

POPULISM AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: AN INTEGRATIVE TWO-LAYERED MODEL FOR ANALYSIS

*Populismo y Democracia Liberal: Un Modelo
Integrador de Dos Niveles para el Análisis*

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I put-forward an original two-layered model for the study of populism that distinguishes between two different meanings of this term: *symbolical* populism and *institutional* populism. Symbolical populism points to a symbolical matrix that some political actors use in order to create and mobilize political majorities. Instead, institutional populism includes a concrete plan to transform the political order in the direction of a hybrid regime, whether an illiberal democracy, a competitive authoritarianism, or a legal autocracy. While these two kinds of populism are related, they do not necessarily come together as some populist actors remain at a purely symbolical level. This model contributes to the debate by allowing for a more precise understanding of the relation between populism and liberal democracy, and by bridging some of the most influential academic accounts of populism.

Keywords: thin theories of populism, thick theories of populism, populist symbolical matrix, populist institutional plan, liberal public culture.

RESUMEN

En este artículo propongo un modelo original de dos niveles para analizar el populismo que distingue dos sentidos distintos del término: el populismo simbólico y el populismo institucional. El populismo simbólico designa una matriz simbólica que algunos actores políticos usan para crear y movilizar mayorías políticas. En cambio, el populismo institucional es un plan para transformar el orden político en la dirección de una democracia iliberal, un autoritarismo competitivo o una autocracia legal. Aunque ambos tipos de populismo están relacionados, no necesariamente se presentan juntos ya que algunos actores populistas se mantienen en un nivel puramente simbólico. Este modelo contribuye al debate permitiendo una comprensión más precisa de la relación entre el populismo y la democracia liberal y tendiendo un puente entre algunas de las concepciones académicas más influyentes del populismo.

Palabras clave: teorías delgadas del populismo, teorías densas del populismo, matriz simbólica populista, plan institucional populista, cultura pública liberal.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Most scholars of populism emphasize that populism is a vague and highly contested concept. They not only disagree about the nature of populism but also about its impact on liberal democracy. Some think that populists seek to impose an authoritarian order, whether an illiberal democracy, a competitive authoritarianism, or a legal autocracy. Contrariwise, others suggest that populism is not necessarily illiberal and that, when it is moderate, left-oriented, or works as an opposition movement, it may even revitalize liberal institutions.¹ In this paper I argue that both groups of authors are correct in part and that their disagreements become more treatable when we discriminate between two related but distinct kinds of “populism:” populism as a symbolical matrix and populism as a plan to transform political institutions –or “symbolical” and “institutional” populism. This distinction will result in an *integrative* two-layered model that will help us make more careful assessments of the risks that populism poses to liberal democracy and bridge some very influential accounts of populism that are often seen as mutually exclusive rivals.

Three prefatory remarks are relevant before I get started. First, in this paper I will only focus on neo-populism, understood as a contemporary phenomenon that emerged after World War II, mainly in Latin America, and that grows in a world in which liberal democracy has become the dominant political paradigm. This means that I will leave aside previous populist movements, such as the popular republican tradition, the Russian *Narodniki*, or the US agrarian populist movement. Second, this piece does not intend to produce a novel or a full-blown account of populism that replaces or debunks prior ones. Rather my aim is to introduce a more flexible model that combines preexistent accounts in a cogent way. And third, even though the ideas of populism as a symbolical matrix and populism as an institutional plan in principle refer to ways in which we use the term populism in ordinary and academic debate, I think that ultimately characterize distinct populist actors and populist experiences.

The essay is structured as follows: in Section II, I review some of the most influential academic conceptions of populism, I group them into two families, and I discuss their merits and limitations. In Section III, I outline my two-layered model by developing the notions of symbolical and institutional populism and analyzing their main contrasts. In Section IV, I make some important clarifications about how these notions relate to one another and explain why the distinction I propose differs from other potentially similar frameworks. And finally, in Section V, I show the practical value of my model by discussing the distinct risks that symbolical and institutional populism entail for the liberal order. To carry out this analysis I will assume that liberal democracy involves

¹ For the first approach, see for instance Abts and Rummens (2007), Levitsky and Loxton (2012), Albertazzi and Mueller (2013), Müller (2016), Arato and Cohen (2017), Pappas (2019), Urbinati (2019). For the second approach, see for instance Canovan (1999), Arditì (2003), Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), Gerim (2018), Bugaric (2019), Mansbridge and Macedo (2019), Tushnet (2019).

both an institutional apparatus and particular public culture that rests on fundamental principle of liberal respect that requires that citizens treat each other as partners in a joint political venture. I will conclude that while institutional populism seeks to progressively Erode liberal institutions, symbolical populism only threatens the liberal ethos and in particular scenarios it may even facilitate liberal reforms of social structures. In this way, this paper adds to the work of a growing number of scholars who reject a black-and-white reading of populism and liberal democracy, while still maintaining a clear-cutting point between the two.

