chapters through the context of these speeches. The potential ideological claims that populism might have will be assessed in the extent to which the Vote Leave speeches also may or may not be making them, and what implications for the theory the speeches would have. It may be clear by now that not only is the type of methodology contextual, but it is also discourse analysis. The context, which is at the base of the whole contextual political analysis methodology, is set here by the discourse of political actors. This has been seen as consistent with contextualism. Contextualists may look at how specific policies are worded (Carens, for example, looked at the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), essentially interpreting the discourse within those policies to gain insights in more theoretical terms.

### *Looking ahead*

This chapter has served a few purposes. It served as a transition between the theoretical approach to populism into the more contextual section of the research. It tackled some of the literature on contextual political analysis, firstly by describing its aims and methods in general, and secondly in highlighting the nuanced differences between various types of contextualist approaches. In the end, it was justified that within the research project there is an assumption that context can be relevant to theory, with the idea of context as an intimation of theory. Analysing the relation between the nature of context and the nature theory (i.e., does context determine theory? co-determine? Or viceversa? and so on) is tricky and a worthwhile question, but for the scope of this research it is enough to say that context could be an intimation of a certain theoretical framework, and by looking at a specific context one can gain insights that the theory did not account for. A similar approach was then defended in terms of the use of political discourse analysis in relation to contextualism. A contextualist analysis is inevitably an analysis of discourse, but this link does not make contextualism any less consistent or coherent. Even if one was to avoid the troubling task to see how exactly language, context and theory related to one another, it has been seen here in the chapter how language (and political discourse) is at least relevant and informative to (political) context, which in turn is at least relevant and informative to (political) theoretical formulations.

Having then presented contextual political analysis in general and its implications in terms of political discourse analysis, the chapter then moved on to analyse the use of this methodology for the case study selected (the Vote Leave campaign) and for the aims of the project in general, proposing gaining insights on the theoretical framework of the potential populist ideological claims by looking at Vote Leave as an example of populist discourse in practice. The chapter also addressed the pros and cons of both the methodology and the case study selection. Finally, this chapter set up the case study itself, giving a brief description of the context (a brief history of Brexit and the Vote Leave campaign) and making clearer how the case study will actually be carried out. This is done by looking at how the theoretical framework on populism's potential ideological claims (e.g., claims of anti-elitism, exclusive representation, direct representation, and so on) is reflected in twelve selected speeches and interviews of the Vote Leave campaigners. The aim is here to further bolster, adapt, or clarify the theory by giving a real example of those claims in practice. The expectation is not to simply confirm what has been said in previous chapters, but to be challenged and gain insights from things the theory may have gotten wrong or may have not addressed.

## Chapter V: Case Study – What is the potential populist ideology in Vote Leave?

*A Brexiteer walks into a bar  
...and leaves*

Having dedicated the previous chapter in analysing the contextual methodology that will be used, as well as introducing the case study itself, this chapter will actually undertake said case study. The aim is to see how the theoretical framework of potential populist ideological claims is reflected in the Vote Leave's discourse. Step by step, each potential claim will be analysed within the context, each giving specific insights for the theory to learn from.

To give some structure to the case study, it may be worth following the structure of potential populist ideological claims of chapter II. Those potential claims, rather brutally summarised, are:

- 7) Anti-elitism: The elite are 'bad', most often referring to the current political officials;
- 8) Purity of the people: bluntly put, the people (which can have many interpretations) are essentially always right and must be praised;
- 9) Importance will of the people: the will of the people is the only important drive for political decisions;
- 10) Direct representation: on the assumption that modern liberal representative democracy is unnecessarily bureaucratic or corrupt, there should be a more recurring implementation of such things as referenda, or more ideally a devolution of power to a single figure.
- 11) Exclusive representation: the populists are the only ones legitimate to or capable of representing the people, with competitors for representation said to be non-existent, corrupt, or wrong.
- 12) Homogeneity of the people (anti-pluralism): within the citizenry there is only one will, people who think differently are said to be non-existent or not part of 'the people'.

This chapter will go through these claims within the context of the Vote Leave campaign. The strategy here is to roughly see if and how these claims are being made in the speeches, as well as openly looking to what implications the context might have on the theoretical framework. In other words, the analysis is on potential insights the case study might have that validate, change or go against the theoretical framework set out in the project so far. As well as the previous six claims, there will also be two other sections to point out things that had either been missed by the theory (7. New insights) or are not relevant to the theory but interesting to mention nonetheless (8. Other).

Alongside the theoretical framework of potential populist ideological claims, this research project has also highlighted some issues noted in populism's relation to democracy, as seen in Chapter III. These can be summarised as:

- (a) a purely ideological issue: a populist majority rule implies existence and respect of minority, which however populism neglects
- (b) an ideological and practical issue: populism may bypass democratic rules of open dialogue to the point that no one can rationally engage with them
- (c) a purely practical issue: populist use any ideological claim solely to serve their own individual interests (e.g., the figure of the power-hungry leader)

These issues will also be analysed within the context of the Vote Leave campaign, however, for the sake of brevity and to avoid excessive repetition of quotes, the analysis of these issue will be incorporated within the structure mentioned above of potential ideological claims (as in sections 1 to 8 corresponding to individual ideological claims).

**The case study: Ideological claims and their contextual analysis:**

1) Anti-elitism:

This is perhaps the most obviously present and detailed claim in the Vote Leave campaign of those potential ideological claims outlined in this project. This does however presuppose seeing the EU or its representatives as the elite. Well, an initial way to make this presupposition is by seeing whether the EU is factually elitist. Arguably this is a fundamental question with no quick substantive answer, or at least not an objective one. Simplifying massively on a topic worthy of its own research, and indeed its own field of study, the EU is undoubtably a complex decision-making union, with many facets, sub-groups, aims and regulations. Nonetheless, ultimately it is still given mandate from the individual citizen (of its member states). In its most simplified structure, EU decisions are in theory the effectuation of the member states' wills, which in turn are effectuations of their own nationals' will. Indirectly then, the aim of the EU is still to reflect the will of the people(s). However, the way the will of the people is effectuated through the EU is much more complicated than that, both in theory and in practice. There are many interpretative and evaluative steps the will of the people has to go through to be effectuated by the EU. With each step, individual political actors have to perform this interpretative and evaluative role, as well as perhaps a bargaining role in order to guarantee a specific part of the will of the people seen as more important at the cost of some other lesser part of the will of the people. On the one hand, it is not surprising that at face value some may have doubts on whether such a system could be or is exploited by individuals who become the elite and who might 'get away with it' precisely because of the complexity of the system. On the other hand, some might firstly have more trust in the system and its representatives to start with, and secondly might see the various successes of the EU as a sign that the system of representation can work and is working. Which interpretation is correct goes beyond the scope of this research, but this is just to highlight that a system such as the EU is in theory not necessarily elitist, but in practice could well be so, or not. The aims of this research is analysing through the Vote Leave campaign whether anti-elitism is a populist claim. If this was indeed so – given that the Vote Leave campaign is very critical of the EU as elite, as we shall see – it does not necessarily mean that they are right or wrong in their presupposition that the EU is elitist. 'Perceived elitism' is good enough for this research. One can make an ideological claim even if the claim itself is wrong (e.g., the

Nazi belief of the superiority of the Aryan race is still an ideological claim, even if it is universally understood as normatively, conceptually and theoretically flawed) or even if it does not apply to what they are criticising (e.g., one could make a flawless claim about the importance of religious freedom while trying to get a discount at the supermarket because it is Sunday, this being an example of a context where the ideological claim is not actually appropriate for the situation). The important thing for this research is that a claim about elites is made, regardless of whether the claim is well-founded or not. Not only are claims against elitism made, but there is a variety of interpretation of who the elite are. In general, the status quo<sup>1</sup> and “the establishment”<sup>2</sup> are criticised, but there are three more specific groups that can be interpreted as the elite within the speeches:

*The EU elite:* In this light, anti-elitism is unmissable in the Vote Leave campaign, with explicit references to “the EU elites”<sup>3</sup>, the “European elites”<sup>4</sup> or the “Brussels elite”<sup>5</sup>, leading to the assumption that the elite is what elsewhere is meant simply with the terms “Brussels”<sup>6</sup> or “the EU”. More nuanced interpretation of European elites are the European Court of Justice,<sup>7</sup> the European Commission,<sup>8</sup> and the troika.<sup>9</sup>

*The Government elite:* Interestingly, however, these are not the only elite identified in the speeches. The British Government is seen as part of the establishment that needs to be fought, with references to “Whitehall”,<sup>10</sup> the then-prime minister David Cameron<sup>11</sup> as well as the prime ministers before him<sup>12</sup>, and other government figures like the Home Secretary, the Chancellor and ministers in general.<sup>13</sup>

*The business elite:* Moreover, the establishment is further associated with terms such as “big business”<sup>14</sup>, the CBI (Confederation of British Industry), “a very small number of very powerful and very big multinational firms”<sup>15</sup> or the FTSE 100.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S1. For a breakdown of the speeches’ abbreviations, see the end of chapter IV. Briefly, C stand for Cummings, G stands for Gove. J for Johnson, S for Stuart, and M for the statement done by thirteen ministers, with then a number potentially indicating which speech of that person it is.

<sup>2</sup> C, S1.

<sup>3</sup> G2.

<sup>4</sup> G2, J1.

<sup>5</sup> G2.

<sup>6</sup> J1, J2, GJS1, C, G2.

<sup>7</sup> C, G1, G2, J1, J2, S1, GJS1, M.

<sup>8</sup> C, G1, S3, J1.

<sup>9</sup> S1, the term referring to group consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

<sup>10</sup> C.

<sup>11</sup> C, S1, J1, J2, G1.

<sup>12</sup> C, J2.

<sup>13</sup> “We were told many times – by the PM, Home Sec and Chancellor – that we were going to get real changes [...]. We got no such change”, J1.

<sup>14</sup> C, M, GJS1.

<sup>15</sup> C, “the multinational corporations” in GJS1.

<sup>16</sup> S1, J2, in reference to the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 Index, meaning the hundred companies with the highest market capitalisation.



So, to summarise, the elites which Vote Leave goes against are a combination of the EU, the British Government and big multinationals. These are argued to be playing different roles and have different faults within the establishment:

*What the EU does as the elite:* There are many claims made about the EU as elitist. In short, it is either seen as inefficient and incapable or as malicious and self-serving, or more commonly as simultaneously all these things. At best, for all the good intentions the EU may have, it is described nonetheless as extraordinarily opaque, extraordinarily slow, extraordinarily bureaucratic, extraordinarily wasteful,<sup>17</sup> incapable of dealing with the current crises<sup>18</sup> and incapable of critical self-evaluation.<sup>19</sup> However, the general consensus amongst the speeches is that, far from well-meaning, the EU (and those governing it) is narcissistic and corrupt: the EU squanders money on grand parliamentary buildings and bureaucratic follies,<sup>20</sup> it is built to keep power and control with the elites rather than the people,<sup>21</sup> it puts business interests above workers,<sup>22</sup> it is an organisation that only serves its own interests<sup>23</sup>, showing cavalier waste and theft of EU funds<sup>24</sup> by which the money sticks to bureaucratic fingers.<sup>25</sup> In any case, malicious or not, the EU is definitely seen as hopelessly out of date.<sup>26</sup>

*What the UK Government does as the elite:* The UK Government is seen as less purposefully malicious, but incompetent and untrustworthy nonetheless. A recurring claim is that the UK government, especially Cameron, have simply not delivered on promises for change. Example of this are: “we were told many times – by the PM, Home Sec and Chancellor – that we were going to get real changes [...]. We got no such change”<sup>27</sup>, “Cameron has promised that all sorts of things would change—and not even asked for them to be changed”<sup>28</sup> and “having promised fundamental reform, Cameron came back with little”.<sup>29</sup> Although Cameron takes the brunt of the criticism, the speeches mention a “long history of British prime ministers promising things on the EU that don’t happen”.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned, in contrast to the claims made about the EU, Cameron’s failure is not necessarily expressed as due to fraud or corruption, even though there are questions raised about his management of “his own personal interests and the internal politics of the Conservative Party”.<sup>31</sup> There is, however, the general consensus that Cameron had knowingly been deceiving everyone, as “he never thought he could achieve fundamental reform”.<sup>32</sup> Any attempt of renegotiation done by PM is seen as a Potemkin

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<sup>17</sup> C.

