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# The stylistic approach to populism: From early definitions to interdisciplinary hybridization

Théo Aiolfi

Style is a concept fraught with prejudices. The word itself comes from the Latin *stilus*, a cylindrical tool used to write on wax tablets. Through a metonymic slide from instrument to result, style came to refer to the way of writing or expressing oneself, which expanded into its contemporary use. But before the word even emerged, the notion of style was originally associated with rhetoric, where it was seen as a subfield of the discipline focused on the form taken by language. Using the word *lexis* (λέξις), defined as the way of saying, Aristotle thus dedicated the third book of his seminal *Rhetoric* to style in language. In a notable parallel to the Greek philosopher, Cicero also dedicated the third book of his treatise *De Oratore* to the notion of *elocutio*, by which he meant the rhetorical style of the speaker.

It is precisely from this origin in rhetoric that the concept of style acquired an awkward position in the scholarship on political science. Indeed, echoing the contempt that some philosophers in Ancient Greece held for Sophists, the experts teaching rhetoric to politicians and the nobility, style has historically been understudied in political science and remained an object of lesser academic interest. Because of its association with ‘aesthetics, theatre and fashion’, style has been ‘relegated to the “outside” of mainstream political science as a “surface level” feature of politics – something for media scholars, cultural theorists or rhetoricians to study rather than “serious” political

scientists' (Moffitt 2016: 33). As such, the concept of style has been taken for granted, scarcely defined when it is mobilized and used to capture something that does not neatly fit into previous categories.

In spite of this conceptual blur, style has nevertheless remained a recurring presence in political science, used as 'placeholder to group certain phenomena together, or as shorthand for a political "something" that is ephemeral and difficult to pin down' (Moffitt 2016). This resilience demonstrates that the concept strikes a chord: it has intuitive power and resonance with other areas of society. In this chapter, I argue that style showcases a phenomenon that is fundamental in politics, but also more generally in social life: the interaction between content and form. Whether it is the rhetorical study of *lexis* or *elocutio*, the subfield of stylistics in applied linguistics or Marshall McLuhan's iconic saying that 'the medium is the message' (1964: 1), many scholars have shown that one needs to consider not only *what* is said but also *how* things are said. There are many ways to formulate the contrast between content, substance or ideas on the one hand and form, medium or articulation on the other. Regardless of the words used, these two aspects are inextricably linked as they mutually shape each-other in a symbiotic relationship of interdependence.

In the face of a bias from the political science scholarship which primarily focuses on ideas without considering the form these ideas take, the aim of this chapter is to show the relevance of this relationship when applied to one of the most contentious concepts of contemporary politics: populism. In the following section, I will first consider recent debates on the nature of populism, opposing the ideational approach to populism which defines it as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2007) and the critical scholarship inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005a, 2005b) which challenges this theoretical *a priori*. After justifying the choice to refer to populism as a style, I will provide a brief overview of the way the concept has been used in the literature from the heterogeneous trailblazers to the first systematic definition in the work of Benjamin Moffitt (2016). After assessing its principal limitations, I will then make the case for an interdisciplinary hybridization of

the stylistic approach by integrating concepts drawn from theatre and performance studies, such as performance, performativity and repertoire. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by elaborating on what this theoretical discussion concretely means for progressive politics. I will highlight three key insights that the stylistic approach offers to the Left: showing that populism is not the exclusive domain of the far right, providing a richer lens to understand the success and limitations of previous forms of left-wing populism and offering lessons for emerging forms of progressive politics that seek to embrace the power of style and performance.

