

The Creation of the “People” in Laclau’s Theory of Populism: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract: Defining populism as a political articulation, rather than a specific ideology, Laclau has been one of the first scholars to show why the form and content of this phenomenon are strictly related. According to him, stylistic features such as vague, polarising and strong emotive discourse are not merely epiphenomenal elements of populism, which prove the irrationality of its ideology. They are constitutive elements of populism as they are necessary to create and maintain the division of society into two antagonistic blocs. Laclau’s theory of populism, however, has also been criticised for implicitly endorsing an authoritarian view of power. In this paper I argue that to better identify the source of the democratic deficit in such theory, we need to explore the combination of form and content it endorses. In order to do this I analyse Laclau’s account of the articulatory practices of populism, focusing on their rhetorical character in particular. My argument is that this account is democratically problematic, since being based on a merely formal understanding of rhetoric, inevitably reduces the rhetorical dimension of these practices to an instrumental and thus potentially manipulative logic. This logic presupposes and promotes a homogenised, passive, and unreflective idea of the “people”.

Keywords: Laclau, populism, rhetoric, leadership, deliberation

1. Introduction

Many scholars have noticed the ambiguous intimacy that exists between populism and political representation in democratic regimes. At its most superficial level, the relationship appears clearly as a conflicted one. The assertion that the people are not truly represented by traditional parties, and

the promise to ensure more direct expression of their will is indeed a basic feat of populist movements. At the same time, however, populism thrives on the tension between substantive and formal dimensions of representative democracy. In this regard, one can argue that populism is inherent to representative democracy, to the extent that it is the inevitable effect of the paradoxical nature of a regime that claims to receive its legitimacy from the demos, but confers to the demos only a highly mediated access to rule. It is because of this conflicted, but at the same time intimate relationship between populism and representative democracy that the former has been labelled variously as the “shadow”, “mirror”, “internal periphery”, or even as the “parasite” of the latter.¹

However, there is a further dimension to the relationship between populism and political representation. Populist movements cannot deny that even under populist forms the people cannot act politically without being represented in some way or another. Thus, populism itself cannot be but a form of political representation. As I will show later on, this conclusion has been clearly corroborated also by Ernesto Laclau, who indeed is regarded not only as a leading theorist of populism, but also as an important theorist of representation. Lisa Disch, one of the exponents of the so-called current “constructivist turn” in representation theory, has identified Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) radical democratic pluralism as a primary inspiration for this influential new paradigm.²

A significant difference however can be observed between Laclau’s view of representation on the one hand and that of theorists of the constructivist turn on the other. In the latter case, what we see is that the question of the conditions and possibilities that the representative relationship creates for

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- 1 See respectively Canovan, M., *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. Political Studies*, 47, 1999, No. 1, pp. 2–16; Panizza, F., Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy. In: Panizza, F. (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London, Verso 2005, pp. 1–31; Arditì, B., Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics. In: *ibid.*, pp. 72–98; Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2014.
 - 2 Disch, L., The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End? *Constellations*, 22, 2015, p. 490; Laclau, E. – Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London, Verso, 1985. The “constructivist turn” in political representation is a relatively new theoretical approach in the literature on this regime. It sees representation as a constitutive relationship that does not merely mirror some pre-existing political identities, but rather essentially contributes to bringing them into life. See e.g. Ankersmit, F. R., *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press 1996; Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006; Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*. New York, Oxford University Press 2010; Disch, L., Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation. *American Political Science Review*, 105, 2011, No. 1, pp. 100–114; and Disch, L., The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?, *op. cit.*

the exercise of judgment among the parts (the represented and the representatives) is emerging, even if not always explicitly, as a key element to assess the democratic nature of such a relationship. In this case, the importance of judgment appears as an inevitable consequence of the constructivist approach’s emphasis on the role representation plays in creating political identities. In describing political representation as a constitutive and dynamic relationship that creates, rather than merely mirroring, political identities, these theories reveal that the democratic character of the representative relationship depends, beyond its institutional and legal framework, on the instauration of an ongoing and circular flux of communication, judgment, and influence among the parts.³

Despite its evident constructivism, the same kind of emphasis on judgment is almost completely absent in Laclau’s theory of populism. The fact that Laclau’s constructive process has a much broader application, as it concerns the creation of a political subject as wide-ranging as the concept of a singular unified “people”, renders this absence even more problematic. In this sense, Laclau’s theory shows a serious democratic deficit. It is a theory that suffers from excessive voluntarism and decisionism, as it concentrates all agency in the master signifier that assumes the lead in the process of constructing the “people”. The “democratic demands” to be represented, on the other hand, remain in a passive position, as mere receivers of a hegemonic articulation that seems to be completely external to them.

Another question that Laclau’s theory of populism leaves unexplored is the kind of rationality employed by the master signifier in the construction of the “people”. Such inattention, as I will demonstrate, is equally problematic from a democratic point of view. This is because it makes Laclau’s theory incapable of avoiding the reduction of the representative logic to a merely instrumental, and thus potentially manipulative, one. In this sense, one can argue that it is the very logic of representation, which is implicit in Laclau’s theory of populism that reveals an anti-democratic character.

