

RESEARCH ARTICLE

There is no such thing as ‘right-wing populism’: Reclaiming the emancipatory potential of populism in reactionary times[‡]

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Abstract

Populism has become generally equated with far-right politics in public discourse. Beyond this association being widely problematised in much of the literature on populism, in this theoretical intervention, we argue that the populist label is ill-fitting for far-right politics for three reasons. First, any antagonism of ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ is only secondary, at best, for the far right. Second, while populism constructs an anti-elitist crisis of the system, the far right constructs a crisis in the system, seeking to (re-)entrench elite rule and systems of oppression. Third, populism transgresses hegemonic political norms by making a novel political subject visible, whereas the far right attempts to extend the privilege of its already privileged voting base. As such, we argue that we should abandon the ‘populist’ signifier to refer to reactionary politics and instead rely on more precise, but also more stigmatising signifiers such as far/radical/extreme right for projects of reactionary people-building. Whereas populism builds a coalition through equivalential links between the demands of ‘the people’, such demands are of little concern for reactionary elites. Instead, ‘the people’ are constructed to lend legitimacy to their elitist project. While there are clear risks in attempting to reclaim the concept considering its quasi-hegemonic misuse, we argue that the emancipatory potential of populism makes it worthy of serious investigation in our demophobic and authoritarian times.

Keywords: populism; far right; reactionary politics; democracy; elite

Populist hype (Goyvaerts et al. 2024) has been a defining feature of political discourse in the twenty-first century. In politics, the media, and academia, the term ‘populism’ has become ubiquitous to describe the challenges faced by liberal democracies in an increasingly crisis-ridden world. Particularly since the defeat of left-wing populist movements in the 2010s, it has been almost exclusively used to describe far-right politics, often as the sole definer for such politics: ‘populism is on the rise!’ This is despite a clear consensus in serious research on the matter that populism is, at best, secondary in the ideological content of the far right or a discursive element, itself ideologically hollow (Kim 2021). According to most mainstream and critical accounts, therefore, ‘populism’ tells us very little about the nature of the threat posed by far-right, reactionary politics, apart from them relying on the construction of *an* elite vs *a* people. Some even

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reject the application of populism to describe far-right politics altogether as both inaccurate and dangerous (Collovald 2004) or at least recommend a great deal of caution when calling the far-right ‘populist’ (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. 2017). For others, we should question whether populism can be right-wing at all (Vergara 2020a; Biglieri and Cadahia 2021).

This article builds on these more critical approaches and suggests that the populist label is inaccurate and counterproductive to describe reactionary, far-right politics for three reasons. Building on key theories on the subject and avoiding the pitfalls of mainstream approaches overly focused on electoral politics, we first question the centrality of ‘the people’ against ‘elite’ antagonism in far-right politics. We argue that the far right does not seek to construct ‘a people’ through populism, but rather through its ideological core components, whether these be nationalism or racism. ‘The people’ is therefore not constructed in a bottom-up manner, but rather as a passive, homogenised actor which takes shape in the reactionary fantasies of far-right elites. Relatedly, we contend that the far right does not have an anti-elite agenda or discourse, where elites are defined as those with privileged access to the means of shaping public discourse (van Dijk 1993), such that they exercise a disproportionate amount of influence over the political agenda (McCombs 2014). Instead, its elitist project aims to replace one elite with another to reassert systems of oppression and domination. Second, we suggest that rather than constructing a populist ‘crisis of the system’ (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis et al. 2018), the far right constructs a ‘crisis in’ whereby the privilege of its supporters is extended through a reaffirmation of elite rule. Third, we argue, therefore, that contrary to most useful definitions of populism, far-right politics does not seek to transgress hegemonic political norms and instead aims to reinforce certain forms of privilege. Overall, we contend that the use of the term ‘populism’ to describe these phenomena betrays an epistemology of ignorance regarding the nature of reactionary politics as well as what Jacques Rancière (2007) has called a ‘hatred of democracy’ through the conflation of far-right politics and populism. To clarify, our contention here is not that populism is necessarily incompatible with all forms of right-wing politics, but that the term ‘right-wing populism’, as a common euphemism for the far right, conceals some key tensions between populist discourse and, specifically, *far-right* ideological content.

To move beyond this impasse, we suggest abandoning the signifier of ‘right-wing populism’ in favour of more precise, but also more stigmatising signifiers for projects of reactionary people-building, such as far/radical/extreme right. Whereas populism builds a coalition through equivalential links between the demands of ‘the people’ (Laclau 2005), such demands are of little concern for reactionary elites. Instead, ‘the people’ are merely constructed to lend legitimacy to their elitist project. As such, this article intervenes in a context where ‘populism’ has lost much of its usefulness in public discourse (Hunger and Paxton 2022). While there are clear risks in attempting to reclaim the concept considering its quasi-hegemonic misuse, we argue that the emancipatory potential of populism makes it worthy of serious investigation in our demophobic and authoritarian times.

Populism in the literature

The discursive-performative approach to populism

As the central argument of this paper focuses on the incompatibility between far-right ideological content and populism, we must first outline how we understand the latter. Here, we take our cues from the discursive-performative approach to populism (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021), which brings together insights from the discursive (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017) and socio-cultural approaches to populism (Ostiguy 2017).

The discursive-performative approach understands populism as a discourse that builds chains of equivalence between different unsatisfied demands against the status quo, unified under the

banner of 'the people' (Katsambekis and Kioupiolis 2019). Here, we use Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis' (2017: 310) definition as a starting point:

Populism is a dichotomic discourse in which "the people" are juxtaposed to "the elite" along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which "the people" is discursively constructed as a large powerless group through opposition to "the elite" conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group. Populist politics thus claim to represent "the people" against an "elite" that frustrates their legitimate demands, and presents these demands as expressions of the will of "the people."