### Populism: substance or form?

After decades of debate, a mainstream consensus emerged in the literature on populism around the work of Cas Mudde (2004, 2007) which coalesced into what is now dubbed the ideational approach to populism. Adapting the influential morphological approach developed by Michael Freeden (1998), Mudde famously argued that populism is a ‘thin-centred ideology’ founded on the antagonism between two homogenous groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’. However, because populism fails to provide a comprehensive range of answers to every political problem, ‘it is unable to stand alone as a practical political ideology’ (Stanley 2008: 95). In other words, the shallowness of populism implies its need to get attached to what could be described as a full ideology, like socialism or conservatism. However, a criticism from the originator of the concept of thin ideology, who argued that populism is ‘ideologically too scrawny even to be thin’ (Freeden 2017: 3), sheds doubt on the accuracy of such a depiction of populism.

Inspired by the influential work of Laclau (2005a), a critical group of scholars developed a set of challenges to some of the main assumptions of the ideational approach, highlighting fundamental issues like its reliance on concepts of homogeneity and anti-pluralism (Katsambekis 2020). Recently, a ‘discursive–performative approach’ (Ostiguy, Panizza,

and Moffitt 2021) to populism has sought to unpack the all-too-common conflation between populism and nationalism, and more generally, far-right ideology. Dissatisfied with the theoretical blur of ideational scholars regarding the boundaries of populism, Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) developed a sophisticated model to explain the overlap as well as the differences between populism and nationalism based on their respective focus on the people and the nation. In a later work shaping the premises of a unified critical approach to populism, De Cleen, Jason Glynos, and Aurélien Mondon (2018: 655) insisted on the need to distinguish ‘the normative vision’ of populist actors from ‘the way they seek to achieve this normative vision.’ Their position, which very much mirrors the aforementioned discussion on substance and form, was even more clearly developed later in their text and substantiated with a direct quote of Laclau:

Consequently, this conceptualization of populism goes against the tendency to see populism as a set of ideas about politics and society: the focus shifts from the ‘contents’ of populism – *what* are the demands formulated by populist actors, what is their ideology – to *how* it articulates ‘those contents – whatever those contents are’ (citing Laclau 2005b: 33).

(De Cleen et al. 2018: 655)

Faithful to their theoretical grounding within the Essex School of discourse analysis founded by Laclau, these authors acknowledged a conceptual difference between content and form. But despite this, the difference remained vague due to the catch-all concept of discourse. Indeed, they framed both populism and nationalism through the same conceptual category of ‘discourse.’ Laclau (2005a: 13) defined discourses as ‘structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements,’ a wide definition drawn from his post-structural perspective within which the distinction between ideas and their articulation becomes muddled. This implies that either discourse is broad enough as an analytical category to encompass both content and form, or that their differences are not significant enough to warrant the use of another concept.

In opposition to this ambiguous position, I argue that it is important to use a different concept than the catch-all ‘discourse’ to productively disentangle form and content at the analytical level, especially in the case of populism. I have thus chosen to define populism as a style in clear contrast with its ideological content and to provide more nuance to Laclauian discourse theory. I thus seek to formally move away from perspectives seeing populism as a fixed set of ideas, like ideational scholars, or those conflating it with discourse, like followers of the Essex School. Instead, I suggest that populism is better understood as a political form that can shape and be given shape by any set of ideas, or ideology. Although there are worthwhile alternatives, like the concept of logic, the main conceptual appeal of style is that it is fiercely transparent about its difference with ideology. As such, it clarifies this distinction between form and substance while acknowledging their interdependence.

### A partial genealogy of the populist style

When it comes to the literature on populism, the concept of style has been used by a variety of authors (Kazin 1995; Taguieff 1995; Knight 1998; Canovan 1999; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). However, its application has been heterogeneous and rarely systematic. Compared to its alternatives like ideology or discourse, the notion of a populist style took longer to coalesce into a full-fledged approach precisely because its use has been inconsistent. The aforementioned scholars typically used style as nothing more than a synonym for something closer to discourse, rhetoric or even strategy. That said, many of these authors chose the concept as a result of a diagnosis sharing striking similarities with the idea that populism is located at the level of form and not content. Margaret Canovan (1984: 314) for example, argued that populism is ‘a matter of style rather than substance’; Alan Knight (1998: 226) claimed that populism ‘does not [...] relate to a specific ideology’; while Pierre-André Taguieff (1995: 9) pointed out that

populism 'has no particular ideological content. It is a political style applicable to various ideological frameworks.'