Laclau’s contribution to the understanding of populism is his demonstration of the ways in which populism’s ideological content and stylistic form are interdependent. By questioning the priority given to content-based theories of populism, he has advanced an explanation of populism as a political logic of articulation, particularly relevant in junctures of structural crisis, which divides society into two antagonistic blocks. For Laclau, the form in which populism claims to represent the “people” is ontologically constitu-

3 See e.g. Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*, op. cit.; Disch, L., *Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation*, op. cit.; Disch, L., *The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?*, op. cit.

tive, since its style – characterized as vague, radical, strongly emotive and figurative – is fundamental for fostering the division of society into two blocs.⁴ Critics of populism often censure this form of politics for the threat it poses to the basic institutions of liberal democracy and the pluralism they intend to protect. Likewise, the critiques of Laclau’s theory of populism are often cast in these terms.⁵ According to some of his critics, it is the same logic of populism – which Laclau has contributed to explaining and formalizing – that is democratically problematic, to the extent that it presupposes and promotes an idealized conception of the “people” created through the opposition to a constitutive Other, which can easily lead to a totalitarian suppression of pluralism.⁶

Laclau’s critics certainly bring to the fore a serious drawback of his theory. Nevertheless, it is possible to reply to this kind of critique: if Laclau’s theory of populism is characterized by a clear decisionism, at the same time it is also a theory based on poststructuralist principles, which view the social realm as characterized by an ultimate undecidability and contingency. Indeed, according to Laclau, populist movements’ occupation of power is always temporary, partial, and unstable. This is because his fundamental premise is the recognition of an irreducible heterogeneity and a constitutive failure of representation.⁷ Therefore, the key elements to consider when assessing whether Laclau’s theory of populism suffers from a democratic deficit are the very mechanisms of articulation, which according to him create the populist subject.

4 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso 2005.

5 See e.g. Ochoa Espejo, P., Power to Whom? The People between Procedure and Populism. In: Torre, C. de la (ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspective*. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky 2015, pp. 59–90; Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, op. cit.; Diehl, P., Populist Twist: The Relationship between the Leader and the People in Populism. In: Castiglione, D. - Pollak, J. (eds.), *Giving Presence: The New Politics of Democratic Representation*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2017 (forthcoming).

6 See Stavrakakis, Y., Re-Activating the Democratic Revolution: the Politics of Transformation beyond Reoccupation and Conformism. *Parallax*, 9, 2003, No. 2, pp. 56–71; Žižek, S., Against the Populist Temptation. *Critical Inquiry*, 32, 2006, No. 3, pp. 551–574; Arato, A., Political Theology and Populism. In: Torre, C. de la (ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 31–58; cf. Müller, J-W., *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2016.

7 In this sense, it is inaccurate to argue – as Urbinati has done – that the partiality of power’s occupation by populist movements in Laclau’s theory is more “a limit that the human practice of consent formation cannot avoid or overcome than a normative principle”. On the contrary, it is a consequence of its theoretical assumptions. (Urbinati, N., *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, op. cit., p. 132). As Laclau and Mouffe write in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: “The ... dimension of structural undecidability is the very condition of hegemony.” Laclau, E. – Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, op. cit., p. 12.

Now, an important way in which Laclau characterizes the articulatory practices of populist projects (and of every political project in general) is that of being rhetorical. Rhetoric in effect has increasingly become a central theme for Laclau⁸, in what can be read as a continuation of his early interest in language, as well as of the influence Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony as an alternative to Marxist economic determinism had on him.⁹ Not only the articulatory practices of populism, but the same ontological structure of society is described by Laclau as rhetorical. Constituted as a system of differences, society’s ontological structure is something that permanently defies full representability – a final and definitive literality – and thus it always calls for a rhetorical process of re-signification through displacement of meaning.¹⁰ This process of displacement occurs through the different logics provided by the different rhetorical *tropoi*. For Laclau, this process is vital for forming political subjectivities out of irreducible social heterogeneity.¹¹

My argument in this paper is that it is precisely by focusing on the rhetorical character of the populist subject’s practices of articulation that we can better grasp the anti-democratic dimension of Laclau’s project. As mentioned before, a significant merit of Laclau’s work is the deconstruction of the distinction between the ideological content of populism and its stylistic, discursive, and performative form, by showing that the latter is not an extrinsic but a constitutive element of the former. In Laclau’s words: “the distinction between a movement and its ideology is not only hopeless, but also irrelevant – what matters is the determination of the discursive sequences through which a social force or movement carries out its overall political performance.”¹² But if we apply this (correct) insight to the same populist model Laclau proposes, by analysing its articulatory practices as constitutive of political contents, then we will see that these practices presuppose and promote a homogenized, passive, and unreflective idea of the “people” to the extent that they don’t include any sort of deliberative engagement. As I will argue, this results essentially from the fact that Laclau’s

8 Laclau, E., *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London, Verso 2014; see also Kaplan, M., *The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes*. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 43, 2010, No. 3, pp. 253–283; Gaonkar, D., *The Primacy of the Political and the Trope of the People in Laclau on Populist Reason*. *Cultural Studies*, 26, 2012, No. 2–3, pp. 185–206; Finlayson, A., *Rhetoric and the Political Theory of Ideologies*. *Political Studies*, 60, 2012, No. 4, pp. 751–767.

