

# Populism

David Featherstone and  
Lazaros Karaliotas

What are the possibilities - and potential problems - of  
left populism?

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Populism has emerged as one of the most vexed, over-used but least defined terms of the current conjuncture. Mobilised in a significant array of different ways and with a diversity of meanings and intentions, it is also, unusually, a term that is associated with both the political right and the left. At its broadest, populism refers to forms of politics that put ‘the people’ at their centre. Within this, the way ‘the people’ is understood varies widely, and questions of left populism have gained significant traction and engagement in the period since the 2008 ‘more than economic’ crisis. This makes understanding the term, the different ways it is used and envisioned, and the kind of left strategies with which it is associated, a key, if slippery, task. It also makes critically intervening in some of the different articulations of populism a task which has significant stakes in terms of its bearing on left political analysis and strategies.<sup>1</sup>

This article considers how both right-wing and left-wing articulations of populism have been understood, but develops a particular focus on understanding the potential and limits of left populist practices. The first section considers Ernesto Laclau’s analysis of populism in *On Populist Reason*, arguably the most influential account of populist politics of recent times. Rooted in his broader discourse-analytical approach to the political, Laclau’s account proposes a minimal definition of populist politics; seeks to rescue populism from pejorative attacks which associate appeals to ‘the people’ with demagoguery; and positions it as constitutive of the political. While recognising the significance of Laclau’s analysis, we argue, however, that his work is hindered by his overly formalist account of the political.

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To offer an alternative, in the second section we turn to Stuart Hall's writings on Thatcherism, which offer a more contextual and situated engagement with particular populist strategies, and which have continuing relevance for understanding some contemporary far right articulations of the populist political terrain.

The final section explores some of the actually existing experiences of left populism in contemporary Europe, to draw out both the strengths and the weaknesses of these strategies. Focusing on Podemos and Syriza, we argue that left populist strategies have been significant in challenging the hegemony of austerity policies in the European-crisis conjuncture. However, we also probe three key areas where there are limitations in their strategies. These concern, firstly, questions of 'nationed' narratives around the crisis and ways out of it;<sup>2</sup> secondly, the relationship between leadership and grassroots politics; and, thirdly, the ways they engage with internationalist political projects.

## **Laclau's theory of populism: limits to formalism**

Ernesto Laclau has been the most influential - and perhaps also the most controversial - theorist of populism in recent years. Over the past four decades, beginning with his early contributions in the 1970s and culminating in the publication of *On Populist Reason*, Laclau's work has powerfully challenged pejorative understandings of populism that reduce populist politics to a reactionary, demagogic, nativist and often authoritarian ideology.<sup>3</sup> Such pejorative understandings, for Laclau, feed on the conceptual ambiguity of academic, popular and political engagements with populism, and mirror liberal political thinking that reduces democratic politics to techno-managerial governance tactics by denigrating 'the people' as ignorant and irrational masses.<sup>4</sup> Alongside his critiques of such approaches, Laclau has sought to define populism in what he calls a 'strictly formal' way - as a form of politics that seeks to articulate and construct political identities and practices within a specific logic. Populism for Laclau, thus, entails two minimal characteristics: populist politics, first, revolve around the nodal point of 'the people', and, second, construct an antagonistic representation of society, dividing the social field in two opposing camps: on one side 'the people' - the underdogs, the many, the 99% - and on the other 'the elite' - the establishment, the few, the 1%.<sup>5</sup>

At the core of Laclau's interventions lies the key theoretical move to conceive of

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the 'people' as a *political category*, rather than a given of the social structure. Building also on his work with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau argues that 'the people' are not a pre-given population but are constantly constructed and demarcated through the 'discursive frontiers' that populist discourses draw between them and a 'constitutive outside' - the enemy, against which 'the people' is constituted.<sup>6</sup> Populist discourses, thus, institute 'the people', creating a new agency out of a plurality of political demands.<sup>7</sup> For Laclau, demands - or more accurately social demands - that cannot be accommodated within the current institutional order are the building blocks for populism. When a number of such demands remain unsatisfied, grievances may escape their specificity, and they can then be politically and discursively linked together (articulated) in such a way as to create new forms of solidarity. Laclau and Mouffe refer to this process as making 'chains of equivalence'. Populist politics and leaders, thus, capitalise on such unmet demands to initiate a process of political identification, and construct 'the people' as a political actor demanding change against the existing institutional order.<sup>8</sup>