These early definitions still conflated the concept of style with that of discourse, stressing populism's rhetorical dimension. That was particularly apparent in Michael Kazin's (1995: 5) description of populism as 'a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric' and for Canovan (1984: 313) who described populism as 'a rhetorical style.' The notable exception to this conflation between discourse and style was Knight's (1998) work in which he went 'beyond the formally discursive and rhetorical level of analysis [...], gesturing towards the more performative and affective dimension' (Moffitt 2016: 31) of the populist style. However, although his use of the concept went beyond the rhetoric dimension, Knight's definition of a political style, as he humbly recognized it himself, suffered from being 'vague and imprecise' (Knight 1998: 231), as he took the meaning of the concept for granted and only loosely defined it as a 'way of doing politics' (Knight 1998: 234). While recognizing the foundational influence of these authors in developing the concept of a populist political style, their limitations as well as the widely different ways they defined and applied the concept of style left the stylistic approach scattered and inaudible within the broader debates in the specialist literature on populism.

### Moffitt's definition of the populist style

This situation changed with the more recent work of Moffitt who developed the first systematic and sophisticated definition of populism as a political style. Beyond the literature on populism, the concept of style has remained slippery and vague, precisely what Moffitt sought to address. He distinguished two ways to use the concept: one as a 'placeholder to group certain phenomena together', and the second as 'shorthand for a political "something" that is ephemeral and difficult to pin down' (Moffitt 2016: 33). In the first case, style became synonymous with *patterns* and served as a medium for a typological exercise that

‘order[s] or bring[s] together disparate objects or phenomena with similar characteristics to schematize them in a comprehensible fashion’ (Moffitt 2016). This first function notably echoes the way style is deployed in the visual arts where it draws attention to the similarities between various works or paintings by linking them as part of, for instance, romanticism or surrealism. In the second case, style took a more general meaning as it became entirely synonymous with the idea of form, in contrast with the notion of content.

To design his own definition of a political style, Moffitt drew inspiration from three authors engaging with various adjacent disciplines to political science: rhetoric for Robert Hariman (1995), political communication for Dick Pels (2003) and political philosophy for Frank Ankersmit (2002). Hariman outlined a typology of four political styles (realist, courtly, republican and bureaucratic) that remained mostly grounded in their rhetorical dimension, while Ankersmit and Pels both focused on the aesthetic dimension of style in relation to democratic politics. Although their approaches substantially differed, Moffitt argued that what united these authors was that ‘they [took] seriously the often-ignored “shallow” elements of political style and imbue[d] the concept with analytical substance’ (Moffitt 2016: 37). The result of his synthesis was a definition of political styles, in the plural, as ‘the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life’ (Moffitt 2016: 38).

For Moffitt, the populist style is thus a repertoire of performances based on three core features: (1) ‘An appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”’, (2) ‘Bad manners’ and (3) ‘Performance of crisis, breakdown or threat’ (Moffitt 2016: 45). His stylistic approach to populism has four major strengths. First, it captures populism as a global phenomenon, beyond national but also organizational and ideological boundaries. Second, it moves beyond the textual aspects of populism and gives its performative and aesthetic dimensions an equal theoretical significance. Third, it allows for a more nuanced view of populism as



a gradational concept and not as a binary. Fourth, it accounts for the alleged shallowness or lack of substance that populism is often criticized for by its opponents. By accepting that what is ‘superficial’, literally ‘on the surface’ of politics, matters analytically, it goes beyond where other approaches stop. However, it is exactly this argument that was used by other scholars to discredit the very concept of style.