II. POPULISM IN POLITICAL THEORY: THIN AND THICK ACCOUNTS

For analytical purposes, the political theorists that study populism may be divided into two main families.² A first group of authors proposes what I will call *thin* accounts. These views characterize populism as a kind of discourse, a political style, or an ideational map.³ In spite of their variations, all these views treat populism as an ideological shell that lacks a substantive agenda of its own and borrows its policy contents from traditional ideologies.⁴ Perhaps for this reason, thin authors often reject the strict binary between populism and liberal democracy. For them, populism is not *necessarily* a threat for liberal democracy; it all depends on the ideology that populists parasite. Of course, these authors recognize that the populist polarizing rhetoric may dramatically reduce the space for negotiation, democratic dialogue, and mutual toleration. Yet, on the other hand, they insist that populism may enhance the inclusion of marginalized groups, increase accountability, and render politics more sensitive to the interests of ordinary people. As a result, these scholars conclude that populism may end up functioning as “corrective” for the oligarchic deviations that are common in modern democracies, in particular when it is “inclusive” or left-oriented, or when it works from the opposition (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 508-509; Mansbridge and Macedo 2019: 62, 73; Moffit 2020: 133-151).

The obvious virtue of thin accounts is that they offer a lowest-common denominator that explains what all populist actors have in common beyond their diverse doctrinarian profiles. This makes these views particularly fruitful for

² This taxonomy does not include all theories of populism, just those I consider the most influential ones.

³ For discursive accounts, see Laclau (2005), for stylistic accounts, see Moffit and Tormey (2004), and for ideational accounts, see Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013). Another example of a thin account is the view of populism as a political strategy to mobilize a mass of unstructured followers through a direct, non-institutionalized connection with a charismatic leader. See Weylan (2001; 2017) and Betz (2002).

⁴ In the words of Mark Tushnet (2019: 382), “populism is a mode of political activity, without specific substantive content. That content is provided by something else: Typically either some version of nationalistic neoliberalism or some version of a similarly nationalistic socialism.” Along the same lines, Mansbridge and Macedo (2019: 61) say: “We do not call populism and ideology, even a ‘thin-centered ideology,’ because there is no common populist program or set of principles.”

comparative empirical research. But thin accounts are vulnerable to two important objections. The first objection points out that rhetorical confrontation, mistrust of those in power, and the contraposition between the “honest many” and the “corrupt few” is part and parcel of democratic life.⁵ In fact, especially when they are in campaign, political candidates tend to depict their contenders as malicious, self-centered, or out of touch elites. This is true even of liberal leaders that resist populist governments as they often present their rulers as a perverse oligarchy that oppresses the citizenry, steals its resources, and rules for its own benefit. Juan Guaidó and María Corina Machado in Venezuela may illustrate this conduct. Consequently, thin accounts may end up being un-specific or over-inclusive, thus blurring the distinction between populism and regular electoral politics.

The second objection is perhaps more relevant for my argument. This objection claims that thin accounts are unable to illuminate the most paradigmatic populist experiences. To see why, consider populist governments such as those of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, or Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey.⁶ All of them harassed their political opponents, closed critical media, and compromised the functioning of control agencies. In the name of an oppressed people, they infringed the division of powers and curtailed civic freedoms. So, to conceptualize these populists just by reference to a kind discourse, a political style, or a peculiar mental map seems extremely superficial. It neglects the risks that populism entails for the liberal order and therefore fails to account for one of the most salient and problematic features of the populist phenomenon.

The above considerations may explain why other authors have developed thicker and much more pessimistic conceptions of populism. For them, as soon as we examine what populists do when they are in power, it becomes evident that populism is a substantive “project of government” that “subverts the pillars of modern democracy” in order to impose a new kind of political regime. More specifically, a regime that pushes “constitutional democracy so far that it opens the door to authoritarianism or even dictatorship,” and that runs the risk of arriving at “solutions that are dangerously close to being fascist” (Urbinati 2019: 20, 14). For these authors, populism is not only illiberal; it is also anti-democratic as it conditions the exercise of political rights, blocks the formation of new majorities, and aspires to turn the government *by* the majority into the government of *one* majority.⁷

⁵ According to Urbinati (2019: 29), these discursive practices come from the Roman republican tradition and became an essential component of modern electoral democracy.

⁶ I focus on these cases in particular both because they are unanimously considered as paradigms of populist leadership and because of their diversity in geographical, ideological, and temporal terms.