9 Laclau, E. – Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, op. cit.

10 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., p. 71.

11 For Laclau, “far from being mere rhetoric, rhetoric would actually be the anatomy of the ideological world”. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

understanding of rhetoric remains at a merely formal level: as a tropological characterization of the articulatory practices involved in populist projects. This way Laclau misses the perspective of the Aristotelian-Ciceronian tradition of rhetoric altogether. That perspective understands rhetoric as a form of practical reasoning based on the union between *ethos-pathos-logos* and involves both the speaker and the audience in a process of common deliberation. The neglect of this understanding of rhetoric corroborates the impression that Laclau's conception of representation remains at a too high level of abstraction and responds only to the systemic logic of populism, leaving no space for a moment of reflexivity through deliberation.

Before moving to the analysis of the rhetorical dimension of Laclau's populist theory, however, it is necessary to explore the constructivism of his understanding of representation. This is because it is precisely this aspect that renders the absence of judgment and reflexivity particularly relevant in such a theory. The next section, thus, proposes a comparison between Laclau's theory of populism and a few recent constructivist theories of representation, with the aim of demonstrating how judgment and reflexivity become central in the latter case, while they seem to play no role in the former.

2. Laclau's theory of populism and the "constructivist turn" in political representation

In the last few years, we have witnessed an interesting wave of new theories on representative democracy which have put forward two main ideas that question what has been referred to as the "standard account" of representation.¹³ First, these theorists have argued that political representation is not antithetical to participation, but rather something that elicits democratic participation as it creates a permanent flow of interaction – in the form of judging, influencing, deliberating – among the represented and representatives. Second, they have proposed a "constructivist" interpretation of political representation, stressing that the creation of political identities does not occur prior to representation, but rather that it is a product of the same process of representation.¹⁴ These two arguments, as I will show, are interre-

13 Urbinati, N. – Warren, M. E., The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11, 2008, No. 1, p. 389.

14 See e.g. Ankersmit, F. R., *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value*, op. cit.; Plotke, D., Representation is Democracy. *Constellations*, 4, 1997, No. 1, pp. 19–34.; Mansbridge, J., Rethinking Representation. *The American Political Science Review*, 97, 2003, No. 4, pp. 515–528; Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*, op. cit.; Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*, op. cit.; Disch, L., *Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democrat-*

lated: the question of representation’s democratic potential indeed becomes even more significant once we reveal its constructivist dimension.

The importance of the constructivist dimension in Laclau’s idea of representation and generally of political action is already clear in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and becomes absolutely patent in *On Populist Reason*.¹⁵ In the former book, Laclau and Mouffe present a critique of the way in which Marxist thought has traditionally understood political subjectivities: as fixed entities whose identities are pre-determined by an economic logic and whose political actions (and in particular their articulation in hegemonic blocs) have no effect on these identities, because they respond to a logic external to the political domain. For Laclau and Mouffe, this view is based on a rudimentary understanding of political subjectification: it presupposes the erroneous ideas that political representation can be completely transparent and that the interests and beliefs of the social subject are independently determined prior to the subject’s engagement in political action.

Contrary to this view, Laclau and Mouffe argue that because of the overdetermination and non-objective character of the social field, political identities cannot but depend on the particular and contingent discursive articulation through which they are represented and mobilized in the public arena. The link between the discursive articulation and the formation of a political identity becomes especially strong in the instauration of a new hegemony, to the extent that this process implies the reduction of a plurality of dispersed and evanescent social identities to unity (even if unstable and temporary). In this sense, representation is central to the constructivist process, to the extent that the unification of plurality through ideological realignment operates for Laclau and Mouffe more on a symbolic dimension rather than on a “material” economic basis.¹⁶

The same constructivist logic becomes even more central in *On Populist Reason*, as in this work it involves the creation of a subject as broad as the “people”. Here, the constructivism of representation reaches its apex in the moment when the different democratic demands are brought together in a new populist subject. Such process requires not only the creation of a chain of equivalences and an agonistic frontier, but also the identifica-

ic Representation, op. cit.; Disch, L., The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?, op. cit.

15 However, as Moffitt correctly points out, a constructivism dimension in Laclau’s view of representation can be detected in his earlier works as well. See Laclau, E., *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London, NLB 1977; and Laclau, E., *Populist Rupture and Discourse*. *Screen Education*, 34, 1980, pp. 87–93; Moffitt, B., *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, Stanford University Press 2016, p. 24.