<sup>18</sup> G1.

<sup>19</sup> S3.

<sup>20</sup> G1.

<sup>21</sup> G1.

<sup>22</sup> S1, actually talking about the European Court of Justice.

<sup>23</sup> S3.

<sup>24</sup> J1.

<sup>25</sup> G2 or “EU spending is persistently associated with fraud” in J1.

<sup>26</sup> G1, J1.

<sup>27</sup> J1.

<sup>28</sup> C.

<sup>29</sup> S1.

<sup>30</sup> C.

<sup>31</sup> C.

<sup>32</sup> S1.

process.<sup>33</sup> Other governmental political actors are mentioned too: (some) MPs are described more simply as ignorant or disinterested,<sup>34</sup> whilst ministers are hinted as well-meaning, but due to pressure from the EU they “constantly have to lie about what the origins of things are [and] constantly have to invent Potemkin processes”.<sup>35</sup> This is not really a criticism towards government actors, but still aimed at the EU: “one of the things I found most depressing in government was seeing how the EU process is corrupting [ministers and civil servants sticking to the law] and making it extremely hard for people to stay honest”.<sup>36</sup>

*What big business does as the elite:* the least mentioned of the three potential elite groups, big multinationals are mainly seen as opportunistic towards a flawed EU system. The system “is exploited by some big companies that use immigration to keep wages down”<sup>37</sup> or to “escape taxes lawfully imposed on them in Britain”.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, big business are not seen as simply passively gaining from this, but are claimed to also be actively involved in keeping such a system in place: “for a very small number of very powerful and very big multinational firms, there are advantages in having one set of rules set in Brussels in a very non-transparent way which expensive lobbying operations can go to work on”<sup>39</sup> or alleging that the IN campaign is funded by “the undeserving rich, the investment banks that crashed the world economy in 2008 and who bankrupted the people of Greece, and the multinational corporations who spend millions on lobbying the corrupt Brussels system”.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting now to attempt to translate all this into theoretical terms. First of all this all rather ‘confirms’ the initial theoretical framework that populism makes anti-elitism claims. However, this is not such a great victory as it may seem. This case was selected because it seemed populist to some extent, and undoubtedly the anti-elitism was a key part of why this case seemed populist. Regardless of a confirmation bias, it is simply circular reasoning to claim that the case – selected because it is populist given its anti-elitist nature – shows that populist cases have an anti-elitist nature. Nonetheless, the aims of the projects are of analysing whether the populist claims can be seen as ideological and thus grant populism the status of ideology, so the circular argument about the choice of the case is limited, as there was no prior assumption on whether in the case selected the populist claims could be ideological. Moving on then, similarly to what was seen in the theoretical framework, here too it is difficult to translate just the pure anti-elitism seen in the Vote Leave speeches into a more general ideological claim. What is more insightful is that this anti-elitist theme could be seen as a critique of federalisation and instead a desire to keep the centre of power more local. This

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<sup>33</sup> In C, meaning an impressive façade. This refers to Potemkin villages, fake villages consisting of facades and temporary structures meant to look like fully-functioning villages which governor Grigory Potemkin allegedly built along the Dnipro river to impress the Empress Catherine II.

<sup>34</sup> “There are still lots of MPs who don’t know about the Five Presidents’ Report” or don’t “really understand the Single Market” in C.

<sup>35</sup> C.

<sup>36</sup> C.

<sup>37</sup> J2.

<sup>38</sup> By having “successfully used the European Court and EU law”, in M.

<sup>39</sup> C.

<sup>40</sup> GJS1.

can be both understood in political terms, as well as in terms of economics and industry. The mistrust towards big multinationals or supra-national unions could be seen as symptoms of a populist desire to hold the individual State as the primary and maximal authority. Nonetheless, the speeches mention the UN and NATO in a neutral if not positive light,<sup>41</sup> the difference being perhaps the extent of political and economic influence on the UK between these two and the EU. There can be something at the supra-national level, as long as at the national level there is more self-governance than that possible within the EU. In terms of populism, this could relate to the suggestions that populists ultimately aim to gain and solidify power,<sup>42</sup> as it would be easier to do so within the national context without external interference. However, this research aims to look at what potential ideological claims could be made and it could well be that the Vote Leave campaigners are attempting to give a genuine claim unattached to personal gains. As said, such a claim would be that of further focus on the national-level self-governance. In these terms, however, the closest thing the anti-elitism in the Vote Leave campaign would have to an ideological claim would be that of more focus on national-level governance and desire to avoid supra-national institutions. However, this may more appropriately be expressed as something like ‘nationalism’.<sup>43</sup> If this is what populism’s claims were, they would not really add anything new on a theoretical level.

## 2) Purity of the people

The term ‘purity’ does not feature in the speeches, however there is a lot of praise for the British people and its alleged accomplishments, which is in line with how the ‘purity’ of the people was discussed in the theoretical framework. The British people are described as generous<sup>44</sup> with core values of solidarity, fairness and inclusivity,<sup>45</sup> British entrepreneurs and workers are endeavouring and hard-working.<sup>46</sup> Britain – which here will be seen as synonymous to the British people – is said to have “the best armed forces of any nation, more Nobel Prizes [...] more world-leading universities than any European country, [...] the most attractive capital city, [...] the greatest ‘soft power’”,<sup>47</sup> “we developed the world’s strongest economy, its most respected political institutions, its most tolerant approach towards refugees, its best publicly funded health service and its most respected public broadcaster”.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, historical achievements are also highlighted: “in Britain we established trial by jury in the modern world, we set up the first free parliament [...] we led the world in abolishing

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<sup>41</sup> “My family is a genetic UN peacekeeping force” in J1 or “the EU has to stop undermining NATO” in S1.

<sup>42</sup> In Nadia Urbinati, ‘Political Theory of Populism’, in *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2019, No.22, p.117 or Jan-Werner Müller, 2016, *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.44-49.

<sup>43</sup> Maybe even ‘socialism’ in some cases, ‘Nationalism’ not necessarily seen as a common synonym to xenophobia, but as the political theory of nationalism: an ideology embodying the importance of popular sovereignty, as described for example in Varun Uberoi, 2017, ‘National Identity – A Multiculturalist’s Approach’, in *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 21.

<sup>44</sup> J2.

<sup>45</sup> GJS1.

<sup>46</sup> G2.

<sup>47</sup> G1.

<sup>48</sup> G2.

slavery, we established free education for all”,<sup>49</sup> as well as Britain being credited as the inventor of democratic self-government.<sup>50</sup> Apparently “we’re a great country”<sup>51</sup> indeed. Not only is Britain seen as a great country but it is framed as *better* than others, to the point that other countries look up to it. Britain is seen as “an inspirational example to the world”<sup>52</sup> and a model of good governance for countries around the world,<sup>53</sup> leading the discussions on security, on counter-terrorism, on foreign and defence policy.<sup>54</sup> Or rather, allegedly Britain used to be such a model before the EU’s influence.

This all is not exactly the claim of the purity of the people, but it is close: it is a claim of the extraordinary capabilities and potential of the British people, which are allegedly stunted by EU membership. In the theoretical framework it was argued that for populism the purity of the people may precede reason, by which it is meant that an idea is right because the people have said it is right (‘if the people want to ban pears, then pears must be bad’, as opposed to ‘pears are bad and therefore people want to ban them’). This aspect is not explicitly present in the Vote Leave campaign, but it is definitely implied that if the British people had the means to do what they wanted, what they would do would be right,<sup>55</sup> without necessarily addressing the nature of the relation between the right action and the people. It seems more likely that the Vote Leave campaigners would say that things are right or wrong independently and British people are simply capable enough to assess what is right, rather than saying that things are right because the British people have said so, but again there is no explicit confirmation of this in the speeches. Nonetheless, the Vote Leave case is still insightful for the theory, as it shows how closely populism in theory is associated with national pride or patriotism, or a general sense of believing to be *better* than others. Similar to the relation between populism and nationalism as seen under the section about anti-elitism, it is hard to see populism as adding much more in ideological terms than what other concepts such as nationalism or patriotism may already claim.

### 3) Importance of the will of the people

In the analysis at the theoretical level discussing the importance of the will of the people easily collapsed into discussing democracy in general. In this case study too, it is a little tricky to take this concept in isolation from references to direct or exclusive representation. The importance of the will of the people is a given upon which wider claims about the status of representation lie. For example, it is claimed that “a large majority of businesses, roughly 70% over the past ten years or so, think it would be far better [to be without the Single Market]”.<sup>56</sup> This comes with a tacit understanding that it is desirable for this preference to be reflected in governmental action: “the idea of governing ourselves is [not] some extraordinary and novel proposition that requires a fresh a priori justification”.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, a few quotes do make

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<sup>49</sup> G1.

<sup>50</sup> “Democratic self-government, [...] the form of Government we in Britain actually invented” in G2.

<sup>51</sup> S3.

<sup>52</sup> G2.

<sup>53</sup> C.

<sup>54</sup> J1.

<sup>55</sup> e.g., “Britain, left to its own devices, certainly would not [...] slow down the process of drug testing [unlike the EU, by which] people have died unnecessarily as a result”, in C.

<sup>56</sup> C.

<sup>57</sup> C.

it clearer that the importance of the will of the people is a theme present in this case study: “the decisions which govern all our lives, the laws we must all obey and the taxes we must all pay should be decided by people we choose and who we can throw out if we want change”<sup>58</sup> or “the ability to choose who governs us, and the freedom to change laws we do not like, were secured for us in the past by radicals and liberals who took power from unaccountable elites and placed it in the hands of the people”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, there are references to the basic building block or the most basic power of modern democracies being “the rule of law determined by a government elected government elected by and accountable to a free people—a demos”<sup>60</sup> or “the rights of the people to decide their priorities”.<sup>61</sup>

In ideological terms, rather than a self-standing claim, the importance of the will of the people is mainly used as the justification for why federalisation or supranational structures should be avoided, in favour of keeping the power more on the national level. Very simplistically explained, given that there is the (questionable) tacit assumption that the (British) people are *better* decision-makers than other peoples, it is then consistent to not want to involve others in the decision-making process. This is insightful to the theoretical framework, as the claim of the importance of the will of the people is here seen as the starting point for all other possible populist claims. Moreover, this importance is also justified not only because of some intrinsic value of the people, but also because of a comparative value of the people, in relation to other peoples. The will of a people ought to be followed not only because the people have an *a priori* claim on self-governance, but also because they are in practice better than all other peoples. However, it is conceivable to imagine a more neutral populist claim which sees each people as equally qualified as decision-makers (as in, it is not that a country is better than another),<sup>62</sup> but rather each country has a claim to decide on their own interests without external influence, without necessarily implying that anyone external is *worse*. In other words, self-governance does not necessarily imply intellectual superiority over others. However, a certain level of perceived superiority does transpire from the case study which the theoretical framework did not account for, and is also in line with what transpired in the analysis of the ‘purity’ of the people.

#### 4) Direct representation

Again, trying to isolate direct representation from exclusive representation or claims about the will of the people is not straightforward. However, some championing of direct representation is obvious. The theoretical framework saw the populist claim of direct representation as the expression that modern liberal representative democracy is unnecessarily bureaucratic, or those in power have too much freedom and cumbersomeness in ‘interpreting’ the will of the people. Instead, populist voices suggest a more direct version of democracy, with a recurring implementation of such things as referenda. The case study selected is possibly the most famous example of a referendum, with the first speeches even

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<sup>58</sup> G1.

