

Too left-wing or not populist enough? Using Laclau and Mouffe to rethink Corbynism and future left strategy in the UK¹

Abstract:

Jeremy Corbyn's dramatic rise and fall created a problem for left political strategists in the UK. Contradictory explanations centre around two broad areas. First, ideology: Corbynism was either too left-wing or not left-wing enough; and second, democracy and populism: Corbynism was either anti-democratic and authoritarian populist or 'left-populist' and democratising. The centrality of these debates to the Corbyn literature implies that strategists today face a dilemma. Either consolidate the Labour party as a radical left-wing grassroots movement against the PLP, or a centre-left party that re-establishes PLP authority. Indeed, Keir Starmer is already interpreted to have aligned himself with the latter of these two options. This paper offers an original interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism to demonstrate that this is a false dichotomy which not only risks unnecessarily restricting Labour party strategy but potentially has severe ramifications for how we understand left-wing politics in Britain more widely.

Keywords: Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jeremy Corbyn, left politics, ideology, populism.

Jeremy Corbyn's dramatic rise and fall has created a problem for left political strategists in the UK. Contradictory explanations centre around two broad areas of disagreement. First, ideology: how left-wing Labour's policies should be; and second, democracy and populism: Corbynism was either anti-democratic and authoritarian populist or 'left-populist' and democratising. With regards to ideology, Corbyn's strategists and supporters never seemed to doubt that Corbynism's surprise appeal stemmed from its left-wing politics (Martell, 2018; Byrne, 2019; Airas, 2018; Massey, 2015). However, media pundits and scholars insisted that if Labour were to be elected to government they would either have to return to the centre and appeal to the median voter or somehow overturn these central tenets of majoritarian electoral theory (Blair, 2015; Crines, 2015, 7; Bale, 2016a, 7; 2016b, 19; Honeyman, 2018, 15). Even though the 2017 election saw Corbyn's Labour Party gain their biggest increase in vote share since 1945, the subsequent 2019 defeat could be said to vindicate earlier predictions. For many commentators, Corbynism was too left-wing to win, and was faced with a choice between ideology or electability (Kellner, 2017, 29; Dorey, 2017; Quinn, 2016; Curtice, 2015).

Regarding democracy, commentators disagree as to whether Corbyn's leadership style and his navigation of the relationship between the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the wider membership was more or less democratic. Although many initially criticised Corbyn as weak and uncharismatic (Quinn 2016; Crines et al., 2018) this was soon displaced by concerns about what was referred to as a leadership 'cult', promulgated by the Labour-aligned Momentum

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network (McTernan, 2016; Blakey, 2016) and seen in cadres of young fans wearing Corbyn T-shirts, chanting his name at rallies and supporting his appearance at popular events such as Glastonbury music festival in 2017. This led to claims that Corbynism was actually enacting an anti-democratic, authoritarian populist style of leadership, associated with a form of simplistic politics, typical of contemporary successful right-wing leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. These concerns were intensified by the clash between Corbyn's supporters and the PLP. Although this was defended as a valiant attempt to democratise a party, using 'left populist' strategies to return it to its grassroots and free it from the grip of the establishment (Martell, 2018; Airas, 2018; Massey, 2015; Byrne, 2019) it was interpreted by critics as an undemocratic threat to our representative system seeking to build a shallow populist movement through appeal to conspiracy theories (Baggini, 2016; Bolton and Pitts, 2020); or.

The centrality of these debates to the Corbyn literature and the failure to resolve them suggests that Labour Party strategists are today faced with a dilemma: are they to consolidate as either a radical left-wing movement of the grassroots against the PLP, or a centre-left party that re-establishes the PLP's authority? Keir Starmer, Corbyn's successor, is already interpreted to have aligned himself with the latter of these two options (Mills, 2020, 55; Panitch, 2020; 90). However, I offer a reinterpretation of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism that, in recasting the relationship between ideology, democracy and populism, indicates this to be a false dichotomy. It not only risks unnecessarily restricting Labour Party strategy but, as I will show, has severe ramifications for how we understand left-wing politics in Britain more widely.

To make this argument, I begin, in section one, with the curious occurrence of the term 'populist' to describe both concerns about Corbynism's democratic credentials as well as its defence. I argue that Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism can demonstrate that the term populist is misused by both critics and supporters of Corbynism. This may be surprising, since it is reported that Corbyn's strategists were strongly influenced by left populism (Stewart and Elgot, 2016; Flinders, 2018; Hindmoor, 2018; Dean, 2020) – and Laclau and Mouffe are the foremost theorists of left populism. However, I argue that the novelty of Mouffe and Laclau's theory of populism has been widely misunderstood, conflated too easily with other populism scholarship, including by some of Laclau and Mouffe's proponents and most significantly, by Corbynist strategists. This has meant that the substantial contribution that Mouffe and Laclau could make to left strategy has largely been obscured. Laclau and Mouffe'sⁱ retheorisation of populism as the most democratic form of politics and as discursive more than ideological have almost been entirely overlooked. The implication for left strategy in the UK is that both strands of the apparent dilemma facing strategists are misconceived, stemming from an insufficient conceptualisation of democracy and ideology.

The second section details how Laclau and Mouffe's novel theorisation of ideology and democracy informs an alternative account of Corbyn's success and failure. It argues that Corbynism was first, neither too left-wing, nor needed to consolidate ideological unity to win

an election. Second, Corbynism was neither as authoritarian nor as democratic as detractors and supporters claim. Corbynist strategists appear to have shared many of the false assumptions about left-wing politics held by their opponents. Whilst purportedly trying to enact the populism associated with the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, I argue that Corbynism ended up enacting a parody of the anti-democratic populism decried by mainstream scholars.

What then, is the significance of my argument for future left strategy in the UK? In section three I suggest that Laclau and Mouffe can help here too. However, before demonstrating this, given the wide acceptance of the critical readings of prominent scholars (e.g. Urbinati, 2011; Müller, 2017, 98-9) who worry that Laclau and Mouffe's theory tends towards homogeneity, authoritarianism and exclusion, it is necessary to defend my claim via a counter-argument that Laclau and Mouffe's populism actually encourages broad alliance building, pluralism, and inclusivity. In addition, sections two and three are structured in such a way as to make Mouffe and Laclau's work accessible to those who work beyond the narrow field of radical democratic theory, including policy-makers and political strategists. I present their populism as a strategy toolkit comprising six key features: democratic political movements begin from demands rather than ideology; and from the people rather than the party; can be named by a phrase or the name of a *primus inter pares* leader; build broad alliances; are pluralist rather than pure; and seek an ever expanding and inclusive definition of the people rather than fall into the traditional binaries of nationalist or internationalist.