⁷ De la Torre (2019: 56-57) summarizes the core of thick accounts by describing populism as “a discourse and a strategy that aims to rupture institutional systems.” For other thick accounts see Müller (2016), Finchelstein (2019), Pappas (2019), and Urbinati (2019).

Thick conceptions are obviously better equipped to describe the most extreme populist experiences. Nevertheless, they face an important drawback too: they cannot explain more familiar instances of populism, such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Lula Da Silva in Brazil, Podemos in Spain, Boris Johnson in the UK, or Syriza in Greece.⁸ In spite of their divisive rhetoric, their harsh criticism of the establishment, and their occasional hostility towards the media and the opposition, there is no evidence that these populists were in the business of bringing about an institutional relaunch. In the words of Benjamin Moffit (2020: 107-108):

While there is ample evidence of cases in which populism has veered towards authoritarianism, this is by no means a universal phenomenon, nor is populism's "slide" into authoritarianism guaranteed when populists gain high office... It is ludicrous to claim that the likes of Tsipras have "made the transition from populism to dictatorship..." Similarly, on the populist right no one would seriously call the governments of the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland or Berlusconi's various prime-ministerships in Italy great victories for liberal democracy; nevertheless, it is rather over the top to argue that these countries have found themselves under "autocratic rule."

I take all this to mean that while thin theories of populism may result superficial, naively optimistic, and theoretically unspecific, thick theories have the opposite problem: they seem too restrictive and exaggeratedly pessimistic. If populism *necessarily* involved a plan to transform liberal institutions in an authoritarian direction, then we would have to radically purge the list of actors that most experts label as "populists." This could be an option, of course; sometimes, our theoretical notions or are just misleading. Yet, before carrying out such a radical revision of our conceptual and linguistic practices, we should try an alternative view that succeeds at justifying them.

III. AN INTEGRATIVE TWO-LAYERED MODEL

As we saw in the preceding section, thin and thick accounts only explain *some* aspects of the populist phenomenon. Is it possible to articulate a superior view that preserves their virtues while at the same time avoiding their main limitations? I think it is. To do so, we need a more flexible model that consistently combines elements of both conceptions. As I anticipated, the model I propose is two-layered as it discriminates between two related though mutually irreducible kinds of populist manifestations that relate to liberal democracy in different ways: symbolical populism and institutional populism. I will develop these notions in turns.

⁸ All these politicians are generally classified as populists in the literature. Moreover, they were not just populists in the opposition but ruled their countries.

Populism as a symbolical matrix

In this first sense, populism points to a symbolical matrix that some political actors use in a more or less systematic way or as their main power capability. This matrix may involve a particular mental map but mainly manifests itself in public speech. Concretely, a political actor—whether an officer, a candidate, or a movement—counts as a symbolical populist when their political interventions are structured around three core claims: the *partition claim*, the *injustice claim*, and the *exclusivity claim*.

The partition claim posits that society is split into two bands with opposite needs, interests, and values: the people and an antipeople.⁹ The tenet that modern societies include different groups with diverse preferences and priorities is integral to democratic politics, of course. However, this is not what populists say. To the contrary, populists divide society into two monolithic camps that lack internal diversity and speak with one voice, and present the conflict between them as impossible to overcome through consensus, dialogue, or negotiation. Furthermore, in populist discourse, these poles are meant to exist independently of the political process, not as a product of elections. They have always been out there, and populists have just have just discovered, named, and activated them.¹⁰

In turn, the injustice claim maintains that the social partition is not just a natural product of pluralism and diversity. It is marked, instead, by an egregious injustice that populists denounce, condemn, and promise to redress: the antipeople oppress the people and usurp their sovereignty. As a result, the populist partition is not only political but *moral* in the deepest possible sense. The people are an innocent victim—a perpetually neglected “underdog” in the words of Ernesto Laclau. Contrariwise, the antipeople are an evil exploiter, not just co-citizens with different priorities or viewpoints. The exact content that the populist injustice takes depends on the particular narrative each populist movement constructs; yet that injustice is generally presented as the key that illuminates the entire life of the political community, thus connecting past, present, and future.

Finally, the exclusivity claim asserts that *only* the interests of the people merit representation and that *only* populists can fully represent them. This is because, from the populist perspective, the main interest of the antipeople is to preserve their privilege and continue oppressing the people, so their concerns are just illegitimate and should be expelled from the democratic arena. For this reason the populist partition ultimately involves a *pars pro toto* operation, where a

⁹ I prefer the term “antipeople” rather than “elite” because some populists target powerless minorities, such as immigrants, religious minorities, or the poor. I would not classify such groups as “elites” in any possible objective or descriptive sense.

