

# Legitimacy for some

## Right-wing populist rationality and antagonistic politics

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The purpose of this article is to examine under what conditions the disruptive character of right-wing populism can be perceived as a positive element within a functioning democracy. Using the thinking of philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe I argue that the disruptive character of right-wing populism gives the marginalised concerns of 'the people' public legitimacy. However, right-wing populism is also criticised for excluding, in a similar fashion, certain social actors from the public sphere. Instead of enabling a more inclusive society, I therefore argue that right-wing populism enables a society that is distinguished by antagonism. To make it possible for all social actors' concerns to gain public legitimacy without promoting antagonism, I argue that a new political reality needs to be imagined. In conclusion I therefore offer a theoretical framework for such a reality through the political philosophy of Bruno Latour.

In this article, I will examine under which conditions the disruptive character of right-wing populism towards the established political order can be perceived as a positive element within a functioning democracy. I will, however, also challenge right-wing populism for facilitating the creation of a public that is in conflict with the same pursuits for wider political participation that right-wing populists claim to value. Specifically, I will argue that right-wing populism is based on a paradox – at the same time as it enables marginalised concerns to gain public legitimacy, it also marginalises the public legitimacy of the concerns of certain social actors. In addition, I will problematise the antagonistic political stance that derives from such marginalisation and argue that it limits the ability of different social actors to publically confront conflicting concerns.

The theoretical point of departure for discussing the conditions of populism is taken from the philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Both are of interest because they develop an attitude towards right-wing populism and populism in general that doesn't reject their disruptive character. Mouffe's thinking is also interesting because it offers a criticism of the antagonistic politics of right-wing populism and also clarifies what I claim

is the biggest deficiency in right-wing populism – its relationship to the stranger.

In order to further confront these deficiencies in right-wing populism, as well as offer an alternative political attitude towards the stranger, I will conclude by giving a brief presentation of the political philosophy of the philosopher Bruno Latour. The goal is to offer, through his thinking, part of a theoretical framework that can assist contemporary political actors in confronting the challenge of creating a more inclusive public in a pluralistic age.

### The logic of populist rationality

Populism is an essentially contested concept, and depending on the context in which the term is being used, it will be understood in different ways (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 2–5). It is also impossible to give any conclusive definition of right-wing populism, as it is also expressed in a variety of forms depending on the context (Norris 2005: 43–4).<sup>1</sup> Through Ernesto Laclau's thinking it is, however, possible to argue that one purpose of right-wing populism is to give public legitimacy to the concerns of a marginalised social group.

In Laclau's book *On Populist Reason* (2005) he opposes attempts to downplay populism by understanding it as a distortion of what is perceived as the established political practice in society. Laclau asserts that politicians and academics sometimes tend to argue that populism has its origins in irrationalism and emphasises overly simplistic solutions to pressing societal challenges. He furthermore argues that such a critique serves as a defence of the established political order. However, Laclau also maintains that this critique fails to realise that populism doesn't work according to the same rational conditions as the established political order. Instead, populism has its own political rationality – its own 'logic of articulation,' as Laclau writes (2005b: 33) – and one of the purposes of the book is, consequently, to describe the logic of populist rationality (Laclau 2005a: 16–20).

As populism, according to Laclau, cannot be given any substantive definition – it is not possible to determine any criteria that encompass all forms of populism (Laclau 2005a: 9) – he argues that populist rationality can be

1 Without making any normative claims, in this article I will with the term right-wing populism be referring to the growing visibility of such political movements that combine ethnocentrism and anti-elitism.

understood primarily through an analysis of the political practices that are expressed in populist movements. Based on such an analysis, Laclau believes that certain features appear that are shared by all populist movements, regardless of whether they are identified as left- or right-leaning movements (Laclau 2005b: 33).

Laclau explains that all populist movements are characterised by the formation of a new social body – ‘the people’ – that arises from a general frustration towards the political ‘elite’ for not recognising their concerns. If only one citizen’s concern isn’t recognised, this will not express a populist attitude in itself. A populist movement only emerges when citizens unite around a generally experienced frustration that the political elite is not recognising their various concerns. Thus, when several social actors express a common dissatisfaction, even though the causes of their dissatisfaction may be very different, and then organise themselves in opposition to the political elite, then, Laclau argues, a populist movement can be identified (Laclau 2005a: 73–4, 2005b: 36–8).

Due to a disjuncture between the people’s concerns and the system’s ability to recognise them, populism will have an anti-institutional character. Or expressed in another way: populism directs its political commitment towards an enemy – in this case a political elite who cannot meet the demands of the people (Laclau 2005b: 39).