In understanding 'the people' as a political actor in the making, and populism as a specific logic in the articulation of 'the people', Laclau's work has opened up important new avenues in thinking through populist politics from a left perspective. Rather than sweepingly equating populism with reactionary right-wing ideologies, Laclau usefully draws attention to the - often conflicting - ways in which diverse populist discourses construct and interpellate their respective 'people'. This emphasis on the diverse constructions of the people and the discursive frontiers that different populist politics articulate is particularly useful in the current conjuncture in Europe and the US, which is marked by the concomitant upsurge of both left-wing and right-wing populisms. It not only allows for more nuanced readings of populist politics; it also offers important analytical and theoretical tools in thinking through the possibilities and limitations of left populism.

Nevertheless, Laclau's insistence on a formalist reading of populism is also the terrain upon which his theory encounters some key tensions and limitations, since formalism tends to obscure the specific histories and geographies that shape political activity. Firstly, there is an at least implicit tendency in Laclau's work on populism to elide the spaces of the political with the spaces of the nation-state.<sup>9</sup> While his theorisation enables a dynamic and plural sense of the making of 'the people' through antagonisms and solidarities, this construction remains largely inscribed

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within the given space of the nation-state. As Matthew Sparke argues, the effect of this 'built-in territorialisation of the political' is to close down 'sites of radical and plural democracy ... within the larger space of differences that is the nation-state'.<sup>10</sup> It also obscures the constitutive role of transnational connections in shaping, and being shaped by, populist politics.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly - and this is of particular importance in a conjuncture marked by the upsurge of exclusionary if not outright racist discourses throughout Europe and the US - there is a danger of conflating 'the people' that populist politics construct and seek to represent with the citizens of a nation-state. As Etienne Balibar has convincingly argued, however, 'the nation, or the national identity, however effective it has been in modern history, is only one of the possible institutional forms of the community of citizens, and it neither encapsulates all of its functions nor completely neutralizes its contradictions'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jacques Rancière usefully distinguishes between the *demos* and *the ethnos* as the two names of 'the people'. While the *ethnos* signifies the construction of the people as 'the living body of those who have the same origin, are born on the same soil or worship the same god', the *demos* points to 'the count of the uncounted', and transcends any quality that could be construed as 'given'.<sup>13</sup> 'The life of the *demos*', for Rancière, 'is the ongoing process of its differentiation from the *ethnos*'.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, as Benjamin Arditi among others has noted, Laclau's reading of populism is also marked by a 'strong attachment to a leader - which is in fact an attachment to a strong leader'.<sup>15</sup> For Laclau, in populism 'the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to the identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader'.<sup>16</sup> As Arditi argues, while the name of the leader is, for Laclau, an 'empty signifier' of popular unity - 'the symbolic unification of the group around an individuality' - the leader is also a person, and frequently male.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, any discussion of the symbolic unity of the people under the leader also needs to address issues and critiques revolving around personality cult, the idealisation of the all-powerful leader and the implications these might have for an emancipatory democratic politics.

As Hilary Wainwright has noted in relation to Jeremy Corbyn, particular forms of left leadership, including their relationship to broader movements, are malleable and not pre-determined. She has argued that part of Corbyn's appeal and distinctiveness has been his refusal of certain tropes of the charismatic,

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populist leader. Thus she contrasts Tony Benn, who ‘championed radical change through his charisma and established status as a leading politician’, with Corbyn, who she sees as having symbolised a ‘new effort to open the party to becoming a movement for radical change through his very modesty and daily support for others in struggle’.<sup>18</sup> While Corbyn’s period as Labour leader has probably followed a more uneven and differentiated trajectory than Wainwright’s optimistic account allows, it is significant that such dispersed notions of leadership also imply a different understanding of the spaces through which politics take place, a shift away from those implied by the top-down nature of a national party led by a strong, charismatic leader. This re-envisioning of leadership opens up different sites and practices of left politics as having importance, and allows more dispersed and generous constructions of political agency.