From the outset, then, 'the people' of populism has a class component inasmuch as 'the people' is constructed as a coalition of the *plebs*: those excluded from the halls of power (Vergara 2020a). Unlike nationalism, for instance, populism constructs its antagonism on an up/down register ('the people' below against 'the establishment' above) rather than an in/out register ('natives' against 'foreigners') (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). This is a crucial distinction to which we will later return. Under this approach, crises also play a central role in the emergence of populism. In the 'objective' sense, crises may involve a decline in living standards or a crisis of legitimacy within the government, which weakens the status quo. However, for such an external shock to become a crisis proper, it needs to be constructed as an event that requires decisive political intervention (Hay 1996). Thus, crises also have subjective components. Populism, then, narrates a crisis of the system, where elites must be replaced, and power returned to 'the people' (Moffitt 2016; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupiolis et al. 2018).

The discursive-performative approach also focuses on the performances which incite identification with a populist project (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021). Pierre Ostiguy (2017) asserts that populist leaders perform the socio-cultural 'low' by demonstrating strong personalistic leadership, performing local cultural customs, and using coarse, politically incorrect language, whereas Benjamin Moffitt (2016) claims that populist performances use 'bad manners'. Both formulations, however, are highly leader-centric, focusing on the performances of prominent populist politicians. Instead, Thomás Zicman de Barros and Théo Aiolfi (2025) argue that populist performance is better thought of as transgressive: it makes previously invisible subjectivities visible. By understanding populist performance in this way, we can better account for populist social movements, which transgress political norms by placing bodies where they should not be (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025). For example, participants in the *Gilets Jaunes* populist social movement occupy roundabouts, or the set up encampments in city squares by the Spanish and Greek *Indignados* and the Occupy movements.

This is where the discursive-performative approach differs from the solely discursive approach. While the discursive approach principally focuses on the form of populism, the ways in which demands are articulated together against the status quo (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017), the discursive-performative approach includes some reference to content. While not ascribing any ideological content to populism, unlike, for example, the ideational approach (Mudde 2004), the discursive-performative approach claims that populism's transgressions – its breaking of the rules of the political game – serve an important role in inciting identification with the populist project (Aiolfi 2025). It is this transgressive component of populism offered by the discursive-performative approach which helps us later identify so-called 'right-wing populism' as a misnomer.

The central feature of populism, within the discursive-performative approach, is the mobilisation of those below against those above, as part of an up vs down antagonism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). This anti-oligarchic core has, further, been centred by those who take a critical-materialist approach to populism (see Vergara 2020a, 2020b; Borriello, Pranchère and Vandamme 2024; Tarragoni 2024), with these scholars offering a much-needed rebuttal to the reified association between populism and the far right. This approach rightly argues that central to populist

movements throughout history has been the politicisation of economic inequality (Vergara 2020a, 2020b) and calls to refound democracy ‘in the most inclusive way possible and imaginable’ (Tarragoni 2024: 54). Populism, then, is understood as a ‘popular reaction to oligarchic tendencies’ rather than ‘the claim that politics should reflect the general will of the people, nor mere anti-elitism, nor anti-pluralism, nor fascination for charismatic leaders’ (Borriello, Pranchère and Vandamme 2024: 431). Indeed, this is the nucleus of populism which we seek to recover in this article, as we argue it lessens conceptual confusion and the detrimental effects that go with it. We suggest that in a context where political elites of the right and (centre) left have done little to tackle the re-emergence of reactionary politics, and have often participated in its mainstreaming (Brown, Mondon and Winter 2023), any anti-elitist pretence from reactionaries and the far right is, in fact, subsumed into a horizontal struggle between elitist positions. As such, an understanding of populism, which brings ‘the people’ back onto the political stage against these elites, can serve as a powerful democratic corrective.

Right-wing populism: An essentialised connection

As we demonstrate below, the conflation of populism and the far right is misguided on two counts. First, we suggest that it plays into the hands of the far right by positing the relationship between populism and core demands of the (far) right, such as nationalism or racism, as ‘popular’ and necessary, rather than contingent. Second, following Brown and Mondon (2021), we argue that referring to the far right as merely ‘populist’ conceals their extreme, anti-democratic and elitist ideology behind the euphemism of ‘populism’, providing such parties with undue democratic legitimacy. Therefore, as outlined earlier, the degree to which so-called ‘right-wing populism’ can be understood as populist at all is unclear, but perhaps more importantly, it is dangerous (Goyvaerts et al. 2024).

In contrast to earlier twentieth-century interventions on populism, which referred to cases of populism on the left and right (Ionescu and Gellner 1969) and to studies focusing on the South American cases, scholarship focusing on Europe, in particular, has moved its focus squarely to the right of the political spectrum (Hunger and Paxton 2022). The terms ‘populist right’, ‘right-wing populism’, ‘radical right populism’ and, later, the ‘populist radical right’ have been used to define the electoral success of what has been elsewhere labelled as a ‘3rd wave’ of far-right parties from the 1980s onwards (Mudde 2019), such as Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party of Austria, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front in France, and Umberto Bossi’s Northern League in Italy. The anti-system/establishment stance of these parties has often been confused for anti-elitism, which led many to grab the concept of populism to describe these new (far-)right formations (Betz 1994; Taguieff 1995). Ironically, this followed attempts by some far-right leaders, such as Le Pen in the early 1990s, to force the use of populism to describe their party, something taken up by various far-right leaders since (Collovald 2004; Brown and Mondon 2021; Casiraghi and Bordignon 2023; Newth 2024).