## Challenges to the stylistic approach

The stylistic approach to populism has often been dismissed in the populist literature because it ontologically focuses on something considered ‘shallow’ or ‘futile’. Catherine Fieschi (2004: 115), for example, criticized this approach for ‘not doing (populism) justice (...), implying something frivolous or at the very least inessential or superficial’. For his part, Jan-Werner Müller (2016: 40) asserted that populism could not be summarized as ‘just a question of style’. These criticisms are also echoed by like-minded scholars from the critical scholarship. De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon (2018: 653) for instance, argued that populism is not ‘a “popular style” of talking, acting or looking like “ordinary people”’ and brushed the concept aside without any other justification besides its alleged superficiality. A more developed critique to the stylistic approach can be found in the work of Stavrakakis et al. (2017: 424–5), who conceded that a Laclauian definition ‘bears similarities with a body of work that understands populism more as a political communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016)’. However, they claimed to ‘prefer the term “discourse” or “discursive logic”, since discourse constitutes the core material of analysis and should not be treated as something secondary or superficial – an unavoidable connotation of “style”’ (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016).

In that quote, Stavrakakis et al. (2017) not only conflated Moffitt’s approach with that of Jagers and Walgrave (2007) in spite of their fundamental differences, they even perpetuated the prejudice associating style with superficiality. However, the notion that style is

necessarily secondary or superficial stems from a misunderstanding regarding the ontological nature of style as a concept. In this chapter, I advocate for a deeper understanding of style inspired by performance studies which comprises much more than its superficial components like political communication or rhetoric. Understanding populism as a style does not mean that it is secondary to the ideology which it articulates – although this is a stance that implicitly underpins Muddé's approach where the 'thick' ideology is more important than the 'thin' ideology of populism – it means that they play a different role within a wider discourse: ideology constitutes the foundation of ideas determining *what* is being said while style represents *the way* these ideas are articulated.

However, the fear from Stavrakakis et al. (2017: 425) that populism will be 'treated as something secondary or superficial' if it is conceptualized as a style is girded by the implicit notion that content is always more important, and thus superior to, the form that it takes. This binary opposition, where 'one of the two terms governs the other' (Derrida 1981: 41), implicitly reproduces the noble position of studying content while relegating the analysis of form, and thus that of style, to an inherently inferior and thus less interesting position. Because of this, even when other scholars from a Laclauian perspective made claims that one should go beyond content to look at the articulation of politics (De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon 2018: 655), their claims are hard to take seriously without challenging the inherent hierarchy and granting form an equal analytical footing to content. Furthermore, as demonstrated above, the extreme flexibility of the concept of discourse in the Essex tradition, understood as a 'structured totality' (Laclau 2005a: 13), means that both content and its articulation merge within the wider notion of discourse and the nuances caused by their distinction become harder to visualize.

I assert that the stylistic approach to populism provides a framework to go beyond this conceptual blur by analytically separating form and content while acknowledging their mutual interaction. By focusing on form as a lesser explored dimension of the political, the stylistic

approach provides a theoretical explanation for the ideological hollowness or lack of substance that populism is often criticized for, its ‘empty heart’ (Taggart 2004: 280), as well as accounting for its shape-shifting nature and versatility. Through this ‘thicker’ understanding of style, the stylistic approach emphasizes the need to genuinely consider the form that politics takes and aims to destabilize the dichotomy between form and substance. Because there are no pure examples of form without content and vice-versa, it remains important not to reify this distinction and to pragmatically approach the challenge of studying stylistic features through their interaction with a specific ideological content.