16 Laclau, E. – Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, op. cit.

tion of a particular element of this chain as the symbol of such unity: the embodiment of a new (particular) universality, whose meaning will in turn determine the political identities of each of all its finite elements.¹⁷ At this moment, Laclau argues, the equivalential chain – which is only ancillary to the democratic demands at first – starts reacting “over them and, through an inversion of the relationship, start behaving as their ground.” It is this inversion that crystallizes the subject’s new identity and therefore modifies the particular identities of the elements included in this new subject.¹⁸

However, constructivist understandings of political representation highlight an important conundrum. They bring to the fore a tension between the democratic expectation that representatives should be responsive to their constituents’ interests and values, on the one hand, and the recognition that such interests and values are formed also through the same process of representation, on the other.¹⁹ This problem is evident in Laclau’s theory of populism as well. And Laclau is perfectly aware of it. As I have said, he explicitly describes political representation as radically constructivist. As he writes: “the main difficulty with classical theories of political representation is that most of them conceived the will of the ‘people’ as something that was constituted before representation.” On the contrary, “the empty signifier is something more than the image of a pre-given totality: it is what *constitutes* that totality”. But if political representation is inherently constructivist, Laclau stresses, then in order to maintain its democratic character, the empty signifier that represents the chains’ different elements “must actually represent them; it cannot become entirely autonomous from them.” A constructivist understanding of political representation then clearly makes patent the problem of “how to respect the will of those represented.”²⁰

In my view, Laclau’s response to this question is unsatisfactory and suffers from a problem of circularity. Indeed his response consists essentially in reiterating that it is the same logic of democracy – if we understand it, as Lefort has suggested, as an emptiness that needs to be continuously filled²¹ – that entails the creation of the democratic subject of the “people” through

17 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., p. 111.

18 Ibid. p. 93; cf. Laclau, E., Populism: What’s in a Name? In: Panizza, F. (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, op. cit., p. 33.

19 Disch, L., The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?, op. cit.

20 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., p. 162–164. As we will see later this problem is accentuated by the fact that in Laclau’s theory, as it generally happens in all forms of populism, the process of representation and construction of the “people” assumes a strongly vertical form, to the extent that the empty signifier is clearly associated with the figure of a leader. I will return to this question in the next section.

21 Lefort, C., *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge, Polity Press 1988.

a process of hegemonic configuration. A different path could have been taken, I think, had Laclau underscored the moments of judgment and creation of consensus through deliberation the representative relation calls for, in the way Nadia Urbinati and other theorists of representation have done.

The centrality of judgment and deliberation for political representation has started to appear as a central topic at least since Hannah Pitkin’s seminal theory of representation advanced in her book, *The Concept of Representation*.²² On the one hand, Pitkin rendered the concept of “responsiveness” central for assessing the democratic nature of representation; but on the other, she defended the idea that representing is a “substantive” activity – an “acting for” – which requires a considerable autonomy for the representative. In this way, as Lisa Dish has argued, Pitkin came to question “the intuition, definitive for late twentieth-century liberalism, that citizen preferences are and ought to be the ‘principal force in a representative system.’”²³ Thus, Pitkin’s theory makes two distinctive and potentially conflictive aspects of representation central to its definition. The result is that beyond its institutional arrangements, representation comes to depend on the interaction among two kinds of judgment. First, that of the representatives who have a free mandate to interpret and give form to the interests, opinions, and beliefs of the represented. Second, that of the represented who have to assess the representatives’ activity, taking into consideration also the “judgmental” nature of such activity (and thus the fact that it requires a significant level of autonomy).

If the question of judgment was only implicitly evoked by Pitkin; it has become much more explicit in some more recent theories of representation. These theories have broadened the scope of representation much beyond the institutional framework of representative democracy (parliamentary elections, primarily) and the simple juridical relation of principal-agent.²⁴ As a consequence of the more complex view of representation it defends, the constructivist turn has rendered the moment of judgment in representation even more evident. It forces us to see political identities as invoked or summoned, political meaning as dependent on context, and representa-

22 Pitkin, H., *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley. Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, University of California Press 1972.

23 Dish, L., Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, 2012, No. 3, p. 599.

24 See Plotke, D., Representation is Democracy, op. cit.; Mansbridge, J., Rethinking Representation. op. cit.; Rehfeld, A., Towards a General Theory of Representation. *Journal of Politics*, 68, 2006, pp. 1–21; Rehfeld, A., Representation Rethought: On Trustees, Delegates, and Gyroscopes in the Study of Political Representation and Democracy. *American Political Science Review*, 103, 2009, No. 2, pp. 214–230; Urbinati, N. – Warren, M. E., The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory, op. cit.

tion as an activity that constantly permeates the entire political domain.²⁵ By doing so, this approach has made clear how an authentically democratic representative relationship requires the creation of a continuous and circular flux of communication, judgment, and influence between the parts within and outside its institutional framework. Therefore, to inquire into the quality and conditions of such a moment of reflexivity appears as the only possible solution to the normative challenge that the constructivist turn has raised by expanding the scope of representation so much and, in particular, by evacuating the most familiar basis for assessing its democratic legitimacy: the interests and beliefs of the electors.²⁶