Although not explicitly focused on the far right, the work of Stuart Hall (1979) on Margaret Thatcher and authoritarian populism stands out as one of the first contributions to signify populism as an explicitly right-wing phenomenon. For Hall (1979), Thatcherism was a project of conservative renewal in the wake of the breakdown of post-war social democracy in the 1970s. It is understood as a form of authoritarian populism, where a populist cleavage is constructed between the aspirational ‘people’ and ‘the imposed structures of an interventionist capitalist state’ (Hall 1979: 17). This formation is authoritarian as it demonises ‘folk devils’ (Hall 1979: 17), such as welfare recipients and trade unions, and utilises this demonisation to justify coercive state control over these internal enemies. Hall (1980) contrasts authoritarian populism with ‘popular democracy’. Both possible outcomes of a crisis context, Hall (1980: 155) understands popular democracy as the process of dividing classes ‘along the line of the exploited and the exploiters’ or the ‘lower classes’ against the ‘upper classes’. ‘Populist democracy’, in contrast, is ‘powerfully inflected towards the right’ (Hall

1980: 159). While both seek to mobilise 'the people' for their political ends, Hall (1980) argues they differ in their authoritarian ideological content, with popular democracy being an emancipatory project and populism being authoritarian. Hall (1980: 161) claims that it is because of populism's authoritarian content that he rechristens 'populism' as 'authoritarian populism.' Obviously, the meaning of words is not set in stone, and nothing inherent suggests that populism as a term cannot be right-wing (as Hall suggests). However, conceptual meaning can only be created and shaped in conversation and considering that Hall's understanding of populism is mostly ignored in research on the far right, but also on populism, we suggest that, while his analysis of the Thatcherite moment is convincing, the choice of terms has become problematic in our current setting.

This connection between populism and the far right only strengthened as the 20th century progressed and the reconstructed European far-right parties resurged. As Collovald (2004) showed, populism re-entered French academia in the mid-1980s through the work of Pierre-André Taguieff, who had himself been influenced by scholarship from the US. From then on, it became increasingly associated with the newly reconstructed parties of the European far right. While, for Taguieff (1995: 12), populism asserts the unity of 'the people' which 'engenders an uninterrupted and excessive suspicion of traitors and detractors', this 'flows into' a nationalism which targets potential traitors on the basis of national identity. Here, Taguieff presents an elective affinity between populism and nationalism, such that they often combine into a singular 'national-populism', yet elsewhere he seems to go one step further and assert their inseparability. Taguieff (1995: 32) claims that populism is constituted by two poles: 'the *protest/social* and the *identity/national pole*'. While the former captures populism's opposition to elites, the latter describes populism's suspicion of national outsiders. Although these poles define the core of national-populism, they are also argued to be 'two dimensions of all political populism' (Taguieff 1995: 32). This reflects a conceptual confusion in Taguieff's work as to whether national-populism is merely a particularly potent form of the nationalism which is latent in all populist formations, or whether nationalism and populism are two distinct phenomena which happen to regularly combine. Crucially, the threat for Taguieff is as much, if not more, 'the people' understood as the *classes populaires*, thought to have fallen for Le Pen's demagoguery as it is the far right itself.

The claim that 'right-wing populism', which centres a nationalist component, is in some ways populism *par excellence* is also evident in Jan Jagers and Walgrave's (2007: 334) argument that a populism which excludes an internal enemy, such as immigrants or the underclass, is the most 'complete populism'. Similarly, despite Paul Taggart's (2000: 115) suggestion in his influential monograph that he 'deliberately tried to avoid portraying populism as good or bad', his assertion that populism centres 'the heartland' as its constituency which 'excludes elements it sees as alien, corrupt or debased' demonstrates the relationship he forges between populism and exclusivist nationalism (Taggart 2000: 3). For Hans-Georg Betz (1994: 4), another early adopter of the term, populism is a cynical tool used by the (far) right to capitalise on 'sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment'. In what became a mainstream approach in the 1990s, we can witness a certain degree of demophobia where people are seen as gullible and easily conned by snake oil salesmen. This demophobia is further exemplified by the classist nature of much analysis on the rise of populism, which focuses on disenfranchised working-class communities, despite research showing early on the more nuanced picture of far-right support (Mayer 2002). For all these contributors, populism is at the very least a common bedfellow with the nationalism (itself a euphemisation of racism) of the far right, if not inseparable from it.

While perhaps unsurprising that such conclusions were developed in a context of increasing influence for far-right parties, this 'reified association' is unsustainable (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. 2017). We argue it is analytically unsatisfying to assert nationalism and populism's inseparability, and politically undesirable to euphemise the far right as merely 'national populist', 'authoritarian-populist', or 'right-wing populist'. As De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) have argued, nationalism and populism are distinct political logics. While the latter affirms the in-out distinction between 'natives' and 'foreigners' as the central division of politics, the latter focuses on

the up-down division between ‘people’ and ‘elites’. As such, while populism and nationalism may sometimes interact, instances of transnational populism, such as by the left-populist political alliance DiEM25 (De Cleen, Moffitt, Panayotu et al. 2020), demonstrate that they are not reducible to one another. Essentialising the connection between populism and the (far) right also risks the political consequence of providing mainstream support for the far right. By euphemising the far right as merely ‘populist’, they are presented as a legitimate democratic alternative in a context where the status quo is increasingly unpopular, not least because of the semantic connection between populism and popularity (Brown and Mondon 2021). Because populism is only a secondary feature, at best, of far-right parties (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. 2017), labelling them as ‘far-right’, instead, accurately portrays their anti-democratic and extremist tendencies without centring populism as a main feature, with the semblance of democratic legitimacy that this label provides. While Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. (2017) and Cas Mudde (2007) advise researchers to decentre populism when studying the far right, many have been reluctant to jettison the concept entirely. We, therefore, go one step further in arguing that populism and far-right ideological content are incompatible.