¹⁰ Yet, as Laclau (2005: 48) explains, in reality the populist people “is never a primary datum but a construct” in that “populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity [but] actually *constitutes* the latter.”

subgroup of the population takes the place of the whole and is authorized to rule in its exclusive benefit (Müller 2016: 21-25). Moreover, in this epic battle between victims and victimizers, populists typically regard traditional parties as mere custodians of an exploitative status-quo. Consequently, when they lose an election, they often denounce electoral fraud or claim that the people have been deceived by their internal and external enemies, as in the cases of Donald Trump in the U.S. and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Needless to say, this Manichean partition of society is not unique to populism. Other radical ideologies hold a similar view. What makes populism distinct is that the populist people and antipeople are open-ended notions. They do not refer to sociological categories or social classes, and they have no theoretical or doctrinarian anchor. The populist people can be the working class, the poor, or the socially excluded, but it can also be the middle class, the taxpayers, the “honest hard-working people,” or an ethnic, national, or religious group. Similarly, the antipeople may refer to economic, social or cultural elites, the “lazy,” or a religious, ethnic, or cultural minority. In this respect, the exact content of the people/antipeople distinction is context-sensitive or “chameleonic” (Taggart 2020: 4). Each populist movement creates and recreates its own people and antipeople with the material that the structure, history, and tradition of their society offers. This is why the populist narrative may include religious, nationalistic, ethnic, class, anti-imperialistic, and even libertarian traits, creating an impressive array of populist subtypes that cut across the left and right divide (Urbinati 2019: 17).

The three claims we have just examined clearly separate populists from conventional democratic actors. When non-populist politicians speak of oppression or marginalization, they do not necessarily imply that society is *structurally* split into two monolithic bands whose interests are impossible to reconcile. Instead, they accept that the political community is composed of a plurality of groups with diverse interests and priorities, and they simply insist that the concerns of some are under-represented or unfairly treated. Likewise, even if their speech becomes critical of the elites, non-populists do not necessarily imply that the whole of their political adversaries are morally perverse; they just mean that some of them are insensitive, self-interested, or hold a misleading ideology (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019: 62). And when they claim to be the ones who *best* represent the interests of ordinary citizens, non-populists do not assume that they are the *only ones* who can represent them. They rather treat representation as a contingent relation that must be validated through institutional processes. So, when they lose an election, they accept that other candidates were more successful in interpreting, articulating, and channeling the interests of the majority at that particular point in time and wait for the next election.¹¹

¹¹ Many authors think that populism requires the presence of a personalistic leader. Contrariwise, others treat this feature as important but not essential. In fact, some populist movements, such as Peronism in Argentina, have achieved a significant degree of institutionalization. This is why I prefer to remain silent on whether personalistic leadership is a core feature of populism or just a frequently correlated one.

Populism as an institutional plan

In addition to this symbolical matrix, populism may also refer to a distinct institutional plan that some political actors implement, try to implement, or promise to implement. This plan involves a specific type of political regime and has three main pillars:

- **Concentration of power:** populists make attempts to significantly increase the power of the Executive and subordinate the parliament, control agencies, and the courts. They also pass or make attempts to pass legal reforms that help them stay in government as long as possible, including laws that allow successive reelection or reconfigure electoral regulations in their favor –gerrymandering, ending second-round runoffs, limiting campaign advertising, etc.
- **Partisan appropriation of the state:** populists make attempts to appropriate the state apparatus by hijacking the public administration with their supporters and removing or minimizing independent officials. Moreover, they make a discretionary use of public resources to reward their sympathizers, gain new voters, and promote their cause. This is why populism often comes hand in hand with clientelism.
- **Colonization of civil society:** populists make attempts to progressively colonize the civil society at all its levels. This implies coopting trade unions, social movements, universities, the educational system, public intellectuals, the media, civil society associations, and non-governmental organizations. When these agents cannot be enrolled, they are attacked, harassed, or expelled.¹²

These three pillars of the populist plan were present in the governments of Perón, Chávez, and Orbán.¹³ All three of them sanctioned new Constitutions that concentrated power in their favor, downplayed the role of the parliament, and emptied monitoring bodies in practice. They also took virtual control of the courts, filled the public administration with those loyal to them, and turned the state into the main communicator to the public.¹⁴ Perón closed or expropriated media outlets who criticized him, incarcerated political opponents, and dominated the labor movement by turning trade unions into quasi-official actors. Chávez filled the National Electoral Council, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, and lower courts with his unconditional followers, and he enacted laws to revoke broadcasting concessions and discretionarily ban media material, with

¹² Colonization of the civil society often involves an appropriation of common symbols and the creation of new narratives about the national history. For similar descriptions of the populist substantive agenda, see Müller (2016) and Pappas (2019).