<sup>59</sup> G1.

<sup>60</sup> S3.

<sup>61</sup> “It bewilders people to be told that this most basic power of a state [...] has been taken away, [...] a steady attrition of the rights of the people to decide their priorities” in J1.

<sup>62</sup> ‘people’ as in the members of a country.

advocating to make a Brexit referendum possible.<sup>63</sup> The Vote Leave campaign is also a renowned example of criticism of bureaucracy, namely EU bureaucracy. As seen in the anti-elitism section, the EU is seen as either willingly neglecting or incompetent in effectuating the will of the British people. In any case, the EU is seen as a constraint on ministers' ability to do the things they were elected to do.<sup>64</sup>

Interestingly, the speeches tend to advocate for a 'more direct' representation, but it is not a completely direct form of representation. There is of course the criticism of the EU system as essentially too indirect from the British people, however there is also the assumption that there should be politicians and representatives (as trustees) within the UK Government. The "public should be able to vote for those who make the laws",<sup>65</sup> and the EU is unelected.<sup>66</sup> So, although something like referenda are at the very core of the campaign, there is no great claim for a radical shift toward complete direct representation, i.e., an Athenian-inspired system with virtually no representatives, or a more modern understanding of representatives as delegates not trustees,<sup>67</sup> relying on a recurring implementation of such things as referenda. Rather, the speeches frame the desired system as one which the people have the ability to choose who governs them,<sup>68</sup> who then in turn make "the decisions which govern all our lives, the laws we must all obey".<sup>69</sup> This paints a picture more identifiable with the idea of representatives as trustees who are chosen by the people but ultimately know better than them, after all "people don't obsess about politics in the way that we in Westminster do".<sup>70</sup> In this whole system however the people are still in power thanks to a strong sense of accountability. The issue with EU law is that it is decided "by politicians from other nations who we never elected and can't throw out",<sup>71</sup> with democratic accountability being "so central for us in Britain"<sup>72</sup> which ultimately allows the people "the freedom to change laws we do not like".<sup>73</sup> Lastly, there is no great manifestation of the worth of referenda. The Brexit referendum itself is seen as something that had long been promised, but apart from that there is not much to suggest a claim for further implementation of referenda as a common democratic standard.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cummings' interview predates by about a month Cameron's announcement that the referendum would take place.

<sup>64</sup> G1.

<sup>65</sup> J2.

<sup>66</sup> The EU commission/bureaucracy/E CJ/ the politicians setting EU laws are throughout all speeches described as unelected.

<sup>67</sup> See Pitkin in previous chapter. Trustees "rely on their own independent judgments in carrying out their duties", whilst "delegates defer to the judgments of their citizens", in Thomas Christiano, 2022, 'Democracy', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>> [last accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of Oct 2022].

<sup>68</sup> G1.

<sup>69</sup> G1.

<sup>70</sup> In C, not Cummings' own words, although he shows signs of agreement.

<sup>71</sup> G1.

<sup>72</sup> S3.

<sup>73</sup> G1.

<sup>74</sup> The only mention of referenda other than the Brexit one or in general is in Cummings' interview stating the government may well seek to hold another referendum, on the terms of Brexit. This is however not necessarily a normative statement, he could have well just been stating what he thought might happen, not if he thought it should happen.

As suggested, in ideological terms this is only a partial claim of direct representation, where the system criticised is seen as unnecessarily bureaucratic<sup>75</sup> with those in power having too much freedom and cumbersomeness in ‘interpreting’ the will of the people, but representatives are nonetheless still seen as trustees rather than delegates. As conflicting as this may sound, it is still insightful to our theoretical framework. Even if it is not a complete claim of direct representation, there is a claim for a *more* direct representation than the status quo. It does seem to still confirm that claims of direct representation are associated or linked to populism, but it gives the insight that this claim does not necessarily require a radical revolution of the political system. Leaving the EU is of course significant, but it is not as radical as what the theoretical framework suggested a claim of direct representation would imply. On a national level, the Vote Leave campaign was not advocating for a huge shift of democratic standards toward direct democracy.

### 5) Exclusive representation

Although a lot of Vote Leave quotes may hint at exclusive representation, none do so as explicitly as Boris Johnson’s first major speech about the referendum:<sup>76</sup>

*“It is we who are speaking up for the people, and it is they who are defending an obscurantist and universalist system of government that is now well past its sell by date and which is ever more remote from ordinary voters.*

*It is we in the Leave Camp – not they – who stand in the tradition of the liberal cosmopolitan European enlightenment – not just of Locke and Wilkes, but of Rousseau and Voltaire; and though they are many, and though they are well-funded, and though we know that they can call on unlimited taxpayer funds for their leaflets, it is we few, we happy few who have the inestimable advantage of believing strongly in our cause, and that we will be vindicated by history; and we will win for exactly the same reason that the Greeks beat the Persians at Marathon – because they are fighting for an outdated absolutist ideology, and we are fighting for freedom”.*

Within the context of the rest of the speech it becomes even clearer that “they” refers really to anyone who is not in favour of voting to leave. This snippet would be enough in itself to show that claims of exclusive representation are made within the Vote Leave group, however, there is more to be said. Throughout the speeches there is a general ambiguity of the use of the terms “we/our/us”, interchangeably used for the British people in general, for British politicians, for the Vote Leave group, or anyone wanting to leave in general. It is tempting to assume that this shows a general tendency of likening those who want to leave as the British population, and in turn that the Vote Leave campaign is its only advocate. The ambiguity makes it seem as if the Vote Leave campaign has all the answers and all the legitimacy to follow through on the people’s will: “We will end the ‘free movement’ of people from the EU and take back control. We will introduce a points-based system”,<sup>77</sup> “once we vote leave we

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<sup>75</sup> “the bureaucracy [...] can be scrapped once we take back control”, in M.

<sup>76</sup> J1, underlined for emphasis on the exclusive representation theme.

<sup>77</sup> GJS1.

decide”,<sup>78</sup> “the day after we vote to leave we hold all the cards and we can choose the path we want”.<sup>79</sup> What is meant here as “we” was most probably ‘the British people’, but the ambiguity makes it sound as if the Vote Leave group is solely responsible for all this freedom of choice. However, such an ambiguity in the use of “we” is not uncommon in political discourse regardless of populism. If one was to compare the Vote Leave speeches to, for example, a David Cameron speech in favour of remaining in the EU, one could see that there too there is ambiguity of who ‘we’ refers to: at different points it could be the British people, the Conservative party, or those who want to remain in the EU.<sup>80</sup> The argument could be made that this means Cameron was being populist. However, a key difference is that in the Vote Leave campaign there is emphasis also put on what ‘the others’ are doing. Whitehall and Brussels are said to have “called people up and said: ‘If you support the anti-Euro campaign we will destroy you on the following regulations’” on the Euro campaign in 1999.<sup>81</sup> Again with the Brexit referendum, claims are made that the establishment (“CBI, Whitehall, Brussels”) are going round threatening businesses saying “we’ll destroy your business if you come out on the Leave side”.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, “it’s the small guys who don’t have the lobby firms [...] who are naturally in the Out campaign”.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, there is a suggestion that the language used themed around rationality and facts gives a further sense that the Vote Leave campaign are the only real representatives of the people, but more on this can be found later on in the chapter under section 7 (New insights).

What makes this case study particularly insightful is to some extent its simplicity in terms of ‘competitors’ for exclusive representation. If one was to think of populism, they more usually would think in terms of parties or political actors in a multi-party context, potentially with individual politicians as figureheads of those parties. Contrary to this, the Vote Leave campaign realistically only has one ‘contender’ for the claim of (exclusive) representation, the IN campaign. Unsurprisingly then, there is a lot of critique of the IN campaign. As well as what was seen in the Johnson snippet above, allegedly the IN campaign “treats people like children, unfit to be trusted and easily scared by ghost stories”,<sup>84</sup> or “imagines the people of this country are mere children, capable of being frightened into obedience by conjuring up new bogeymen every night”.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, there are implications made of the intentions of the IN campaign:

*“A vote to leave is a vote for a fairer Britain. You only have to look at who funds the IN campaign to realise this: the undeserving rich, the investment banks that crashed the world economy in 2008 and who bankrupted the people of Greece, and the multinational corporations who spend millions on lobbying the corrupt Brussels system”.*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> G2.

<sup>79</sup> G2.

<sup>80</sup> Cameron’s ‘Bloomberg speech’, available amongst other places at <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jan/23/david-cameron-eu-speech-referendum>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>81</sup> C.

<sup>82</sup> C.

<sup>83</sup> In C, although not Cummings’ own words, though he confirms them.

<sup>84</sup> G2.

<sup>85</sup> G2.

<sup>86</sup> GSJ1.



Interestingly and unexpectedly, a claim of representation is made beyond the British confines. Apart from the alleged benefits to the British people, “our vote to Leave will liberate and strengthen those voices across the EU calling for a different future”.<sup>87</sup> One should vote to leave not just for the British people, but “for Greeks [...] for Spanish families [...] for Portuguese citizens [...] for Italians [...] for Danes [...] for Poles [...] for Britain”.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, beyond European voices, an independent Britain “could choose to strike free trade agreements with emerging economies and lower tariffs, extending new opportunities to developing nations [...]. Leaving the EU would thus help the poorest nations in the world to advance”.<sup>89</sup> In other words, without EU regulations Britain could make new deals that “could include enhanced arrangements for developing nations, [...] Africa or Asia's poorest nations”.<sup>90</sup>

In ideological or theoretical terms, all this seems to confirm the idea of exclusive representation in populism. Only one representative (Vote Leave) is seen as legitimate, all other representatives (the IN campaign) do not really know or care about the will of the people. However, the comments on the representation beyond the individual national-level are particularly insightful and had not been accounted for in the theoretical framework. On further reflection, this should not have been that surprising. For example, a victory for a South American socialist populist leader could have been celebrated by populists as a victory for socialism in general, perhaps even an example for other countries to follow.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the Vote Leave campaigners claim Brexit would be inspirational for other peoples to also reject federalisation in favour of more focus on national-level self-governance, as well as helping poorer countries (in Asia and Africa) – although this last benefit seems less of an ideological sequitur but more of an example of other practical beneficial consequences Brexit could have. Here again, however, the ideological claim in the exclusive representation is still related to other claims (e.g., against federalism), it is not exclusive representation itself the ideology. Vote Leave’s claims that voting to leave is the only option that really reflects the interests of the British as well as everyone else’s gives more ideological attention and worth to anti-federalism rather than populism itself. Exclusive representation is reducible to a way to justify other ideologies, it is not an ideological claim itself. This is consistent to the theoretical framework set up in chapter II, albeit with the added insight of a much more general approach that goes beyond the national-level. Exclusive representation and populism could justify and advocate other ideologies not only on the national-level, but internationally and in universal terms too.

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<sup>87</sup> G2.

<sup>88</sup> G2.

<sup>89</sup> G2.

<sup>90</sup> G2.

<sup>91</sup> “*viva la independencia nacional, viva el socialismo!*” cheered Hugo Chávez during his re-election campaign in 2012, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmlwRGInWDC&ab\\_channel=teleSURtv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmlwRGInWDC&ab_channel=teleSURtv)> [last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> of Nov 2022].

