TOWARDS AN ELITE THEORY OF POPULISM

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In this paper, we offer a contribution to the ideational approach to populism. Considering populism as a ‘thin’ ideology in whose conceptual core lie the notions of the good ‘people’, the evil ‘elite’ and popular sovereignty, we propose a theoretical articulation of populism that, in our view, encompasses two hitherto inadequately articulated dimensions of the populist phenomenon – reactivity and elitism. To this end, we draw from Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogical account of Slave morality, Vilfredo Pareto’s theory of elite cycles, as well as from John Higley and Michael Burton’s notion of ‘elite configuration’ to construct a descriptive elitetheoretical model which we then apply in our interpretation of the populist phenomenon. According to our proposed model, populism can be understood as the ideological expression of an ‘outsider-elite’ whose aim is to renegotiate the ‘thickened’ ideological consensus of a consensually united political elite.

INTRODUCTION

In the case of populism, the frequency of the term’s usage in public discourse seems commensurate to the degree of scholarly attention devoted to researching the phenomenon it denotes. Cambridge Dictionary’s 2017 ‘word of the year’ has been, of late, subject of much theoretical discussion, of which a significant part concerns the nature of the concept, its definition and extension.¹ In this paper, we attempt to contribute to the understanding of the nature of the populist phenomenon by bringing its ideational features in relation to the socio-political dynamics within which populist political organizations emerge.

What is populism? Is it best understood as a political strategy, a type of discourse or a variant of ideology? In the first Chapter, we critically assess three dominant contemporary ways to conceptualizing populism: Kurt Weyland’s ‘organizational’ approach, Pierre Ostiguy’s ‘socio-cultural’ approach, and the ‘ideational’ approach championed by Mudde et. al. (Weyland 2001) (Ostiguy 2017) (Mudde 2017). We find efforts to define populism in terms of the structural features of populist political organizations, i.e. personalistic leadership and weak organizational structure, ultimately inconclusive, due to the elusive meaning of these two proposed criteria. We further contend that the primary connotation of the central notion of the socio-cultural approach, namely, the so-called ‘high-low’ axis, remains unclear, suggesting, at the same time, class affiliation and normative beliefs. Finally, while in the ideational approach

we recognize the greatest explanatory potential, we submit that the theories treating populism as a type of ‘thin’ ideology fail to adequately emphasize what we identify as two salient features of the populist phenomenon: the reactivity inherent in its conceptual core and the elitist nature of its politics.

To complement the ideational approach so as to bring to the fore these two neglected aspects of populism, in the second Chapter we draw from Nietzsche’s work, finding structural parallels between Nietzsche’s account of Slave morality and the populist juxtaposition of the good ‘people’ to the evil ‘elite’ (Nietzsche 1997). Relying on this framework, we posit that, in the particular way in which populism antagonizes ‘the elite’ from the perspective of ‘the people’, there is a distinct sense of what Nietzsche called ressentiment, harbored by the powerless Slave towards an oppressive Master. Our employment of Nietzsche’s notions leads us to consider the sociological framework within which Nietzsche puts forth his genealogical account of Slave morality. In this respect, we invoke Nietzsche’s description of the tripartite structure of early human societies (comprised of the Masters, the Slaves and the Priests) as a useful heuristic device for interpreting populism’s broader socio-political dynamics. We argue that, much like in the case of Nietzsche’s Priests and their relations towards the Masters, the ambiguous position of populist leaders vis-à-vis the political elite informs the conceptual architecture of the populism qua ‘thin’ ideology.