¹³ But also of Erdogan, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and the Law and Justice Party in Poland, among many others

¹⁴ According to Pappas (2019: 73), during Peron's first government, the civil service grew from 120.000 to 540.000 employees. Similarly, when employees of the state oil company complained about the government policies in 2003, Chávez replaced almost 20.000 protesting workers with regime supporters.

the state controlling up to 64% of television channels. And Orbán weakened checks and balances on executive power, reshaped the electoral rules to make it more difficult for the fragmented opposition to mount an effective challenge, created a regulatory body to supervise what the media could publish, and openly confronted independent NGOs and universities.¹⁵

As these historical cases show, when it is successful, the populist reform plan leads to the emergence of a new type of political regime. This regime is not a dictatorship as it normally preserves electoral competition, allows some level of internal dissent, and keeps the external forms of a republican architecture. Parliaments and courts continue functioning, some critical media are tolerated, and public protest is not automatically suppressed. This makes the populist regime distinct from other illiberal orders such as fascism and orthodox marxism, which proudly celebrate dictatorship, ideological unanimity, and the use of physical violence. Indeed, populists accept that elections are the only legitimate route to office, they speak the language of democracy, and they transform liberal institutions in the name of democratic values, often promising to bring about a more genuine, participative, and inclusive democracy. Their aim is not to completely obliterate the liberal order but to use its resources to capture, defunctionalize, and empty liberal institutions from within. The end result of this mutation process is an intolerant majoritarianism in which the winner takes all and rules with minimal real constraints (Urbinati 2019: 192).¹⁶

Apart from the hybrid nature of the political order it seeks to impose, we should also take into account that the populist transformation is not revolutionary but progressive. Populists normally build up their populist regime bit by bit and use legal methods to achieve their illiberal ends. “Their weapons are laws, constitutional revision, and institutional reform” (Scheppelle 2018: 574). This is why some commentators describe the populist mutation process as an “authoritarian legalism” or an “abusive constitutionalism” (Scheppelle 2013; Kristán 2024). In this vein, populists subordinate control agencies by trimming down their capacities, replacing their members, or expanding their size in order to create a new majority. Similarly, they use legal resources to defund, harass, or close down critical media and condition the exercise of freedom of expression, including allegedly progressive hate speech regulations (Scheppelle 2013: 561). If considered in isolation, these populist reforms often seem perfectly democratic. Indeed, it takes a long time after the populist transformation started before the populist regime takes its definitive shape.

The radical ambitions of institutional populism are not just the result of opportunistic political leaders that embrace authoritarian ideologies. To the contrary,

¹⁵ For these historical characterizations, I rely mainly on Müller (2016: Ch. 2), de la Torre (2019: Ch. 4), and Pappas (2020). But see also Uitz (2015), Scheppelle (2018), Finchelstein (2019) and Kristán (2024).

¹⁶ This is not meant to deny that populism may degenerate in an outright dictatorship, as in Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela. However, dictatorship does not seem to be populists’ first option. In fact, it could be argued that when populist regimes turn into dictatorships, they are not populist any longer.

according to populist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe, the erosion of the liberal order is an aim that populists ought to pursue. In *The Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005) maintains that the ultimate goal of the populist discursive strategy is to rupture the ongoing institutional order. In his own words: "Populism presents itself as subversive of the existing state of things and as the starting point of a more or less radical reconstruction of a new order... The institutional system has to be broken if the populist appeal is to be effective" (Laclau 2005: 177). In Laclau's work the exact nature of the new order that populists advance is not theoretically predetermined, but Mouffe (2005: 53) makes clear that populists aspire to impose a "radical democracy." And while this radical democracy is meant to "keep distance from the Leninist tradition of a total revolutionary break," and is said to be compatible with the institutions of "formal democracy," Mouffe nevertheless rejects the liberal ideas of a neutral state, public deliberation, and rationalistic consensus seeking. For her, concern with the division of powers and the rule of law count as bare liberal incrustations in the democratic ideal that obstruct popular control and legitimize domination (2005, 93). In her view, liberal democracy is not the triumph of rationality and civilization; it is just a contingent articulation of two divergent political traditions that must be reverted for the sake of the sovereign people.