In the concluding section, I sketch how this toolkit informs a more fruitful future strategy for the British left. In particular, I argue that it is imperative to shift the focus from internal party politics to the wider electorate and to move from constructing a unified politics of shared ideology/values in advance, to linking voter demands into a broad alliance that discursively repositions the 'British people' in a more inclusive manner. The original contribution of this paper is threefold. I reframe key debates that currently seek to explain Corbynism's success and failure and argue that they cannot set the agenda for left political strategy; I offer a novel interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism that is accessible to those beyond the academy; and I apply this interpretation to develop a unique account of Corbynism's rise and fall that I use to inform original recommendations for left strategy in the UK.ⁱⁱ

Using populism to rethink ideology and democracy in British left politics

Starting with the centrality of 'populism' in debates over Corbynism's democratic credentials, I note that the distinctiveness of Laclau and Mouffe's populism from what is commonly understood as populism, and even 'left populism', is rarely acknowledged. Since the majority of populism scholars avow a commitment to democracy, the focus of their arguments centre on how to distinguish populism from democracy (Betz, 1994; Taggart, 2000; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Rosanvallon, 2008; Urbinati, 2014; Müller, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and

Kaltwasser, 2017; Moffitt, 2016). Even many who support elements of populism on the left (Arditi, 2003; Sandel, 2018, 359; Comaroff, 2011) accept that populism is, at least in some part, bad for democracy, albeit disagreeing over how bad. Although this may seem a banal observation, Laclau and Mouffe's approach brings into focus the anti-democratic danger of these analyses. Refusing to start from the assumption that populism must be undesirable, they trace the logics of populism to show where they converge more or less with democratic logic arguing that populism is the most democratic form of politics (Laclau, 2005a; Mouffe, 2018). This alternative starting point highlights a striking question at the heart of the populism debates, which is nearly always overlooked. If, at its simplest, populism just means 'politics of the people' how did the near consensus that populism is bad for democracy come about?

Despite many early forms of populism emerging as movements for justice and redistribution, the first studies of populism were hostile towards ordinary people, conjuring an elitist notion 'of ignorant crowds impressed by the sonorous words of "agitators" ...[leading] to extreme violence by the circulation of unchecked rumours and contagious fears' (Rancière, 2013, np). Indeed, in attempting to defend the good non-populist democracy from the bad populist democracy, contemporary populism scholars get trapped in the task of distinguishing the bad politics of the people from the good; the right people from the wrong; the anti-democratic, authoritarian, illiberal or fascist people from the egalitarian, inclusive, liberal, pluralist, democratic people. This preoccupation with needing to limit or constrain 'the people' of democracy in some way or other indicates a disquieting possibility that the elitist position identified by Rancière may be lingering unnoticed within political theory and practice today, undermining many scholars' expressed intentions to the contrary (Mudde, 2004, 555; Urbinati, 2014, 141). This draws attention to the fact that arguments about the extent to which Corbynism was democratic take place in a context where democracy is accepted by both sides as requiring limits and hierarchy. Although elitism may be more easily identified in the politics of those who prioritise the authority of the PLP over the membership, it is also the case, from Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, that limitations to 'the people' via other criteria such as party membership or ideology, as accepted by many of Labour's 'left populists' could also count as limiting democracy. This places Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic politics at some distance from both factions.

By approaching populism as a relation of logics rather than an ideology, Mouffe and Laclau no longer need to furnish the claim that democracy is just 'an appeal to the people' (Canovan, 1999: 5) with additional criteria, since there is no reason to think 'the people' of populism is necessarily any different to 'the people' of democracy. They assert that populism is, in actual fact, a defining feature of any democratic politics. Indeed, from their point of view, the question arises concerning what it would mean to imagine democracy without populism since this would be a democracy without the people. Such a democracy would no longer be democratic since it would imply a different and therefore nondemocratic constituent unit (Stavrakakis, 2014, 506) such as the rich, the tyrannous, economic rating agencies, the party,

or the virtuous. From this perspective, critique of populism *qua* populism rather than specific populist movements, appears to limit or remove the people from democracy in the name of protecting it. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe indicate that populism can be more or less democratic and can emerge from anywhere across the spectrum of left to right. The most populist politics is the most democratising and thus when enacted fully is more closely aligned with Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of left politics than any otherⁱⁱⁱ.

In turning to the relationship between ideology and populism, it is striking how many populism scholars use liberal values as their measure of democratic political legitimacy in order to argue that populism is to some extent undemocratic (e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Muller, 2016; Urbinati, 2014). Canovan identifies a 'two strand' model in many populism theories (2005, 84-6) which asserts that populism occurs when the liberal strand comprising liberal values and rights are neglected in favour of direct popular (democratic) action. This Schmittian dualism pits liberalism and democracy against each other. A move towards democracy leads away from liberalism and ultimately towards authoritarianism. Although Abts and Rummens (2007) cite the work of Chantal Mouffe as an adherent of this approach, I suggest that we must recognise that Mouffe's argument is more nuanced. She argues that our current regime type is liberal democratic, and that this is made up of two opposing traditions: liberal values alongside democracy as a form of rule (2000, 2). However, her critique of Schmitt asserts that the relationship between liberalism and democracy is not a 'balanced compromise' (Abts and Rummens, 2007, 410) since this implies a 'simplistic dualism' or binary (Mouffe, 2000, 10). Instead, it is a more complex relationship of contamination – each is already implicated within the other (ibid.): the democratic principle of popular sovereignty is, within the liberal-democratic regime, always *in tension with* the liberal commitment that it is acceptable to 'limit popular sovereignty in the name of liberty' (ibid., 2-4). Perhaps this nuance is missed because the detail is laid out in Mouffe's earlier co-authored work with Ernesto Laclau (2001), which offers a unique theorisation of the liberal-democratic regime-type that is rarely, if ever, commented on by their adherents. Nevertheless, I contend that it has considerable implications for how we conceptualise left-wing politics.