Among the theorists of the constructivist turn, the one who has come closest to embrace this conclusion is Nadia Urbinati. In defending the idea of representation as a form of advocacy – the creation of an “ideological sympathy” – she is the theorist who has stressed more the role of judgment in representation (and in particular, the judgement of the represented). Urbinati argues that the democratic potential of such a form of politics dwells precisely in making judgment, rather than will, the central political faculty. The constructivist dimension of Urbinati’s theory of representation can be identified in her idea of representation as an indirect form of politics, which aims to transform social demands into political subjects through the creation of ideological narratives around which they coalesce. It is such a process of transformation, from the social to the political, which according to Urbinati calls for an exercise of reflective judgment – as she defines it: an *as if* kind of thinking based on imagination, that is, thinking *as if* the common good would really exist and *as if* we would be in someone else’s place.²⁷

We can locate references to the significance of judgment in the works of other theorists of the constructivist turn, even if more implicitly. Lisa Disch, for instance, has argued that we should stop worrying about the capacity of the elites to manipulate citizen preference formation, and instead try to develop arrangements that promote what she calls a “systemic” reflexivity: an exercise of reflexivity disseminated through a plurality of interlocked sites and beyond the dyadic relation of representative-represented.²⁸

In addition, in the case of Michael Saward – who has proposed the most radically constructivist and the least explicitly normative theory of repre-

25 Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*, op. cit., pp. 43–44.

26 Disch, L., The “Constructivist Turn” in *Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?*, op. cit., p. 488.

27 The adjective “reflective” used by Urbinati in relation to judgment refers to Kant’s known distinction between “reflective” and “determinant” judgments. Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy*, op. cit., p. 121.

28 Disch, L., *Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation*, op. cit.

sentation – we can find analytical instruments with which to critically inspect the conditions that enable the citizens’ judgment. The fact that in Saward’s theory, as in Weber’s, the legitimacy of representative claims ultimately depends only on their “perception” as “legitimate” “by appropriate constituencies under reasonable conditions of judgment” clearly demonstrates the non-normative orientation of his theory.²⁹ The rich set of theoretical classifications and categories he develops for the analysis of representative claims do not provide normative standards of legitimacy. This is because what counts for Saward are “the judgments of appropriate constituencies, not independent theoretical judgment that matter to democrats.”³⁰ Nevertheless, these classifications and categories do provide important heuristic instruments to understand how “representative claims” are formed – the rhetorical resources on which they are based, their symbolic and affective dimension, their strategic use, etc. – and thus to explore the forms and conditions of such judgments of legitimacy.

For Laclau, the constructivist dimension of representation is what makes representation democratic. He understands representation as a process of articulation that allows ascribing a common ideological vision and a common enemy to different social forces, thus bringing them together in the form of a political subject with a common purpose. This is particularly clear in the case of populism, since what is at stake is the creation of the “people” through the mobilization of the masses against the elites.³¹ For Laclau, populist representation is radically democratic precisely because it makes possible the passage from the social to the political and from the particular to the general. In his words:

The function of the representative is not only to transmit the will of those he represents, but to give credibility to that will in a milieu different from the one in which it was originally constituted. That will is always the will of a sectorial group, and the representative has to show that it is compatible with the interests of the community as a whole.³²

The difference between his position and those of the constructivist theorists cited earlier, however, is that in Laclau’s account there seems to be no room for the exercise of judgment and deliberation that is needed to guarantee that the process of articulation entailed by representation remains democratic. In my opinion, this is what constitutes the main democratic

29 Saward, M., *The Representative Claim*, op. cit., pp. 144–145.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

31 Laclau, E., *Emancipations*. New York, Verso 1996, pp. 84–103; Laclau, E. – Mouffe, C., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 118–140; Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., ch. 6; cf. Disch, L., *The “Constructivist Turn” in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?*, op. cit.

32 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., p. 158.

deficit in his theory. A deficit which is aggravated by the fact that such reflexivity is made, at the same time, more urgent by the extension that the constructivist operation reaches in his theory (the construction of a hegemonic subject identified with the “people”) and more difficult precisely by this very extension.

3. What is wrong with Laclau’s idea of rhetoric?

In order to better grasp the absence of judgment as common deliberation in Laclau’s theory of populism, we need to focus on the process through which “democratic demands” are brought together in a populist subject. I will focus on two operations that play a particularly significant role in this process: first, the moment of identification with a leader, which Laclau sees as decisive in constituting the “people”; second, the tropological articulation that brings to the constitution of the equivalential chain. As I will demonstrate in this section, both operations can be examined using rhetorical categories. Through this analysis, it will become clear that both operations systematically exclude any significant role for a common deliberation among the parts involved in the construction of the “people”.