Since populism has a polemical character many will, according to Laclau, be critical of the rhetoric that populist leaders will tend to use. But unlike its critics, Laclau wants to highlight and appreciate the disruptive character of populism. In particular, Laclau believes that the disruptive character of populist rationality should be valued because it makes it possible to imagine an *alternative* to the dominant political establishment. And according to Laclau, it is specifically because such distinctions can be made that politics is at all possible: ‘We only have politics through the gesture that embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it’ (Laclau 2005b: 47).

Laclau’s argument can be elaborated with the help of the thinking of Chantal Mouffe, someone that Laclau has worked closely with.<sup>2</sup> Her ideas also provide an argument for *who* the elite is that right-wing populism takes its aim at.

2 In addition to being married, they have written the much-discussed book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).

## Hegemony at the end of history

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued, in his much-discussed article ‘The end of history?’ (1989), that Western capitalist democratic liberalism after the Cold War had triumphed over other political ideologies. He didn’t maintain that all the nation states in the world after the Cold War had automatically become liberal democracies, but that the political development in the world will inevitably be based on liberal principles because no ideological alternatives to liberalism exist any longer. Hence, the history of humanity, which, according to Fukuyama, up until then had been characterised by ideological conflicts, had come to an end.

From Mouffe’s perspective, Fukuyama expresses a general hope among liberal theorists – that the world will one day be freed from conflict and hostility; a world where rational deliberation replaces power struggles and the pursuit of consensus is prioritised. Mouffe, on the other hand, wants to challenge such an optimistic vision because, in her opinion, it is based on an insufficient conception of the political that creates a condition where social actors aren’t provided with any public resources for peacefully confronting their conflicting concerns (Mouffe 2005a: 1–2, 31–2).

Mouffe explains that what is lacking in the liberal understanding of the political is the realisation that *conflict* is a fundamental aspect of the political. Based on the liberal narrative, conflicts are something that no longer play a role in the history of humanity. Instead, liberal democracies have succeeded in creating such institutions and structures that allow and encourage different social actors in conflict to seek consensus through rational debate. Liberal theorists thus acknowledge that conflicts exist, but argue that their disruptive capacity can be mitigated as long as all parties which are in conflict are willing to act rationally and suppress their ‘passions’ (Mouffe 2005a: 11–12, 29, 31).<sup>3</sup>

While such a peaceful pursuit of consensus is appealing in many ways, such an endeavour also marginalises the passions of social actors. Based on Mouffe’s thinking, passions characterise different social actors’ utmost concerns, and, as I will show, that is why their continuing marginalisation cannot be sustained. However, the primary reason why these passions need to

3 When referring to ‘passions’, Mouffe means such ‘various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identifications’ (Mouffe 2005a: 24).

be valued in the public sphere, according to Mouffe, is because they are able to create political distinctions between social actors – a prerequisite for politics according to Mouffe. She draws support for this line of thinking from the political theorist Carl Schmitt, who she believes offers a concept of the political that not only recognises passion, but also enables these passions to be valued and directed productively.

Carl Schmitt believes that politics essentially consists of a division into friends and enemies, which entails that the basic political act is to identify the group that deserves one's loyalty and to identify the boundaries of one's loyalty. According to Schmitt, conflicts between friends and enemies consequently become the true essence of politics, and if it were possible to develop a conflict-free world, it would lack politics (Schmitt 2007: 26–8).

Similarly, Mouffe believes that it is by identifying what one opposes that it is possible to identify one's own political position. And to the extent that this position is regarded as an important concern, it will give rise to passion. Conflicts between opponents will therefore be a prerequisite for the political to be *political*.

Because liberal theorists condemn and marginalise passion, their concept of the political is, according to Mouffe, insufficient. Furthermore, because liberalism doesn't offer any outlet for these passions – because they are not recognised in an effort to reach consensus on the basis of a general rationality – the people's utmost concerns will never be given any public legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, according to Mouffe's thinking, political life will be reduced to a technical-bureaucratic application of certain economic and legal conditions, where all political expressions that call into question the political order are understood as archaic, non-rational or even dangerous (Mouffe 2005a: 1–3, 10–12).

If such a liberal order constituted a position among many others, its ability to marginalise passion might be limited. Mouffe argues, on the other hand, that liberalism in its consensus-making role has gained a hegemonic position in the Western world following World War II, which means that liberalism has more or less been accepted as the only viable political option. This is all the more evident, according to Mouffe, in its neoliberal form, where all parties, including the traditional left-wing ones, have accepted free-market capitalism as a given and created the structural conditions for

4 Schmitt has also criticised liberalism for marginalising the role of conflict in the political (Schmitt 2007: 78–9).

a free-market economy (Mouffe 2000: 14–15, 2005a: 56–63). This makes it possible to argue that humanity has reached an end of history, as no alternatives to the dominant liberal politics are seen as viable.