Mouffe and Laclau argue that the liberal-democratic regime type, which has endured with few interruptions since the French Revolution is less an ideology, and more a discursive formation of social practices that always *combine* liberalism with democracy as part of an unfolding democratic revolution (2001, 155; Mouffe, 2018, 42). The particular way these are combined in socioeconomic institutions will vary depending on the hegemonic articulation of the time (Mouffe, 2018, 44) which will likely draw on a specific ideology – Social Democratic, Conservative, Liberal, or Neoliberal for example. These ideologies are articulated *within* the liberal-democratic formation. In each articulation the practices of any liberal-democratic regime type may be more or less liberal or more or less democratic, but they will always combine the two in some way, and the possibility will remain of reorganising the combination. Far from seeking to overthrow the liberal-democratic regime type, Laclau and Mouffe's aim

for the left is to 'deepen and expand' liberal democracy such that we can construct the most 'radical and plural democracy' within it (2001, 176). They reject classical left revolutionary politics in place of a radical reformation of liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2018, 49). This is widely misunderstood, as for example in Mudde and Kaltwasser's assertion that for Laclau and Mouffe 'liberal democracy is the problem and radical democracy is the solution' (2017, 3). Instead, Mouffe and Laclau's aim is to radically democratise our current liberal democracies, not to prioritise democracy over liberty but to counter the recent tendency to empty the content out of our liberal-democratic practices. Populism is the method of achieving this, and for Mouffe and Laclau takes us to a position that they contend is more left-wing in the sense of being more radically egalitarian and libertarian, than much classical 'revolutionary' left politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 152; Mouffe, 2018, 40-1).

Thus, *pace* much of the populism literature, we must not assume that if a certain politics appears to constrain liberty to some extent in the name of democratic popular sovereignty then it must be wholly illiberal. As Mouffe argues, such a politics may simply draw on a different articulation of the tension between democracy and liberty. In any liberal-democratic constitution, Laclau and Mouffe contend that liberty must *always* be limited in some way by democracy. If we simply see our task as one of defending liberty from democracy, we increasingly empty the democracy from our liberal-democratic regimes and move instead towards the inequities and hierarchies of neoliberalism and the new right which purports to defend liberal rights against the interference of the state and democracy (2001, 172-5). This enables us to understand how the widely observed narrowing of the political field in recent times has occurred (Mudde, 2004, 553) as seen in the bias observed against Corbyn in political science as well as the media (Allen, 2019; Dean, 2016). Understanding democracy and liberalism as a binary rather than in tension encourages the grouping of all non-centrist politics, including that of Corbyn's Labour, under the umbrella of populism without distinguishing the more significant issue of how they seek to navigate the tension between liberalism and democracy to discern whether they operate on the left, centre or right within the liberal-democratic regime type at all, or whether they fall outside of it. This also provides a novel way to think about how we understand political extremism vis-à-vis liberal democracy, and reframes the debate about good versus bad populism to one of whether a politics is more populist or more extremist.

Having established that much of the nuance of Laclau and Mouffe's populism has been overlooked, it is necessary to revisit its key components in order to reassess its implications for how we account for Corbynism's rise and fall, and the implications for future left-wing strategy in Britain. To emphasise just how different Mouffe and Laclau's theory of populism is from dominant interpretations of populism, the discussion in the following two sections will be structured so as to contrast my interpretation of their work with Mudde's oft-quoted definition of populism as a 'thin-centred *ideology*' (2004, 544)

that considers society to be ultimately *separated* into *two homogeneous and antagonistic groups* “the *pure people*” versus “the *corrupt elite*” and which argues that politics should be an *expression of the volonté générale* (general will) of the people (ibid., 562 italics added).

Where many scholars, including those who defend Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of populism, argue that the difference between their work and Mudde’s is not, in practice, so significant (e.g. Katzambekis and Kioupkiolis, 2019, 11) I use Mudde’s quote to construct two category groupings that I contrast with Laclau and Mouffe to identify marked differences between the two that lead to significantly different political outcomes. First, in discussing *ideology* and the separation into *two antagonistic groups*, the people and the corrupt elite, I will demonstrate that Laclau and Mouffe’s populism, can, in contrast to Mudde’s, articulate an alternative account of Corbynism’s rise and fall (section two). I will argue that this account can be defended from widely accepted critiques of their work (section three) with regards to *purity, homogeneity* and *the general will*. The discussion of these two sections informs six criteria that comprise what I will refer to as a toolkit to inform, in the concluding section, six original recommendations for future British left strategy.

Ideology, the people and the corrupt elite

For Mouffe and Laclau, populism cannot begin at the level of ideology, since this presumes that a group has already been formed that shares certain views or values (Laclau, 2005a, 72). Instead, for them, populism details how such a group might form in the first place. It does not mean that Laclau and Mouffe’s populism is somehow above ideology, or that populism comprises an ideology, ‘thin-centred’ or otherwise. Instead, populism is a political logic through which diverse ideologies can operate since it has no ideological content of its own (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 142). Populism comprises a strategy of institution or de-institution of a political group via the linking and de-linking of otherwise isolated social demands (ibid.). Initially, these are discrete demands e.g. an end to austerity politics, a better funded NHS, affordable housing, a more reliable railway service, etc. If they are met by those in government they remain separate from one another and the possibility of building a movement never arises. If the regime fails to meet them, then dissatisfaction about separate demands could begin to be associated as part of a growing movement.

The move from fragmented demands into groups occurs via two opposing logics. In the first, isolated demands that differ from one another are said to embody a logic of difference, where no links are perceived between them. In contrast, demands that are associated with one another are related through a logic of equivalence since they share something that makes them equivalent: their unmet status (2005b, 39). This does not happen spontaneously but is the task of a political movement. The association or ‘equivalence’ between demands can be conceptualised as a chain linking demands. For example, healthcare funding and housing

might begin to be linked together as features of a shared movement, as Corbynism initially appeared to have succeeded in doing with its definition of anti-austerity politics.

This interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe marks a striking break with received wisdom about the role of ideology in politics that is rarely acknowledged and hence its ramifications are overlooked. First, it can help us rethink the aforementioned disagreement concerning whether Corbynism was too left-wing to win power in the UK. The prevailing view in much UK political analysis is that legitimate politics is that which comprises 'the centre' (Black, 1947; Downs, 1957; and Giddens's reworking of this 1994 and 1998). Despite many assuming that this is a non-normative category, discussion of the political centre is often interpreted as implying that the centre is fixed in place, as the ideological 'middle ground' to which a party such as Labour must return if they are to win an election (Bale, 2016, 7; Crines, 2015, 4; Honeyman, 2018, 15). Furthermore, Laclau and Mouffe's theorisation of liberal democracy helps us recognise how, in this language of the centre, the shift since the 1980s away from liberal democracy and towards liberalism moves what is commonly perceived to be 'the centre' and its accepted peripheries to an extreme limit of the liberal-democratic framework where the democratic element of liberal democracy is increasingly constrained in favour of economic liberalism. Not only does this mean that any left politics, including Corbynism, will seem more extreme now than it did before the neoliberal ascendancy, but that this is conceptualised in terms of it being further left of the (new) 'centre'. This might be why Corbynism was received by many as 'hard left' despite little policy-based evidence to support this (Allen and Moon, 2020; Maiguashca and Dean 2019a, 6-7; 2019b, 150). Indeed, Mouffe and Laclau's above theorisation of the role of liberal rights and freedoms in liberal democracy prompts us to analyse more carefully how much Corbynist politics incorporated liberal-democratic rights in relation to the discussion of how left-wing Corbynism actually was. Bolton and Pitts suggest that Corbynism refuted abstract rights and freedoms associated with the liberal tradition (2020, 4). However, the 2017 manifesto, along with the 2019 manifesto, contained policies clearly within Laclau and Mouffe's aforementioned liberal-democratic framework. Strangely though these policies were not even that left-wing, denounced as surprisingly un-radical (Rawnsley, 2017; Manwaring and Smith, 2019; Martell 2018; Worth, 2019). But if Corbynist politics were not as far left as many assumed, then Corbynism did not represent a choice between ideology or electability as many claimed.

Indeed, it is worth considering whether Corbyn's own strategists may have accepted the terms of this debate too, giving too much priority to the need to fracture 'ideological hegemony' in order to change the common sense that supports the current regime (Massey, 2015). In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe start at the level of what may appear to be fragmented, individual demands such as calls for better healthcare, housing, employment, which could be linked to the emerging 'Corbynist' movement to challenge the Tory ability to rule. Although these demands can be articulated as part of a wider anti-neoliberal ideology that is not a necessary condition of building a movement or winning an election. Starting with ideology causes an

over-emphasis on the role of party unity – as seen in the rift between Labour’s grassroots and the PLP. It could displace the role of demands and thereby miss an opportunity to bring together those who have different ideological positions on the left around popular policies and also to attract voters who may not (yet) identify ideologically with the Labour Party. Laclau and Mouffe’s reworking of the place of ideology in political strategising is corroborated by British Election Study data that showed UK party support is more strongly influenced by policies and leadership than ideological affiliation (Curtice, 2015). Indeed, research from the U.S. suggests meaningful political group affiliation is better explained by ‘affective identity’ than ‘ideological identity’ (Iyengar, et al., 2012), where voters view ‘opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively’ based more on our feelings of camaraderie and dislike, than ideological content (Iyengar et al., 2019, 135). This is not to assume that ideology plays no part in affective identity, but that, ideological change is the discursive product of a political movement, not its cause (Laclau, 2006b, 114).

This need not mean, as Doreen Massey fears, that politicians must give up on ‘campaigning to change the notion of what the electorate might want’, since just starting with what the electorate currently demand does not mean ‘there is no chance at all of countering the currently dominant ways of thinking’ (2015, 8). Second, appealing to demands does not mean that we must appeal to self-interest. Just because a demand emerges at the level of the subject does not mean that it could not be communitarian, collective, or other-oriented. In contrast, starting at the level of the demand may indicate, not that we must give up on hegemonic change and accept the status quo, but that hegemonic change must be conceptualised differently. Ideology, for Laclau, operates at the level of the wider discourse. The demand first must be linked into the discourse. This takes place via the affective rejection of the ruling elite. This means that Corbynism needed to neither accept the status quo nor seek ideological unity as much as construct a new chain of equivalence which would in the process have shifted the political ‘centre’ to the left.

How about the disagreement over whether Corbynism reduced or enhanced democracy? To satisfy unmet demands, any movement’s aim is to take power. It must build its own appeal whilst targeting the position of those currently in power as the enemy. This is not necessarily polarising or simplifying as many fear (Urbinati, 2014; Muller, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Instead, a movement can simply take advantage of already existing polarisation by making links between disparate demands from ‘the people’ (the underdog) into a single opposition, perhaps bringing together otherwise separate groups such as feminists, healthcare workers, immigrant groups and religious groups. In linking unmet demands, it constructs a new camp separated from the incumbent rulers by an internal frontier (an antagonistic division that is internal to a certain society rather than on its peripheries). In defence, the rulers (‘elite’) will seek to unlink these demands from the populist chain and either argue that they can be met separately or seek to discredit them as invalid.

Did Corbynism succeed in constructing a 'people'? It was widely commented that the Corbynist movement devoted much energy to changing dominant views within the PLP (Kelly, 2015; Diamond, 2016, 22; Watts and Bale, 2019) yet scholars are divided as to whether this was at the cost of addressing the electorate more widely, and whether it mistakenly equated Corbynism with the Party more than the 'people' (Atkins and Turnbull, 2016; Maiguashca and Dean, 2019b, 154; Bennister, et al., 2017, 14) thereby failing to accurately recognise the constituent unit of democracy. Some claim that Corbyn did try, although ultimately failed, to appeal significantly to 'the British people' (Bolton and Pitts, 2020) yet others disagree (Maiguashca and Dean 2019b, 154) and suggest that wider appeal to alliances beyond the party faithful was always in short supply (Gilbert, 2017). Hence, despite initial success, it would seem that despite the broader democratic policies put forward and the work of Momentum outside the party (Martell, 2018) the attempt to revolutionise the Labour Party, based on a misguided assumption that parties are the key constituency of democracy, ultimately came at the expense of seeking to build a populist movement that could win an election.