## The stylistic approach and performance studies

As observed, most criticisms of the stylistic approach to populism stem from a limited understanding of style. Yet, I argue that it is still possible to make a case for it by adding nuances to Moffitt’s theory. What is most striking about Moffitt’s definition of populism as style is that although he framed Hariman, Ankersmit and Pels as his main influences, several essential elements remain underdeveloped: the concepts of ‘performance’ and ‘repertoire’ among them. Indeed, Moffitt acknowledged the influence of several broader academic movements, including the “constructivist turn” in studies of political representation [and] the “performative turn” in cultural sociology’ (Moffitt 2016: 38), as well as that of major authors from the canon of performance studies like Erving Goffman, J. L. Austin and Judith Butler. However, he remained surprisingly vague about their influence and the specific meaning of the concepts he deployed. I propose to address analytical gaps remaining in Moffitt’s work by engaging with a major disciplinary influence which he overlooked: performance studies. By tapping into this latent influence for the stylistic approach, I seek to establish the foundations of an interdisciplinary understanding of populism at the crossroads of politics and performance. Furthermore, engaging with

performance studies sheds new light on the aforementioned distinction between form and content, providing tools beyond political theory to grasp their interconnection.

## **Populism and performance**

Performance studies emerged from the need to analyse human performances beyond the ritualized structure of theatre. Since its rise as an independent academic discipline in the 1980s, performance studies has developed beyond its parent discipline of theatre studies with a growing influence on other parts of academia, leading many other disciplines to undergo their 'performative turn' (Domanska 2007). Synthesizing and offering its original perspective on concepts coming from not only theatre but also sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, gender studies, philosophy and many others, performance studies is openly and proudly interdisciplinary. Its strength is built on two major concepts whose analytical influence explains its appeal and success as a discipline: performance and performativity.

Going back to the very root of the concept, a 'performance implies any action that is conducted with the intention of being to some degree witnessed by another' (Rowe 2013: 8), what Richard Schechner (2013: 28) succinctly called 'showing doing'. In other words, a performance is an action characterized by two necessary conditions: relationality, that is the presence of two people engaging in a social interaction, and self-awareness, the awareness of the actors that an interaction is taking place and has meaning (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 4). Although the concept has historically been associated with the context of theatre, such a broad definition encompasses a much larger set of phenomena. Indeed, performance is an inclusive concept in which theatre is merely a node on a rich continuum from everyday life rituals to international ceremonies. Another important difference must be drawn between whether something 'is performance' or can be analysed 'as performance' (Taylor 2003; Schechner 2013). In the former case, something 'is' a performance if and only if the social context and

norms consider that it is, as in the case of a theatrical performance. The latter definition constitutes a much broader frame since any situation implying an actor and an audience can be studied 'as performance'. According to Taylor (2003: 3), more than the core concept of the discipline, 'performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyse events *as performance*'.

Politics too can be productively studied as performance: every aspect of political life involves a performance of some sort. From official ceremonies to street protests, from parliamentary debates to a politician's personal storytelling, performances are a fundamental feature of politics. Because 'politics is a social necessity that is evident at all levels of society, [political performances are] a brand of "showing doing" with some degree of political intent' (Rowe 2013: 11). While many scholars of politics have used theatre and performance as a mere metaphor (Parkinson 2015), a useful shortcut that immediately 'sets the stage' to develop their concepts through a frame that every reader intuitively understands, there has been a growing effort in recent years to develop an interdisciplinary perspective combining political science with performance studies.

One of the first openly interdisciplinary works combining both disciplines was developed by Shirin Rai and Janelle Reinelt (2015)<sup>1</sup> who encouraged scholars from both disciplines to study what they called a 'grammar of politics and performance'. Starting from the premise that politics and performance are 'inter-related discursive and embodied practices' (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 4) sharing similar structural rules, they suggested that interdisciplinary collaboration would contribute to fleshing out a common grammar, by which they mean 'a set of recognizable rules or codifications that facilitate communication'. Such a grammar of politics and performance would exist at the intersection of both disciplines but should not be seen as fixed entity since any grammar 'shifts and changes over time, and thus allows for a space to re-form and re-enact rules through everyday subversion of some codes and renegotiation of others' (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 2).