Based on Mouffe's thinking, the idea that conflict doesn't constitute an essential part of the political will therefore be publically encouraged within liberal democracies. This furthermore entails a situation where many concerns are never given any public legitimacy, as they are marginalised or reduced to the level of private concerns. As conflicts between different social actors, according to liberal logic, can be resolved by organising citizens according to certain economic and legal criteria, the need, according to Mouffe's thinking, of creating arenas where conflicting passions can be peacefully confronted, is limited (Mouffe 2005a: 29–30). And because right-wing populist movements are increasingly emerging in public life, the absence of such arenas will present particular challenges for liberal societies.

Mouffe stresses that unless the passions appearing within a society are given a peaceful outlet, they will eventually discharge themselves in other ways. She believes that this explains the emergence of right-wing populist movements. According to Mouffe's thinking, the emergence of right-wing populism is a response to the marginalisation of passions as a consequence of the establishment of a hegemonic liberal order. Right-wing populism is accordingly appealing to many social actors, as it offers an alternative to the hegemonic order. It can also offer an outlet for their passions, something that the dominant political order has denied them. Therefore Mouffe believes that it isn't only understandable that right-wing populism is growing in influence. It is also natural, as the people's passions cannot be subdued forever and will find an outlet anywhere it is provided (Mouffe 2005b: 55–6, 2005a: 66–76).

### **An antagonistic clash between civilisations**

In light of Laclau's and Mouffe's thinking, right-wing populism can be perceived in a new way. While critics of right-wing populism want to condemn the disruptive character of right-wing populism, Laclau and Mouffe show that an excessively critical attitude obscures the fact that its disruptiveness necessitates the conditions for a truly political society (at least if you accept Schmitt's conceptual position), and makes it possible for marginalised concerns to gain public legitimacy. Neither Laclau (Laermans and Laclau 2011) nor Mouffe (2005b: 56) supports right-wing populism.

However, from Laclau's and Mouffe's perspective, the disruptive character of right-wing populist movements contribute to the creation of a society that recognises the people's concerns – a society where passion is not perceived as a vice.

Their perspective, on the other hand, also offers the possibility of a more nuanced critique of right-wing populism. If the purpose of right-wing populism is to enable a more inclusive society, then all attempts to limit inclusivity should be subject to critical review. As a starting point for this criticism, I would like to present a general description of how right-wing populists rhetorically represent the stranger, especially the Muslim immigrant. To exemplify this rhetoric, I will highlight some statements made by Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders.

A feature of right-wing populist rhetoric is an imagining of an immediate threat. Sometimes the rhetoric even takes the form of such expressions that it is possible to be deceived into believing that a foreign power is occupying the Western world. Take for example this now infamous statement about Mexicans by Trump in his presidential announcement address:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... .  
They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems to us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (Time 2015)

Trump furthermore has applied the same rhetoric towards Muslims, who, according to his thinking, constitute the ultimate threat to Western civilisation. Trump has often, as a candidate for president and later as president, marginalised Muslims<sup>5</sup> and stressed that they represent a threat. He has even gone as far as to claim: 'I think Islam hates us' (Schleifer 2016).

Le Pen, too, has in a similar fashion expressed the belief that Muslims are a threat. In her announcement address for the French presidential election of 2017, she did not merely assert that mass immigration has meant that the French people no longer feel that they have the right to their own country. She also argued that globalisation has made it possible for Islamic

5 Not least through what has been described as Trump's pursuit of introducing a 'Muslim ban', the purpose of which is to ban the entry into USA from certain nationalities with a Muslim majority.

fundamentalism, in her mind an enemy of France, to gain a foothold in the country. According to her, Islamic fundamentalism threatens the French people, as these fundamentalists, as she emphasised, 'are looking to impose on us gender discrimination in public places, full body veils or not, prayer rooms in the workplace, prayers in the streets, huge mosques, or the submission of women, forbidden to wear skirts, have a job or go to the bar' (Farand 2017).