Preoccupation with the party is also apparent in the extent to which Corbynism failed to construct the 'corrupt elite' as the 'enemy'. Corbyn's leadership victory effected a dramatic break with the politics of austerity and neoliberalism associated with previous governments (Richards, 2016, 15), initially seeming to successfully enact Laclau and Mouffe's populism (Mouffe, 2018, 38), propelling its early appeal (Massey, 2015; Worth, 2019; Whiteley et al., 2019; Airas, 2018). However, how clearly did the Corbynist movement associate neoliberalism with the governing Tory party rather than an amorphous capitalist class? Although some note that Corbyn strongly opposed the Tories as opposed to fighting along class lines (Maiguashca and Dean, 2019a, 14; 2019b, 156; Seymour, 2016, 204) others disagree (Martell, 2018, 3) claiming that the enemy was neoliberalism in general (Airas, 2018, 447). Indeed, the elites targeted by Corbynism were not only the Tory party but the entire Westminster regime – including the PLP. Analysis by Crines et al. suggests that Corbyn's own strategists actually overestimated the level of disagreement within the Party (2018) indicating a narrow preoccupation with party unification instead of movement building. Thus, despite clearly enacting an affective break with the austerity politics of the ruling party that was needed to initiate Labour's resistance to the Tories (Airas, 2018), it appears that Corbynism failed to sufficiently identify the parliamentary Tory party as the 'corrupt elite'. This could be said to have hindered the clear construction of an internal frontier between Labour and the Tories at the 2019 general election, confusingly incorporating much of the PLP alongside the Tories in the elite to be opposed. This again asserts an unnecessary primacy to the role of political parties, conflating the party with a political movement rather than a partner within it. It assumes a more limited, less egalitarian, model of democracy than Laclau and Mouffe's, restricting the potential for the Labour Party to win the election by failing to attract those who had voted Tory or did not see themselves as primarily left-wing or anti-neoliberal, even if they

may have shared some of the demands appealed to in Labour's 2017 and 2019 manifestos (Curtice, 2015).

With regard to the role of the leader, the process of linking plural demands into a single chain requires one to stand in for all. This is a demand that has a meaning more ambiguous than some of the others – more likely 'anti-austerity' than 'a better railway service'. However, it cannot just be an ambiguous – or 'floating' – signifier. It must be at least tendentially *empty* – i.e. have no fixed signified. This is routinely misunderstood by many populist scholars. It does not mean, *contra* Mudde, that in every practical instantiation of populism 'the people' is not filled with meaning in some way (2015, 435). Simply, that which comes to represent the people cannot already be strongly associated with an existing definition which is necessarily pre-limited (e.g. a better railway service) since it needs to be contestable in turn (such as anti-austerity which could be associated with a wide range, of, at times, conflicting, demands). Although many left populists strongly defend using the name of a leader in this role (e.g. Mouffe, 2018, 70; Biglieri and Cadahia, 2020), few note that the same function could be performed by 'an idea or abstraction' (Laclau citing Freud, 2005a, 60) or any tendentially empty phrase, such as 'anti-austerity'. However, the name of a leader is commonly used and in a democratic situation, a leader could be represented as having no demands of their own other than demanding the institutional position to fulfil the other demands. Far from 'a narcissistic despot' this could be any democratic, *primus inter pares*, leader (Laclau, 2005a, 60). Indeed, Corbyn's surprise victory as Labour leader in 2015, was argued to have been partly fuelled by the use of his name to bring together the otherwise disparate elements of the anti-austerity movement – creating the phenomenon 'Corbynism' (Massey, 2015, 9; Airas, 2018, 448). Airas suggests that Corbyn's 'bland' image (ibid.) could have made his name an ideal empty signifier, a 'conduit' (Massey, 2015, 9) for the people's demands. However, the introverted party focus meant that Corbyn was increasingly perceived as a conduit that channelled the demands of party members against the PLP rather than the demands of the wider electorate, including the Tory voters needed for Labour to take power (Crines, 2017).

The emphasis placed in this section on the oft-overlooked distinctiveness of Laclau and Mouffe's populism demonstrates that their theorisation of ideology and democracy dissolves the apparent dilemmas facing left strategists today, providing an alternative account of Corbynism's rise and fall. First, there need not be a choice between ideology and electability. A party is neither too left-wing nor needs to shift public opinion to the left in advance. Instead, populist strategy can shift the centre through the construction of a chain of equivalence during an election campaign. Second, rather than identifying Corbynism as either authoritarian populist or a democratic 'left populist', it would seem that with respect to the construction of an enemy and the role of the leader, it failed to adequately enact the populism of Laclau and Mouffe at all. Identifying the PLP with 'the enemy' in a misguided quest to secure party hegemony and ideological unity prevented the clear construction of an internal frontier that could position the Labour Party as representatives of 'the people'. The identification of

Corbynism more with the demands of Labour party members rather than the wider electorate missed the opportunity to mobilise the name of the leader as the empty signifier that could represent a wider chain of equivalence in a democratic manner.

My argument here will raise objections from those familiar with the more dominant interpretations of Laclau and Mouffe's populism concerning anti-democratic tendencies in what is perceived as their reliance on purity, homogeneity, and the will of an exclusive 'people'. In the next section I will argue that these charges are misplaced and actually, in distinguishing Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism from that of Mudde's, their populism can be understood as protecting liberal democracy from these threats.

Purity, homogeneity, and the exclusionary general will

For Laclau, the supreme point of a populist movement is one in which the empty signifier signifies the 'pure idea of a communitarian fullness' (1996, 42) indicated by the otherwise empty moniker 'the people' (2005b, 40). 'The people' acts as a name for all of the people's demands – or at least as many as possible – against the current regime. It can unite people, even if only tenuously as in the case of the Peronist coalition of early 1970s Argentina, from across the political spectrum (2005a, 220-21). But what is the role of the term 'pure' here? Although it has unfortunately led many to assume that populism excludes and is intolerant of difference, making it anti-democratic and authoritarian (e.g. Urbinati, 166; Mudde, 2004, 563; Muller, 2017, 98-9) Laclau insists that heterogeneity is retained at every stage – because purity, although conceptually possible, is, in practice, always absent (1996, 42). This is most clear at the level of each demand which is comprised of both homogeneity and heterogeneity. Any demand retains its particularity via its content (e.g. a better railway service or access to healthcare). Homogeneity only emerges in what is shared with the other demands in the chain – their unmet status. As the chain of equivalence is extended, the shared (homogeneous) part of every demand can never suppress its particular (heterogeneous) content (Laclau, 2005b, 46). Hence equivalence in practice can never be pure. Laclau's 'pure idea' thus arises from his extensive theoretical formalism. Unfortunately it appears to have misled critics who fixate on the risks, as they see it, of purity in populist politics, and ignore Laclau's insistence that any actual attempt in practice to fix any chain as the only possible way to signify a movement collapses the social 'into simple identity' (2005a, 82), undermining the system of signification that we rely upon for communication, by erasing any residue of the equivalential relation.

Consequently, Mouffe and Laclau's populism does not assert pure homogeneity against difference. Instead, populism is the tense point where equivalence and difference are balanced against one another. This can be seen in their conceptualisation of equivalence and difference as opposing poles on an axis:

political identities are the result of the articulation (that is, tension) of the opposed logics of equivalence and difference, and the mere fact that the balance between these logics is broken by one of the two poles prevailing beyond a certain point over the other, is enough to cause the 'people' as a political actor to disintegrate (Laclau, 2005a, 200).