Can populism even be right-wing?

Increasingly, the discursive-performative approach has identified three of populism’s core tenets. Namely, the central discursive division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (Kim 2021), a construction of a crisis of the system (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis et al. 2018), and a transgressive performance which breaks the rules of the political game (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025). We argue that what is normally referred to as ‘right-wing populism’ cannot really be considered populist at all, as it fails to meet these criteria. In this section, we evidence how each of these criteria is not met by so-called ‘right-wing populism’. First, we demonstrate how the ‘people’ against ‘elite’ division is always secondary to a reactionary horizon in such discourses. Second, we claim that the crisis that so-called ‘right-wing populism’ constructs is a crisis in, rather than a crisis of the system, as it leaves the organising discourse of capitalo-parliamentarism (Badiou 2018), defined below, unscathed. Instead, it extends the principles of racism and exclusion, which liberalism can accommodate, to protect capital. Finally, and relatedly, we claim that what is referred to as ‘right-wing populism’ is not transgressive, as transgression demands the rendering of a novel political subject as visible (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025). In contrast, so-called ‘right-wing populism’ maintains and enhances the privilege of its better-off supporters. As such, the signifier of ‘populism’ offers no conceptual clarity when studying reactionary politics and, instead, muddies the water through the erroneous association it constructs with ‘the people’.

First and foremost, so-called ‘right-wing populism’ fails to satisfy the most basic condition of populist politics, held as a criterion across almost all approaches, that of the central division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (Kim 2021). As such, we hold that ‘the people’ as plebs is the central subject of populist politics (Vergara 2020a), as it is ‘those below’ positioned against ‘those above’ in populism’s up/down antagonism, in contrast to other discourses which construct ‘the people’ against other constitutive outsides (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Populism is a secondary feature, at best, of ‘right-wing populism’ (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. 2017) in that it is subsumed under a nationalist/racist horizon which forms the central division of these formations.¹ While a division between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ is central to the far right, it is not

¹For example, the Five Star Movement in Italy may have appeared populist at first through its seeming bottom-up decision making, but soon crystallised into a more reactionary one once the leadership made a right-wing turn (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). This highlights that the borders are fuzzy and shift, but that populism is lost once the reactionary core becomes primary. This applies to the *Gilets Jaunes* movement as well in the struggle the movement faced between its populist origins and the ethnonationalist turn it faced, which then foreclosed the emancipatory potential of ‘the people’ in its populist sense (Hayat 2024; Ietter 2025).

one that finds its source in the construction of 'the people' as such, but rather in the construction of a 'people' through a transcendental signified (race, the nation, men etc.) as a permanent fixture which holds meaning in place and prevents racialised and marginalised communities from being part of 'the people' (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis et al. 2017). In other words, 'the people' are mainly articulated as *ethnos* rather than as *plebs*. Of course, this is not to say that so-called 'right-wing populism' does not engage in some plebian rhetoric, but that it takes a backseat to other, more exclusionary articulations. This essentialised construction stands in opposition with populism, which constructs its 'people' through the linking together of different demands through a logic of equivalence (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 38), populism 'is traversed and shaped by an egalitarian logic insofar as it privileges a logic of equivalence, ie a logic that articulates different demands that become equivalent with one another without being eliminated' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 38). This latter point is crucial: in a populist logic, demands are equivalently drawn together yet retain their particularity. In contrast, far-right projects suppress the diversity of these demands and 'organizes them through homogeneity' (Biglieri and Cadahia 2021: 38), even if the demands of those who participate in such projects are originally more diverse. As such, the nodal point, the concept which anchors a social identity (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017), of so-called 'right-wing populism' is not 'the people' but a homogenising signifier (eg the nation). This centrality of race and nation as mutually constitutive in far-right politics is hardly controversial and therefore brings into question the need for populism as a key definer if the us/them antagonism is found elsewhere. This is clearly demonstrated in Katsambekis' (2022) analysis of Marine Le Pen's discourse. While on the surface, Le Pen may embody a populist articulation of an equivalential chain of unsatisfied demands against the establishment, what unifies her 'people' is not their unsatisfied demands and opposition to the establishment, as would be the case in a populist formation, but their commitment to their French national (racialised) identity.

This is not to say that the far right does not make appeals to 'the people' as demonstrated in the Le Pen case. In fact, such positioning as the truly democratic alternative to the technocratic status quo has become a cornerstone of the reconstructed far right. They claim to represent 'the people', often cast as the 'left behind' or the 'silent majority', and thus are conveniently easy to speak for. It is why many far-right leaders have happily accepted, and even pushed for, being called populist. While some academics have latched on to such narratives, often betraying their own ideological blind spots or soft spots for far-right or demophobic politics, it has long been clear that such links between the far-right and the 'left behind' are far from obvious (Mayer 2002; Collovald 2004; Dorling 2016; Dobbernack 2024). Indeed, this focus on the far right as the voice of 'the people' ignores the deeply elitist nature of such politics. As is evident in their political programmes and wider discursive universe, far-right leaders do not work to bring those disenfranchised back into the democratic arena but rather make decisions for them and for the benefit of an elite under the pretence of working for some essentialised grouping (race, nation, gender, etc.). Whether it is through the cult of the leader or economic programmes that benefit the wealthy without ever challenging capital, it is naïve, at best, to argue that far-right parties are people-focused. Even their essentialised construction of a people on the basis of race or nation is based on a clear hierarchy of worth that generally extends to class (something that has always been entrenched in white supremacy) (Roediger 1991).