Thinking about populism spatially - that is, in a way that foregrounds the generative role of space and geography in the articulation of diverse populist projects - can help us to move beyond some of these tensions in Laclau’s work. Such a perspective entails an interest in the relationship of space and place to populist politics that is both theoretical and empirical. Indeed, recent political theory work has highlighted the importance of engaging with the spaces in and through which populist politics are performed.<sup>19</sup> Rather than eliding the spaces of populist politics with the nation-state, an emphasis on the everyday spaces and political infrastructures that make populist politics possible opens up a plural understanding of the diverse range of places that populist politics shapes, and the different ways in which place is thought about in populist strategy. Zooming in on these spaces enables more nuanced readings of contemporary populist politics - both in the sense of unearthing the diverse repertoires, emotions and solidarities at work in different populist politics, and in terms of tracing the diverse trans-local connections and disconnections shaping and being shaped by populist politics. At the same time, charting the discursive topographies and geographical imaginations of different populist discourses can offer important insights into the ways in which they are constructed, including the ways in which they converge and diverge. To demonstrate the significance of such an approach, in the next section we turn to Stuart Hall’s engagement with populist political strategies in his writings on Thatcherism.

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## Articulating populism

In his essay 'The empire strikes back', written in April 1982, during the Malvinas-Falklands conflict, Stuart Hall argued that, while the Falklands crisis may 'have been unpredicted', the 'way it has been constructed into a populist cause is not'.<sup>20</sup> Hall understood the conflict as 'the apogee of the whole arc of Thatcherite populism': as he had recognised for some time, this was a political project that understood how to intervene in events as they arose, in ways that reinforced its 'common-sense' view of how the world worked. In 1982, Thatcher had only been in power for three years and her government was deeply unpopular; and the war with Argentina was to play a very significant role in reversing this unpopularity and winning the 1983 general election.

Hall's analysis allowed him to immediately recognise the importance of the Thatcher government's response to the Malvinas-Falklands crisis. His account provides a very clear and helpful illustration of how to understand a populist project of this kind - and what is at stake in doing so. He also noted that by populism he meant 'something more than the ability to secure electoral support for a political programme': for him, populism referred to 'the project, central to the politics of Thatcherism, to ground neoliberal politics directly in an appeal to "the people"; to root them in the essentialist categories of commonsense experience and practical moralism'.<sup>21</sup>

Hall's account here draws attention to the ways in which populism can function as an integral part of particular kinds of political projects. This is significant, as in recent media and popular debates populism has been counterposed with the political, and seen as something that inevitably undermines constructions of politics.<sup>22</sup> His essay is also significant in demonstrating how constructions of 'the people' can be actively shaped in particular ways through populist projects: they are not a given force just waiting to be mobilised. Indeed the terms and practices through which such populist projects are envisioned are constitutive of their political character in important ways. Hall's analysis of the Malvinas-Falklands War also signals the ways in which at 'different stages' of this 'populist project' different themes were drawn into service in an attempt to 'capture common sense for populism and the right'.<sup>23</sup>

Of particular significance here was the way he drew attention to the manner in which the Falklands War drew on a set of 'imperial' histories and imaginaries - and

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re-centred them at the 'heart' of constructions of 'the people'. This is significant: populism is often constructed as a rather vague, place-less phenomenon, but Hall's analysis located it directly in relation to particular contests, histories and geographies. This was, and remains, an important intervention in terms of the ways in which populism is thought and understood. Hall's writings from this period not only sought to engage with the emergent right-wing populist strategies associated with Thatcherism; they also critically intervened in the terms on which the histories and geographies of populism were understood.

Hall's writings on Thatcherism drew on Laclau's critique of class-reductionist accounts of populism to analyse the diverse political constituencies that were integral to Thatcher's populist project. He also, however, critically engaged with some of Laclau's positions. He argued, for example, that Laclau's approach led to expectations of 'the constant formation and reformation of discourses across the ideological field'. In this respect Laclau's work, Hall asserted, took 'too little into consideration the fact that the articulation of certain discourses to the practices of particular classes has been secured over long periods'.<sup>24</sup> His own engagement with particular populist formations such as Thatcherism was explicitly attentive to the situated dynamics of such politics - including their inter-connections with longer-term historical processes - in ways which are often missed by Laclau's formalist approach. Hall was insistent that formations such as the intensely racialised populism that was central to the political settlement emerging in the 1970s and 1980s were shaped by specific histories and geographies.

