

# **Populist representation and agonistic politics.**

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## **1. Outline**

In this paper I analyze the relation between populism and democratic politics. I view agonistic politics as a defining feature of democratic politics and argue that the difference between agonism and antagonism distinguishes democratic from non-democratic politics. I will argue that populism can be analyzed, at least in part, as a reaction against agonistic politics. In the next section I argue that within the dominant discourse of ‘democracy’, ‘liberal democracy’ has become the hegemonic articulation in western countries. Next, I will, along with Mouffe, call the domestication of political struggle agonistic politics. In the third section I explain that both the impartiality of democratic procedures and institutions and a democratic ethos of dual partisanship are preconditions for agonistic politics. I will discuss two carriers of this partisanship: citizens and political parties. In the fourth section I will argue that populism does not share this democratic ethos of dual partisanship. Populists are partisans of holism which excludes pluralism and liberalism. In the final section I will argue that it is the task of democracy to refuse to let antagonistically articulated oppositions by populists result in a friend-enemy distinction.

## **2. Partisanship of democratic politics**

Since the Second World War, ‘democracy’ has gradually become the accepted political norm in Western Europe. Before the war mass political parties in these countries, e.g. Christian, socialist, communist parties, accepted democracy reluctantly as a political regime that deals with pragmatically with political conflicts but were secretly hoping for the realization of their own political ideal in spite of democracy. It was only after the Second World War that in Western Europe democracy was accepted as the general norm for political action. This shifting political connotation of democracy means that the burden of proof for advocates and opponents of democracy has shifted, too. While before the Second World War advocates of democracy had to give reasons why democracy is a good political regime, after 1945, when democracy became the political value, the positions shifted, and opponents had to give reasons why they think that democracy is a bad political regime.

After this shift, ‘democracy’ has gradually become the dominant discourse worldwide. In 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the *Universal Declaration of*

*Human Rights*, which represented the international recognition that human rights and fundamental freedoms are applicable to every person, everywhere. After their struggle for independence in the 1950s, Third World countries legitimized their political regimes by referring to liberal democratic values and norms, too. The Bandung Conference in 1955, a meeting of representatives of 29 African and Asian nations, which intended to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose (neo-)colonialism, resulted in a declaration that included, among others, the protection of human rights and the principle of self-determination. In the *Vienna Declaration* in 1993, the first human rights conference held since the end of the Cold War, democracy was explicitly identified with liberal democracy. The *Vienna Declaration* recognized democracy as a human right, thus strengthening the promotion of democracy and the rule of law.<sup>1</sup> Although ‘democracy’ has become the dominant discourse, it has not become objective reality in many countries. At the discursive level, democracy has to become dominant so that even dictatorial regimes take reference to ‘the people’ to legitimize their political actions and beliefs.

Within this dominant discourse of ‘democracy’, liberal democracy has become the hegemonic order in the western countries. I borrow the notion of hegemony from Mouffe, who – drawing on her work with Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – has argued that „social objectivity is constituted through acts of power.”<sup>2</sup> For Mouffe, it follows from this that social objectivity and „every order is ultimately political and based on some form of exclusion.”<sup>3</sup> The mutual collapse or convergence of objectivity and power is what Laclau and Mouffe call ‘hegemony’. A hegemony articulates an order as real or given and legitimizes it ‘as natural’. Mouffe argues that these hegemonic articulations are always contingent and constitutive. They are contingent because any political order is the expression of the temporary articulation of power relations which could always be otherwise. Every order is based on a particular structure of power relations that excludes other possibilities. Hegemonic