Geert Wilders has also expressed concern over the spread of Islam in the Netherlands. In an interview for the newspaper *De Pers*, he emphasised the ways in which Islam is radically changing society, as follows:

Take a walk down the street and see where this is going. You no longer feel like you are living in your own country. There is a battle going on and we have to defend ourselves. Before you know it there will be more mosques than churches! (De Pers 2007)

Overall, Trump, Le Pen and Wilders emphasise a widely-accepted perception among many right-wing populists that immigration is a threat to the Western world, and the resonance that this rhetoric has had among many citizens shows that these right-wing populists are able to express an experience that many Westerners share. Many experience immigrants as a cultural and economic threat, and especially Muslims are often understood as the ultimate threat to Western values. Muslims are not only perceived as strangers. They are also often perceived as violent fanatics, with a general lack of tolerance for divergent opinions and practices (Pew Research Center 2017).

Right-wing populists like Trump, Le Pen and Wilders thus argue that the Western world hasn't been freed from conflict. On the contrary, they argue that conflicts are a palpable contemporary trend. Instead of embracing Fukuyama's triumphal declaration of the end of history, it is possible to argue that right-wing populists instead embrace Samuel Huntington's thesis concerning the 'clash of civilizations' which he developed in the much-discussed article 'The clash of civilizations?' (Huntington 1993). According to Huntington's thesis, conflicts will not cease after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as Fukuyama argues. Instead, they will change in character from conflicts between nation-states into conflicts between different civilisations. While nation-states will play a significant role in the future, he argues that conflicts



will to a greater extent be caused by the cultural differences that distinguish one civilisation from another (Huntington 1993).<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, a distinctive feature of the right-wing populism that is expressed by Trump, Le Pen and Wilders is that their critique is not directed solely towards an elite that marginalises the people's concerns. It is also directed towards a perceived threat emanating from those who do not share the national and cultural legacy with the people. Instead, they claim that immigrants challenge the national stability, corrupt the national culture, and eradicate the national economy. The anti-elitist position of right-wing populism is thus combined with ethnocentrism and anti-immigration.

Based on Schmitt's thinking, such an attitude can be perceived as the expression of a true political stance. According to him, a fundamental feature of the political is the ability to identify friend from enemy. Thus, by identifying the immigrant as an enemy, right-wing populists make a political judgment, which means that their position cannot be criticised based on the political criteria that Schmitt proposes.

In addition to the fact that it is problematic to assume that the immigrant is an enemy and not a potential friend, it is worth pointing out that this right-wing attitude towards the stranger highlights some shortcomings in how Schmitt conceptually understands the political. By emphasising that politics requires a division between friend and enemy, it is possible to argue that there exists an *antagonistic* tension in the political relationship formed between social actors from different sides of the political spectrum – an antagonism that makes it difficult to find common ground.

Although Mouffe claims that Schmitt recognises an important aspect of the political by highlighting the necessity of friend–enemy relations, she wants to develop Schmitt's thinking so that it becomes more applicable within a pluralist age (Mouffe 2005a: 14–15). One aspect that therefore needs to be addressed in Schmitt's thinking is above all the antagonistic foundation that his conceptual description of the political presupposes: we

6 The philosopher Slavoj Žižek believes that this shift in emphasis gives rise to a tendency among right-wing populists that he describes as 'Huntington's disease'. This 'disease' begins as 'random acts of excessive violence against immigrants, outbursts which lack coordination and merely express a general unease and restlessness apropos of "foreign intruders"'. After a while, he believes that this general xenophobic attitude allows a group of people to be organised and work for the marginalisation of immigrants in public life (Žižek 2017).

cannot live in a pluralist society if we perceive of each other as enemies. Instead of emphasising that politics is based on the distinction between friend and enemy, Mouffe consequently emphasises that politics is based on the distinction between friends and *opponents*. While a relationship with an enemy, conceptually speaking, entails some degree of hostility, an opponent, Mouffe argues, is someone whose perspective you do not share but that you still consider as a legitimate political actor in public life (*ibid.* 19–21).

According to Mouffe, the recognition that all social actors, even one's political opponents, are legitimate political actors, constitutes a prerequisite for civil discourse between political opponents. However, among right-wing populists such as Trump, Le Pen and Wilders, such a quest for civility is accordingly limited. Based on Mouffe's thinking, it is possible to argue that they relate to their opponents antagonistically. Instead of confronting their opponents constructively, they instead offer a clash of civilisation. For that reason, the right-wing populist attitude towards the stranger is expressed as hostility and generally as an attempt to limit or completely deny the public influence of the stranger.