6) Homoogeneity of the people (anti-pluralism)

Again, a lot could be said in terms of the ambiguity of the term ‘we’. For example, in “we were told many times - by the PM, Home Sec and Chancellor - that we were going to get real changes [...]. We got no such change”,<sup>92</sup> it is not explicit who Johnson is referring to, presumably the British population as a whole, but perhaps it was meant those who wanted a change in EU-UK relations. This ambiguity makes it sound as if everyone in the UK wanted these changes, it does not seem to account to a plurality in the population’s opinion on the matter. This tendency to ignore plurality of opinions is further shown whenever the British people are indeed more explicitly mentioned: “the British public support immigration but they want it controlled by those who they elect. They are generous but feel their generosity has been abused. They are right”.<sup>93</sup> While undoubtedly many would have felt their generosity had been abused, there is definitely a degree of generalisation going on. Saying that this was a generalisation that did not account to the plurality of opinions within the British public does not necessarily require some convoluted abstract justification. Quite simply, I can confirm that I, Stefan, a member of the British public, would have not felt that British generosity was being abused, so the previous statement about the British public must have been to some extent a generalisation. Insofar as the theoretical framework understood it, this would imply that Stefan – given that Stefan had a differing opinion – was either not part of the British people,<sup>94</sup> or wrong and should conform to the ‘real’ and correct British people. In fairness to the Vote Leave campaigners, the previous statement is quite strongly-worded. At most, they probably do not make a case for the homogeneity of the people, but rather for the primacy of the will of the majority. They probably meant that ‘a majority of British people might have felt that their generosity was being abused’ and this was enough to infer that the British people felt like that overall. This would feature the tacit assumption of the rule of the majority seen in the previous chapter and be in line with the general theoretical framework. Admittedly, this could also be purely a matter of rhetoric and it could be suggested that it is not an uncommon feature in political discourse, without it being necessarily populist. For the sake of simplicity or brevity, this amounts to saying that any political actor could make a claim about ‘the people’, whilst in truth meaning its majority.<sup>95</sup> While this may well be true, the nonchalance with which this generalisation of ‘the majority = the people’ is used in the general justification of the populist cause must be noted.<sup>96</sup> Even without mentioning ‘the people’ per se, there tends to be a generalising brush within the speeches. For example, when Cummings claims that Cameron’s negotiations with the EU have simply been “about how David Cameron manages his own personal interests and the internal politics of the Conservative Party’ he adds that “I think everyone pretty much realises that!”.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, he says “I think all reasonable people, including those on the Pro side, will accept that [there has

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<sup>92</sup> J1.

<sup>93</sup> J2.

<sup>94</sup> A surprising claim, given as I write this whilst drinking tea with a splash of milk, having just had beans on toast for lunch.

<sup>95</sup> I myself could be seen to have made a generalisation in the previous footnote on the British people drinking milky tea and eating beans on toast.

<sup>96</sup> Following the example in the previous footnotes, if I would then be anti-pluralist of me to campaign for lower taxes on baked beans with the reason being that that’s what (all of = the majority of) the British people eat and want.

<sup>97</sup> C.

not been fundamental change]”.<sup>98</sup> This will be highlighted again later when assessing Vote Leave’s rhetorical emphasis on facts and reason, but it again shows a tendency of portraying the public as having one homogenous individual thought.

Again, something which the theoretical framework had not accounted for is that within the perceived homogeneity, there is actually plurality, for example: “people of all races and backgrounds in the UK are genuinely concerned about uncontrolled immigration”<sup>99</sup> or “when my Pakistani newspaper man, who has spent the last 40 years of his life getting up at 5am, has a problem getting in his mother for a family wedding, but finds a Bulgarian taxi driver can claim child benefit for children who are not even here, it’s very easy to say, this is racism”.<sup>100</sup> There are two types of homogeneity (and pluralism) at play here, one at an ethno-socio-cultural level and one at an opinion-based level. The quotes just mentioned show a degree of ethno-cultural pluralism (i.e., it is not just the white rich that want to vote leave), but this pluralism is used to justify the homogeneity in terms of the general will of the people (i.e., everyone wants to vote leave). Moreover, – again something not initially picked up on by the theoretical framework – such pluralism-in-homogeneity transpires not only on the national level, but internationally too: British people aside, “the peoples of the EU are profoundly unhappy with the European project”.<sup>101</sup> This pluralism in terms of different peoples is used here to strengthen the anti-pluralist claim that everyone wants to leave the EU, not just the UK. Ideologically speaking then, pluralism is for populism not seen as intrinsically bad. If populism would be an ideology some level of pluralism would be present in its ideological claims, but only insofar as it furthers the justification of homogeneity of the will of the people. Again, this is not so strange. Looking at Chávez’s famous “*¡Chávez es un pueblo!*”<sup>102</sup> – possibly the most explicit populist quote in terms of exclusive and direct representation claims –, he justifies by stating how he embodies everyone: women, children, soldiers, fishermen, traders, and so on.<sup>103</sup> The homogeneity of will is given mandate through the plurality of the people. Granted, the plurality is limited<sup>104</sup> but it would still play a part in a potential populist ideology.

### 7) New insights

Naturally, there are also elements in the case study that did not really feature in our theoretical analysis of populism which served as the premise for the case study. These new elements are here roughly grouped into five categories: the monopoly of rationality; namedropping; use of historical references; appeal to emotions; mockery.

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<sup>98</sup> C.

<sup>99</sup> J2.

<sup>100</sup> S2.

<sup>101</sup> G2.

<sup>102</sup> *Chávez is a people*, found in many of his speeches.

<sup>103</sup> found in many of his speeches. Here an example: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4sdk7Zyaa8&ab\\_channel=ComandoCarabobo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4sdk7Zyaa8&ab_channel=ComandoCarabobo)> [last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>104</sup> Chávez was after all referring to the *Venezuelan* women, *Venezuelan* children, *Venezuelan* soldiers, *Venezuelan* fishermen, *Venezuelan* traders, and so on.

### 7.1) The championing of rationality and facts

Similarly to exclusive representation, there is a strong theme of exclusive claim to rationality. Whereas the first was the idea that only the populist can represent the people, throughout the speeches there are many quotes showing how everyone else who would not vote to leave is not rational. There are three types of claims of (ir)rationality: the status quo is irrational; voting leave is rational; and the remain campaign is irrational.

-The status quo is framed as rationally non-sensical, EU rules are seen as “extremely stupid” and “in a rational world you wouldn’t have [them]”, they have “all sorts of stupidities in [them]”,<sup>105</sup> “these rules may be comical”,<sup>106</sup> also at the national level “at the moment government immigration policy is arguably the most stupid policy”.<sup>107</sup> EU decisions are described as “delusion”<sup>108</sup> and “mad”<sup>109</sup>, and thinking Europe will change is “insanity”<sup>110</sup>.

-The rational choice is seen then to leave: “outside the EU we would have a much more rational immigration system”,<sup>111</sup> we would “have sensible laws”,<sup>112</sup> “we would be mad not to take this once in a lifetime chance”<sup>113</sup>

-Those opposing (so, the IN campaign) are seen as irrational: “the only thing that’s irrational is the picture the IN campaign paints”<sup>114</sup> and “yet we are somehow expected to believe that if Britain left [Britain] would be acting irrationally”.<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, one of the speeches has as a heading in bold capital letters “restoring a sense of proportion to the debate”,<sup>116</sup> further fuelling a sense of claiming to have the monopoly on the rationality in the debate. Additionally, this is alongside a similar interest in highlighting things as facts: “I think the facts will speak for themselves”,<sup>117</sup> “the truth is [...]”<sup>118</sup>, “It’s a fact that [...]. It’s a fact that [...]. It’s a fact that [...]”<sup>119</sup>. While other’s (the EU or the IN campaign’s) claims are “wrong”,<sup>120</sup> “completely wrong”,<sup>121</sup> or “simply false”<sup>122</sup>. The IN campaign is described as having “a deeply pessimistic view of the British people’s potential [...] which isn’t rooted in reality”<sup>123</sup> and that there are “three big myths that are peddled by the Remain

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<sup>105</sup> C.

<sup>106</sup> G1.

<sup>107</sup> C.

<sup>108</sup> “They persist in the delusion that political cohesion can be created by a forcible economic integration”, J1.

<sup>109</sup> “It is mad”, J2, commenting on new countries wanting to join the EU and the EU visa-free travel policies.

<sup>110</sup> S3.

<sup>111</sup> C.

<sup>112</sup> C, referring to the free movement of people .

<sup>113</sup> J1.

<sup>114</sup> G2.

<sup>115</sup> G2.

<sup>116</sup> G2.

<sup>117</sup> C.

<sup>118</sup> J1.

<sup>119</sup> G2.

<sup>120</sup> G2.

<sup>121</sup> C.

<sup>122</sup> J1.

<sup>123</sup> G2.

campaign, [...] all three arguments are wholly bogus".<sup>124</sup> Again, this seems to depict the Vote Leave campaign as the only one with the answers. This is definitely more of a characteristic of populism as a rhetoric style or what populists do in practice. While this is still insightful and interesting, it does not necessarily change much on a theoretical level in terms of populism as an ideology, except perhaps further point out the claims of exclusive representation, which however also would not be particularly generalisable as ideological claims. It does nonetheless give further backing to some of the issues faced in the previous chapter, namely that populists tend to undemocratically claim the monopoly of reason in the public debate, hindering any possible response.

## 7.2) Appeal to experts

In a similar vein to the above, there are multiple occasions in which the Vote Leave campaigners quote other people in order to further a claim or point they are making. These people are either experts, well-respected figures, or even people associated with the EU or IN campaign.<sup>125</sup> Current figures like "Nobel scientists and all sorts of people",<sup>126</sup> possibly meaning the physicist Andre Geim also quoted elsewhere<sup>127</sup>, the former Governor of the Bank of England Mervyn King,<sup>128</sup> professor John R. Gillingham,<sup>129</sup> the former head of Interpol,<sup>130</sup> "one of the biggest hedge-fund guys in the City",<sup>131</sup> economist and author Michael Burrage,<sup>132</sup> and columnist Wolfgang Munchau<sup>133</sup> are all referenced to further the arguments for Leave and are put in a light that depicts them all as believing Leave is the best option. Some may well have believed that, but – willingly or not – there is ambiguity in how they are quoted, which may lead the reader to the assumption that all these experts are in favour of leaving. It is quite probable that all these people had much more nuanced stances on the Brexit vote: as an example, the quoted prof. Gillingham, although quite critical of the current EU situation may have favoured a global common market as a solution,<sup>134</sup> far from the Vote Leave's intentions; or the Nobel prize winner Andre Geim is quoted twice as saying "I can offer no nice words for the EU framework programmes which ... can be praised only by Europhobes for discrediting the whole idea of an effectively working Europe"<sup>135</sup>, omitting Geim's "except

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<sup>124</sup> J1.

<sup>125</sup> In parallel to this, however, the Vote Leave campaign also showed a general frustration and/or mistrust towards experts. Gove, for example, said: "I think the people of this country have had enough of experts with organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong", Richard Portes, "I think the people of this country have had enough of experts", in *Think* in London Business School website, available at <<https://www.london.edu/think/who-needs-experts>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>126</sup> C.

<sup>127</sup> G2, J1, and M.

<sup>128</sup> S3.

<sup>129</sup> G2. Professor Gillingham's research is on the EU.

<sup>130</sup> G1.

<sup>131</sup> C.

<sup>132</sup> J1.

<sup>133</sup> J1.

<sup>134</sup> Gillingham argues that "successful negotiations of the Trade Agreement Parity (TAP) initiative and the Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP) could become the EU's greatest achievement by creating a global common market that in turn could strengthen Europe's economy"., as seen on his directory page for the Centre for European Studies at Harvard, <https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/people/002295-john-rowlery-gillingham> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>135</sup> G2, J1, and M.

for the European Research Council” after “EU framework” and ignoring Geim’s general stance that Brexit would have a negative impact on UK research.<sup>136</sup> Although a Eurosceptic, Geim was against the UK leaving the EU, going as far as saying that on the day of the Brexit referendum’s results he “went to bed acknowledging the human species were not very smart animals”.<sup>137</sup>

In a similarly way, historical figures (who would have not been able to have an opinion on the Brexit referendum) are also mentioned with quotes in favour of the argumentation to Leave: the judge Lord Denning,<sup>138</sup> Adam Smith,<sup>139</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder.<sup>140</sup> This also ties into a following section on the use of historical references as a way of establishing an aura of expertise. Perhaps surprisingly, a similar treatment is reserved for figures associated with the EU or the IN campaign. Quotes from former president of the European Commission Manuel Barroso,<sup>141</sup> Jean-Claude Juncker,<sup>142</sup> former Attorney General – and IN campaigner – Dominic Grieve,<sup>143</sup> and the Chairman of the IN campaign Lord Rose,<sup>144</sup> are taken out of context to give the idea that EU or IN figures themselves take issue with the EU.