IV. SOME CLARIFICATIONS

Some clarifications are necessary to avoid confusion. First, when applied to concrete cases, the distinction between symbolical and institutional populism is meant to be empirical or observational, not essentialist. This means that the use of these labels depends on what populists do, try to do, or promise to do if they make it in office, not on their "real" intentions as these are purely speculative and remain subject to theoretical contamination. So, in order to decide whether certain actors count as symbolical or institutional populists, we must investigate their actions, conducts, and proposals. Moreover, we must also take into account that symbolical and institutional populism are not rigid notions in practice. There are pure cases, of course. But there are also migrations, where a same populist actor moves back and forth between these categories.¹⁷ Some populist candidates, such as Syriza, Lula, Ollanta Humala in Perú, or Gabriel Boric in Chile may promise deep institutional transformations when they are campaigning but give up their radical aspirations once they are elected. Contrariwise, other populists, such as Alberto Fujimori in Perú may follow the opposite path.¹⁸ The two-layered model is just a theoretical framework to guide analysis and needs to be combined with empirical research in order to produce concrete results.

¹⁷ For an illuminating analysis of populism's different pathways and the reasons that explain them, see Pappas (2019).

¹⁸ This could also be the case of Chávez, who during his 1998 presidential campaign presented himself as a socialdemocrat.

Second, the populist symbolical matrix and the populist institutional plan are obviously related. This is because the belief that the people are the victim of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization may easily create impatience against any social structures or actors that block or resist the reforms required to bring justice to the people. Thus, the populist reform agenda is a natural by-product of the populist mentality. However, in spite of this, the populist matrix and the populist program do not necessarily come together. They can be severed from one another, both conceptually and empirically. As thick authors argue, populism is not reducible to a kind of discourse, a political style, or mental map; yet, the populist matrix does not automatically lead to a populist transformation plan, not even when populists are in power. This is why I am convinced that thin and thick accounts must be treated as complementary views that make sense of different aspects of a more complex populist phenomenon.¹⁹

Third, it is important to bear in mind that the two-layered model is not meant to replace or debunk thin and thick accounts. It rather attempts to offer an integrative model that combines both perspectives. Like thick accounts, this model warns us about the illiberal potential of populism beyond the right/left divide; however, on the other hand, it highlights that not all populists are proto dictators who want to impose a hybrid or a semi authoritarian political regime. For all these reasons, I think that the two-layered model outlines a more complete, precise, and nuanced framework for analysis that better fits the historical experience without collapsing all populist manifestations into a single, monolithic, all-or-nothing category.

Finally, I need to mention that the distinction between symbolical and institutional populism taps onto other apparently similar classifications. These include “populism in opposition” versus “populism in power” (Müller 2016; Mansbridge and Macedo 2019; Urbinati 2019), “moderate” versus “radical” populism, “authoritarian” versus “democratic” populism, and “exclusive” versus “inclusive” populism (Bugaric 2019; Tushnet 2019). However, the distinction I propose is superior to all of them. This is because not all populists in power carry out a populist reform agenda; because institutional populism has substantive components that are absent in purely symbolical populism, meaning that the contrast between them is not just a matter of degree as the terms “moderate” and “radical” suggest; and because, as I will soon argue, not even symbolical populism can be considered as fully inclusive or democratic.

¹⁹ The question of why some populists try to implement an institutional reform program while others stay at a purely symbolical level exceeds the aims of this essay. That said, my impression is that two types of factors may help us address this issue. The first have to do with the ideological convictions of populists, whereas the second type of factors refer to contextual conditions such as the nature of the public culture of the host society, the strength of the party system, the vigor of the civil society, and the level of organization of the opposition. For an illuminating comparison of the trajectories of Lula, Chávez, and the Kirchners in Argentina in the light of these and other variables, see Etchemendy and Garay (2011).

V. THE MODEL AT WORK: THE RISKS IN POPULISM

As I anticipated, the two-layered model may explain why even scholars who share similar normative outlooks maintain such pervasive disagreements on the impact of populism over liberal democracy.²⁰ But the model also has a practical import as it can help us make more careful evaluations of the risks that specific populist actors entail for liberal democracy. As I argued, institutional populism is plainly incompatible with the liberal order. It just aims to empty or disfigure it. This is not the case with symbolical populism, however. May this type of populism be considered as a fellow traveler of liberal democracy that in particular contexts can increase participation, correct oligarchic deviations, and give power back to the people?