Thus, populism faces two challenges. First, differentiation/fragmentation – either institutional or social – separates demands and makes it impossible to establish an equivalential chain in the first instance (ibid., 200). Examples of this might be Disraeli's One Nation; technocratic government of experts; or even the welfare state when it responds to demands via separate bureaus, discouraging any attempt to link them. Second, 'pure' equivalence (2005b, 45-6) or 'simple identity' (Laclau, 2005a, 82) would also make the emergence of the 'people' as a collective actor impossible, emptying out the particular content of any demand (Laclau, 1996, 45) and equating all demands only with love for the leader or idea (2005a, 82). An example of the latter is found in the subordination of the name of the people to the Communist concept of 'worker' (ibid.; 2005a, 183). It is also found in the Kemalist creation of 'the people' as 'an *a priori* homogeneous unity' (ibid., 208), presenting the Turkish people as 'a seamless community without internal fissures' (ibid., 209). In such a case, the people's demands are already asserted and met by the movement's leaders, and any other demands are portrayed as false. In the latter, it is as if the contingent equivalential relation is fixed as the only possible meaning of the 'the people'. By denying its contingency, the differential part of each demand becomes increasingly subordinated to the signifier, rather than held in a balanced tension. This slides the movement away from the central point of tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity, and towards homogeneity.

Here I contend that it is instructive to interpret Laclau and Mouffe as theorising populism in terms of a sliding scale, the central point of which would be the point of maximum alliance between plural positions rather than a point of totalising sameness. Conceptually, this could also be referred to as the point of maximum populism, where the highest number of different demands are bought together into a single chain but where their contingent place in the chain remains open to contestation. In practical terms this would mean that the more populist a movement is, the *less* pure it would be in terms of simple identity. Instead, it would always be in motion, building alliances that have to be 'constantly re-created and re-negotiated' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 188). In contrast, Corbynism's quest to radicalise the PLP could be said to mistakenly seek purity of the party at the expense of constructing a broad alliance of popular, heterogeneous, support (Gilbert, 2017), including but extending beyond the party.

I further contend that Laclau and Mouffe offer resources to not only distinguish a liberal-democratic political movement (which combines homogeneity and heterogeneity in various ways) from extremism (which tends towards purity of either heterogeneity or homogeneity) but different forms of extremism - authoritarianism and totalitarianism – from each other.

Given its novelty, this claim needs to be explicated if we are to respond adequately to the concerns that Corbynism had authoritarian tendencies. Although totalitarianism has commonly been understood as a more extreme version of authoritarianism (Linz, 1964) I suggest that each opposing pole of Laclau and Mouffe's discursive scale could accord with Paul Sondrol's study of totalitarianism and authoritarianism which identifies a distinction between them. According to Sondrol, authoritarianism breaks down the links between people so that they can be ruled passively whereas totalitarianism requires strong identities between the people who are subordinated to the leader (2009). Relating this back to Laclau and Mouffe, if homogeneity intensifies it would lead towards totalitarianism (2001, 186). Second, as we move towards difference the links between demands are broken, to be dealt with individually and hierarchically by bureaucratic administration. The more intensely this differentiation is defended the closer this would tend towards authoritarianism (ibid., 188; Laclau, 2005b, 46)^{iv}.

In practical terms this suggests that a democratising movement would link demands without enforcing homogeneity, retaining pluralism whilst constructing a common movement rather than seeking to incorporate pluralism under a single party identity. Although Corbynism has been accused of authoritarianism by several scholars, my analysis indicates that the features observed such as dogmatism, lack of compromise, homogeneous vanguardism, anti-pluralism, and personality cult (Thompson, 2016, 46; Hiindmoor, 2018, 17; Bolton and Pitts, 2020, 4; Blakey, 2016) are more precisely identified as totalitarian. Although the extent to which these tendencies existed at all is far from clear (Dean and Maignashca, 2019; Dean, 2020), they could be explained by misguided strategy. Laclau and Mouffe's populism celebrates pluralism and consequently resists both totalitarianism and authoritarianism. However, perhaps familiar only with the more well-known theories of populism, the aforementioned features would suggest that Corbynism ended up enacting a caricature of populism as totalitarian. This prevented it from appealing to floating voters who may only have shared one or two demands with the Corbynist movement. This could help explain the failure to capitalise on Corbyn's initial surge of support.

Finally, let us consider Mudde's category of the *general will*. I suggest that Laclau's understanding of the communitarian identity of the people differs significantly from Rousseau's organic general will as interpreted by Mudde. Rather than a single will it is a crystallisation of a consciously artificial coalition of multiple different demands. It cannot manifest itself to us without a political movement making efforts to represent it, to actively link already existing demands together into a movement (2005b, 41). But to what extent could such a movement be 'general'? Where do 'the people' of democracy extend to and what happens to those who are not represented by it?

Several scholars worry that 'the people' of Laclau and Mouffe's populism would in practice always violently exclude (Devenney, 2019, 143; Urbinati, 2014, 160-6; Muller, 2017, 98-9). Indeed, Claire Ainsley, Labour's current Director of Policy is concerned that populism stokes

'national identity' as it requires 'definition of a people against others' (2018, 47). In nation-state electoral politics the exclusion is explicit and given in advance as the electorate is the nation's citizenry however construed. Yet I contend that there is nothing in Laclau and Mouffe's populism to indicate that the people must be defined in advance (Laclau, 2006a, 672). Instead, the particular effectiveness of the term 'the people' stems from its plural meanings. Both today and in its Roman origins, it indicates everyone, without qualification; as well as a particular privileged citizenry, such as those belonging to a particular nation; as well as what are considered just the common, ordinary 'plebs', or poorer people. Although it is always the case that in any such movement 'the people' will emerge as a partial grouping comprising those who oppose the elite, the claim to be 'the people' is not a claim to be 'a people' but a *performative* claim to be the entire, unspecified general people – where the plural meanings combine. Laclau articulates this as the moment when the 'plebs' (the underdog) become 'the populus' (2005a, 86) successfully demonstrating that their demands have aligned with those of everyone and asserting that common sense has shifted. But does even this require exclusion at some level?