While narratives about the (white) working-class nature of the Trump (and Brexit) vote have been popularised in public discourse (see Vance 2016; Hochschild 2016, 2024), these did not withstand scrutiny and instead have participated in the normalisation of the idea before it was a reality. In short, it is not the poor white voters of Appalachia that won it for Trump in any of his election victories. For example, it is clear that the vote for Donald Trump was predominantly a wealthy vote in 2016, and even more so in 2020 when Joe Biden recovered some of the working-class voters who had flocked to abstention in 2016. Still, even then, Hillary Clinton soundly won the vote of those at the bottom of the income scale (Mondon and Winter 2019; 2020a, 2020b). 2024 marked a reversal as, while Kamala Harris retained a significant lead, albeit much smaller

than her Democrat predecessors in the poorest section of the population by income (50 per cent vs 46 per cent for those under \$30,000), the gap reversed with regard to those in the category above (46 per cent vs 52 per cent for those between \$30,000 and \$49,999). Harris performed better than Trump with voters with an income of \$100,000 or more, the opposite of Clinton and Biden (NBC 2024). Crucially, despite the relatively high turnout in 2024, more than a third of registered voters did not vote (36 per cent). As highlighted by Pew, these are not spread evenly across all demographics and are predominantly found in those that could actually be considered 'left behind' by the electoral system: 'about a quarter of Americans eligible to vote (26 per cent) have no record of voting in any of the last three national elections (2020, 2022, 2024). These Americans are disproportionately young and much less likely to have four-year college degrees than those who vote more frequently' (Hartig et al. 2025: 12). Therefore, the idea of Trump as the candidate of the 'left behind' becomes only partially true in 2024 after almost a decade of this being treated as a fact by his supporters and mainstream opponents and therefore solidified in public discourse: a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Crucially, the role of crisis in far-right politics and in populism points to another key difference. To reiterate, we conceptualise crises as containing objective and subjective components. Objectively, a crisis may emerge in the context of, for example, an economic downturn (Roberts 2003; Vergara 2020a). It only becomes a crisis proper, however, when actors politicise these objective conditions (see Vergara 2020a). In other words, a crisis only occurs when political agents construct it in their discourse as 'a moment in which a decisive intervention *can* (and perhaps *must*) be made' (Hay 1996: 254; see also Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis et al. 2018). Where populism constructs a *crisis of* the system, far-right politics constructs a *crisis in*. As aforementioned, Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis et al. (2018) formulate populism as constructing a crisis of the system, which demands radical political change to be redressed, as opposed to anti-populist responses which blame 'populism' itself for the crisis and pose an elite-led reformist solution. Farkas and Schou (2024: 87) define crisis, minimally, as an indication that 'that the current state of affairs – that is, the specific way in which the world has been formed up until a certain point – cannot go on. The crisis upsets and, in a sense, dislocates the *status quo*.' It is this concept of dislocation that can help us locate the distinction between crisis *in* and crisis *of*. For Laclau (1990), crises dislocate pre-existing identities of a given order, whereby entrenched social practices are revealed as contingent, or reactivated, and the possibility of new identities emerges. We contend this is how we can understand the performance of a crisis *of* the system: pre-existing identities are brought into contestation and systemically-and historically-constructed hierarchies threatened. In contrast, a crisis *in* relies upon sedimented pre-existing identities and attempts to pre-empt their contestation and, as such, is a struggle between elites rather than a crisis which threatens them as *the* elite. As we shall see, so-called 'right-wing populism' does not aim to subvert the system, but rather to reinstate the limited amount of privilege lost by the recent, nascent challenges to white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2015), something which does not threaten the status quo in and of itself, as its elite also benefits from these structures. Populism, on the other hand, can be seen as what subverts and transgresses these elitist struggles and seeks to bring into being a new political subject.

Here, we suggest that Alain Badiou's (2018: 129) concept of 'capitalo-parliamentarism' is useful in delineating the identities to which so-called 'right-wing populism' is loyal.² Badiou (2018: 124) claims in our current conjuncture, particularly in the Global North,

²We prefer the term capitalo-parliamentarism to neoliberalism here, as although neoliberalism has more recently come under sustained challenge from the left, and increasingly the centre-left, capitalo-parliamentarism remains relatively unscathed with no parties seriously contesting the principles of representative parliamentary democracy or the primacy of capital over labour.

We find ourselves, and this is important, in a moment of avowal. That the substantial content of every “democracy” is the existence of gigantic and suspect fortunes, that the maxim “Get rich!” is the alpha and omega of the epoch, that the brutal materiality of profits is the absolute condition of every respectable membership in society - in brief, that ownership is the essence of “civilization.”