To provide a careful answer to this question, we must take into account that liberal democracy is not exhausted by an institutional apparatus –a Constitution with a bill of rights, an independent judiciary that effectively protects those rights, and strict respect for the rule of law. Apart from this, liberal democracy involves a specific public culture that allows this institutional apparatus to work properly and provides its ethical glue. In this respect, John Rawls (1996: li) has famously argued that the heart of the liberal order is an ideal of reciprocity that specifies “the nature of the political relation... as one of civic friendship,” whereby citizens justify their main social institutions in terms that others could accept as free and equals, respecting common rules of civility in public argumentation. Echoing this view, Ronald Dworkin (2006: 131-132) characterizes a liberal community as one in which citizens treat each other as “full partners” who are entitled to “mutual attention and respect.” In *Law’s Empire*, Dworkin (1986: 209-210) contrasts this “community of principle” with a “rulebook association” whose members just accept some common rules as part of “a compromise between antagonistic interests or points of view.”²¹

Relying on these contributions, I will assume that the public culture that characterizes a genuine liberal democracy presupposes a fundamental principle of political morality, namely:

Principle of liberal respect: in a liberal democracy, most citizens see their political disagreements as a natural result of human diversity ra-

²⁰ As some authors point out (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Moffit 2020: 95), disagreements about the relation between populism and democracy often result from the fact that commentators hold alternative normative accounts of democracy –liberal, constitutional, radical, etc. However, as we saw, these disagreements are also common between authors who subscribe liberal values and have a relatively convergent understanding of the liberal-democratic order. For a concise taxonomy of different perspectives on the relation between populism and democracy, see Moffit (2020: 131-151).

²¹ Rawls (1999: 225) explicitly speaks of the willingness to listen to others and of “fair mindedness” as integral to his “duty of civility.” And he adds that fundamental public regulations must be “guided by judgment and inference, reasons and evidence that [people] can reasonably be expected to endorse.” Along similar lines, Dworkin (2006) contends that a true democracy requires a “culture of argumentation” in which citizens rationally reflect on what public-policies better embody the more abstract principles they all share as members of a same political community. The rational formation of the general will is also a key requisite of Habermas’ (1998: Ch 7) deliberative model, where “rational” involves dialogue and common deliberation.

ther than bad faith, and when they win a majority they do not just want to use their political power to promote their interests and values at the expense of others. On the contrary, they are willing to justify their preferred laws and policies by reference to a conception of the common good that considers the interests of all, and which they sincerely believe that others could reflectively come to accept as equals.²²

Needless to say, this principle is extremely ambitious and mainly functions as a normative pole to orientate the public conduct of citizens –though I think it is reasonably honored in many contemporary well-ordered democracies. Importantly, this clause does not imply that political majorities cannot pursue their policy goals or dismiss interests they consider parochial, factional, or egoistic. It just implies that, in normal conditions, majorities are prepared to impartially assess the interests and viewpoints of others rather than automatically discard them only because they are not majoritarian. In this sense, this principle explains many of the practices and civic virtues that give liberal democracy its unique dynamics: it makes dialogue, negotiation, and public deliberation possible, promotes civic friendship, and provides the grounds for mutual tolerance among individuals and groups.

To borrow an expression from Rawls, general acceptance of this liberal principle is the product of an “overlapping consensus” among citizens. This is an arduous and to some extent fortuitous process whereby historical events, co-operation over time, and the influence of outstanding public figures leads a majority of the citizenry to internalize certain attitudes and values in spite of their more specific ethical, religious, or ideological commitments. And it is only when such agreement is firm, sincere, and widespread that liberal democracy becomes stable and constitutional restraints are embraced as a matter of principle, not just on paper. In the long term, the resilience of the rule of law and the division of powers as well as the disposition to tolerate conducts, lifeforms, and convictions that we strongly disapprove ultimately depend on this overlapping, informal, and extra-institutional consensus among reasonable people.

The tenet that liberal democracy involves a particular public culture is crucial to evaluate the impact of symbolical populism. Even if the populist symbolical matrix does not target the liberal apparatus, its polarizing rhetoric together with the assumption that there is only one possible conception of the common good that the “decent” people can uphold, may seriously undermine the liberal ethos. When individuals come to see politics as a battle between pure people and pervert antipeople, they are less motivated to justify their views to their political opponents, to impartially assess their interests and needs, and to treat others as fellow citizens who deserve equal respect. Politics becomes instead a zero-sum game in which everyone is forced to choose sides, and the agonistic

²² For a somehow convergent conception of liberal democracy, see Abts and Rummens (2007: 412-415).

stance ends up contaminating schools, families, universities, and civil associations, favoring the emergence of conflictual identities (de la Torre, 2019: 19).²³

That populism openly seeks to erode the liberal public culture is not just an interpretation of liberal commentators. Following Carl Schmitt, populist ideologists argue that since political disagreements are rationally untreatable, antagonism is just impossible to eliminate from the political domain. So, for them, the essence of politics consists in the creation of an “us” by the determination of a “them” through the use of emotions, collective identifications, and discursive hostility. The public agonism that authors like Mouffe favor excludes violence, of course. According to her, political opponents should not see each other as “enemies” to be exterminated but as festering “adversaries.” This notwithstanding, Mouffe firmly condemns political liberalism as a “post-political” or “anti-political” paradigm, and declares that democratic life must take the form of a vibrant confrontation between groups with opposite political projects (Mouffe 2005). In the language of Dworkin (1986: 212), this means that the populist symbolical matrix may pull the community of principle back to a rulebook association in which people feel free to use “the standing political machinery to advance [their] own interests and ideals”. And in the language of Rawls, it entails that symbolical populism may end-up damaging the ethical overlapping consensus on which liberal democracy rests. This is a serious risk that must not be overlooked as there is no known recipe to repair the liberal ethos once it is frosted.