There has been scant reflection on Laclau and Mouffe's answer to this question. I note that in his discussion of ethno-nationalism Laclau distinguishes different forms of politics based on the status of ethnic or other exclusive membership criteria. For example, in cases of ethnic cleansing and ethno-nationalist politics an additional frontier is drawn on the basis of blood to separate 'the people' from those who are not deemed to be part of the ethnic group (2005a, 196-7) and who have no future place in society's composition. This is not an internal frontier since an internal frontier recognises a place for the opposing camp within a shared society, and simply draws a line within society over which aspirational and incumbent rulers fight. Instead, any blood distinction is an *a priori* exclusion from the people and as such is an 'external' frontier, limiting who is included within the political struggle in the first place, and who can instead be subordinated or killed. Thus, any movement that relies on an ethnic composition of the people in addition to the establishment of an internal frontier seeks to significantly reduce in advance contestation over who is included within 'the people'. Any such movement would subordinate the internal political frontier to an external ethnic one, since one has to first be admitted into that specific people, before being able to participate in political struggle.

Thus, the extent to which 'the people' is defined in advance is gradational, identified by the existence but also the status of any external frontier. In the context of a national politics, the national qualifier, such as 'British' will always signify an exclusivity to whomsoever is designated as the British people. Populism consequently appears at odds with an internationalist left politics. Yet such exclusivity is not a consequence of populism as much as the nation-state system within which democratic politics is constrained to operate. Upon recognising this, I suggest that Laclau and Mouffe's populism indicates that any national people could be construed in a more or less inclusive manner, seeking, as much as might be

possible, to undermine racist and exclusionary definitions by minimising the status of the external frontier (minimising the significance of the national border through an open border policy for example). Whilst the implications for future left strategy will be explored below, suffice to say that what is novel about Laclau and Mouffe's approach, but has nowhere been developed until this point, is that the extent to which criteria governing inclusion in any 'people' are liberal-democratic must be assessed in terms of their 'openness' (2001, 186) rather than simply on whether or not there are criteria. This moves beyond a simplistic nationalism/internationalism binary, forcing us to question how we might re-signify national identity so as to still construct a strong political movement that can take power within the existing nation state system, but in the most inclusive way, in order to subvert and challenge racist nationalist identities.

However, Corbyn appeared to avoid the issue of Britishness rather than take a clear stance, deploying the term 'British people' relatively rarely. This could be taken as evidence that, as assumed by many, Corbynism opposed borders (Rutherford, 2017). Yet, given the discussion above, if Corbynism was to succeed, it needed to appeal to the British electorate. Corbynism provided an opportunity for the British left to construct a narrative of 'the British people' beyond the unsophisticated nationalist/internationalist dichotomies emerging from Brexit. Not only did this fail to materialise but Bolton and Pitts suggest it never could, since Corbynism was wedded to a rather out-of-date state-based nationalism (2020, 4-6). Perhaps the confusion here indicates more that Corbynist strategists were simply struggling to find a way to appeal to the British electorate whilst at the same time holding fast to the internationalism with which Corbyn has long been associated.

My interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe's populism challenges the dominant narratives explaining Corbynism's rise and fall. It indicates less that Corbynism was hindered or helped by its ideological position or by being either too authoritarian or democratising, and more that Corbynist strategists misunderstood the post-Marxist 'left populism' they sought to enact. In defending and developing Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism against the concerns of their critics I have identified six criteria for building a populist political movement: start at the level of the demand rather than ideology; link the demands of the people, not just the party, against the ruling elite; incorporate demands into a chain of equivalence forming an internal frontier that can be identified with the name of a *primus inter pares* leader or a phrase; construct a broad alliance; aspire to pluralism not purity; and minimize the external frontier, constituting a more inclusive people. As noted above, such features align a populist movement with what is commonly understood as a left political position. Although right-wing political movements may attempt to apply some of these criteria they can only ever do so partially, perhaps linking demands into a broad alliance against the incumbent elite, but likely tending away from the *primus inter pares* leader and towards a more dominatory figurehead; seeking purity over pluralism; and maximising the external frontier to restrict their notion of the people. However, despite the alignment of Laclau and Mouffe's populism with left politics, the

theoretical focus of their work can make it difficult to see in simple terms what it would mean for the UK left to implement these criteria in practice. In the final section I will sketch out an answer to this question by demonstrating how these criteria might inform an analysis of current Labour Party strategy under Corbyn's successor, Keir Starmer.

Conclusion: Implications for left-wing politics in the UK

In November 2021 Labour opened an opinion poll lead over the Conservatives for the first time since June 2019. But Labour's lead was not overwhelming and doubts remained about whether Starmer would be a good prime minister (Savage, 2021). Although political success may always require exploiting an opponent's weakness, this alone can never be the whole story. I will here consider how my interpretation of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism indicates how the British left could gain support in its own right beyond simply waiting for the Tories to defeat themselves.

I have first argued that Corbynism was constrained by its misunderstanding of the place of ideology within a political movement, seeking to unite supporters with a shared ideology. Starmer's Labour could be seen to continue along this path, with their policy director, Claire Ainsley, arguing that they need to identify values in advance that voters will associate with (2018). Both approaches overlook the aforementioned role of policies, leadership and affective identity in shaping voter preference. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe indicate that if a left party or coalition is to win an election in the UK it would benefit from a greater focus on policies, so as to link left-wing demands with those of the wider electorate. Although it could be argued that demands are often shaped by particular values or ideology, this may not always be the case, since different values could inform the same demand. Starting with values or ideology adds an extra level of complication that is unlikely to be necessary and may restrict rather than expand the number of voters that could be attracted. This does not mean that politics can be 'value-free' but that the relationship between policy and values needs to be rethought. Indeed, starting with a demand may in fact help to shift voter values by forming a novel alliance that then facilitates communication and exchange of views. Whilst Starmer's (2021) recent pamphlet *'The Road Ahead'* does seem to attempt to identify key issues that his Labour Party wish to address, these are derived, for Starmer from 'ten principles' rather than simply from voter demands, and the pamphlet is strikingly devoid of policy proposals.

Secondly, Corbynism was hindered by its preoccupation with party unity. In contrast, for Laclau and Mouffe, it is necessary to look beyond the elitist limitations represented by any party, recognising that the constitutive unit of democracy is instead 'the people'. Thus, any left-wing party would need to worry less about party unity and more about constructing a clear narrative identifying the party with 'the people'. Party unity would likely still emerge in such a process, but as a by-product of a clearer association of the parliamentary opposition, in this case the Tories, with the 'corrupt elite', rather than as an end in itself. Despite quite

staggering allegations of Tory sleaze circulating for some time, Labour has, as yet, failed to capitalise on these. Although, under Starmer, we can see a greater attempt to appeal to 'the people' alongside the party (2021), he could be seen to continue the preoccupation with unifying the party through his July 2021 purge of the party's more radical members (Mason, 2021).