As insightful as this may be, it is again probably more obviously an analysis of populism in practice or populism as a style of political rhetoric. Nonetheless, in theoretical terms it once again seems to suggest a populist drive towards presenting the populist idea as the general will, thus giving further evidence for the presence of anti-pluralism and/or exclusive representation in populism.

### 7.3) Historical references

In the section on the purity of the people, there were a few quotes highlighting the various historical achievements of the British people,<sup>145</sup> e.g., “In Britain we established trial by jury in the modern world, we set up the first free parliament [...] we led the world in abolishing slavery, we established free education for all” and democratic self-government is “the form of Government we in Britain actually invented”. However, this section here focusses more on the general attention the speeches give to history: Cummings mentions post-renaissance China and communist propaganda from the Russian revolution, as well as acknowledging historical ties to Canada and New Zealand;<sup>146</sup> Gove implies that the EU is like “Austria-Hungary

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<sup>136</sup> Anna Fazackerley, ‘Things will only get worse: fears top scientists may shun UK over Brexit’, in *The Observer* <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/oct/08/things-will-only-get-worse-fears-top-scientists-may-shun-uk-over-brexit>> or Oliver Wright, ‘Brexit: Don’t take us for fools, top scientist Andre Geim warns Boris Johnson’, in *The Times*, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brexit-dont-take-us-for-fools-top-scientist-warns-boris-johnson-wrqb35wp>> [both last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>137</sup> In an interview with Simon Parking for *Independent* <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/brexit-latest-scientist-andre-geim-graphene-discovery-university-manchester-eu-exit-withdrawal-article-50-a7886416.html>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>138</sup> C.

<sup>139</sup> C.

<sup>140</sup> G2.

<sup>141</sup> G2.

<sup>142</sup> J1.

<sup>143</sup> G2.

<sup>144</sup> M.

<sup>145</sup> Interestingly, the term “empire” only features in the speeches in reference to the EU.

<sup>146</sup> C.

under the Habsburgs, the Russian Empire under Nicholas the Second, Rome under its later Emperors or the Ottoman Empire in its final years”,<sup>147</sup> Johnson mentions “1920s Soviet Russia”<sup>148</sup> and likens a Vote Leave victory to that of the Greeks against the Persians at the battle of Marathon because they are both fighting for freedom.<sup>149</sup>

Again, this seems more relating to a rhetoric style rather than real ideological claims. Making historical claims about the people’s past grandeur would probably be a populist thing to do, in any case it is definitely a nationalist thing to do. Famously, for example, Mussolini made many attempts to frame Italy as the rightful heirs to the old Roman Empire.<sup>150</sup> This is often seen as a way to jostle national pride in favour of the (populist) leader. While this may well be the case too in the Vote Leave campaign speeches, as they mention British historical achievements and also claim “voting to leave will be a [...] moment of patriotic renewal”,<sup>151</sup> it would not quite explain the use of other historical examples unrelated to the British (e.g., China, Russia, or the Ancient Greeks). Occam’s razor may suggest that nothing ‘sinister’ is really at play here. Another suggestion, which goes beyond the scope of this research, would be on the lines of the namedropping element, namely that such statements may be made to appear more knowledgeable in order to give a sense of expertise which the listener should trust, so again as a rhetorical style to give further credibility to the claims of exclusive representation. However, such a suggestion is currently only speculative, plus it could well be a rhetoric style that although present in populism is – ironically – not exclusive to it. The only real theoretical insight this can have is that for populism history matters. It may clarify the populist’s view of who the people are or it may highlight specific motivations which populism aims for.<sup>152</sup>

#### 7.4) Emotions and the personal

Two types of quotes are grouped in this section together, the first are quotes which are statements which are worded in such a way to elicit an impactful negative response about how things are in the EU, the second are quotes in which the Vote Leave campaigners ‘get personal’ sharing how they feel or how they identify. For the first type, a few examples mention threats to national security, citing how the EU is responsible for the presence of convicted murderers,<sup>153</sup> extremists,<sup>154</sup> hate preachers<sup>155</sup> and people-smugglers<sup>156</sup> in the UK. Other examples of this type of quotes is that “people have died unnecessarily as a result” of EU regulations on drug trials,<sup>157</sup> that millions of young people have been “thrown on the

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<sup>147</sup> G2.

<sup>148</sup> J1.

<sup>149</sup> J1.

<sup>150</sup> Øystein Rygg Haanæs, 2019, *Using language as a weapon: How Mussolini used Latin to link fascism to the mighty Roman Empire*, in University of Oslo website, <<https://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/news-and-events/news/2019/using-language-as-a-weapon-how-mussolini-used-lati.html#:~:text=From%20the%20balcony%20on%20the,empire%20of%20civilisation%20and%20humanity.%22>> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>151</sup> G2.

<sup>152</sup> A theory of populism as an anti-colonial movement, for example.

<sup>153</sup> C, G2.

<sup>154</sup> C, G1, G2.

<sup>155</sup> S3.

<sup>156</sup> G2.

<sup>157</sup> C.

unemployment scrapheap”<sup>158</sup>, while the increased suicide rate in Greece is also implied as due to EU management.<sup>159</sup> In more abstract terms, voting to remain is likened to being “a hostage”,<sup>160</sup> “locked in the boot in a car heading off to a place that we can see and where we know we don’t want to go”.<sup>161</sup> Such vivid imagery is possibly meant to elicit a negative emotional response to the EU, furthered by a frequent use of terms such as “threat”, “danger”, “worries” and “anxieties” about the EU or about staying in the EU. Secondly, there are also a few ‘personal’ quotes: Gove talks about his career and friendship worries (“I have been wrestling with the most difficult decision of my political life. [...] It pains me to have to disagree with the Prime Minister”); Stuart talks about her background (as a foreigner Stuart feels “a duty to reassure ordinary voters”<sup>162</sup>, “I am the child of a refugee from eastern Europe. I grew up with the recollections of the horror not just of war itself, but the painful efforts to rebuild a country”,<sup>163</sup> “It has not always been comfortable for me to see the direction Europe has taken—the arc from the recovery and optimism of my parents’ generation to my disillusionment today. Now, I look forward to the kind of country I would like my grandchildren to grow up in”.<sup>164</sup>); Johnson too refers to his background (“my family is a genetic UN peacekeeping force”<sup>165</sup> and “a proud descendant of immigrants”<sup>166</sup>). Johnson also lists examples of personal attacks towards him (“the other day someone insulted me”, “I can read novels in French and I can sing the Ode to joy in German, and if they keep accusing me of being a Little Englander, I will”, “I find it offensive, insulting, irrelevant and positively cretinous to be told [...] that I belong to a group of small-minded xenophobes”)<sup>167</sup>. This too possibly is used to elicit a positive emotional response towards the Vote Leave campaigners. A similar assessment to the other sections applies here too. These suggestions are somewhat speculative and it is not necessarily a uniquely populist rhetoric, although it could well be the case that it is indeed part of the populist rhetoric. In any case, they would not necessarily modify or inform the theoretical framework on populism, except for again giving some speculative confirmation towards the presence of anti-elitism and exclusive representation in populism.

#### 7.5) Mockery and exaggeration

There is also a noticeable degree of exaggeration within the speeches, intertwined with a degree of mockery of either the EU or the IN campaign. A great example of this is in Gove’s depiction of what the IN campaign is allegedly saying about the dangers of leaving the EU:<sup>168</sup>

*“Some of the In campaigners seek to imply, insinuate and sometimes just declare, that if we left the EU we would not be able to take the train or fly cheaply to European nations. If, by*

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<sup>158</sup> J1, S1.

<sup>159</sup> J1.

<sup>160</sup> G2.

<sup>161</sup> G2, C.

<sup>162</sup> She uses the term foreigner. “It [...] befalls the foreigner to explain to the natives what they have”, S2.

<sup>163</sup> S3.

<sup>164</sup> S3.

<sup>165</sup> J1.

<sup>166</sup> J2.

<sup>167</sup> J1.

<sup>168</sup> G2.



*some miracle, we somehow managed to make it to distant Calais or exotic Boulogne we would find that [...] our mobile telephones would no longer work. And heaven help us if we fell ill, [...] we would be barred from all of Europe's hospitals and left to expire unmourned in some foreign field. [...] Our football teams would be denuded of foreign players, so Premier league matches would have to become – at best – five-a-side contests. And we'd better not schedule those fixtures for dark evenings because there'd be no electricity left for the floodlights[...]. The City of London would become a ghost town, our manufacturing industries would be sanctioned more punitively than even communist North Korea, decades would pass before a single British Land Rover or Mr Kipling cake could ever again be sold in France and in the meantime our farmers would have been driven from the land by poverty worse than the Potato Famine. To cap it all, an alliance of Vladimir Putin, Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump, emboldened by our weakness, would, like some geopolitical equivalent of the Penguin, Catwoman and the Joker, be liberated to spread chaos worldwide and subvert our democracy. I sometimes think that the In campaign appears to be operating to a script written by George R.R Martin and Stephen King - Brexit would mean a combination of a Feast for Crows and Misery”.*

Similarly, Johnson states that the IN campaigners believe “we need to stay in to prevent German tanks crossing the French border”.<sup>169</sup> Other harsh analogies are made about being in the EU as “trying to ride a vast pantomime horse, with 28 people blindly pulling in different directions”,<sup>170</sup> or that “insisting that the EU is about economics is like saying the Italian Mafia is interested in olive oil and real estate”<sup>171</sup>. Not just IN campaigners, but European figures are also subject to similar treatment, with quotes such as “whenever I typed [the President of the Convention on the Future of Europe] Giscard’s name the spell-checker prompted me to put Discard. Now that is what I call artificial intelligence”<sup>172</sup> or “If we vote to stay [...] the EU’s bosses and bureaucrats [...] will say [...] Britain has spoken, it said ‘oui’ and now it had better shut up and suck it up”.<sup>173</sup>

Similar forms of exaggerations are made by taking a potentially real situations and over-exaggerating its impact: “the current TTIP negotiations are stalled at least partly because Greek feta cheese manufacturers object to the concept of American feta,”<sup>174</sup> “If two people sitting on a Shetland island want to sell olive oil to each other, the EU says they can’t sell it in containers of more than five litres”<sup>175</sup>, or “the Chancellor of the Exchequer has to go around personally asking other finance ministers to allow him to cut VAT on tampons”.<sup>176</sup>

In line with the previous sections, this is consistent with an attempt to give further validation to exclusive representation, by eliciting an instinctive negative response in the listener towards the EU and the IN campaign. Again, however, in terms of ideological claims, it does not add too much. This is something populist (might) do in practice but it is not necessarily a pre-requisite in theory.

#### 8) Other

A couple of other points are made that do not necessarily relate to populism, but which might nonetheless be interesting to mention:

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<sup>169</sup> J1.

<sup>170</sup> J1.

<sup>171</sup> J1.

<sup>172</sup> S3.

<sup>173</sup> G2.

<sup>174</sup> J1.

<sup>175</sup> C.

<sup>176</sup> J1.

-In the very early days of the Vote Leave campaign, before a Brexit referendum was even called, Cummings highlighted that “it is a distinct possibility” that if the Brexit referendum would yield the result to Leave the government would seek to hold another referendum, this time on the terms of Brexit. Cummings also said that leaving the EU “is not sufficient but it is necessary” for a reprisal of British representation.<sup>177</sup>

-Unsurprisingly, the NHS and immigration were the most explicit areas of attention in the speeches. What may be surprising is how explicitly these were understood on an economical level rather than on a human level: Gove repeatedly mentions the intention to “benefit economically from control of immigration”,<sup>178</sup> while in the EU “we have no proper control over whether that individual’s presence here is economically beneficial”.<sup>179</sup> Others elsewhere note that in the UK “between 2005 and 2014, there were 475,000 live births to mothers who were EU citizens, [...] this is the equivalent of adding a city the size of Manchester. [...] The cost of maternity services alone to these families is likely to exceed £1.3 billion”.<sup>180</sup> It was surprising to see how quickly the focus of the worth of human lives was seen in economic terms, seemingly framing people – in the last case babies – solely as a financial burden.