The core argument of this chapter is that instead of seeing populism as a purely political phenomenon, one should consider its intrinsically performative dimension. Moffitt followed the same reasoning as he justified his use to structure his approach around theatrical concepts – like performer, audience and stage – by claiming that ‘this vocabulary captures the inherent theatricality of contemporary populism, while also bringing the mechanisms of populist representation into focus’ (Moffitt 2016: 154). Understanding populism as a style means going beyond rhetoric, it implies acknowledging the deeper mechanisms of articulation of ideas at play through this mode of political expression. For the interdisciplinary approach to populism advocated in this chapter, the use of the conceptual toolbox of theatre and performance is not merely an elegant metaphor: these concepts underpin the ontological foundations of the analysis.

### **Populism and performativity**

Considering this interdisciplinary hybridization of performance and politics sheds new light on the central role of performativity in populism. While there is relative consensus around the meaning of performance, performativity is a much more contentious concept whose use and meaning have evolved since its inception. Originally coined by Austin (1962) within his theory of speech acts, the concept was used to explain the power of the utterance of words. Austin saw performativity as the effect of ‘performatives’, utterances inducing a change in reality, like a pledge or a promise, as opposed to ‘constatives’, statements merely describing a situation. Because it remained strongly attached to language, and thus omitted non-verbal elements, Austin’s conceptualization could be described as a ‘thin’ definition of performativity.

‘Thicker’ accounts of performativity emerged through the work of post-structuralist authors who, following Derrida’s emphasis on the citational and iterative nature of performativity, allowed the concept

to be less reliant on words and drew more attention to the effects of actions more generally. The most prominent example of such an understanding of performativity is found in Butler's (1988) work on gender in which she famously defined it as 'a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988: 519). Drawing inspiration from this 'thick' understanding, the way performativity is used in the stylistic approach to populism nonetheless differs from Butler's perspective as it focuses less on the structural determinants shaping the performing subject and highlights instead the ontological effects established through performance. Understood this way, performance and performativity are symbiotically linked: performances constitute the ontic site on which performativity comes into action while performativity expresses the ontological effects that performances create. This interconnection between performance and performativity thus provides an analytical frame through which one can understand how form shapes substance by assessing that even the medium itself produces ontological effects.

In the case of populism, performativity is central to populism's logic. Following Laclau's keen intuition, one can understand populism as a 'representative claim' (Saward 2010). Beyond a static understanding of representation as given through electoral consent, this concept argues that representation is not a fixed attribute but rather the performative product of the representative's performances. Understood this way, populism is a representative claim made on behalf of 'the people'. But because there is no pre-existing people 'out there', a performer adopting the populist style 'brings the subject known as "the people" into being through [...] performance' (Moffitt 2016: 24). In Laclauian terms, the people and the elite are 'empty signifiers', they do not hold a specific meaning until their performative articulation through the embodied performance of an individual. Additionally, because identity is relational, political actors themselves are conversely shaped by performativity through their mobilization of the populist style: their very identity as populist leaders is simultaneously co-constituted in the performative process. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir through Butler's reading of performativity: one is not born a populist leader, but rather becomes one.

## The populist repertoire

The final point of interdisciplinary hybridization which I will defend in this chapter regards the notion of repertoire. While Moffitt defines political styles as ‘repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances’ (Moffitt 2016: 38), the concept of repertoire, was neither defined nor developed, and in fact barely referenced in his discussion of political style. Beyond Hariman (1995: 187) who mentioned the concept in passing in his definition of political style associated with rhetoric, the likeliest influence for Moffitt is the influential work of Charles Tilly (2006). In his assessment of what he called ‘contentious politics’, Tilly argued that claim-making performances conglomerate into repertoires of practices. Tilly’s understanding of these concepts remained superficial however, as he admitted using both repertoires and performances as ‘theatrical metaphors’ (Tilly 2006: 34). While he argued that doing so ‘calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people’s interactions’ (Tilly 2006: 35), he did not share the ontological stance of the stylistic approach in which performances are not merely metaphors but constitutive elements of a shared social reality.