In capitulo-parliamentarism, politics is understood as the activity of professional politicians, who are always constrained by the market (Badiou 2018). This discourse also becomes the organising principle of militarised borders, whereby the capitulo-parliamentary world ‘must be protected from the barbarians (repentant Albanians as well as “fanatical Muslims”)’ (Badiou 2018: 131). Insofar as we can understand capitulo-parliamentarism as hegemonic in much of the Global North, very few nominally populist discourses construct a crisis of this system, which would demand root-and-branch political change. In fact, many supposedly ‘populist’ parties on the right are its most ardent supporters. As Ietter (2023: 16) argues,

... in the construction of crisis lies the possibility of unveiling and challenging the relations of oppression and exploitation upon which the social order is based (through populism), but also that of keeping these invisible by co-opting and absorbing individual demands before they can be framed through a logic of equivalence (institutionalism), and, most importantly here, of rearticulating and re-legitimising such relations to ensure the continuation of established institutions (anti-populism).

For Ietter (2023), therefore, ‘right-wing populism’ cannot be considered populist as it leaves relations of oppression and exploitation unchallenged. Any crisis that nominally ‘populist’ right-wing formations construct will necessarily be a crisis in the system rather than a crisis of the system. This is because the proposed reforms of these formations, such as further border militarisation or the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ people, are commensurate with the capitulo-parliamentarist status quo, as exemplified by the willingness of the elite opposed by the far right to implement similar policies and discourse (Katsambekis 2023). Rather than constructing a crisis of this order, ‘right-wing populism’ extends the relations of domination already latent within the hegemony or shifts the balance towards harsher politics which said hegemony can accommodate and absorb, as it has in the past (Losurdo 2014). Furthermore, in doing so, they reaffirm the hegemonic identities of national citizens and market participants, while creating the illusion of a democratic opposition. If one is to claim that a construction of a crisis of the system is a constitutive feature of populism, as we do, nominally ‘right-wing populism’ fails to meet this condition.

We can see this most clearly in the case of US President Donald Trump, whose repeated calls to ‘drain the swamp’ of Washington DC, gained him the populist moniker. Yet this antagonism between the American people and swamp-dwelling elites operated as a crisis-in rather than a crisis-of as his administration pursued an agenda of tax cuts for the wealthy and further border militarisation. It is decidedly not a crisis since it reinforces existing hierarchies of wealth and power. This could not be clearer than in the first year of Trump’s second presidential stint, when this article was written, which has seen the rise of reactionary tech oligarchy to ensure that power remains in the hands of an ever-smaller elite tied to capital. As such, the submission of the political sphere to the demands of the market and the extreme border policing upon which capitulo-parliamentarism relies is bolstered, rather than restrained. In fact, the branding of Trump as the legitimate voice of ‘the white working class’ by liberal elites in 2016 only played into his hands. It allowed him to masquerade as a man of the people and present himself as a real alternative to the status quo, which was not the case, as demonstrated by Joe Biden’s talks of reconciliation and rather timid stand against resurgent fascism during his term. This has also been apparent through Trump’s performance of a crisis-in through the establishment of the Department of Government

Efficiency (DOGE), under the control of Elon Musk. For Musk and Trump, the crisis of the so-called ‘administrative state’ is really a crisis *in*, which can be resolved through extensive budget cuts and deregulation. It is not done for ‘the people’ expressly, but to free the oligarchy from the shackles of democratic institutions and safeguards. This does not mean that Trump was not addressing ‘the people’ in his campaign, or, indeed, in his justification of DOGE’s cuts, but he was doing so through a discourse structured by a reactionary horizon.

Further, populism is increasingly characterised in the literature as a transgressive form of politics (Laclau 2005; Peetz 2020; Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021; Aiolfi 2025). In some way or another, populism breaks the rules of the political game. Following Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi (2025), who themselves draw on the work of Rancière (2004), we understand transgression aesthetically as the process of making visible previously invisible subjects and revealing routinised forms of domination. Transgression is thus the emergence of a novel political subject, a part with no part, which disrupts the prevailing distribution of the sensible that rules over whose demands are (not) counted within a given police order (Rancière 2004). Though Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi (2025) claim that reactionary populism, in the end, only reinforces these forms of domination, they nevertheless affirm that it transgresses by making visible otherwise invisible subjectivities. It is not clear, however, how the electoral base of so-called ‘right-wing populism’ can be considered to have otherwise been invisible. Again, this is most apparent in the oft-cited cases of the Trump presidency and Brexit. Although regularly presented as a revolt of the marginalised ‘white working class’ or the ‘left behind’ (Dobbernack 2024), in fact, in the case of the ‘white working class’, such a constituency is barely coherent beyond its discursive construction as one must confront ‘the fact that the working class is not white and that the social-economic inequality and political disenfranchisement they experience is also experienced, often to a greater degree, by Black and Minority Ethnic working class people’ (Mondon and Winter, 2019: 516). Furthermore, the reactionary politics of so-called ‘right-wing populism’ should be understood as an extension of the racism latent in liberalism, rather than a transgressive break (Losurdo 2014). By Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi’s (2025) standards, therefore, so-called ‘right-wing populism’ fails to transgress. It is an indication of liberalism’s ability to accommodate, and even facilitate, reactionary politics supported by relatively privileged, and certainly visible, subjects. Subjects that, we could argue, are in fact constructed in a top-down manner to split the working class and its common interests, and protect those of the elite (Roediger 1991). Badiou’s work is once again instructive here. Even though he may not be considered by most to be a ‘right-wing populist’, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy promised a ‘rupture’ which would ‘overcome the moral crisis of France’ in his 2007 Presidential election campaign. Yet, as Badiou (2008: 79) argues, this was not ruptural since it was committed to ‘unconditional obedience to the potentates of world capitalism’ and instantiated ‘a politics of uninterrupted bowing and scraping that presents itself as a politics of national regeneration.’ Astutely captured by Badiou’s analysis is that claims to transgression and rupture made by the (far) right play on familiar themes of a national rebirth that do nothing to break from the capitulo-parliamentarist hegemony, its racist bordering practices, and its rule by elites who are, ultimately, cowed by market forces.