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<sup>1</sup> The Vienna Declaration states that „Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Democracy is based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. In the context of the above, the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels should be universal and conducted without conditions attached. The international community should support the strengthening and promoting of democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the entire world.” Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, as adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights on 25 June 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe, C. (2000), *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

articulations are constitutive in the sense that they constitute social relations, not depending on any a priori social rationality.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Mouffe believes that democracy requires a consensus around liberal democratic values, but she argues that consensus on these values is already an expression of a hegemonic articulation which is necessarily an expression of particular constellation of power relations. As such, for Mouffe, what consensus around liberal-democratic values means, is the constitution of a hegemony. Given the assumption that any consensus refers to the constitution of social objectivity that can only come about through acts of power, the main question for democratic politics can not be the elimination of power, but as Mouffe notes, the main question becomes „how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values”<sup>5</sup>. This is why Mouffe sees as the primary task of democracy to transform all kinds of societal tensions and oppositions, which are potentially a threat for the political order, into an agonistic conflict in which the legitimacy of the political opponent is recognized.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the question is how to domesticate the political – ”the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonisms than can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations” – by politics – ”the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual, because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’.”<sup>7</sup>

The domestication of political struggle is what I, along with Mouffe, will call agonistic politics. The extent to which democratic institutions succeed to transform antagonism into agonism is an important criterion for the legitimacy of a democratic regime. The democratic degree of a political regime is dependent on the extent to which antagonism is transformed into agonism. The extent to which democratic institutions succeed in this task may fluctuate. For, as a consequence of societal tensions and oppositions, there exists the possibility that antagonistic opposition may not be transformed into an agonistic one. If such transformation does not take place, oppositional hostility arises. Arguably, non-democratic institutions are able to domesticate political struggle, too, but they do not offer room for the political articulation of different interests and values. In sum, democracy is a struggle between different political articulations of real and potential societal antagonisms that can enter the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> Mouffe, C., (2005), *On The Political*, London/New York: Routledge, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Mouffe, C. (2000), *The Democratic Paradox*, Verso, London, p. 101.

political process in the form of legitimate political demands. Therefore, democracy has to translate opposite societal forces into contested political power.

### **3. Impartiality and partisanship in democratic politics**

Following Mouffe, Iris Marion Young has described liberal democracy as „a set of institutions that transforms mere exclusion and opposition to the other into engaged antagonism within accepted rules.”<sup>8</sup> In order for political conflict to be fought out within these accepted rules, political actors have to agree upon a set of procedures, i.e. they have to share a particular democratic ethos.

#### *3.1. Impartiality of procedures and ethos of impartiality*

Let us assume that as a result of the fact that what A wants differs from the particular content of what B wants, there is a political conflict between person A and B. This potential antagonistic conflict can only be articulated agonistically when both A and B share a democratic ethos with respect to the democratic institutions and procedures. These democratic institutions and procedures are the general form within which A and B fight out their political conflict. This general form is ‘impartiality’, i.e. the democratic institutions and procedures are formally impartial with respect to all citizens in the sense of not privileging a particular individual or group in society above another. Let’s take the impartiality of the electoral law as a starting point. The impartiality of the electoral law implies that all citizens have an equal right to vote and an equal right to become a candidate for public office. While the impartiality of the electoral law points at the logic of formal equality, the French historian Bernard Manin has remarked that the election procedure as a mechanism to select candidates treats candidates in a non-egalitarian way. For instance, candidates have to mobilize resources to make themselves known to the public. Because election campaigns are usually expensive enterprises, the elective procedure usually favors the wealthier strata of the population.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the formal impartiality of democratic institutions and procedures does not prevent that some citizens or parties are able to gain more political influence than others because of actual inequality. And even if campaigns would be publicly financed and/or electoral expenses regulated, free election could not preclude partiality in the treatment of candidates. For, there have to be reasons why somebody is elected, and these reasons cannot be the same for all

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<sup>8</sup> Young, I. (2002), *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford UP, Oxford, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Manin, B. (1997), *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, p. 142

candidates. In sum, although partiality cannot be excluded, there is also always impartiality involved in these procedures.