To reconcile the concept of repertoire with the interdisciplinary framework of the stylistic approach to populism, I will turn to one of the most prominent contributions in performance studies developed by Diana Taylor (2003). She discussed the productive tension between the archive and the repertoire, engaging with the question of how knowledge and memory are produced, reproduced and transmitted. She described two main forms that stored knowledge and memory may take: either ‘the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)’ or the ‘ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)’ (Taylor 2003: 19). Challenging the preponderance of archives in Western epistemology, which favours written forms of knowledge, she made the case for reconsidering repertoires of embodied actions as valuable *loci* of human communication. While only written text matters from the perspective of the archive, re-introducing the notion of the



repertoire enabled the possibility to make sense of performances as more than just text in action and emphasized their intrinsic value in capturing a complementary aspect of human existence that discourse alone fails to grasp.

Going back to repertoire's etymology as 'treasury, inventory', Taylor argued that one of the specificities of the concept is that it gives a more prominent role to individual agency by implying a 'finder, discoverer', and showcases the fundamental importance of the 'presence' of individuals in creating and preserving 'acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge' (Taylor 2003: 20). However, the most relevant strength of Taylor's concept of the repertoire lies in its fluidity and flexibility. Although specific performances may disappear, their meaning and intent take another life through the action of another performer and the concept of the repertoire captures this continuity:

As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. [...] Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers (and even individual dancers) swear they're always the same. But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same.

(Taylor 2003: 20)

Taylor's understanding of the concept can be productively associated with that of political style. Holding on to the core of the concept, it is productive to consider repertoires as plural to showcase that beyond repertoire as a principle, one can imagine a multiplicity of repertoires of embodied practices united by common principles and shared meanings. Such an adaptation of the concept of repertoire to the grammar of politics and performance captures how a way of doing politics can remain the same while being embodied by a multiplicity of potentially disconnected actors performing in a myriad of different socio-cultural contexts. Beyond Hariman's (1995: 187) understanding of the word that was reduced to its rhetorical dimension and Tilly's (2006: 34) metaphorical use of the term, incorporating Taylor's

definition emphasizes the open-ended and constantly evolving nature of political style, whose shape constantly changes but remains united through a common lineage of meaning-making. Using repertoire in this light, I concur with Moffitt's definition of a political style but reckon that it can be stripped of its redundancies by being described as *a repertoire of embodied performances*. To go back to the specific case at hand, populism can thus be seen as one of a diversity of political styles, a way of doing politics whose characteristics are defined by the kind of performances within it. When going back to the distinction between form and substance in politics, this notion of repertoire enables us to find patterns in the way form is mobilized to articulate content and to productively operationalize the concept of style. Moreover, while style is only one component among the wider set of practices that could be described as form, understanding political styles as open-ended repertoires brings attention to commonalities within the performances of political actors without claiming to comprehensively capture form.

### Conclusion: The populist style and its lessons for progressive politics

In this chapter, I have shown that the fundamental distinction between form and content addresses the challenging task of defining populism. As such, I have made the case for approaching populism as a political style, arguing that such an approach is intrinsically interdisciplinary, located at the junction of politics and performance. Furthermore, I have shown that the central concepts of performance studies are not merely mobilized on the margins of the approach, they are central to its very logic and most innovative insights, consequently making populism itself an interdisciplinary concept.