While this prior visibility of ‘right-wing populism’s’ base in the Global North is evident, others have pointed to the support that far-right figures, such as former presidents Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, have garnered from the precariously employed (Lero 2023). Even when supported by precarious workers, however, so-called ‘right-wing populism’ does not seek the equality of the invisibilised, but the integration of this part into the order of inequality. Often left out of trade unions and collective bargaining agreements, these precarious workers arguably constitute an invisible constituency that Duterte and Bolsonaro have brought to the fore. Yet, such workers have been integrated on account of their adherence to neoliberal logics, rather than their exclusion from them (Nunes 2024). In the Brazilian case, Bolsonaro castigated the unemployed for taking handouts, while encouraging entrepreneurship (Lero 2023). Bolsonarism sought to expand neoliberalism’s hegemonic subjectivity of *homo oeconomicus*,

whereby individuals' status as a consumer and producer is foregrounded (Brown 2015), rather than advocating for precarious workers as a constituency in need of economic and social rights. This was built on older reactionary strategies aimed at splitting the working class between those deserving and undeserving (Roediger 1991).

To reiterate, so-called 'right-wing populism' fails to meet three key conditions which characterise populist politics. First, it does not construct a central antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite'. 'The people' that it evokes are not mobilised *qua plebs* or *demos*, but are rather constructed in an essentialised manner as 'the white working class' or 'the left behind' in service of a nationalist/racist project. On 'the elite' side, so-called 'right-wing populism' is always tied to elite rule, evoking fears of the 'woke mob' to justify the need for authoritarian control. Second, rather than constructing a crisis of the capitulo-parliamentarist hegemony, 'right-wing populism' is constructed as a crisis in, whereby the exclusions latent within liberal democracy are extended, rather than ruptured from. Finally, rather than transgressing by making visible previously invisible subjects, 'right-wing populism' seeks to extend the privilege of already visible constituencies. In the next section, then, we argue that we must give up on the term 'populism' when analysing reactionary politics as it is not only conceptually inaccurate for these politics, but counterproductive.

Cancelling 'populism' in far-right studies

Overall, we suggest that 'right-wing populism' brings no conceptual clarity when a plethora of more meaningful terms can be used to describe the project of building a reactionary 'people'. This could be through the use of heuristic concepts such as far/radical/extreme right or reactionary politics, or more precise ones such as (xeno-)racism, white supremacy/patriarchy, etc. The sole aim of this construction of a 'people' is to conceal the defence of privilege and elitism imbuing it, instead, with democratic legitimacy, concealing its minoritarian, supremacist and exclusionary nature (Mondon and Winter 2020a). This formation may use various discursive tools. Nationalist discourses, for example, are deployed to secure the relative privilege of citizens against migrants, documented or undocumented (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). These nationalist discourses are often racialised through nativism, which draws upon racist tropes to construct a superior national character in contrast to those constructed as inferior non-natives (Newth 2023), even when this nationalism is cast in nominally civic terms (Tinsley 2022).³ Beyond the nation, reactionaries also deploy civilisational forms of racism whereby the so-called 'Judeo-Christian' civilisation is used to justify the exclusion of apparently illiberal Muslims (Mondon and Winter 2020a). This extends to other forms of exclusion and othering, where the construction of 'the people' serves to divide them and weaken demands that would benefit all. For example, it can co-opt liberal discourses of LGBTQ+ rights to push and mainstream Islamophobia (Puar 2007; Farris 2012). Such a commitment to LGBTQ+ rights is far from sincere, however, as belonging to 'the people' is always precarious and subject to the whims of reactionary elites and their interests. This is evidenced by the opposition to so-called 'gender ideology' by reactionaries who construct trans people and their allies as a threat to women and children (Butler 2024; Lambie 2024; Duffy 2025), without any of these communities having a say in the matter.

Using the term '(right-wing) populism' to describe reactionary people-building, then, is analytically unhelpful and politically counterproductive. The reactionary 'people' is not given a voice, and there is no genuine attempt to construct a coalition of equivalent demands, as populism is understood in the discursive school (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Instead, reactionary actors aim to mobilise a fantasised and homogenised version of 'the people', be it as the 'white working

³We realise that describing white supremacy in settler colonies such as the USA, Australia, or Canada as nativist may give credence to the false claim that descendants of colonisers are native to the land stolen from indigenous communities. Nevertheless, the term captures the way in which reactionary politics claims this native status to exclude racialised non-natives, even if this claim is built upon a falsehood.

class', the 'moral majority', or 'the left behind', to defend privilege and push reactionary, elite interests and ultimately support capital: 'the people' never *really* exists through its demands and agency, but only in its construction by reactionaries based on their own elitist interests and demands. Here, we go beyond Corey Robin's (2018: 40) formulation of conservative/reactionary politics as a way 'to make privilege popular'. Instead, we suggest that reactionary politics do not seek to make privilege popular at all. To do so would be to respond to existing demands or seek to mobilise 'the people'. Instead, the symbolically powerful referent of 'the people' lends legitimacy to an ultimately elitist project. The aim then is primarily to present privilege as popular, not necessarily to make it so. In contrast to Robin (2018: 50), who describes 'the task of right-wing populism' as being 'to harness the energy of the mass in order to reinforce or restore the power of the elites', we suggest this mobilisation does not need to take place. So-called 'right-wing populism', does not need to mobilise such a people, even if it may encourage some of its most fervent supporters to engage in anti-democratic street violence (Nunes 2024), it must primarily convince other elites that they do and that responding to these fantasised popular demands is the only way forward for 'democracy': we may not like it, but that is what the people want. In turn, this sets the agenda and reinforces the limited choice between the bad and the worse (Finlayson 2024), both of which are in the service of the current hegemony.