The impartiality is not merely a matter of procedures and institutions. Impartiality is only warranted if civil servants exercise ‘impartiality’ when performing their official duties. That is, civil servants have to share an ethos of impartiality that prevents a personal bias toward a party, politician or social group. As Max Weber argues, civil servants have to maintain impartial with respect to political issues and have to exercise directives from politicians independent from their personal preferences.<sup>10</sup> Although the democratic institutions and procedures, i.e. the general form in which political conflicts are fought out, are impartial, this impartiality itself is not neutral. Other institutions and procedures are conceivable. Additionally, A en B cannot be neutral towards these institutions and procedures, but have to accept it or not as a way to deal with their conflict.

### *3.2. Democratic ethos of dual partisanship: citizens*

Political conflicts can only be fought out through democratic institutions when political actors adhere to these democratic procedures and institutions. Thus, the extent to which a democratic society succeeds in transforming antagonism into agonistic politics does not only depend on the institutions, but also on the attitude of political actors. While civil servants have to share an ethos of impartiality, political actors have to adhere a democratic ethos of dual partisanship. I will discuss two carriers of dual partisanship in liberal democracy: citizens and political parties.

In opposition to the deliberative theory of Jürgen Habermas, which seems to prescribe impartiality as a political virtue of citizens, I will argue that citizens have to adhere a democratic ethos of dual partisanship. In *Between Norms and Facts* Habermas introduces the discourse principle which is intended to explain the point of view from which different reasonable arguments brought forward during deliberative processes can be judged and justified impartially.<sup>11</sup> More precisely, given ideal conditions, the outcome of a deliberative process is legitimate if it would be rationally accepted by all citizens. In his deliberative theory arguments are valid if they meet the test of universality, and therefore citizens are asked to be impartial. Habermas’ discourse principle has been criticized for the exclusionary effects of rational deliberation by, for instance, Iris Marion Young who argues that other

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<sup>10</sup> Weber, M. (1976), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Mohr, Tübingen, p. 826.

<sup>11</sup> Habermas, J. (1996), *Between Norms and Facts*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 107.

forms of communication generate legitimacy, too.<sup>12</sup> I will, however, focus on an other problematic aspect in Habermas' theory, viz. that his focus on impartiality as a prescriptive maxim or a moral duty in the deliberative process neglects the fact that citizens enter the deliberative process because they want to realize particular wants, preferences or values. I think that Habermas neglects this aspect of advocacy of citizens. Indeed, citizens could value positively (and not only reluctantly) procedures and institutions, but democratic politics has always also to do with the particular outcome of the democratic process. That is, citizens are not only interested in the impartiality of the procedure, but also in the particularity of the political outcome. The problem with Habermas is that citizens should be satisfied with the outcome because of the impartiality of the procedure and their equal opportunity to re-enter the deliberative process. Thus, possible dissatisfaction of citizens with the outcome is fully compensated by satisfaction with the form.

While citizens are partisan advocates of specific wants, preferences and values, agonistic politics presupposes that citizens accept the democratic procedures and institutions as a way to fight out their political conflicts. Thus, the general form of 'impartiality', i.e. the set of democratic institutions and procedures, becomes the object of a second-order partisanship. Democratic citizens have to favor democratic procedures above other ways of dealing with political conflict and have to recognize equally the legitimacy of their political opponent. This means that citizens have to be partisans of impartiality and partisans of equality. Agonistic politics presupposes an ethos of dual partisanship. I use the concept of 'dual partisanship' because although democratic citizens respect democratic institutions as a way to deal with political conflicts and view the opponent as a legitimate political opponent, they also want get realized their ideals, wants and preferences. Hence, democratic citizens are both partisans of impartiality and partisan adversaries.

### *3.3. Democratic ethos of dual partisanship: political parties*

In liberal democracies, political parties have an organizing and a representative function. Political parties have an instrumental role in the organization of parliament and government, in the recruitment of politicians and the structuring of elector's votes (organizing function) and political parties play an intermediary role between citizens and the state (representative function). In my discussion about political parties I will only focus on the representative function of political parties.

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<sup>12</sup> Young, I. (2002), *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 56.