### *What this all means*

The next chapter, concluding the research, will elaborate more fully the implications that arise from the insights gained from this case study. Nonetheless, it is worth summarising what this chapter has attempted. It firstly reminded us of the potential ideological claims that populism might have, as seen so far in the project. These are: Anti-elitism, purity of the people, the importance of the will of the people, direct representation, exclusive representation, and anti-pluralism (of the people). Moreover, some issues with populism from the literature on democracy were once more presented, namely that ‘it is paradoxical to claim majoritarian rule ignoring the existence of a minority’, that ‘populists can be hard to rationally engage with as they go against the standards for democratic discourse’, and that ‘populism may be just a way for a power-hungry leader to gain influence’. In the chapter, each ideological claim was taken individually (with the ‘issues’ mentioned throughout, not in a specific section) and seen whether the Vote Leave speeches feature it, and if so, how.

Anti-elitism featured prominently in the speeches, with multiple types of elite (the EU, the UK Government, and multinational businesses) being criticised. The case study confirmed the theory and gave insights to a potential general populist desire to keep things at a national level. The purity of the people could be seen in the speeches, if by that one means overtly praising the (British) people. The case study seems to be in line with the theory, with other insights of the close association of populism with patriotism, nationalism, or a general sense of superiority. The will of the people was seen as pivotal in the case study, as the theory

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<sup>177</sup> C.

<sup>178</sup> G2.

<sup>179</sup> G2.

<sup>180</sup> GJS1. In general there are multiple references of measuring immigration in terms of adding the equivalent population of cities (Newcastle, Oxford or Manchester) to the UK.

suggested, and again provided insight into a very strong sense of self-governance justified however by a borderline nationalistic belief of the people being *better* decision-makers. For direct representation, the speeches did advocate for a more direct representation than the status quo, but did not seem to have the radical change of the democratic system which the theoretical framework expected populism to have. Exclusive representation in Vote Leave matched the expectations of the theory, and moreover showed that such claims of representation need not stop at the national level. Anti-pluralism (a.k.a. the homogeneity of the people's will) also featured in the case selected, as the theory expected. However, here too insights were gained as populist claims of anti-pluralism might actually be made stronger with the use of pluralism (e.g., 'all these *different* people think the *same* thing'). Other potential insights on populism which the theoretical framework had not accounted for were the championing of rationality, strategic name-dropping, the use of historical references, the appeal to emotions and to the personal, and the mocking tone towards others. All these relate more closely to populism as a political style, as various rhetorical strategies to hold the upper hand in political discourse. The chapter that follows will elaborate on all these insights, both in terms of changes to the theoretical framework and in terms of what possible future research can be inspired by this.

## Conclusion

### Chapter VI: Concluding theory and further research

*A PhD student walks into a bar as the bartender calls last orders,  
the PhD student says: “no, no, this is just the beginning”*

It would seem logical to immediately discuss the impact of the case study on the literature. However, it may be worth first presenting a recap of what has transpired from the conceptual study of populism, i.e. the first three chapters of the project. In a second instance, can then the conclusions from the case study also be seen. These two section may seem like a repetitive exercise, however summarising what has been said allows in a third instance for a reformulation of the theoretical framework guided from the insights gained in the case study. This amounts to the first aim of this chapter: putting all the work so far together. The second aim of the chapter will be assessing the outcome of the research, in terms of what contributions it might have given to the literature and what ideas can be suggested for further study.

#### *What the theory was*

One of the main issues with defining a theory of populism is that the term really predates any international comprehensive populist movement. While with other concepts, such as socialism, there have been explicitly self-conscious and politically prominent socialist movements, populism initially got applied to multiple specific contexts, whose ideological content varied greatly. For example, had the American agrarian populism embodied in the Populist Party (or People’s party) which ran for presidential office in 1892 been successful, that term might have then subsequently been associated closely with their policies and thus been used to describe exclusively a socialist pro-workers agrarianism. Instead, the term became applied to elements of agrarian movements, peasantism, anti-colonialism, provincialism, democracy, or dictatorships, transcending the left/right-wing spectrum. Initially, in the 60’s and 70’s scholars attempted to pinpoint the term to one of these ideas, but by then the vagueness of the term had already become too solidified within it. The literature from then attempted to challenge the vagueness, but it proved virtually impossible to have a comprehensive theory that would present populism as an ideology that could encompass and explain all those contexts the term was applied to. After all, it seems impossible for a full ideology to apply to South American left-wing dictatorships, US right-wing bourgeoisie provincialism, Russian peasantism and African emancipation against colonial powers, to name a few. Surely, it would seem that these do not have many ideological claims in common.

More recent developments in the literature have had the insight to not shy away from this vagueness, but rather see it as pivotal to its definition instead. Seeing populism as simply a rhetoric style or as an incomplete ideology that relies on other ideologies (what the project labelled *pessimistic theories of populism*), would indeed be better able to encompass all those potential definitions of populism. It is not ideological claims that link all those potential populisms, but the way those political actors go about promoting different ideological claims. One of the most exemplar pessimistic theories of populism is that of populism as a thin-centred ideology. Thin-centred ideologies “have a more limited ambition and scope than thick ideologies;<sup>1</sup> they do not formulate a broad menu of solutions to major socio-political issues”.<sup>2</sup> They are limited in content and in morphology and are “necessarily [...] attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other ideologies”.<sup>3</sup> A compatible idea in the literature is that populism may be based on empty signifiers. References to, for example, ‘the people’ or ‘the elite’ are essentially the use of buzzwords that one then attaches their own meaning to. The structure of a populist argument on the lines of ‘the elite oppress the pure people’ is in itself void of context and meaning, but it allows for the listener to fill in the gaps themselves to fit whatever other ideology they might have. In these terms, the sentence ‘the elite is oppressing the pure people’ makes sense and is agreed upon for example in South American left-wing dictatorships (in the sense of ‘the capitalist rich are oppressing the labourers’), US right-wing bourgeoisie provincialism (‘the city elite are oppressing the petite bourgeoisie in the peripheries’), or African emancipation against colonial powers (‘the colonial power are oppressing the locals’). In other words, the vagueness is what defines populism. It might be worth reminding here that the focus for now is purely conceptual. All this is not to say that populism is *bad*. Indeed, the literature also points out instances in which populism, also due to its potential vagueness, can be positive. In the last example for instance, many might agree that if populism indeed had been helpful as an emancipatory force against colonialism, that would be positive. In general, within the assumption that democracy is to some extent desirable, populism can be seen as a corrective for democracy within a society where the democratic element had indeed been corroded (e.g., a country under colonial control). Of course, there are also many instances where populism might not be so positive, for example it can itself corrode an already functioning healthy democracy. This is just to show that populism is for now not understood as intrinsically good or bad on a theoretical level, the focus is understanding its theoretical definition. The project raised some conceptual doubts with *pessimistic theories of populism*, whose justification is primarily given comparatively to other ideologies. The description of populism as thin-centred or based on empty signifiers is seen as being unlike other ideologies, which instead have more complete ideological claims. However, it seemed unclear firstly why a critique of populism as empty signifiers could not also apply to other ideologies (e.g., ‘liberty’ for which liberalism strives could be used as open for interpretation as ‘the will of the people’ in populism). Secondly, the justification of populism as thin-centred (unlike other ideologies) is that its ideological claims are less strong,

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, this research project is using the adjectives ‘thick’, ‘thick-centred’, and ‘full’ interchangeably when describing ideologies, likewise for ‘thin’ and ‘thin-centred’.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Freeden, 2003, *Ideology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press in Cas Mudde, ‘Populism: An Ideational Approach’, in Kaltwasser et al. (eds.), 2017, p.35.

<sup>3</sup> M&K, 2017, p.6.

this is argued however on the basis of analyses of what populists in practice say or do. The outcome that populism is no proper ideology may well be correct, but the project raised some issues with the methodology by which this conclusion is drawn. It seems as if this justification of difference between populism and other ideologies is done by comparing to some extent populism in practice to other ideologies in theory, which would be an unfair comparison for populism and would automatically put populism in an unflattering light (in terms of whether it is a fuller ideology). An answer in the literature could be found in that elements of how populism occurs in practice are intrinsic to its definition. It is impossible to describe populism without mentioning its political strategies in practice. Populism without its anti-establishment nature (seen here as a practical, not theoretical feature) would not be populism. This may well be true, but there is a gap in the literature in looking more explicitly into this, into essentially a purely theoretical and context-independent theory of populism as an ideology, which would serve as a better comparative to purely theoretical theories of other ideologies. This has been one of the main aim of this project, if not the main aim: analysing in much more abstract and theoretical terms if and how populism is a fuller ideology.

To achieve this, first a clarification was needed on what an ideology is, and what theoretical criteria can be elaborated to assess whether a belief can be understood as an ideological claim. Roughly speaking, an ideology was argued to be a set of ideas about human nature and/or normative socio-political beliefs, essentially a body of thought that expresses a view of what society ought to look like, which is also in line with how the literature on populism described ideologies conceptually. Building on this, the project presented a method in order to assess whether a given belief could be part of an ideology. The belief analysed would have to first of all relate in some way to socio-political themes, and secondly, it must be universalizable. The criterium of universalizability proposed is twofold: firstly, for a belief to be ideological it must be logically possible for everyone to hold such a belief, which is not to say that everyone would hold it, but that there would be no logical contradiction if everyone indeed held this belief; secondly, for a belief to be ideological it must offer *some* guidance regardless of individual societal contexts. The first aspect is building on Kantian universalizability of moral maxims (is there logical contradiction if everyone followed this belief?), the second on social contract theorists' State of Nature as well as Rawls' Original Position (does the belief offer some insight of what society ought to look like when pre-political humans are looking to develop a society?). This criteria was then applied on the possible ideological belief populism could entail. These were: anti-elitism; the purity of the people; the will of the people ought to be the only drive for political action; direct representation; exclusive representation; homogeneity amongst the people (a.k.a. anti-pluralism). All these roughly met the first criterium of relating to socio-political themes, but most of them proved not universalizable either in terms of it not being logically possible for everyone to have said belief or in terms of the belief not giving enough general guidance towards what a society ought to look like. Nonetheless, a couple of the claims seem to fit all the criteria, namely the will of the people having primacy in political processes above all else and the desire for direct democracy. Whilst this may be seen initially as a victory for the proposition that populism is a full ideology, doubts were raised about the uniqueness of these ideological claims for populism. Indeed, the claims that might give populism ideological status

seem closely associated to other concepts and ideologies, to the point that one could see them as best expressed by – say – the concept of liberal democracy rather than populism. Essentially, if populism was to be a fuller ideology it would be on the ideological claims of the importance of the will of the people and direct democracy, but the question arises on whether these ideological claims are enough to say that populism is a helpful and – more importantly – distinct ideology.