All that said, when the populist agonism is moderate and directs its rage against impersonal sociopolitical structures rather than concrete social groups, symbolical populism may coexist with liberal democracy and even serve it by making visible feelings of frustration and exclusion and by directing public attention to social problems that must be duly addressed. If the liberal public culture of the host society is well-established, these benefits may be achieved at a reasonable cost, especially when populists are in the opposition or rule for short periods of time.

In addition to this, there are two very specific scenarios in which symbolical populism may actively promote some of the values that lie at the heart of the liberal-democratic project. Both of them refer to what political theorists regard as non-ideal contexts. The first is when democratic forces confront a dictatorship, an autocracy, or a deeply illiberal regime, whether populist or not, or when they have to stop authoritarian-minded candidates that may try to impose a populist or an otherwise authoritarian regime (Scheuerman 2022a: 13). If, as populist theorists argue, agonistic rhetoric has the potential to bring to-

²³ As Urbinati (2019: 197-198) says, the populist rhetoric instills a deeply anti-liberal cultural mentality that “damages ‘friendship’ among citizens and creates niches of like-minded individuals, a fact that jeopardizes the basic condition of respect among opposite ‘sides’ and ‘parts’ of the society and jeopardizes the process of revising ideas...” Relying on Rosanvallon, Arato and Cohen (2017: 289) also discuss the negative impact of populism over civil society.

gether disparate and disorganized groups, unify them around a catch-all cause, and mobilize the citizenry to uphold the rule of law, then symbolical populism is a resource that democratic forces may legitimately use. So, when it comes to creating a liberal democracy from zero, repairing a broken democracy, or obstructing a populist transformation of the political order, symbolical populism is a possibility we should not immediately dismiss.²⁴ Indeed, this possibility is not at odds with the roots of political liberalism as even Rawls accepts that in unjust or undemocratic contexts, “acts of disruption and resistance” are morally permitted (Scheuerman, 2022b: 1285).

The second scenario is more mundane. It has to do with imperfect liberal democracies in which the fundamental interests of certain groups are *objectively* and *persistently* neglected, and in which traditional liberal mechanisms have repeatedly failed to address their concerns. In this regard, no liberal would deny that even in nearly-just liberal societies, the communicative space is often distorted by significant asymmetries of power or contaminated by conservative biases that block any new developments of the liberal ideal. Other times, the public culture proves sensitive to the demands of neglected minorities but the institutional apparatus lacks the flexibility to process and translate those concerns into concrete policies. In scenarios of this kind, the populist rhetoric may help to change minds and force the legal and political system to overcome their natural inertia and find prompt solutions to social problems (Delmas 2016: 685; Scheuerman 2022b: 1286). This notwithstanding, we should not forget that intense populist agonism is highly divisive and sooner or later activates partizan passions that may be hard to revert. Eventually, symbolical enmity may scale up to the point that it results in violent outbreaks (Edyvane 2016: 6) or trigger a virulent regressive backlash. This is why it must be used reluctantly, just to correct serious injustice, and definitely as a last resource.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay I have argued that the main accounts of populism available in recent literature are unable to illuminate the whole range of populist experiences. They are either over or under inclusive and distort the exact relation between populism and liberal democracy. More specifically, thin accounts reduce populism to an ideological shell that lacks a concrete political agenda and thereby minimize its risks, while thick accounts automatically identify populism with an authoritarian project of government, and thus adopt a strict binary opposition between populism and liberal democracy. Building on the virtues of these two families of conceptions, I put forward a two-layered model that provides

²⁴ In an illuminating article where she focuses in the cases of Orbán and the Law and Justice Party, María Victoria Kristán (2024) contends that when liberal forces displace populists from office after a populist transformation of the institutional system, public officials may justifiably disobey the populist laws in order to restore a liberal-republican constitution.

an integrative and more flexible framework for theoretical assessment. Rather than collapse all populist experiences into a single monolithic category, it shows that populism is a complex phenomenon that includes both a symbolical matrix and a plan for institutional reform. And since these two populist layers do not necessarily come together, the model favors a richer understanding of the relation between populism and liberal democracy and leaves space for more nuanced analyses of populist movements, governments, and candidates.

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