From a sociological perspective, Max Weber has described political parties as voluntary organizations, whose actions are oriented toward the acquisition of ‘social power’, i.e. „Einfluß auf ein Gemeinschaftshandeln gleichviel welchen Inhalts ausgerichtet“<sup>13</sup>. This sociological description neglects the fact that political parties have to be advocates to be able to stress the distinguishing features. Political parties are always advocates of particular ideas or advocates of particular outcomes of political procedures. Parties are often passionate defenders of a particular cause and are able to create lines of division and to mobilize citizens. As Nancy Rosenblum notices, it is precisely the achievement of political parties to create the content and to draw lines of division.<sup>14</sup> Political parties do not simply reflect political interests and opinions, but formulate issues and give them political relevance and, thus, political parties integrate the multitude by unifying people’s ideas and interests. In creating these lines of division, political parties define themselves in terms of opposition and are therefore able to mobilize citizens. Parties both brings people together and separates them on issues that are general in reach.

Political parties generate conflicting positions and their conflict focuses attention on problems, brings out information and interpretation and winnows a range of possibilities. As a result, political parties play an important role in political deliberation: advocates and opponents are identified, the beneficiaries of their plans and those who bear the costs etc. Rivalry between political parties is therefore constitutive for democratic politics, because it stages the battle. If this party rivalry is absent, democracy tends to become merely a way of dealing peacefully with conflict in society. The upsurge of right-wing populism has been explained as a result of the depoliticisation of political struggle through a blurring of ideological difference between parties and increasing professionalism of parties.<sup>15</sup>

According to Rosenblum, a political party has to recognize simultaneously to be just a part and to represent the people as a whole. A political party translates the many instances and particularities in a language that is general and wants to represent the general. For, a political representative represents the people as a whole and not only those who have elected him or her. In other words, the representative function of political parties entails that a political party „cannot say only: I support Y because I am bound to do so by an agreement with my

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<sup>13</sup> Weber, M. (1976), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Mohr, Tübingen, p. 539.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenblum, N. (2008), *On the Side of Angels. An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*, Princeton UP, Princeton/Oxford, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Mouffe, C. (2005), *On the Political*, Routledge, London, p. 66.

constituents. He or she must say: Y, which is a matter of great concern to my constituents, is crucial to the public good.”<sup>16</sup>

Democratic political parties do not have to accept a standard of impartiality, but only that they are parts and will be seen as parts: „...as long as partisans accept regulated rivalry, do not aim at eliminating the opposition, and concede that political authority is partisan and contestable, there is no moral imperative for them to assume the view from outside, the perspective of impartial observer.”<sup>17</sup> The acceptance of regulated rivalry presupposes a democratic ethos of dual partisanship, which contains three core elements.<sup>18</sup> First of all, parties should take responsibility for popular political integration and mobilization. Political parties do not represent a specific group, but represents the people as a whole. Secondly, political parties should articulate a comprehensive story about the state and the nation as a whole and should not adhere to just one single value or issue. Thirdly, political parties should take a disposition to compromise and should not adopt a disposition of intransigence on political issues. This last element points at a tension between the representative’s commitment as well as its detachment from a cause. Therefore, a democratic of dual partisanship presupposes that a political party „should *adhere* to her cause *but not be driven* by it.”<sup>19</sup>

From this follows that a political party that adheres to a concrete content or cause without any adherence to the general form within which different claims about concrete contents are fought out, holds an extreme position, and the party may even become a ‘fanatic representative’. The term ‘fanatic’ or ‘extremist’ does not take reference to a particular content of programs, but is a matter of disposition and political conduct of political representatives. For example, one-issue parties like ‘Party for Animals [Partij voor de Dieren] tend to perform ‘extremist politics’. One-issue parties are not per se non-democratic, let alone anti-democratic, but they risk becoming non-democratic. One issue parties tend to insist on a single theme and tend just to carry out their pure doctrine without any adherence to democratic procedures and institutions. They may even prefer to sacrifice electoral victory for the sake of purity. One-issue parties do not acknowledge that their party is just one part among many. Because of the single-mindedness of one-issue parties, political issues tend to

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<sup>16</sup> Plotke, D. (1997), ‘Representation is democracy’, *Constellations*, vol. 4, nr.1, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenblum, N. (2008), *On The Side Of Angels. An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*, Princeton UP, Princeton/Oxford, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Rosenblum, N. (2008), *On the Side of Angels. An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*, Princeton UP, Princeton/Oxford, p. 396.