The project thus then analysed how these potential ideological claims of populism compare to more standard understandings of them in democratic theory. The clearest difference between populism and a more ‘traditional’ understanding of democracy in relation to concepts of popular sovereignty and representation is best exemplified through the image of two pillars of liberal democracy. In democracy as we usually understand it, there is a ‘pure democratic’ pillar which embodies popular sovereignty (the will of the people ought to be followed) and a ‘liberal’ pillar which embodies the avoidance of the tyranny of the majority (some limits to the will of the people should be imposed, e.g., if they infringe certain pre-accepted rights). The current general consensus on democracy recognises a balance of the two pillars, which may also translate in the existence of representatives as trustees rather than delegates (the former have some freedom of interpretation and disagreement of the general will, the latter are simply executors of it). If populism would have ideological claims, those are best understood in this sense, as they would be akin to a championing of the ‘pure democracy’ pillar, at the cost of the ‘liberal’ pillar. In line with the belief in the primacy of popular will and direct representation, a populist ideology would essentially be one promoting the will of the people above all else, with representatives – if there were any – being delegates rather than trustees.<sup>4</sup> If this was not the correct interpretation of populism as an ideology, and instead it would also be promoting a balance of the pillars, it would then not be a unique and distinct ideology, if it was an ideology at all. The theoretical framework then analysed some issues with this resulting populist ideology. Again focusing on the theoretical level, the main issues this project highlighted of this interpretation of populism is essentially that a purely democratic pillar cannot exist without also some degree of a liberal pillar. Majoritarian rule (i.e., the purely democratic pillar) is conceptually reliant on the acceptance of the existence of a minority and is theoretically given credibility and mandate because of a liberal respect for the minority. Similarly, any other feature of populism – features which may have been assessed as not necessarily ideological but which are nonetheless to some extent present with it – would make it so that the standards of open dialogue which are necessary in democratic majoritarian rule are hindered.

Putting all this together, the conclusions drawn from theoretical framework of this project would ultimately be that *if* populism was an ideology, its ideological claims would be related to popular sovereignty representation, but *if* these ideological claims would be unique, they

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<sup>4</sup> A delegate has little to no say on whether in his expert opinion the will of the people is actually a good idea. If the popular will is to ban pears, the delegate cannot guide or inform this will by pointing out its implications for the economy or health, for example. The delegate’s actions must reflect the popular will. This was described with Pitkin in chapter III.

would be theoretically flawed. In short, *if* populism was a distinct ideology, it would be a flawed one.

### *What the practice shed light on*

For all the merits and benefits a highly theoretical, context-independent analysis can have by itself, there is much to be said in terms of a mix of methodological approaches. It seems currently common, even desirable, for academic works to favour a mixed-methods approach. Many reasons can justify using a more applied methodology in combination to a more theoretical one, one of which is it that one's theory can be informed or given further validation through it. One thing is to come up with a brilliant political theory in the philosopher's ivory tower, another is to see whether this theory is actually relevant to real life below the tower. In general, there is also the benefit of the research being insightful in multiple alleyways of study. In the case of this project, for example, it may be relevant for the field of theoretical study of populism and ideologies, as well as on more political scientific studies on Brexit.

Therefore, while the first part of the project specifically aimed at interpreting populism in the most theoretical and abstract way possible, the second part looked at a specific real-life case study. In order to do so, some clarification was needed in terms of the methodology. Contextual political analysis is a methodology used most famously within – but not limited to – debates around multiculturalism and theories of justice. Its aims are more open than simply confirming theory with practice. Instead, the theoretical principles are *generated, refined and revised* by applying them to context. That said, there are varying interpretations of how to do so and what the relation is in the natures of context and theory. Bypassing the differences between different approaches, a general consensus is that context is at least relevant to theory. Moreover, not only is it relevant, it can also be insightful. A safe assumption, without having to delve too much into the nature of context and theory, is that context may be intimation of theoretical positions, meaning that within given context one might be able to notice some hints or suggestions of what the theory at play might be. In other – poorer – words, at the very least a trace of theory may be seen in context. Some general guidelines or suggestions were drawn from the literature on contextual political analysis and the case selection was justified along these lines. The Vote Leave campaign seemed instinctively very much relevant and appropriate to theories of populism, but it also seemed an unusual instance of populism, as there was no stereotypical figure of a populist leader and as it was not a political party trying to get into power. For these reasons, the case study seemed an appropriate one for the contextual methodology, which recommended picking a case that despite being relevant did not seem to properly fit the theoretical framework. The idea goes that by picking a case which is not simply an obvious confirmation of the theory, one can gain insights on the theory looking at the differences between the case study and the theoretical expectations. In this light, the project chose the Vote Leave campaign, which had its own individual benefits as a case study selection regardless of methodology. As mentioned, most



people might instinctively agree that the Vote Leave campaign was populist to some extent. My personal situation is insightful on the matter: I am both British and Italian, so thanks to the former I am more familiar with the case study and with socio-cultural nuances which may occur, but thanks to the latter I also have some level of 'outsider's perspective' on the matter. This could also be argued to be a double-edged sword, as I could be intrinsically biased on the issue, but I believe that the benefits of my personal situation outweigh the negatives. Another good – if not the best – reason for choosing this case study is that there is a degree of self-definition within the Vote Leave campaign. On their own website there is a list of speeches and interviews given by various politicians which are used to promote the Vote Leave campaign. This makes it easier to find material associated with the campaign. There is no elaboration or justification needed to why a certain speech would count as part of the campaign or instead as an individual politician's view. Without this self-association with certain figures and certain speeches it would be tricky to pinpoint a quote given by, for example, Gisela Stuart, who served as a chair of the campaign but was at the time also a Labour MP for Birmingham Edgbaston, as expressing the view of the Vote Leave campaign. Without said quote being used within the Vote Leave materials, that quote could have easily been seen as the view of Labour party members, or of people in Birmingham; some justification would have needed to be made in order to say that such a quote was actually reflective of the Vote Leave campaign.

For all these reasons and more was Vote Leave seen as a good case study selection. Therefore, after a brief presentation of the campaign, the project compared the theoretical framework as developed in the first part of the project through the lens of the Vote Leave context. It did so by analysing a dozen speeches found in the campaign materials, using the structure of the theoretical context. The potential ideological claims that populism might make (anti-elitism; the purity of the people; the will of the people ought to be the only drive for political action; direct representation; exclusive representation; homogeneity amongst the people) were individually assessed within the speeches, in terms of if and how the speeches reflected these claims. The aim was not simply to confirm what the theoretical framework set out, but to gain insights by looking at what those claims refer to in real-life, in order to then re-evaluate the theoretical framework, which is what is happening more formally here.

As a summary, here are the insights gained by looking at potential ideological claims in the case study:

-Not so empty signifiers:

The signifiers seemed less 'empty' than what the theoretical framework suggested. Descriptions of the elite were surprisingly detailed. The expectation might have been for references to the elite being vague and encompassing anyone who opposed the populist. While the second element is confirmed in the case study, namely that anyone considering to vote remain is associated with the elite, the first is not as straightforward. Rather than an empty signifier, three different types of elite are identified: the EU, the Government, and big multinationals. Moreover, there is perhaps more detail on the specific roles and faults these different elites have in the establishment, with the EU elite being corrupt and fraudulent, the Government being incompetent and powerless, and the multinationals being opportunistic

of the flawed system. Moreover, their actions are also specified, with them all being accused of threatening small business to not express their desire to leave the EU, and of funding the IN campaign.

The idea of empty signifiers in the literature is raised as a practical element of populism, as a 'this is what populists say/do in practice'. The case study does not necessarily disprove this, but it does seem to be to some extent at odd with it. There is more detail and description given to 'the elite' than the theory suggests populists would. However, this is only one case, and it can also be argued that 'the elite' is still an empty signifier in the case study, as the Vote Leave speeches do not really give much proof or reason to believe that, for example, the EU is corrupt. There could still be an attempt of using 'EU corruption' as buzzwords. Nonetheless, the main contribution of this project is of using the various features of populism as ideological claims that would give populism status as a full ideology. In the case study, if the critique of the elite is based on empty signifiers, then that would confirm the theoretical framework's suspicion that anti-elitism is not an ideological claim (it is indeed populist, but it is not what would make it an ideology). If, however, anti-elitism was to be understood an ideological claim in the case study, that could only be possible if anti-elitism was stretched to mean the rejection of supra-national institutions (such as the EU) or a general drive to keep the locus of popular sovereignty at the national level, which will be assessed shortly.

-Perceived superiority towards other peoples:

The theoretical framework identified in the purity of the people an ideological claim where the people are inherently right. However, from the case study it transpires that this is not simply justified innately, but also comparatively to other peoples. It is not just that the (British) people are inherently the best decision-makers of their own interests, but they are also the best decision-makers overall, of universal issues, not just their own. This parallel justification of the importance of the will of the people was neglected in the theoretical framework. However, here too there are doubts on the originality of such a claim for a potential populist ideology. Presumably, the idea of one's people being overall better than all the other peoples is best expressed under the term of patriotism or nationalism.

-Populism is not just on the national level

It transpired from the case study that although the attention was to bring back popular sovereignty to the national level, there was also a belief in the positive aspects this would have beyond the national level. A vote to leave was seen as an emancipatory example for other EU countries to follow, plus there were mentions that outside the EU the UK would help developing countries. The theoretical framework may not have necessarily assessed these themes, but there was a tacit understanding that an ideology of populism would be rather inward-looking within a country, there was no expectation on the presence of a universal, international or global aspect to populism. Rather, populism is here seen as outward-looking too, and concerned also with other peoples, not just their own. This is insightful but it would

not require a complete re-evaluation of the theory. It is just worth pointing out that indeed if populism was an ideology promoting direct representation and popular sovereignty, this would be a universal claim. It would be a belief that all countries ought to follow this example, in the same way that perhaps a socialist might campaign indeed to promote socialism in their own country, yes, but also for socialism in general, believing that it is the best system for any country, not just theirs.

-No great revolution necessary

Despite the previous insight that populist claims may be more universal and global than the theoretical framework expected, it is also insightful that the case study showed essentially a relatively less drastic call for revolution. While of course voting to leave the EU is politically speaking a pretty big deal, the theoretical framework painted a picture of populism as championing a radically different type of democracy than what we are used to, or at least than the one present in the UK at the time. The theory seemed to suggest that if populism was an ideology it would be advocating a strong form of direct democracy where representatives act like delegated rather than trustees.<sup>5</sup> In the case study there was a clear push towards a more direct democracy than the status quo. The EU can be criticised or defended extensively, but it is fairly uncontroversial to state that the relation between EU decision and popular will is rather indirect.<sup>6</sup> So, on the face of things, the case study does seem to match the expectations of promoting direct democracy and going against representatives as trustees. However, this critique is made in the case study only insofar as it relates to supra-national institutions. There is no real desire expressed for a change in democratic proceedings on a national level. This is informative to theory, as it seems that such an ideology of populism would not necessarily have as an essential feature a push towards a radical democratic revolution, it can be milder than that.

-(ethno-socio-cultural) Pluralism in itself not bad, as long as it ultimately promotes homogeneity of opinion

The theory essentially described populism as incompatible with pluralism. There may even have been suggestions that it could be seen as a strategy specifically designed to promote the interests of a certain ethnic, social and/or cultural sub-group. This suggestion could still hold depending on the individual contexts. Perhaps it could also be argued to be something at play with the Vote Leave campaign. However, as far as it concerns the case study there was no real suggestion of promotion of a specific sub-group of the people. Actually, quite the opposite seemed to come across. When ethno/socio/cultural pluralism itself was mentioned it was mostly done so in a positive light. The type of pluralism which proved problematic was instead that of pluralism of political opinion. That there might have been British people that

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<sup>5</sup> In the sense that they would have to fairly blindly follow the popular will, without much interpretation or advice-giving.

<sup>6</sup> Which is not to say that it is good or bad, but it is fair to say there are many steps an individual's will has to go through to reach EU decision.

wanted to remain was either neglected or seen negatively. 'The people' wanted to leave, if there were any Remainers they would either be wrong or corrupt. This dichotomy of pluralism (cultural pluralism good or neutral, political pluralism bad) is given further analysis by seeing how the socio-cultural pluralism is actually used as a justification for the political anti-pluralism. In simple terms, this is essentially a claim of 'look at all the (socio-culturally) different people that believe X, it must mean that everyone thinks X'. Anyway, the case study is seemingly at odds with some aspects of the theory which relied on populism being against pluralism. Nonetheless, the main issues of populism as an ideology are still confirmed by these new insights. In ideological terms, the problematic form of anti-pluralism was indeed that of political opinion. By saying the people homogenously all think the same thing, there are conceptual issues with the concept of a majority, as well as theoretical issues with open rational dialogue necessary in democracy. If anything, that suggestion made by the theory is made stronger by using this example of socio-cultural pluralism being ultimately used by populist discourse as proof for political homogeneity.