In this regard, as Hall's discussion of the Falklands War emphasises, imperial practices and imaginaries have been particularly significant in shaping different articulations of populism. These have long histories and continue to shape the terrain on which forms of populist politics are envisioned. Bill Schwarz has described, for example, the forms of 'energetic white populism' that were shaped in South Africa and Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in opposition to non-white workers and 'against distant rulers in London'.<sup>25</sup> Such populist imaginaries were shaped by circuits of 'white labourism' throughout the Empire, and were reproduced through connections between imperial and metropolitan spaces; and these racialised understandings of labour also intersected with popular working-class articulations of politics within Britain.<sup>26</sup> Positioning populism in relation to this broad historical terrain does not provide answers to all the questions relating to the terms on which populist

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politics and moments are articulated. It does, however, help to move beyond some of the superficial ways in which populism has been understood in recent debates, both politically and analytically.

Engaging with the long histories and geographies through which particular racialised forms of politics and imaginaries have been articulated is a necessary precondition for understanding how specific constructions of populism get articulated and generated on specific terms. To understand the populist constructions of the ‘people’ during the Brexit referendum, for example, it is necessary to scrutinise some of the particular ways such constructions of the ‘people’ have mobilised long-standing racialising discourses of the nation. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), as Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever note, ‘was able to gain traction by tapping into a sedimented racist nationalist populism that has been a feature of the English social formation for a number of decades’. Such racism gains traction ‘not simply through the circulation of racist ideas within mainstream political discourse, but because such ideas have been part of the lived habitus of the English social formation for so long’.<sup>27</sup>

This mobilisation of racialised articulations of the nation is a pervasive feature of the different right-wing articulations of populism emerging in contemporary Europe. As Marina Prentoulis has argued, the ‘national element has been appropriated by successful right-wing populisms, which are pushing away from the European project and towards the re-enactment of state boundaries as a means of finding security from external threats - and at this particular conjunction their main focus is on the refugee crisis’.<sup>28</sup> Prentoulis also usefully argues that these strategies ‘cannot be countered by a left populism that confines itself to national boundaries’ - a position that raises important questions about the terms on which left populisms have sought to construct antagonistic constructions of ‘the people’. The next section turns to a discussion of what we might term actually existing forms of left populism, through a discussion of Syriza and Podemos.

## **Actually existing left populisms: ‘Syriza, Podemos, Venceremos’?**

Two of the most palpable and - at least electorally - successful articulations of a left populist strategy in contemporary Europe come from the recent trajectories of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. In the aftermath of the ‘more than



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economic' European crisis, and the continuous legitimisation and brutal implementation of austerity as the only possible response to it, both parties have mobilised populist strategies to articulate and represent popular grievances and demands. Fuelled by the massive popular protests that had recently marked the political landscape in the two countries, the populist projects of Syriza and Podemos have managed to challenge the dogmatic implementation of austerity politics and to re-invigorate democratic debate and disagreement. Indeed, their political strategies have been powerful in opening up institutional spaces for the representation of popular demands and grievances, while also moving beyond techno-managerial responses to Eurozone's crisis, and foregrounding alternatives to austerity. Nevertheless, the current impasses, contradictions and failures of both parties also call for a more nuanced reading of their strategies. And here some useful insights can be gained from focusing in on the different spaces - and ways of thinking about space - in and through which the populist politics of Syriza and Podemos have been articulated; and a consideration of the role of spatial/geographical imaginaries in the ways they have articulated their politics is also helpful.