<sup>19</sup> Urbinati, N. (2006), *Representative Democracy. Principles & Genealogies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 47.

become nonnegotiable. Consequently, it becomes difficult to solve political conflicts between one-issue parties and other political parties in an agonistic way. As a result, a one-issue party tends to fail to transform itself into an agonistic position.

### *2.3. Institutions, democratic ethos and trust*

In the previous two sections, I have argued that the impartiality of democratic procedures and institutions, and a democratic ethos of dual partisanship are preconditions for agonistic politics. Democratic institutions make it possible that all kinds of societal tensions and oppositions can be transformed into agonistic conflicts. That is, democratic institutions do not transform antagonistic oppositions into agonistic ones, but are the means through which this transformation can take place. While democratic institutions make the transformation possible, someone has to do the transforming and this presupposes the appropriate ethos. When societal oppositions are transformed into agonistic conflicts, this may lead to a political struggle between adversaries. Democratic institutions domesticate political struggle while offering room for the political articulation of a plurality of opinions, interests and values. In sum, democratic institutions enable the transformation of opposite societal forces into contested political power, which may lead to a political struggle between adversaries, who can gain political power alternately.

In a liberal democracy, political struggle comes to an end through counting the votes, after election or in parliament,<sup>20</sup> which results in winners and losers. Provided that everybody sticks to the rules, the division between winners and losers is merely temporary, and political struggle through democratic institutions can be repeated. This solution to end political struggle temporarily is acceptable to those who stick to the rules, because of the impartiality of the procedure. Democratic institutions and procedures set the rules in which agonistic politics can take place, but the idea of agonistic politics presupposes a democratic ethos of dual partisanship of political parties and of citizens in society with respect to democratic institutions and procedures and with respect to political opponents. Yet, only when a critical part of the political representatives and citizens are equally one's political friend actually, i.e. adhere to democratic rules, procedures and norms, democracy will succeed in transforming antagonism into agonistic politics.

In this connection, Van der Zweerde has put forward the idea that agonistic politics invokes the notion of political friendship. Agonistic politics seems to presuppose a bond (or

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<sup>20</sup> Canetti, E. (2006), *Masse und Macht*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, p. 220.

communal spirit) between all citizens who are equally each other's political friend. On the other hand, agonistic politics does not reject an eradication of the political, and therefore the friendship is political, too, i.e. essentially contestable. Moreover, political friendship has to remain contestable, for „fully achieved all-inclusive political friendship among perfectly virtuous citizens leads to a total unity of opinions and objectives and thus to the end of politics.”<sup>21</sup> Agonistic politics is not a struggle between collectives of friends and enemies, but a struggle between political adversaries in which striving for political friendship is crucial.

An interaction exists between the functioning of democratic institutions and the impartial behavior of civil servants on the one hand, and the ethos of dual partisanship of citizens and political parties, on the other hand. While the well-functioning of democratic institutions like elections requires the willingness of political actors to accept their possible loss in these elections, the reversal may be true as well: when institutions realize their task, political actors will be more willing to stick to the rules. Citizens will be more willing to accept their electoral loss, and parties and politicians will be more willing to give up their temporary position of power, if they can trust that at a later stage of the democratic process the political struggle will be fought out again, so that they will have a new chance to win. Partisan citizens and parties accept their loss because they trust that at a later stage their opponent will accept their possible victory.