The first element, identification with the leader, is particularly important for Laclau. Drawing on Freud’s mass psychology he argues that without identification there can be no identity, and thus no constitution of a new political subject. Identification is the result of what Laclau defines as a “radical investment” (this time drawing on Lacan): a process that brings about the ontological transformation of a particular finite element of the equivalential chain into the master signifier – the leader of the movement – and of the democratic demands into elements of a new political subject. This particular element is chosen as the symbol of the entire equivalential chain and as such assumes the role of its leader. Assuming the main role in the articulation process, the leader is what makes possible the new political subject’s emergence into existence. However, if we examine the process of identification closely, we will see that it has two aspects that make it democratically problematic: a stark asymmetry among the leader and the led and a neat separation between the affective and the deliberative moments.

To defend his view about the role of identification and the leader in *On Populist Reason*, Laclau engages directly with Hannah Pitkin, who takes a different position on this question. In *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin strongly rejects symbolic representation arguing that identification operates only on an irrational level and therefore makes possible the manipulation of the popular will, as exemplified by Fascism. Opposing this argument, Laclau underlines instead how identification is central to representation

since only by way of identification with a leader can social identities overcome their political indefiniteness and come together in a new political subject. Laclau however does not disregard Pitkin’s concern for manipulation. As he argues, the representative cannot be completely external to the represented. The representative must provide reasons to explain and justify her activity to the latter. But the moment of identification – which for Laclau happens essentially on an affective, extra-rational level – is ontologically prior to reason providing.³³ The key point here is that in Laclau’s theory between the affective investment in the leader and the rational process of asking for reasons about her decisions, there is a constitutive and hierarchical hiatus. It is precisely such a hiatus, I think, that can create the possibility of a manipulative use of emotions and can open the path to anti-democratic conceptions of representation.

Laclau’s radically constructivist theory of representation concentrates all agency in the creation of the new political identity on the side of the representative (and in particular of the leader), relegating the represented to a mere passive position.³⁴ As we have seen, the decisive moment in such a process, is reached when the representative relationship changes its direction, starting to operate from the representative to the represented rather than from the represented to the representatives. It is at this moment that, according to Laclau, a new identity arises. Thus, despite Laclau’s proviso that the leader should be considered a *primus inter pares*, his theory remains vulnerable to the serious objection that it does not rule out the possibility that the relation leader-people could assume a starkly vertical and potentially manipulative form. Indeed, to argue that the moment of extra-rational identification is prior to a secondary moment of reasons providing opens the possibility that the reasons provided are not substantive ones, but rather merely instrumental arguments given to justify *a posteriori* an unreflective attachment to the leader. In this sense, it is difficult to see how populist leaders can be chosen according to a method other than plebiscitary acclamation. Similarly, Laclau’s insistence on the idea that the leadership is the embodiment of a fullness always incomplete,³⁵ which can always be re-signified by those who identify with it, is not enough to ensure its democratic nature. This possibility is not transformed in a common deliberative process, but remains at the level of a cacophonous play of individual re-significations.

33 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., pp. 111, 161–162.

34 See *ibid.*, pp. 161–162, cf. 93.

35 Laclau, E., *Glimpsing the Future*. In: Critchley, S. – Marchart, O. (eds.), *Laclau: A Critical Reader*. London, Routledge 2004, p. 287; Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., pp. 115–116.

If Pitkin, as Laclau correctly argues, in her *tout court* condemnation of symbolic representation is unable to draw the necessary distinction between manipulation of popular will and the constitution of this will through symbolic identification; then Laclau arrives at a complementary impasse: giving an unwarranted priority to a symbolic representation whose meaning is reduced to extra-rational identification, he provides no instruments to differentiate between them.

I think we can find a separation between the extra-rational and the rational also in the second process that Laclau sees as central to the construction of the “people”: the creation of the equivalential chain through mechanisms of associations that work according to the logics of rhetorical *tropoi*. Here the rhetorical dimension of the process is clearer and the dissociation between the extra-rational and the rational assumes the aspect of an implicit dissociation between form and content. But the effect of such dissociation is similar to that which occurs in the process of identifying with the leader. Indeed in this case as well such dissociation implies a situation in which merely instrumental and thus manipulative considerations can prevail over more substantive ones, thereby placing the process’s democratic nature at risk.

As I have mentioned earlier, Laclau has increasingly employed the category of rhetoric to describe the ways in which the social world is constructed. However, his understanding of rhetoric has remained at a purely formal level: as a theory of language based on the centrality of *tropoi* and then applied for understanding society. More specifically, when Laclau talks about the rhetorical construction of society he is referring to the “contingent, discursive, and fundamentally tropological process that brings objective reality into existence by imposing on an array of heterogeneous elements the semblance of a structure within which they acquire identity/meaning.”³⁶ Among the different rhetorical *tropoi*, for Laclau *catathesis* acquires a decisive, almost constitutive, role. This is because its mechanism of employing words, or phrases, in ways that drastically depart from conventional usage exemplifies how social meaning is created through a continual distortion of (an ultimately impossible) literal meaning.³⁷ Once the collapse of the distinction between the literal and the figurative is assumed, Laclau demonstrates that the articulation of social meaning can be explained only according to the logics of the rhetorical *tropoi*. Mechanisms of association such as those provided by metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches and so on, allow for the creation of links between the different elements of society and articulate