With the Nietzschean perspective in place, in the third Chapter we move to further elaborate the links between the socio-political position of the populist ‘outsider-elite’ and the broader political dynamics of populist phenomenon. In this respect, we provide an outline of the so-called elite theory in its classical and contemporary forms, with a particular focus on Vilfredo Pareto’s theory of elite cycles and John Higley and Michael Burton’s notion of elite configurations. Following Pareto’s general idea about the cycles of historical change in the composition of societies’ political elites, we endeavor to construct an account of elite change that situates the rise of populism within the context of oligarchic struggle between the (governing) political elite and the populist ‘outsider-elite’. To this end, we modify Higley and Burton’s distinction between ‘ideologically united’ and ‘consensually united’ political elites, introducing the notion of a consensually united elite’s ideological consensus. This consensus, we argue, initially amounts to a ‘thin’ ideology but tends to ‘thicken’ over time. In our view, this ‘thickening’ process manifests itself politically in ways that resemble Pareto’s description of a governing elite’s progressive descent towards the end of an elite cycle.
Finally, the fourth Chapter of this paper contains the application of our proposed elite-theoretical model to the discussion of the most salient ideological and socio-political features of populism. We note that, in recent literature, there seems to be a tendency to perceive populism’s inherent anti-institutionalism as indiscriminately targeting all institutional facets of the representative system; against this trend, we emphasize populism’s hostility towards established political parties. We argue that what is commonly understood as the crisis of party democracy can be construed as the outcome of the ‘thickening’ of a political elite’s ideological consensus. Our argument is, further, that populism’s rallying cry to re-politicize hitherto depoliticized policy issues manifests the ambition, on part of the populist ‘outsider-elite’, to renegotiate (and, in effect, to ‘thin out’) the ‘thickened’ ideological consensus of the political elite.
DEFINING POPULISM

According to the “Oxford Handbook of Populism”, three distinct approaches to understanding the concept of ‘populism’ dominate the contemporary theoretical discussion. Following Kurt Weyland, we may think of populism as a political strategy (Weyland 2001) (Weyland 2017). Alternatively, in line with Pierre Ostiguy’s approach, populism can be conceptualized as a type of socio-cultural discourse (Ostiguy 2017). Finally, populism can be defined ‘ideationally’, as being a ‘thin’ (or ‘thin-centered’) ideology, as Cas Mudde and many others do (Mudde 2004) (Mudde 2017), (Stanley 2008), (Abts and Rummens 2007), (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014). This tripartite typology of conceptualizations of populism – namely, as a discourse, as a strategy, as a ‘thin’ ideology – is by no means the only one. However, since it reflects the current scholarly consensus in the field, we employ it throughout this Chapter as a frame of reference.

What follows is a critical outline of the three said ways of defining populism. Although we posit that, of the three, the so-called ‘ideational’ approach championed by Mudde et. al. seems the most promising, we nevertheless underscore some descriptive and explanatory lacunae whose existence, in our view, calls for further theoretical articulation of the ideational model.

Populism as Strategy

In his works on Latin American politics, Kurt Weyland develops a ‘political-strategic’ approach to defining populism. According to this approach, populism is best defined as a “political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (Weyland 2001, p. 14).

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2 For an alternative classification of dominant conceptualizations of populism, see Davide Vittori’s paper (Vittori 2017). Vittori distinguishes between five approaches to defining populism: as (1) ‘political illiberalism’, (2) a tool for political mobilization, (3) a ‘leader-led’ movement, (4) as a communicative/discursive tool and (5) as an ideology. We found this classification comparatively wanting in terms of clarity of distinction, as (1) could arguably be subsumed under (5), and (4) might, in a sense, be said to encompass (2).
Populism, according to Weyland, is essentially about power – in his view, to be classified as a ‘political strategy’ means to comprise “methods and instruments of winning and exercising power” (p. 12). As such, there are two elements to populism *qua* strategy: the type of a political actor’s power structure, and its principal power capability. With regard to the former, populism is said to rest on “personalistic” leadership, as opposed to the leadership of an informal clique, or that of a formally structured hierarchy. (Weyland 2017, p. 12). The distinctive feature of populist political actors is a preeminent, authoritative leading figure, whose mass-media-facilitated bond with their voter base approaches cult-like intensity. Where the latter is concerned, populist political actors tend to draw strength from numbers, rather than from the ‘special weight’ of some specific source of power (p. 13). Hence, they seek to assert authority by attracting large, amorphous masses of followers, rather than by securing access to financial resources or control over military force. Moreover, Weyland posits that populist political actors are inherently disorganized – by relying on a leader’s charismatic appeal to attract support, they foster the leader’s unmediated, “quasi-direct” identification with the mass (“Chavez is the People, and the People is Chavez”, as Bolivian populists used to chant), thereby diminishing the role of party hierarchy as an intermediary in this process (pp. 14-15). For this reason, populist organizations rise and fall with their leaders’ fate. Finally, in Weyland’s account, the lack of regard for programmatic coherence in the populist strategy brings to the fore the populists’ ideological vacuity and naked opportunism – thus, when in power, populist leaders govern willfully and unpredictably, recurrently shifting ideological positions and self-servingly usurping institutional checks and balances (pp. 8, 18-19).