### Beyond hegemony and antagonism

If you sum up right-wing populism (as it has been presented in this article) its logical foundations seem rather paradoxical. The paradox is that the people are not only imagined in relation to those who want to marginalise the people's passions. They also find their identity by distancing themselves from those who, from a global perspective, belong among the most marginalised groups in the world – the immigrant who often has lost everything in the struggle for a better life. One reason for criticising right-wing populism is therefore that, in a similar manner as the elite that it criticises, it wants to limit which concerns are to be given public legitimacy. Populism may offer a way to break up the elite's control of the public sphere, but the new society that is created becomes antagonistic – a society where the stranger cannot be perceived as an opponent, only an enemy.

According to Mouffe's thinking, a fundamental problem in liberalism as a political philosophy is that it removes itself from confrontations between different passionate political positions. But it is also worth pointing out that the reason given as to why passions need to be marginalised is laudable. A fundamental purpose of liberalism is to enable peaceful coexistence between different social actors with differing life-views (Heywood 2002: 43–5). Such

a goal is desirable in a pluralist age, and although right-wing populism challenges the shortcomings of liberalism, it also challenges the liberal pursuit of peace.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, it is reasonable to assume that the society that right-wing populism promotes is one that, contrary to liberalism, values passions, but at the same time cannot offer an arena where conflicting passions can be peacefully confronted. Thus, the danger to a society influenced by right-wing populist logic is the creation of a society filled with a lot of enemies without any public resources for bridging the divide that exists between them.

In order to get past the shortcomings of liberalism and right-wing populism, another political reality needs to be imagined. Based on the points made in this article, this alternative should challenge the marginalisation of passions and antagonism between different social actors. Mouffe's *agonistic* politics offers an interesting alternative for such a project.<sup>8</sup> In this article, however, I will highlight Bruno Latour's political-philosophical thinking. In addition to offering an interesting alternative to liberal and right-wing politics, it has not to any great extent so far been the subject of academic reflection.<sup>9</sup> His thinking, then, constitutes an untapped resource for imagining a new political reality. However, his entire political philosophy cannot be presented within the confines of this article, so I will only make a brief presentation of it.<sup>10</sup>

7 It should be noted that Mouffe is not critical of all aspects of liberalism. As she argues, her critique of liberalism stems from a desire for it to be more compatible with the democratic ideals it claims to value (Mouffe 2005a: 32).

8 According to Mouffe, an agonistic politics recognises the need for the people's passions to be channelled and not suppressed, while also recognising all social actors as legitimate political actors. Mouffe believes that the only way to create a common space to peacefully confront social conflicts is if everybody gives each other such recognition. This in turn becomes a prerequisite for the creation of a true pluralist democracy (Mouffe 2013: 1–18).

9 A notable exception is Graham Harman's book *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (2014).

10 One aspect of Latour's political philosophy that I will not describe is how actor-network theory, the theory that has made him a well-known name within, above all, the social sciences, is related to his understanding of politics. Latour's description of actor-network theory offers good insights into how different actors form a society together, and how the network they establish is maintained through negotiation. It is unfortunately not possible to present how actor-network theory relates to politics within the parameters of this article. However, I have previously dealt with this issue in the book *Hopp om en okänd framtid* (see Portin 2016: 184–96).

## Latour's critique of the elite

Summarising Latour's political philosophy is not an easy endeavour. He does not offer any coherent summary of his political philosophy and therefore it must be obtained by piecing together his more or less fragmented thoughts about the political into such a one. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that on the basis of such an analysis, an idea of the political emerges that challenges those rational and practical structures that limit which social actors have public legitimacy.

The pursuit of a more inclusive public is evident throughout Latour's writings. The main example of this, however, appears in his most famous book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), where he challenges what he describes as modern rationality. According to Latour, modern rationality is characterised by the belief that a paradigm shift has made it possible for humanity to break away from an archaic past. 'The moderns' are consequently those who have managed to break away from a 'premodern' world, which in turn makes the moderns believe that they are 'modern' (Latour 1993: 10).

In short, Latour believes that modern rationality is based on the idea that there exists a separation between the natural and the social. Modernity, consequently, can be said to have begun when humanity discovered a separation between a non-human reality – in the sense that it functions independently from human influence – and a human reality – in the sense that a human is able to independently shape her reality according to her own preferences. According to Latour, this logical division has given rise to two public institutions that refer to each of the realities respectively – the laboratory and the political system. The laboratory thus investigates natural phenomena, while the political is responsible for socialising human commitments (Latour 1993: 10–11, 13–31; Latour 2013: 8–9).