Third, although commentators disagree about the extent to which Corbyn's personality 'cult' was a problem for the movement, Laclau and Mouffe indicate that it need not be undemocratic to associate the demands of a movement with the name of a leader as long as the leader remains *primus inter pares*. In such a case, the leader's name would not be used to enforce homogeneity but instead would represent as wide an alliance of supporters as possible. However, it is not essential to use the name of the leader in this way since the same function could be performed by a phrase or idea. Whilst it may seem fanciful to imagine the development of a 'Starmerist' political movement, this indicates that it would not hurt the Labour Party or other left-wing parties to seek to associate their leader or party name with the demands of the people – but that this should be 'the people' in a pluralist sense without the requirement of party membership. Yet, fourth, Laclau and Mouffe's insistence on the need to balance homogeneity with heterogeneity reinforces the suggestion that left political strategy would do well to seek to build a broad political alliance beyond the confines of one party (e.g. Gilbert, 2017) and hence a leader who can appeal beyond the party, or a phrase that is not associated with only one party may have more chance of success.

Fifth, attending to the way Laclau and Mouffe provide resources to differentiate authoritarianism and totalitarianism from liberal democracy helps defend left-wing policies from charges of extremism, or at least being too 'radical', by emphasising their pluralist content. This could legitimise new social-democratic type policies that have for too long been demonised as too left-wing or even authoritarian whilst simultaneously helping identify the authoritarian risks of neoliberal policies and strengthen opposition to them. This would not, however, require a return to the 20th Century post-war consensus, but the forging of a 'new synthesis of democratic and socialist traditions' (Mouffe, 2018, 52). Whilst Starmer's vision seems to include wanting to remake the achievements of post-War social democracy for the 21st century (2021), it is feared that his leadership will see Labour's policies continue to shore up neoliberalism rather than forge such a striking path (Panitch, 2020).

Finally, my development of Laclau and Mouffe's theorisation of how to build an inclusive people can draw inspiration from Spain's *Podemos* to help construct a new inclusive vision of 'the British people' that need not imply links with birth-right or blood. Contra Ainsley's proposal that the Labour Party move from constructing a shared national identity to shared values (2018, 156), we could instead learn from *Podemos*' pluri-nationalism (Kioupiolis, 2019, 65), which, rather than relinquish national identity, leaving it to become the sole property of reactionary political forces, sought to resignify Spanish identity as diverse and plural through

reference to inclusive welfare policies and open citizenship (Custodi, 2021). Rather than accepting the racism and exclusion associated with traditional nationalist identity this resignification comprised a subversive remaking of national identity as less nationalist and more internationalist. This indicates that the 'British people' could be constructed in a more inclusive manner, combining the traditional left commitment to internationalism with the need to articulate a 'people'. This would require a conception of the British people that genuinely incorporates the diversity of a multiracial and multicultural electorate. Again, such an inclusive vision seems implied in Starmer's current position by his defence of 'inclusive patriotism' over 'nationalism' (2021,19-20), however, for Starmer, this requires unity and starts from principles rather than demands. Far from splitting hairs, it is important to note that whilst Laclau and Mouffe emphasise diversity or pluralism as integral to populism, these operate for Laclau and Mouffe as logics, rather than values. The difference can be seen in that, rather than assert that the British people value diversity or pluralism without changing how the British people are constituted, Laclau and Mouffe's discursive approach, as demonstrated by *Podemos*, encourages us to revisit marginalized discursive practices to uncover alternative instances of a plural and diverse people that may already be present but have until this point been suppressed (El-Enany, 2020) - of subversive 'counter-narratives' of the British empire for example that emphasise the significant wealth that the Empire generated by many who have been repeatedly denied access to British citizenship.

We have seen that existing political analysis has struggled to understand Corbynism's rise and fall. Applying my interpretation of Mouffe and Laclau's theory of populism to the 'Corbyn phenomenon' recasts the dilemmas that confront the British left today. Dissolving the dominant arguments concerning Corbyn's defeat, I contend that the British left is constrained by an insufficient conceptualisation of ideology and democracy. I therefore conclude that Corbynism's defeat in 2019 was not because it was too left-wing or not left-wing enough; nor because it was too authoritarian or too democratic; but, because Corbynism was – in Laclau and Mouffe's sense – just not populist enough. The significance of this argument, beyond redefining how we understand populism, is that it indicates that a left-wing political movement is currently electable in the UK without needing to appeal to an already-existing 'centre' or shifting public opinion in advance; nor will its election be effected by simply consolidating any political party in favour of either the grassroots or its parliamentary members. Instead electoral success could be achieved by following the six strategies of a democratising 'populist' movement outlined above. By seeking a much wider alliance of the people, such a movement could begin to substantially shift the UK's political centre to the left, rejecting the neoliberal hegemony that has dominated for so long and significantly reshaping the political landscape of 21st Century Britain.

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ⁱLaclau and Mouffe developed their theory together and although only co-authored *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001) often reference their continued collaboration in separate publications. As a result, although Laclau is more commonly cited as a theorist of populism, I seek in this article to recognise Mouffe's significant contribution to this theory as demonstrated by her *Towards a Left Populism* (2018).

ⁱⁱI am indebted to the participants of meetings hosted by the British Academy Transnational Populism network led by Paula Biglieri at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina and Mark Devenney at the University of Brighton, UK, for inspiring the development of this paper. I am also grateful to Chantal Mouffe, Wojciech Ufel, Paulina Tambakaki, Jonathan Dean, Lasse Thomassen, Leszek Koczanowicz, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, Nick Randall, and two anonymous reviewers for their generous and insightful feedback. All errors are my own.

ⁱⁱⁱ This begs the question whether the moniker 'left' is necessary when referring to Laclau and Mouffe's populism. With regards to the democratic credentials of a political movement, it is more informative for Laclau and Mouffe to identify it as more or less populist rather than left or right populist.

^{iv}The logic of difference could also eventually result in an increasing state of totalisation, although it would need to pass through authoritarianism to arrive there, for it too can eventually conceive of society as a total closed system comprised of an 'absolute system of differences' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 182). This indicates that we should visualise the aforementioned axis between equivalence and difference not as a line but as more of a horseshoe shape, where slippage between authoritarianism at the pole of heterogeneity and totalitarianism at the pole of homogeneity becomes possible.