36 Kaplan, M., *The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes*, op. cit., p. 258.

37 Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., pp. 12, 71.

a new political identity. Among them, also the synecdoche is very important for Laclau, as it represents the mechanism through which a part (the leader) is taken as standing for a whole that exceeds it. Metaphors and metonymies, two other key *tropoi*, operate instead at the horizontal level providing the mechanisms of association – analogy for metaphors and contagion for metonymy – through which different elements combine in a new subject that aspires to become hegemonic.³⁸

However, reducing rhetoric to its tropological and stylistic dimension – a reduction that corresponds to Laclau’s highly formalistic conception of society – is highly problematic. This is because it means (once again) to be unable to provide any instruments to avoid reducing this rhetorical rationality to a form of manipulation moved exclusively by an external aim: the creation of a populist subject and the conquest of power. What Laclau is missing is an entirely different idea of rhetorical rationality as a form of practical reason; an understanding that constitutes the most prominent strand in the tradition of this art, which goes from Aristotle, Cicero, up to Perelman, Gadamer, and some contemporary theorists as Eugene Garver or Bryan Garsten.³⁹ It is a conception of rhetoric that conceives it as an art of arguing and deliberating in the realm of contingency using verisimilar arguments and a combination of rational, emotional, and ethical ones (*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*). It is precisely the union of these three elements, *logos-pathos-ethos*, that avoids the transformation of this art into an instrument of manipulation according to this understanding of rhetoric. This is because it turns emotions and ethical displays into a constitutive part of a situated and contextual way of reasoning.⁴⁰

I cannot expand on this tradition of rhetoric here. But some brief remarks can be made to exemplify how it can contribute to avoid reducing rhetoric to a mere formalistic rationality and thus to a potentially manipulative instrument. For instance, according to this tradition, a good political leader must also be a good orator. A process of identification is considered indispensable for persuasion to the extent that, as Aristotle argues, persuasion requires

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 72; Laclau, E., *Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor*. In: Laclau, E., *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, op. cit., pp. 53–78.

39 Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. New York–Oxford, Oxford University Press 1991; Cicero, M. T., *De Oratore*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 1942; Perelman, C. M. – Olbrechts-Tyteca, L., *Traité de l’argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*. Bruxelles, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles 1988; Gadamer, H.-G., *Truth and Method*. London–New York, Continuum 1993; Garver, E., *Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character*. Chicago–London, University of Chicago Press, 1994; Garsten, B., *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press 2006.

40 See e.g., Garsten, B., *The Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory*. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 14, 2011, p. 169; Garver, E., *Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character*, op. cit.

not only a solid argument, but also a proper emotive involvement and a positive assessment of the speaker's personal attributes. The dialectic between distinction and similarity in the relation between the leader and the people is central to this tradition of rhetoric, as it is in Laclau's theory of populism. The political leader is expected to appear close to the people, as long as she is expected to understand their background, beliefs and interests. But at the same time she is also expected to embody in a distinctive manner virtues and qualities considered important by the community. It is also because of these virtues and qualities, which the people recognize in their political leader, that they accept her arguments and follow the course of action she indicates. However, the crucial point is that those personal qualities and virtues – whose power of persuasion operates at an extra-rational level as well: the creation of trust – have to be, according to Aristotle, part of the very deliberative process through which persuasion is attained. They have to become, so to speak, principles in action: principles that manifest themselves through and in the practice of deliberating in common.⁴¹

As for the question of the employment of *tropoi*, Laclau's theory does not clarify questions such as how can these *tropoi* be used, what are their limits, why are some accepted and others rejected, and so on. In the ancient tradition of rhetoric, the employment of rhetorical figures is part and parcel of a more general practical rationality that the orator should be able to develop. Quintilian, for instance, extols the capacity of metaphors to translate the meaning of a term from its original context to a new one, thereby providing a meaning for everything; or the possibility through the technique of re-description (*paradiastole*) to present reality under different perspectives by highlighting or obscuring one specific aspect or another.⁴² However, this stylistic mastery must be understood in the context of a more general practical rationality developed through education and practice, which combines the rational and the extra-rational, the capacity to understand the context and to reason in terms that are more abstract. In particular, it requires a capacity that in ancient rhetoric was referred to as *decorum*: a principle of behavior that determines the more appropriate words to the context, the subject matter, and the audience, combining political, ethical, and aesthetic considerations.