Latour explains that it is specifically that the moderns have managed to make a separation between the natural and the social that makes them modern. The pre-moderns, by that reckoning, are definitively those who have failed to make the same separation. However, combinations of the natural and the social do occur in modern times. And according to the moderns, religion usually confuses the natural and the social by, for example, creating 'hybrids' of science and politics. To counteract such non-rational developments, a modern pursuit is to purify public life of pre-modern expressions, or at least to significantly restrict their influence in the public sphere. If pre-modern expressions are not granted public legitimacy, moderns believe

that society can strive towards a more modern reality. Latour explains that the solution is thus to privatise these hybrids, ensuring that the pre-moderns have a limited influence over public concerns (Latour 1993: 10–11, 37–9).

Latour opposes modern rationality mainly because it claims to break away from the past in a way that he doesn't believe is consistent with the lived experience of modern life.<sup>11</sup> He is also critical of the moderns, however, for limiting what concerns are given public legitimacy.

Latour's critique of the moderns shares some similarities with populist rationality. Although Latour generally avoids referencing 'the elite', it is more or less evident that he, like the rationale of populism, is being critical of a dominant elite that maintains a hegemonic order in public life. Just as right-wing populists do, Latour wants to challenge such an order. Latour, however, differs from right-wing populists since he wants to challenge *all* attempts to limit public legitimacy – he doesn't want to replace one elite with another.

It is possible to argue that an underlying theme in Latour's writings is to challenge public actors who attempt to limit the public legitimacy of certain actors – for example, the moderns in relation to pre-moderns, social scientists in relation to the actors they study (Latour 2005) and humanity in relation to the planet (Latour 2017).<sup>12</sup> Based on the same logic, right-wing populists may also be subject to criticism, as they want to limit the public legitimacy of the stranger.

Latour's criticism can be clarified with an analysis of how he conceptually describes the political. It should be noted that his understanding of politics differs from that of Schmitt and Mouffe.<sup>13</sup>

- 11 He even goes as far as to claim that the moderns have never been modern (Latour 1993: 46–7; Latour 2013: 14, 104–5).
- 12 It is worth pointing out that an actor, according to Latour, doesn't necessarily have to be human. An actor can also be a non-human (Latour 2005: 71–8). Just as he criticises those who want to marginalise some people's public legitimacy, he therefore also criticises humanity's marginalisation of the planet's public legitimacy.
- 13 Interestingly, on the basis of Latour's understanding of the political, it is possible to argue that right-wing populism is based on a limited concept of the political. According to Latour's thinking it is thus possible to direct a conceptual critique at right-wing populism which is similar to Mouffe's critique of liberalism. Latour, however, differs from Mouffe's thinking on the political by not perceiving the identification of friend and opponent as the essence of politics. As I will soon make clear, he points out that the essence of the political is re-presentation.

## Political re-presentation

Latour emphasises that to the extent that it is possible to speak of politics, it needs to be possible to conceptually represent politics in a way that differs from other practices. For that reason, it must be possible to designate something as politics which at the same time cannot be understood to be, for example, religion, economics or science, as these constitute different ‘modes of existence’ according to Latour (2013: 17–18). Latour therefore examines what constitutes the essence of politics by proposing the specific criteria for judging between true and false in politics. All modes of existence have, as Latour describes it, different ‘felicity conditions’. If it is possible to distinguish one set of felicity conditions from another, it will consequently be possible to distinguish the different modes of existences (Latour 2003: 145–6; Latour 2013: 18, 21).

According to Latour, the essence of politics is *re-presentation*. Notice that re-presentation should not be confused with representative politics – the system of choosing politicians that serve within a political system. Instead he argues that politics is the act of publicly presenting the pluralism of concerns of the public – a *re-presentation*. The main task of a politician – if he or she is truly political – will therefore not be to enact policies within a political system. The task of the politician will rather be to listen and take in the diversity of concerns in society, with the purpose of responsibly presenting these concerns publicly (Latour 2003: 149–56).

Latour furthermore emphasises that the politician’s task, if he or she is engaged in politics, does not end after the public has been presented to. As the public domain is constantly shifting due to a continual change in the configuration of public actors, the politician will need to return to the public to listen and take on board its changing concerns. He or she will then be able to again present these concerns to the public. Politics isn’t therefore only presentation. It is *re-presentation*. Latour writes:

The truthful [politician] is not the one who is right while others are wrong, who is obeyed more than others, who sees further than others;

A more in-depth comparative analysis of Latour’s and Mouffe’s understanding of the political would therefore be an interesting topic. However, since such an investigation goes beyond the parameters of this article, I will leave that analysis for another time.

it is the one who decides to tell the truth because, without fearing the cost, s/he travels the entire route again from the multitude to the unit and back, checking twice, both ways, that there is no *direct* relation between the multitude and its unity. (Latour 2003: 153)

This back and forth is consequently essential to the political process. Insofar as a politician, according to Latour's thinking, can be perceived of as engaged in 'true' politics, he or she will therefore not move along a straight, rational line. Instead, the politician moves along a 'curved' path – never able to settle along any given route towards a known goal, only able to again and again present the ever-changing multitude of concerns in a society.<sup>14</sup> Politics is consequently understood as a practice that orientates between many different concerns and not just a practice of faithfully representing a single concern (Latour 2003: 146; Latour 2013: 337, 344). Thus, politics assumes its own basic criteria for truth when it is allowed to transpire without being halted.