What is 'right-wing populism' the name of?

Ultimately, our article raises the question of why, when other concepts are available, 'right-wing populism' has become so hegemonic within academia when describing reactionary political trends. We contend that the popularity of the term 'right-wing populism' is explicable through what Rancière (2007) called a 'hatred of democracy' on the part of opinion-formers. Central to hatred of democracy, Rancière (2007: 7) explains, is a mistrust of 'the people' whom elites believe lack 'the discipline and sacrifices required for the common good'. In other words, although democracy is dependent upon popular sovereignty, as a legitimising force, 'the people' must be politically marginalised and tamed to guarantee 'responsible' government. In the context of the rise of reactionary, far-right politics, it is 'the people' who are blamed, such that the term 'right-wing populism' becomes an appropriate descriptor. This, of course, ignores the mainstreaming of the far right by nominally 'liberal' elites (Brown 2024). In actuality, it is far from obvious that the agenda of reactionaries is 'what the people want', particularly when one accounts for abstention in elections where the far right have been brought (close) to power. This is not to say that this hatred of democracy on the part of symbolic elites is fully conscious. As Charles Mills (1997) explains, a great deal of European and American political commentary, in particular, has been characterised by an epistemology of ignorance, whereby symbolic elites appear conveniently unable to understand the very world which they have made, for this would destroy the fantasy on which their unfair privilege and power rest. What 'right-wing populism' is the name of, therefore, is the hatred of democracy by symbolic elites, trapped in an epistemology of ignorance, who blame 'the people' for the contemporary reactionary turn, instead of being reflexive about their own role in mainstreaming the reactionary politics.

This blaming of 'the people' is emblematic of a period where elites have marginalised popular involvement in political life, yet continue to speculate on the 'will of the people' without involving 'the people' in politics to any great extent. As Péter Csigó (2016: 4) argues:

Politicians, experts, and observers commonly speculate on how to win the "popularity contest" of politics, how to win the hearts and minds of their popular media-using constituencies. However, this speculative process has detached itself from the real trends of public opinion formation [...] Collective delusion, that is, the rise of a speculative "bubble" that systematically misinforms its participants about the "popular" realm they incessantly

speculate upon, is a key structural feature of today's mediatized democracy, with a binding force and long-reaching consequences for our daily lives as citizens.

Constructing and blaming a reactionary 'people', therefore, is in keeping with this speculative paradigm. Liberal democracies have been hollowed out after 'the end of history' with the power of the people being replaced by a fantasy based on the power of the individual consumer and politics being limited to voting every few years for increasingly indistinct alternatives or the 'lesser evil' (Finlayson 2024). Despite the ultimate wish to govern without the people (Rancière 2007), the mainstream and reactionary elites cannot yet do away with at least a nod to democratic legitimacy. Here, the construction of a people aligned with hegemonic, classist, and racialised imaginaries of the lower orders is essential to support the idea that the power grab is not by and for the elite, but by the elite and for the people. With alternative forms of 'people building', be it through trade unions or mass parties being few and far between in contemporary democratic life (Mair 2013), the reactionary 'people' constructed through the concept of 'right-wing populism' is the one which elites respond to in their mainstreaming of far-right demands.

By way of contrast, we then propose to reclaim populism as an emancipatory and, specifically, intersectional political form. Radical intersectionality requires acknowledgement and inclusion of demands that stem from the ways in which class, gender, race, disability, and other forms of oppression combine to create unique injustices (Crenshaw 1991). A populism which affirms the heterogeneity of 'the people', therefore, lends itself to an intersectional approach, when compared to other forms of class-essentialist left politics (García Agustín 2020). In other words, by treating 'the people' as a subjectivity which can include all the marginalised and account for the ways in which their identities are uniquely targeted, populism has the ability to challenge these forms of domination by harnessing the knowledge and experiences of 'the people' rather than, for example, the (white) working class. In this sense, populism's critique of the status quo has the potential to account for these injustices and challenge them because of how 'the people', as a signifier, can not only cut across gender, race, and class lines, but across borders as well (De Cleen, Moffitt, Panayotu et al. 2020).

Francisco Panizza (2005: 24) lays out the potential of an intersectional populism well by claiming that:

If the feminist movement shifted the public-private divide by claiming that the personal is political, populism erases it by making the political personal and incorporating into public life issues that were left outside the political realm by the hegemonic discourse.

What Panizza highlights here is the potential for populism to bring demands into public consciousness that were previously excluded. This goes to the heart of the intersectional critique, which claims that injustices which occur at the points of overlap between different marginalised identities are often ignored (Crenshaw 1991). Populism, then, can give voice to Rancière's (1999) 'part with no part', the subjectivity excluded from the social goods which the hegemony produces, to contest their mistreatment.

Ultimately, at a time when political alternatives appear limited to technocracy, which demands the careful management of society by the knowledgeable elite, and oligarchy, which demands handing over control to the wealthy, both of which share similar interests, populism offers a potential way forward out of this anti-democratic doom loop. Understanding populism, away from its counterintuitive and counterproductive 'right-wing' construction, and instead as a radically emancipatory, intersectional bottom-up form of politics, can serve not only as a crucial concept to study politics but also as a potentially vital corrective element towards a rejuvenated democratic future.

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