One might object to the above by claiming that the philosophical roots of Laclau's version of rhetoric (that is, Discourse Theory) lie far away from this ancient tradition. They can be found in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, the phenomenology of Heidegger, the structuralism of Saus-

41 Ibid.

42 See Skinner, Q., *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996, ch. 5.

sure and the post-structuralism of Barthes, Derrida, and Lacan. However, the basic premise that Laclau derives from these thinkers – that our access to reality is inevitably mediated by discourse – does not imply that his theory is completely incompatible with the insights of that ancient tradition. To say it quite bluntly: for Laclau, not everything can be created through language. Hence, rationality cannot be reduced to its formal dimension. In other words, Laclau does not deny the existence and significance of something we could call the “real” in opposition to the “symbolic”. What he affirms is that our access to it is always discursively mediated. This implies, crucially, that a more substantive form of rationality – i.e. a form of rationality that operates while engaging both with the “real” and the “symbolic” – is at the same time possible and desirable.

For example, in responding to the objection that his theory lacks the resources to take a normative position, Laclau argues that there is a distance between the “unachievable fullness” we try to signify and “what actually exists” and that this distance is “the source of the ethical experience.”⁴³ Then he adds:

the ethical subject ... is never an unencumbered moral subject; it fully participates in normative order not all of which is put into question at the same time. That is the reason why moral argument can frequently take the form of showing the consequences that would necessarily derive from some actions and, in this way, appeal to shared values which are presented as grounds for preferring some course of action rather than others.⁴⁴

The kind of reasoning at work when we must “show the consequences...” or “appeal to shared values...” is precisely the kind of practical reasoning of which Aristotelian rhetoric is an essential part. Or, to take a thinker closer to Laclau, it is the kind of reasoning described by Richard Rorty, which is centered on the hermeneutic capacity to understand the context and, through rhetoric (or as Rorty says the “art of redescription”), to put in dialogue different or even incommensurable vocabularies.⁴⁵ In this regard,

43 Laclau is responding here to a criticism made by Simon Crithcley. See Crithcley, S., *Is There a Normative Deficit in the Theory of Hegemony?* In: Crithcley, S. – Marchart, O. (eds.) *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, op. cit., pp. 113–122.

44 Laclau, E., *Glimpsing the Future*, op. cit., p. 287.

45 The philosophy of Richard Rorty offers a very interesting example of the possibility (and the limits as well) of combining the ancient conception of rhetoric as a form of practical reason with contemporary post-modern, or post-structuralist positions. See: Ballacci, G., *Richard Rorty’s Unfulfilled Humanism and the Public/Private Divide*. *Review of Politics*, 79, 2017, No. 3, pp. 427–450.

I think we can say that if Laclau's perspective is incompatible with the idealization of dialogue and consent of contemporary rationalist theory of deliberation,⁴⁶ it is not incompatible with conceptions of rhetoric that understand the process of persuasion as always incomplete, biased, and unstable, but nevertheless necessary.

4. Conclusion: Laclau's democratic deficit

What the constructivist turn in political representation has clearly shown us is that once the constitutive nature of the representative relationship is fully recognized, it becomes crucial from a democratic perspective to ensure that this construction is conducted through a process as deliberative as possible. The fact that this deliberative process is recognized as always incomplete, biased, and unstable is not a sufficient reason to forsake it.

Laclau's theory of populism is a very important contribution primarily because, explaining populism as a logic of articulation, it helps us understand the intrinsic connection that populism constitutes between its form and its content. Nevertheless, it is a theory that is very problematic from a normative point of view to the extent that it completely disregards the role of deliberation and judgment in the construction of the "people". Such disregard, as I have argued, it is caused also by a reductive understanding of rhetoric. This is a serious drawback especially from Laclau's own perspective, since he theorizes populism as a way to radicalize democracy.

What Laclau is unable to do, in my view, is to move from an idea of radical democracy as a celebration of difference to a project of collective action based on the democratic practice of deliberation. Difference is celebrated through the insight that the reducible opacity of representation and the impossibility of a literal language open the space for an ongoing play of re-significations. However, to the extent that Laclau completely neglects the question of deliberation, it is difficult to see how the ongoing play of re-significations can move from a cacophony to a common political project, if not through a starkly decisionist gesture.⁴⁷ It is for this reason indeed that the act of "naming" performed by the leader becomes so preponderant in the articulation of the new populist subject according to Laclau's theory. This occurs in a way that recalls quite closely Hobbes's solution to attribute an absolute authority to the Leviathan to decide the meaning of words once and for all, in order to avoid that a plurality of interpretations could put at

46 Mouffe, C., *The Democratic Paradox*. London, Verso Books 2000.

47 Gaonkar, D., *The Primacy of the Political and the Trope of the People in Laclau on Populist Reason*, op. cit.

risk the stability of political authority. After all we do not have to forget that, as I have mentioned before, Laclau’s theory of populism is also and crucially a theory about how to seize power. In this respect I think the key point is to realize that, if as Laclau argues the conquest of power is essentially a discursive undertaking, then there is a difference between understanding rhetoric as a means to obtain our ends and as the medium in which these ends are constituted by way of deliberation.⁴⁸ Without this insight, rhetorical rationality cannot but become a cunning deployment of linguistic techniques used strategically with the aim of conquering power.

48 See e.g., Beiner, R., *Political Judgment*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1993, pp. 94–95.