Trust play a temporal role here: it implies that agonistic politics continues into to the future.. Institutions and procedures can contribute to this trust by guaranteeing fair and regular elections. Thus, democratic institutions provide for the continuation of legitimate political struggle. A fair electoral competition teaches citizens that loss in vote or election is not the end of participation and sharing in political power. Furthermore, it teaches citizens how to rid themselves of governments peacefully and it also contributes to political participation, because citizens participate in getting rid off governments. To conclude, the extent to which a democracy succeeds in transforming antagonist politics into agonistic politics depends both on the institutions and the attitude of political actors. When a democratic ethos of dual partisanship loses its force, i.e. when political actors are not willing to commit themselves to democratic institutions and norms, constitutional guarantees which take reference to principles of liberal democracy, such as universal suffrage, separation of powers and protection of individual rights, are required to conquer a crisis of democracy.

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<sup>21</sup> Zweerde, E. (2007), ‘Friendship and the Political’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol .10, nr. 2, 164.

#### **4. Partisans of holism**

Populism can be analyzed, at least in part, as a reaction against agonistic politics. Agonism attempts to offer room for the political articulation of as many different interest and values as possible under the condition of democratic institutions accepted by political adversaries. Under this condition, a liberal democracy legitimizes a plurality of political demands in society, and, therefore, offers room for an increasing complexity. A liberal democracy has to transform the plurality of people's wills into the will of the *dèmos* and, subsequently, the will of the *dèmos* has to be transformed into legislation. This complexity limits the political will of citizens: either the particular will gets lost or it is transformed in the complex processes of mediation.

This complexity may lead to a call for simplicity and homogeneity, which is articulated by populists. Populists reduce this complexity by articulating an antagonistic opposition between the true *dèmos* and the false *dèmos*. Populism projects the people as a virtuous, homogeneous group which, in fact, is the bearer of sovereign power.<sup>22</sup> The populist longing for substantial homogeneity of the people implies that other groups, e.g. a corrupt elite and/or ethnic groups, immigrants, social security recipients, will be excluded from the *dèmos*. While populists resemble one-issue parties in the sense that their insistence on this manicheist worldview expresses a single theme, too, the specific populist appeal differs from one-issue parties.

Within the dominant discourse of democracy, populism articulates antagonistically the partisanship of the hegemonic, i.e. liberal democratic regime, and argues, in addition, that the liberal democratic regime is not true to the claim of popular sovereignty. To put simply, in the populist view the liberal democratic regime does not do what the people want. The antagonistic articulation between the true *dèmos* and the false *dèmos* has, therefore, less to do with the content of political struggle and decision-making, but more with the political system as a form – which is a content, too. While populists argue that the liberal democratic regime does not do what the people want, they state this ‘what’, however, in terms of content, i.e. concrete issues, and not in terms of a bad procedure of decision-making.

Populists do not share the democratic ethos of dual-partisanship for they do not acknowledge that their party is just one part among many. Instead, populists are partisans of

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<sup>22</sup> Mény, Y. and Y. Surel (2002), ‘The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism’, in: Yves Mény and Yves Surel (eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave, New York, p. 9.

holism. Populist parties claim the moral ascendancy that comes from earning the approval of the virtuous people and represent the minority as a sinister interest opposed to the people. The holist perspective of populism rejects pluralism and liberalism and is ‘antipolitical’. First of all, as a result of the holist perspective, populism is both antipartyist – populism does not view parties as part of the whole, but parties against the whole – and antipartisan – parties are not the only target of populists, but rejects all social and political groups that threaten the substantial homogeneity of the people.

I will elucidate this notion of substantial homogeneity by making a brief comparison between Carl Schmitt’s notion of ‘substantial homogeneity’ and Rousseau’s idea of ‘formal homogeneity’. In *Du contrat social* Rousseau explains that in a democracy the people is both the political subject constituting political unity and object of law enforcing that unity. In his theory, the sovereign people is generated by a voluntary act of particular individuals, in which individual political wills are transformed or rather alienated into the unity of the general will.<sup>23</sup> This voluntary act of association could be called homogeneous. Since the conditions are equal for all, i.e. all particular rights and powers will be alienated into the political unity of the general will, the act of association homogenizes the participants of the social contract. The homogeneity only depends on the *formal* characteristics of the voluntary act of association, since it must be performed by all participants who are in fact not homogeneous. As a result of this formal homogeneity all citizens are equal before the law. In Rousseau’s theory of direct democracy, this means that all citizens have to subdue the law they enacted themselves.