If right-wing populism is compared with the characterisation of politics that Latour develops, it becomes evident that re-presentation is an important concern for right-wing populists. As already mentioned, right-wing populism emphasises that a dominant elite has marginalised the people's concerns, and therefore populist movements can be understood to be a pursuit for a fuller re-presentation of the people's concerns. But at the same time right-wing populists don't emphasise re-presentation for all, only for some. It is only the people as they are imagined by right-wing populists who have any public legitimacy. From a Latourian perspective, right-wing populism consequently needs to be criticised for only allowing a re-presentation of certain concerns while others are condemned and rejected.

14 Instead of a straight and rational line, Latour thus argues that politics has a circular movement. In this political circle, the multitude of concerns is gathered around a political actor – the politician – who presents their concerns to the public. The process is then continued when this politician returns to the multitude to re-engage with their concerns. Re-presentation thus takes the form of a circle – it has no beginning and no end and it constantly moves along a curved path. And as soon as someone interrupts this movement – when the circle is broken – politics ends as a consequence (Latour 2003: 149–54; Latour 2013: 338–42).

## Legitimacy for all

If you reflect on what kind of vision for society Latour's thinking about the political imagines, it is possible to argue that it is a society that strives towards effectively re-presenting all existing concerns within a society, in the sense of giving all of these concerns public legitimacy.

Basically, Latour imagines a society that does not give any group of people or rationality a privileged position. Instead, he imagines a society where all people exist 'on the same level' (Latour 2005: 165–72). Thus, in such a society, no social actor is given any privileged position; this is a prerequisite for re-presentative politics. Because, to paraphrase Latour, as long as anyone can deny re-presentation, then no politics is possible (Latour 2005: 250).

In many ways, what Latour suggests is an ideal that is also emphasised in liberal democracies. Liberal democracies want to be democratic in the sense that they do not want to give anyone a privileged position in society. Instead, everybody is perceived of as equal, as long as all are equally privileged in, and conforming to, the same economic and legal conditions. The crucial difference in what Latour suggests is, on the other hand, that he believes that *all* concerns should be given public legitimacy. This is accordingly a prerequisite for actors to be equal within a society. As already noted with Mouffe's thinking, passions, in particular, are marginalised in liberal democracies, as it is assumed that they challenge a society's ability to seek consensus through rational deliberation. On the basis of Latour's work, however, it is possible to argue that passions must also be given public legitimacy, as they are important concerns for a society's actors. Therefore, if one wishes to develop a truly political society, these passions also need to be re-presented.

The society that can be imagined from Latour's thinking will undeniably experience practical challenges. Is it, for example, reasonable that all concerns are given public legitimacy? Should some social actors, for instance, be allowed to develop their own judicial practices based on the legal resources of their own tradition? Could it be acceptable to discriminate against certain people for, for example, religious reasons? Is it really a complete relativism that Latour advocates, in which no fundamental values, rules or norms have any greater validity than others?

That kind of relativistic stance would be an unfair representation of Latour's thinking: 'If there is a mistake that, for our own salvation, we must not commit, it is that of confusing respect for the various alterations ... with the resources of critical thought' (Latour 2013: 157). He even points out that



all the concerns within public life are not necessarily appropriate and to the extent that they are harmful they should be rejected: 'Yes, there are things to discuss ... there are beings that do not deserve to exist ... we have to judge and decide' (*ibid.* 142–3). Although to some extent he acknowledges that he is a relativist, he consequently doesn't believe that no judgments should be allowed in public life. Instead, he is a relativist in the sense that he believes that it is not possible to determine in advance which concerns have greater legitimacy than others (Latour 1993: 111–14; Latour 2005: 23–4).

For this reason, it is politically valid, from a Latourian perspective, that the issues raised by right-wing populists are given public legitimacy. But it is also politically valid that the concerns of the immigrant – their need for protection, food, work, respect and justice – are given the same legitimacy. When equality is obtained in this manner – when all concerns are placed on the same level – it is possible to compare and value the different concerns. Only then is it possible to confront these concerns and pursue some kind of resolution: 'It's time, perhaps, to speak of democracy again' (Latour 1993: 142).