Concerning the latter, it is important to note that both Syriza and Podemos have been quick to equate 'the people' they seek to represent with their respective nations. Perhaps the most palpable manifestation of this conflation of 'the people' with the nation is the way Podemos articulates and emphasises the national-popular. The term 'national popular' was used by Gramsci to refer to articulations of popular will in a particular relation with a national history and a historical and cultural environment, and without any necessary positivity to the nation form itself. Nevertheless, Íñigo Errejón, in a conversation with Chantal Mouffe, has recently argued for the need to 'combat right wing populism' by a refusal to 'cede' the space of the nation to 'them', and to 'rebuild a civic, popular idea of the country' framed by 'a democratic, progressive and popular patriotism'.<sup>29</sup> Errejón notes that in this strategy Podemos are 'learning from Latin America', especially in relation to constructions of the national-popular. However, he does not give any consideration to the important role of Latin Americans in shaping oppositional political cultures *within* Spain.<sup>30</sup> But immigrants to Spain from countries such as Ecuador and Peru have been increasingly visible in movements against austerity. As Sophie Gonick has noted, Ecuadorian immigrants, 'who were the first victims of crisis after purchasing homes at the height of the bubble' have been central to grassroots mobilisations against evictions in Madrid.<sup>31</sup> Engaging with these kinds of connections can help to

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re-draw our cartographies of left populisms, and to find different ways of relating to internationalist trajectories and collaborations, in all their rich diversity.

In a similar vein, despite the party's origins as a grouping of left-wing parties and organisations, nationalist instances are equally present in Syriza's discourse. Actually, between 2012 and 2015, before they won the election, Syriza spokespersons often adopted a nationalist rhetoric wherein their political opponents were portrayed as traitors of the nation.<sup>32</sup> Alexis Tsipras, for example, described the previous pro-austerity governments as instruments in the hands of foreign interests. In his words, PASOK and New Democracy 'looted Greece and then they lowered the flag and handed it to Merkel'.<sup>33</sup> Feeding on this rhetoric, the Syriza coalition government formed in 2015 came to power thanks to the party's collaboration with the openly nationalist and xenophobic right-wing party ANEL (Independent Greeks). This is not to argue that Syriza's populist discourse should be conflated with a nationalist discourse. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such recurring references to patriotism and national sovereignty not only shaped a nationed narrative of the 'Greek crisis'; it also positioned Syriza's efforts to imagine and articulate an alternative to austerity predominantly within the limited and limiting political space of the nation-state. In this context, Syriza's failure to effect fundamental changes in austerity policies (after its election and the referendum of July 2015) within the European post-democratic configuration has further fuelled nationed narratives, both within Syriza and, even more so, within Greek left-wing opposition parties.

This is not to suggest that the strategies adopted by Syriza and Podemos have been exclusively located within the frame of the nation-state. Indeed, in the run-up to the European Elections of 2014, the two parties actively worked together to construct a left populist alliance in Europe, under the electoral slogan: 'Syriza, Podemos, Venceremos'. And yet, the terms on which the two parties have worked together also have continuities in terms of their discourses of patriotism. In his discussion of the decision by Podemos to sit with Syriza in the European parliament, Errejón argues that:

We've always defended the decision in patriotic terms. In fact we were in the group with Tsipras and Syriza, which are the only patriotic force that has defended the interests of the people and citizens of

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their country against international speculators. It's a left that has put together an inclusive project for the country.<sup>34</sup>

This further emphasises the political challenges which confront attempts to delineate different articulations of left populisms, and to move beyond patriotism as the grounds on which such international linkages are shaped.

In relation to the issue of delineating left populism, it is important to foreground the shifting spaces through which the two parties have articulated their political projects. To begin with, it is paramount not to lose sight of the fact that the surge in support for both Podemos and Syriza came as a result of capitalising on, and succeeding in representing, a substantial section of the people who had been involved in the massive popular protests of 2011 - the Indignados in Spain and the Squares movement in Greece.<sup>35</sup> A closer look at the spaces of the squares movement in Greece, for example, unearths the uneasy and porous but nonetheless constitutive co-existence of two opposing logics and imaginaries in the squares: a nationalist discourse seeking to oust the 'occupation government' and demanding 'jobs for Greeks' in the upper square, and an emancipatory egalibertarian discourse demanding direct democracy and experimenting with solidarity responses to austerity in the lower square.<sup>36</sup> It is, indeed, this uneasy co-existence of a nationalist and emancipatory articulation of 'the people' in the squares that made imaginable and possible the government coalition between Syriza and ANEL four years later.