-Collapsing into other ideologies:

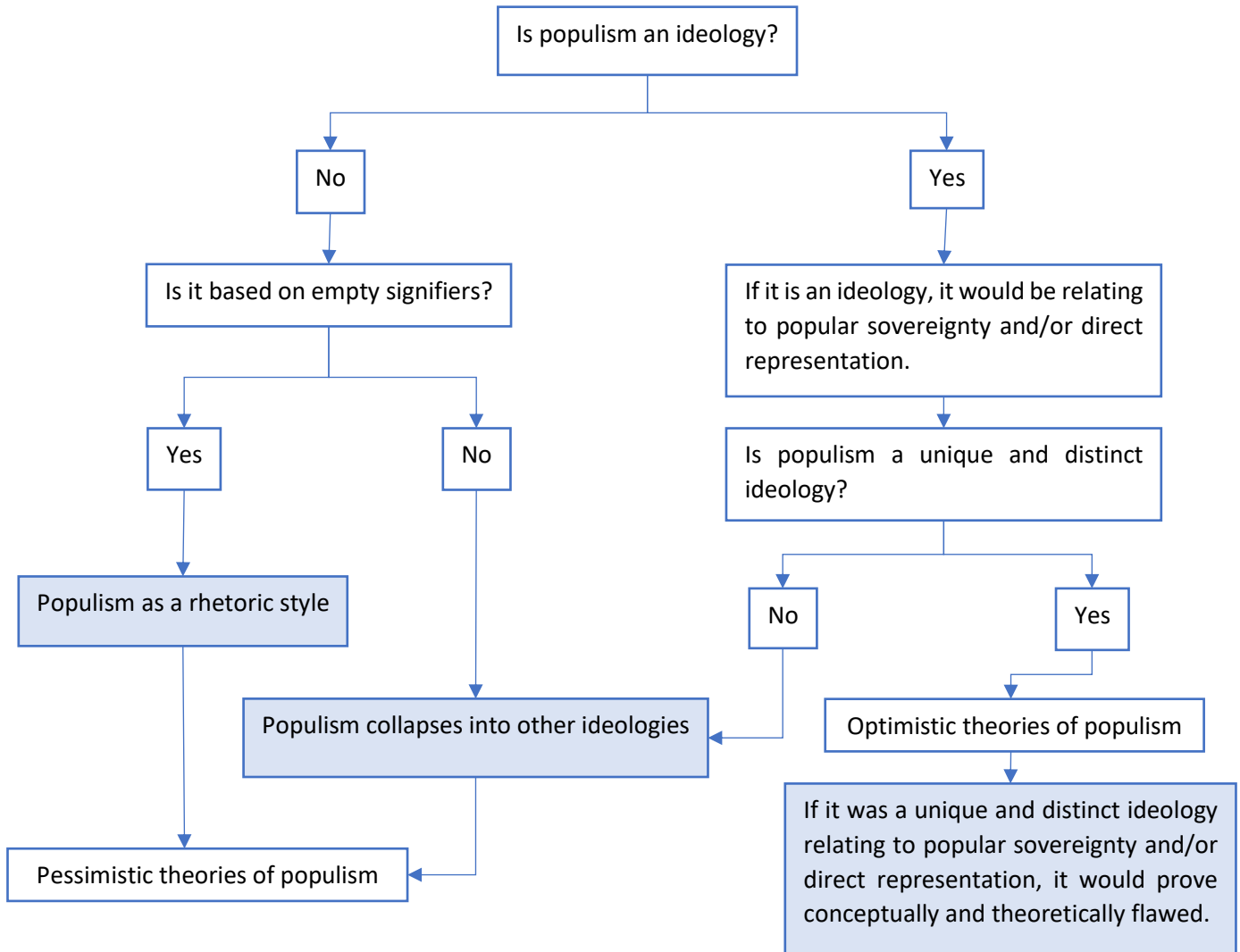
As mentioned already, most attempts in the case study to extrapolate an ideology from it essentially ended up discussing claims closer to other ideologies or political concepts, if any ideological implications could be made at all. For example, anti-elitism represented at best distrust for supra-national institution, the purity of the people at best patriotism, the primacy of the will of the people and direct representation translated into conversations about already existing interpretations of democracy. There were no obvious exclusively populist ideological claims, which is compatible with the theoretical framework. The theory essentially boiled down to *if* populism was an ideology, *if* its ideological claims would be unique and distinct, they would be those of advocating for the primacy of direct popular will at any cost. The case study could be seen as suggesting that indeed its ideological claims are not unique and distinct.

- Good example of all the normative issues the project was trying to avoid

The rest of the insights gained from the case related primarily to populism in practice, rather than to any ideological claims the theory suggested. There is plenty of evidence from the case study to enhance a critique of populism as a rhetoric style, with negative implications to democracy. Indeed, the perceived monopoly of representation and of rationality, the presenting themselves as the champion of the people, the appeal to emotions, the unfair treatment of political opponents are only some of those elements that transpire from the case study that would be good examples of all the normative issues with populist behaviour that the project was desperately trying to avoid in order to focus almost exclusively on a theoretical analysis of populism as an ideology.

*Concluding statements and further research*

The outcome of the research, following developments from the literature and following re-evaluation from the study is as follows:



The three possible outcomes (filled in blue) have been elaborated thanks to the case study. The populist aspect of Vote Leave was either purely a style of rhetoric, it was better expressed through other ideologies (such as nationalism), and if it was to have unique ideological claims these would end up being some kind of absolute majoritarianism, which would fail on the basis of not taking into account the democratic minority. This last point is both a conceptual and a theoretical issue: the concept of a majority (in this case of 51.9%) is given democratic validation by taking into account also the (48.1%) minority's interests to some extent, absolute majority is conceptually impossible as a not flawed ideology; similarly, the

theoretical issue is the implication of a general sense of claiming a monopoly of reason and representation, which would be at odds with the open and rational discourse necessary in any democratic system. A pivotal aspect of this whole research is that this does not necessarily mean that populists are inherently normatively wrong, but rather that their interests and aims might be best served by more explicitly referring to other ideologies. It might be clear that the project hints at normative issues with Vote Leave, but these are not necessarily related to populism. If populism collapsed into other ideologies (for example here nationalism) that does not mean to say that the nationalist is automatically wrong, but rather that by also following populist features their nationalist claim is made weaker. Then, assessing whether nationalism is wrong is another conversation. What the project has been about is whether populist and only populist ideological features are problematic at a theoretical level, concluding 'yes'. The biggest thing to build on from this is a normative analysis of the populism. The implications of this project on how one should approach populism are ultimately not explicitly discussed. The argument that populism is either not making any ideological claims or making flawed claims, would imply it is a normatively negative assessment of it in practice. However, there have been mentions of instances where even if populism was ideologically lacking, it still proved helpful in the real world (i.e., a radical democratization of a democratically lacking society)<sup>7</sup>. Assuming populism was lacking in ideological terms does not by itself inform whether it is then normatively undesirable or in general how one should behave in the presence of populism.

The project explicitly attempted to avoid engaging with populism on a normative level as much as possible, in order to focus more on the whether an abstract theory could be behind it. Indeed, this is the gap in the literature which the project tried to fill: a theoretical assessment of populism which would not assume that populism was not a fuller ideology or in general not normatively desirable. Nonetheless, one can easily see how such a project can serve as a basis for a more extensive normative analysis of populism. This is definitely an aspect that could inspire further research.

A further input for other research is that the theoretical framework, especially the development of the criteria of universalizability, could be applied to other ideologies, more accepted as full ideologies. The project briefly mentioned how concepts like liberalism or nationalism had ideological claims that would be both possible for everyone to hold without logical contradiction and insightful in terms of describing what society ought to look like. The project however did not explicitly delve into a study of why this would be the case. Such a study, i.e., analysing why other ideologies which are ideologies according to the criteria of universalizability proposed in this project, might give further insights into why comparatively populism is not an ideology. Moreover, with such a study applied to ideologies which is what populism is at times described as collapsing into (e.g., nationalism) would also give further validation or revision to why populism may not be a unique and distinct ideology – if it was an ideology to start with.

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<sup>7</sup> As seen in Laclau or Mouffe, or when seeing populism as anti-colonial emancipation.

Other considerations are that the scope of the contextual methodology was rather limited in the project simply due to what was possible in this format. The literature on contextual political analysis suggests using a variety of cases, but instead this project focussed on analysing in greater detail only one. This was still the right choice for this format, as had the project not done this it would have not been able to gain quite as many insights on every single potential ideological claim. Looking at a variety of cases would have yielded less insights which would have been more 'correct', in the sense that if a multitude of case study all presented a certain feature X, then there would have been more justification to say that X is a feature of populism. With only the Vote Leave case study many more insights (features of populism) were yielded but with less reliability of whether those were not simply coincidental to the context rather than the theory. It is helpful that those insights did closely match or were compatible with the expectations of the theoretical framework, so it is fair – but not guaranteed – to assume that those context-dependent insights are relevant for theory. With this in mind there are two options for further study. Further research could look at other case studies selected as instances of populism in the same detail as that of Vote Leave in this project, to then further generate, refine and revise the theoretical framework. This is akin to the idea of *iterative* contextualism, where theory goes on a journey of discovery through a variety of different contexts. Another option, which does not exclude the prior one, is of looking at the same context in more detail, by looking at the alternative in that scenario. In this case, it might be very insightful indeed to look at the IN campaign to see whether the features that came from the study of the Vote Leave campaign were exclusive to it. Some mentions to this were made within the case study, in which it was suggested that it was possible that some of the language seen as potentially populist, e.g., the superiority of the British people, could also have been used by the IN campaign. With a quick comparison – which did not feature in the research but occurred 'behind the scenes' – between David Cameron's Bloomberg speech<sup>8</sup> and Boris Johnson's first major Vote Leave speech<sup>9</sup> one can see that indeed Cameron also talks extensively and in a patriotic light about 'Britain' and 'the British' people like Johnson, but in Cameron's speech there is no comparative to other peoples or in general no sense of British superiority. This quick comparison is not to be taken seriously here within the case study, but it is just an example of some further research that could be done, namely comparing the Vote Leave campaign labelled here as populist with other political actors and groups within the same context of Brexit. This would have great benefits for the development of the theoretical framework, as it would give further validation to which features are indeed populist and not just generally common within the context throughout populist and non-populist actors.

Nonetheless, despite these ways in which the research can be improved, hopefully it has been insightful already as is. It is fair to say that the chimera of an ideology of populism has still

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<sup>8</sup> David Cameron's 2013 famous 'Bloomberg speech' available on many platform, for example <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApcgQDKqXmE&ab\\_channel=10DowningStreet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApcgQDKqXmE&ab_channel=10DowningStreet)> or <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/full-text-david-cameron-s-europe-speech-8462592.html>> [both last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Boris Johnson, 'The liberal cosmopolitan case to Vote Leave', on the *Vote Leave Take Control* website, <[http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/boris\\_johnson\\_the\\_liberal\\_cosmopolitan\\_case\\_to\\_vote\\_leave.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/boris_johnson_the_liberal_cosmopolitan_case_to_vote_leave.html)> [last accessed 30<sup>th</sup> of Nov 2022].

proved to be just that, unachievable. Better said, a populist ideology which is not conceptually or theoretically flawed has been seen as unachievable. The insights achieved (leading to the claim that a flawless populist ideology is not possible) have stronger credibility given that the research approached the themes by accepting the assumption that such a chimera existed in the first place. As the start of the project suggested, the aim was not to find the chimera, but to gain insights along the chase for it.



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