Compared to Rousseau, Schmitt’s conceptualization of homogeneity differs in two important aspects. First of all, whereas Rousseau’s notion of ‘the sovereign people’ is the result of the voluntary acts of individual political wills, to Schmitt ‘the people’ is originally given as a homogeneity. Secondly, while Rousseau’s view on direct democracy presupposes formal homogeneity, Schmitt argues that homogeneity of the people can only be effectuated through substantive or material homogeneity.<sup>24</sup> Only when both rulers and ruled share in the same material substance, both are equal or rather identical and, hence, the people becomes really one. The populist longing for substantive homogeneity or collective identity echoes this Schmittean logic.

Secondly, the holist perspective of populism is ‘antipolitical’. For populists assume that there is an identifiable popular will and, additionally, that no dynamic of cooperation

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<sup>23</sup> Rousseau, J-J. (2001), *Du Contrat social*, Flammarion, Paris, I, VI, pp. 57-58.

<sup>24</sup> Schmitt, C. (1996), *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, Dunckler & Humblot, Berlin, p. 14.

between different parts can illuminate the popular will. Instead, the popular will can only be realized by acclamation and plebiscite. Populist plebiscite could be elucidated by explaining Schmitt's idea of acclamation. Schmitt notices that the people is a concept from public law, i.e. the people does not exist as a deliberative body in parliament, but it can only exist in the sphere of publicity,<sup>25</sup> which becomes manifest in the moment of acclamation: „Erst das wirklich versammelte Volk ist Volk und nur das wirklich versammelte Volk kann das tun, was spezifisch zur Tätigkeit dieses Volk gehört: es kann akklamieren, d.h. durch einfachen Zuruf, seine Zustimmung oder Ablehnung ausdrücken, Hoch oder Nieder rufen, einem Führer oder einem Vorschlag zuzubeln, den König oder irgendeinen anderen hochleben lassen, oder durch Schweigen oder Murren Akklamation verweigern.“<sup>26</sup> In the acclamation, the will of the people is not symbolically represented, but is made really present. Following Rousseau, who claimed that the sovereign cannot be represented, except by itself,<sup>27</sup> Schmitt argues that at the moment of acclamation the people is not represented, but is as sovereign identical with itself.<sup>28</sup> Acclamation is, however, a form of action in which any aspect of political deliberation is absent. Ac-clamation or ‘Zu-ruf’ means that people cannot make political claims themselves, but the people can only ‘speak as one’ to something that precedes the call. Hence, the real unity of the people presupposes a centre that precedes the acclamation.

In modern democracies, however, acclamation is no longer realised through public mass meetings, but through public opinion: „Die öffentliche Meinung ist die moderne Art der Akklamation.“<sup>29</sup> Public opinion is mobilized by populists as the will of the people. In the populist view, public opinion does not function as a counter-force that creates possibilities and sets limits for rulers to act,<sup>30</sup> but public opinion tends to become the real manifestation of the people as an active and permanent presence. That is, public opinion is the true expression of the will of the people. In the populist view, only the will of the people is constitutive for political facts and nothing can oppose the will of the people. The people is always right and therefore, the voice of the people (*vox populi*) – expressed through public opinion – is, therefore, the voice of God (*vox dei*).

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<sup>25</sup> Schmitt, C. (1996), *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, Dunckler & Humblot, Berlin, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt C. (2003), *Verfassungslehre*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, p. 243-244.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, J-J. (2001), *Du Contrat social*, Flammarion, Paris, II, I, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt C. (2003), *Verfassungslehre*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, p. 205.