In the years that followed the rupture introduced by the squares movement, Syriza would not only seek to represent the demos of the squares in the institutional spaces of the Parliament; it also actively participated in the massive wave of grassroots solidarity initiatives against austerity that thoroughly delegitimised the New Democracy government by constructing a network of mutual aid in the interstices of the existing order.<sup>37</sup> Syriza's participation in these political spaces was constitutive for the party. In the period between 2011 and 2014 the party shaped its discourse and repertoires of action in dialogue with, and under the influences of, these movements. In fact, the spaces opened up by the solidarity movement constituted the terrain on which the populist politics of Syriza was shaped - while also being shaped by them. In a similar manner, Podemos would also develop a symbiotic and mutually constitutive relationship with grassroots movements against austerity, particularly with the movement against evictions. These spaces, thus,

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were not merely the backdrop for the activities of Syriza and Podemos. Rather, their populist projects were actively shaped and articulated through the opening of such movement spaces. Tracing the shifting spaces of the articulation of populist politics in this way helps to foreground its movement element. And this is an element that has been most prominently highlighted in the literature around Latin American populisms, which has drawn attention to the role of grassroots - often indigenous - movements in the articulations of populist projects led by men such as Evo Morales, Hugo Chavez and Rafeal Correa.<sup>38</sup>

It is no coincidence, therefore, that as the strategies of Podemos and Syriza began to diverge, their relationships to political spaces and spatial strategies also diversified. More specifically, after its electoral win in the 2014 European Elections, acquiring government power became the horizon of Syriza's political project. And as the party began to increasingly privilege national institutional political spaces, and winning and maintaining a Parliamentary majority, its relationship with grassroots movements also began to weaken. Syriza began to tone down the more radical references to the movements' discourse, while the party's rhetoric and strategy was increasingly shaped in the higher echelons of party power close to Alexis Tsipras. Podemos, on the other hand, strongly influenced by its links with the urban political movements against evictions, also put considerable emphasis and effort into articulating its strategy at the local election and movement level. The 2015 local election wins of Ada Colau in Barcelona and Manuela Carmena in Madrid were fuelled by this strong relationship between movements and party. And this in turn opened up an alternative spatial strategy and a new set of institutional spaces for the articulation of popular politics - extending beyond Syriza's almost exclusive emphasis on government power and the Parliament. These examples also show how a focus on the spaces in and through which left populisms are articulated can be helpful in the navigation of questions around the importance of the leader and strong leadership in populist politics, in that it offers a different way of registering and elucidating the relationship between movements and leaders.

## Conclusion

Chantal Mouffe has argued that the 'populist moment' does not imply that 'the left/right opposition is no longer relevant', but, rather, that 'it must be posed in

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another way, with reference on the type of populism at stake and the chains of equivalences through which the “people” is constructed’.<sup>39</sup> We agree with Mouffe that it is important not to sweepingly dismiss all populist politics as reactionary, exclusionary or authoritarian. As we have argued above, the left populisms of Syriza and Podemos have been important in challenging the hegemony of austerity politics and opening up institutional and everyday spaces for the expression of democratic disagreement. However, as we have also insisted, both parties have to a large extent articulated their discourses along nationed geographical imaginations. This suggests the importance of critically engaging with left populisms, and the terms on which antagonistic constructions of ‘the people’ are articulated and mobilised.

In this sense, we contend, after Laclau, that populist dimensions and articulations of the political are not something that can be ignored by the left, even if we would disagree with the way Laclau’s writings verge at times on eliding populism and the political. Our discussion of Hall’s work, however, has suggested the importance of engaging with situated articulations of populist politics in particular conjunctures. Accordingly, we would argue that it is crucial for left political engagement to scrutinise and displace some of the key tensions that structure actually existing articulations of left populism; and that such scrutiny is also integral to challenging populist articulations of the political from the right. We conclude therefore by summarising our arguments in relation to the three key areas we have been discussing.