Latour's purpose is therefore not to assert that all concerns are equally valuable or important. Instead, he wants to establish the theoretical criteria that are required for the different concerns to be publically compared and valued. Then all concerns can be taken seriously, although without assurances that all concerns will be valued equally after they have been re-presented.

### Concluding remarks

In this article, through Laclau's and Mouffe's thinking, I have argued that the disruptive character of right-wing populism creates the conditions for a more inclusive public sphere by giving the peoples' concerns public legitimacy. Criticising right-wing populism for this quality therefore seems unreasonable or serves to preserve the current power structure within a society. However, as I further argued, with the same logic it is also possible to criticise right-wing populism for marginalising the concerns of some social actors. Right-wing populism tends to turn the stranger into an enemy that needs to be actively opposed. At the same time as right-wing populists emphasise the right to express their utmost concerns – the things they are passionate about – they consequently also marginalise others, especially the Muslim immigrant. Through Mouffe's thinking I argued that the result is

an antagonistic politics that limits the possibility for creating arenas where conflicts between different political positions can be peacefully confronted.

In conclusion, I argue that an alternative political reality needs to be imagined that does not marginalise passion, or encourage antagonism between different social actors. For this alternative I turned to the political philosophy of Latour. The basic principle of his political philosophy is that no people or no rationality should be given any privileged position in public life. If that happens, the concerns of some social actors will not be recognised. Therefore, those social actors who actively marginalise certain issues should be questioned and their dominant position in society challenged.

According to Latour's thinking an inclusive public sphere requires that politics is understood as re-presentation. The purpose of politics is to repeatedly present all the concerns that exist within a society, and to the extent that such a presentation does not occur, the equality between different social actors will be threatened. This equality is also a prerequisite for peacefully confronting conflicts between social actors – it is only when everyone is on the same level that the process of comparing and valuing different concerns can begin.

An area of lack in Latour's thinking is that he does not offer any suggestions on how different social actors can confront each other's concerns in a constructive and peaceful way. For example, he does not offer any suggestions as to which institutions are needed to maintain peaceful confrontations between different social actors. What is valuable in his thinking, however, is that he offers a theoretical framework that identifies the basic criteria for a society that appreciates passions without encouraging antagonism between different social actors – a society that opposes hegemony by not giving any matter of concern any privileged position. Such a society is able to counteract both the hegemonic position of liberalism – as it gives all concerns and even passions public legitimacy – and criticise the antagonistic politics of right-wing populism – as politics is perceived of as an effort to adequately present all concerns in the public sphere without ridicule, threat or marginalisation.

Finally, it should be asked why the concerns of the immigrant should be granted equal public legitimacy to the host nation's citizen's concerns. Should not the people's concerns, as right-wing populists argue, be given a privileged position in public life, as they have a historical connection to the society? There is undeniably ethical reason why a marginalisation of

immigrants' concerns is problematic. However, I also think it possible to argue that their marginalisation is unsustainable in the long-term according to Latour's thinking.

I have not, to any great extent, developed this line of thinking above, but it is worth asking if the endeavour of right-wing populists to exclude certain social actors – namely the stranger – from public life can have any long-term success. As Latour explains, not even have the moderns succeeded in purifying the public sphere of hybridity. In the private sphere the hybrids have grown stronger and more competent, and after a while they have become unsatisfied with limiting themselves to a private sphere of existence. Consequently, they have spread, according to Latour, out into the world and actively begun challenging the hegemony that the moderns have been aspiring to (Latour 1993: 49–50).

Based on the history of modernity, it is possible to question the right-wing populist project. Right-wing populists may possibly win short-term victories – they may build walls, deport unwanted social actors and establish laws restricting the mobility of the stranger and their ability to publicly express themselves. But can such a marginalisation of the stranger be sustained in the long run? Especially today, when refugees are pouring over the borders, when refugee services are at breaking point, when we see pictures of lifeless bodies on Europe's beaches and so forth, is it really reasonable to assume that it is possible to ignore these people? Is it really possible to overlook their pressing concerns? Based on Latour's works, the answer is no.

In order to confront the challenges that the immigrants' concerns raise, a new political reality needs to be pursued that makes their concerns into public concerns. Latour's political philosophy provides part of a theoretical framework which will facilitate that project. And it should be clear that right-wing populism is only able to offer a limited contribution to such a framework.

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