Through a discussion of the connections between populism, performance and performativity, I have fleshed out a deeper understanding of style as an open-ended repertoire accessible to any political actor willing to embrace it. To adapt Moffitt's insights through

this interdisciplinary lens, the populist repertoire is built around three performative clusters: (1) framing politics as an antagonistic struggle between the people and the elite (Laclau 2005a) through the embodiment of a political leader<sup>2</sup> (Casullo 2021), (2) transgressing political norms to make oneself and one's message appear closer to the people (Aiolfi 2022), (3) performing a crisis narrative which requires urgent change (Moffitt 2015). At its core, the populist style articulates a society in crisis where an elite is failing in its duty to represent and act on behalf of its people, and where radical change is embodied through the intervention of a transgressive leader. But without delving deeper into each of these components, the fundamental argument I wish to stress is that one cannot understand the populist form without considering the ideological content to which it gives shape. For instance, the boundaries of who is included in the people will differ based on ideology: from its conflation with the nation for far-right politicians to its association with the working class from a socialist perspective. Likewise, the type of crisis performed through the populist style is also dependent on a political agenda. While a progressive agenda might focus on inequalities and the ecological crisis, a reactionary one might instead argue that traditional values (family, masculinity) or even national identity are threatened by immigration.

What does this theoretical discussion on populism as a style mean for left-wing politics? First, by considering populism as ideologically agnostic, one can go beyond the negative prejudices associated with the concept. In opposition to its implicit association with demagoguery, populism is not in itself a problem. It can revitalize democracy by offering a radically popular alternative to a problematic status quo provided that the message it defends serves the interests of the entire community and that it highlights genuine failures of the system. However, the current dominance of far-right actors who mobilize the populist style shows that it can be weaponized when the ideological content that gives it shape to furthers a reactionary and exclusionary political agenda. But condemning populism for its far-right interpretation ignores its appeal

and potential. On the contrary, it is precisely because the populist style has been so successfully appropriated by the far right that it needs to be disentangled from its ideological content.

Second, dissociating populism from its ideological content does not mean being blind to its limitations as a style. From its reliance on antagonism, its simplification of sophisticated problems to its heavy focus on embodiment which leaves it open to being weaponized by an eloquent leader, populism is not a panacea for progressive politics either. Understanding populism for what it is without confusing it with characteristics of the ideas which it articulates, also allows us to understand with more clarity the contemporary experiences of left-wing politicians and movements which were, sometimes openly, inspired by populism. From *Podemos* and Pablo Iglesias in Spain to *Syriza* in Greece, Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as head of the British Labour Party, Jean Luc Mélenchon's *France Insoumise* and the presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders in the United States, the radical left in the West has not waited for the verdict of political theorists regarding whether populism can be a force for good. But considering the specific interaction between populist style and socialist ideology allows us to understand some of its limitations and contradictions particularly regarding the tension between horizontal aspirations and vertical leadership.

Third, it is important once more to point out that a cautiously optimistic stance on the potential of populism as a democratizing force does not imply any prescriptive views over what left-wing politicians should do. The stylistic approach does not encourage anyone to blindly embrace populism; nor does it frame it as a flawless strategy to pursue a progressive agenda. Instead, it merely reveals the performative power of populism in order to demystify its appeal and make its tools accessible to a wide audience. That said, some of the elements contributing to the success of the populist style can offer lessons for aspiring progressive politicians. For instance, its focus on embodied performances of authenticity highlights the importance of identification in mobilizing a

committed movement. Its use of transgression showcases the distance between the norms of politicians and the lives of the citizens they represent. Finally, the populist emphasis on performing crisis through an affective register demonstrates the necessity of mobilizing both rationality and emotions when defending a radical agenda for change. Their electoral success shows that far-right politicians have long understood the power of form to normalize a reactionary, xenophobic and racist agenda. In order not to let that potential go untapped, it is important for left-wing political actors to pay attention not only to the cohesion and quality of their ideological arguments but also to their style.

## Notes

- 1 Recently, their interdisciplinary endeavour was further expanded in an even more ambitious handbook on politics and performance (Rai et al. 2021).
- 2 This question of the role of – or even need for – the populist leader is a much deeper debate around notions of embodiment, identification and crystallization of affects, which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. This remains one of the most stimulating points of discussion within the discursive-performative approach and beyond.

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