Firstly, we have argued that there has been a tendency for left populist imaginaries to accept a narrowly nationed politics of the crisis. This is in some ways amplified by rather than unsettled by the centrality that Laclau and Mouffe give to the nation in accounts of populism. There are many different articulations of this in actually existing left populist politics, as we have suggested in relation to Syriza, but there are also echoes of such positions in the kind of ‘Lexit’ positions which seem to have some traction in the contemporary UK left. The nation, however, is not an inevitable geographical imaginary through which populism is necessarily articulated. As Etienne Balibar has recently argued, the ‘diverse resistances against austerity policies in Europe’ might as usefully be constructed in relation to a ‘transnational counter-populism’.<sup>40</sup> How and with what analytical tools could we engage with a possibility of such a transnational left populism?

Secondly, as we have discussed, there are real limitations in the ways in which populist constructions of the political conceive of the relations between leaderships

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and grassroots and participatory politics. In this regard Laclau's re-centring of top-down leadership as central to populist politics is inherently problematic from a progressive left position. As Hilary Wainwright suggests, it is necessary to think about the ways in which spaces of politics might be envisioned which enhance different articulations of populist politics. This may open up different ways of envisioning political leadership, but for a left populist politics to function as part of a broader, more participatory, articulation of politics and society it is necessary to unsettle the notion of a charismatic male leader that is all too often refigured in appeals to left populisms.

Finally, thinking about populism from a spatially-informed perspective can further enhance our thinking on how a transnational populism might become articulated. Interestingly enough, it is to the spaces of the Indignados and Occupy movements that De Cleen turns in looking for potential manifestations of transnational populism.<sup>41</sup> And it is true that the political ideas and vocabularies of these movements include a spatial/geographical perspective that has enabled them to articulate the idea of a transnational people against national and transnational elites. Nevertheless, as our analysis of the squares movement in Greece has suggested, the spaces opened up by these movements have often constituted the terrain for negotiating conflicting articulations of 'the people'. It is through foregrounding the spaces of populist politics, and the new ways of thinking about place that are opening up, that such nuances can be better elucidated. And it is also through these new spaces and networks - forged by grassroots solidarity activity across Europe - that a transnational European people might be in the making, as Balibar contends.<sup>42</sup> The networked solidarities shaped by refugee and migrant activism and grassroots movements in the face of what the elites call 'Europe's refugee crisis' represent perhaps the most palpable, and for sure the most hopeful, topography of such a people.<sup>43</sup>

**David Featherstone** is Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Glasgow. He is a member of the editorial collective of *Soundings*, and co-editor of *Stuart Hall: Selected Political Writings* and *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey*. He is author of *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism*.

**Lazaros Karaliotas** is a Lecturer in Urban Geography at the University of Glasgow. He holds a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Manchester and has

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been a post-doctoral research fellow at the Universities of Glasgow and Manchester. He is the book reviews and social media editor, and an editorial board member, at the *Urban Studies* journal.

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## Notes

1. This article is part of the *Soundings* series on critical terms, which seeks to explore some of the main ideas at play in the current political conjuncture. The series was introduced in Deborah Grayson and Ben Little, 'Soundings critical terms: conjunctural analysis and the crisis of ideas', *Soundings* 65, 2017. Each instalment outlines the theoretical and historical background of a particular idea or set of ideas.
2. We use the term 'nationed' to refer to discourses and imaginaries articulated around the signifier of the nation either to explain the 'European Crisis' and the spatial politics around it or to articulate alternatives to the post-crisis conjuncture. For further details see D.J. Featherstone, and L. Karaliotas, 'Challenging the spatial politics of the European crisis: nationed narratives and translocal solidarities in the post-crisis conjuncture', *Cultural Studies*, 32(2), 2018.
3. E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, New Left Books 1977, especially p198; and *On Populist Reason*, Verso 2005.
4. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; J. Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, Verso 2009.
5. *On Populist Reason*.
6. *On Populist Reason*; and E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso 1985, p20.
7. *On Populist Reason*, p224.
8. *On Populist Reason*. See also B. Arditì, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*, Edinburgh University Press 2007.
9. M. Sparke, *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State*, University of Minnesota Press 2005; D.J. Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: the Making of Counter-Global Networks*, Wiley Blackwell 2008.
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