<sup>29</sup> Schmitt C. (2003), *Verfassungslehre*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> Rosanvallon, P. (2009), *Counter-Democracy. Politics in an age of distrust*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, p. 34.

#### **4. Transforming antagonism into agonistic politics**

The holism of populism is hostile to pluralism and liberalism, which means that populism does not share the democratic ethos of dual partisanship. Populism articulates antagonistically the agonistic relations within the liberal democratic regime. Indeed, populists often accept, although reluctantly, the democratic institutions in which political conflicts are fought out. In doing so, populists reconfirm paradoxically the procedures and institutions they criticize. While populists project an antagonistic discourse between the people and ‘the other’, they often reluctantly stick to democratic rules and are, therefore, at the border of the friend-enemy distinction.

I think that it is a task of democracy to refuse to let antagonistically articulated oppositions result in a friend-enemy distinction, and eventually in a civil war. Democracy is the transformation of potential friend-enemy into proponent-opponent relation. Helmut Dubiel has pointed out that conflicts strengthen societies because of the ‘redemption integrated’ experience of passing through political struggle: „...social conflicts produce themselves the valuable ties that hold modern democratic societies together and provide them with the strength and cohesion they need.”<sup>31</sup> However, Hirschmann has correctly amended this viewpoint, for indeed, political conflicts can leave a „positive residue of integration” but they can also „tear society apart.”<sup>32</sup>

From this perspective, democracy has to devise ways in which antagonistically articulated oppositions, the opposition between the true *demos* and false *demos* included, are transformed into agonistically articulated oppositions in which the legitimacy of the political opponent is recognized. One of these ways could entail an inclusive political strategy to populism. An example of an inclusive political strategy involves the incorporation of some populist elements by political parties in their own (non-populist) repertoire. This inclusive strategy tries to transform the antagonistic articulation of populism between ‘the virtuous people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ into agonistic politics, in which the other is viewed as a political adversary rather than an enemy. Indeed, this political strategy may have contradictory political effects in the long run. A possible contradictory effect of this strategy of incorporation is that it may increase citizen’s disappointment with the political elite. For,

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<sup>31</sup> Hirschmann, A.O. (1994), ‘Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Society’, *Political Theory*, vol. 22, nr. 2, p.206.

<sup>32</sup> Hirschmann, A.O. (1994), ‘Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Society’, *Political Theory*, vol. 22, nr. 2, p.209.

the incorporation of some populist elements, e.g. going to the people<sup>33</sup>, could raise political expectations to citizens which political representatives can never fulfill.

Another inclusive strategy is the allowance of populist parties to participate in government. Mouffe argues, for instance, that once populists are in government, they will make policy concessions and political compromises.<sup>34</sup> To her, the inclusion of populists will lead to a moderation of their political views. Opposed to this inclusive strategy, the exclusive strategy of a cordon sanitaire has been mobilized on parties such as the French *Front National* (1988/1998), the *Vlaams Belang* (1989) and the Walloon *Front National* (1993). A cordon sanitaire means that political parties refuse to cooperate with populist parties, which advocate ideas that are at odds with the political values of the other parties. Populists are excluded then from participation in executive power. This exclusive strategy is, however, not non-democratic and does not expel populists from the political order, for populists can still participate in elections and their possessed seats in parliament are still viewed as legitimate. However, this exclusive strategy does not diminish the antagonistic articulation of populists, but runs the risk of sharpening the enmity between populists and other parties. For, although there may be good reasons for a cordon sanitaire, it is a first step in the direction of real exclusion of a political party and, thus, real oppositional enmity.

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<sup>33</sup> An example of this populist element is the ‘100-dagen toer’ of the former Dutch cabinet. After the elections in 2007, the the Dutch cabinet made a trip of hundred days (‘100-dagen toer’) through the country ‘to listen to the people’.

<sup>34</sup> Mouffe, C., (2005), *On The Political*, London/New York: Routledge, p. 67.

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