By Weyland’s own admission, the definition of populism given by the political-strategic approach has a comparably limited scope of extension. In fact, almost all Weyland’s examples come from Latin America, and much of Europe’s so-called radical right – commonly viewed as the powerhouse of populism on the continent – is left out and declared a “different ‘political animal’”, since these organizations do not necessarily exhibit ideologically vacuous personalism and a weak formal structure (p. 18). These limitations are not disqualifying *per se*; however, they give credence to Mudde’s contention that populism cannot only be about charismatic leadership and loose organization (Mudde 2017, p. 15). That there are further components to populism than Weyland lets on is persuasively argued by Ostiguy, who maintains a leader’s “charisma” is insufficient to account for the populists’ “direct, unmediated” rapport with their followers, and that an element of content must feature as well
in populism’s strategic toolbox (Ostiguy, p. 18). If this is so, then the narrow extension of Weyland’s definitions, derived from his insistence on the two aforementioned criteria, seems unwarranted.

Questions of possible false negatives aside, the fundamental problem with Weyland’s approach is the fickleness of the categories of organizational strength and ‘personalistic’ leadership with which he operates.

What makes an organizational structure strong? It serves to note, with Ostiguy, the distinction between a group’s organization and its formal institutionalization (Ibid). We might further posit that a group’s ‘organization’ consists of the rules that govern such matters as collective decision-making and internal division of tasks, and ask how the strength of these arrangements is measured. If efficiency of political advocacy is our criteria, we might well argue that, when it comes to a partisan organization, ‘the leaner the better’. Indeed, the revolution in communication, brought by technological innovation, had its effects on organizational functioning, allowing daily decision-making to bypass many arcane procedures associated with rigorous formalization (nowadays, Conservative MP’s in UK’s House of Commons discuss plenary strategy through a WhatsApp group chat). At any rate, Weyland seems to ignore these nuances, assuming instead that strong partisan organization means old-fashioned procedural rigor.

Moreover, what does personalistic leadership mean? A leader’s preeminence as the public ‘face’ of an organization should not be conflated with a monopoly over decision-making, as hubristic figureheads are all too often reminded by the proverbial powers behind the throne. Unless one is a White House insider, it is hard to assess whether Donald Trump has more say over his cabinet appointments than his predecessor did. In any case, the crowd’s adoration at Trump’s mega-rallies is no benchmark for determining this. Weyland, however, appears not to take this subtle distinction into account.

3 At one point, Weyland indeed suggests that populists “stimulate popular identification with their leadership by [acting] in ways that embody and live out the dreams of the common man” (Weyland, 2001, pp. 12-14) in (Ostiguy 2017, p. 18). These ‘ways of acting’ are, of course, context-dependent – nevertheless, if they are part of the populist strategy, then populism qua strategy does have a discursive feature that should be acknowledged.
For these reasons, in our view, the ambiguity of these conceptual tools renders the overall political-strategic approach unable to meet the task.

**Populism as Discourse**

An alternative way of conceptualizing populism is to see it, as Pierre Ostiguy does, as the “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy, p. 2). Ostiguy’s definition of populism finds its place within a modified version of the commonly employed two-dimensional (left-right/liberal-conservative) ideological chart. Orthogonally to the horizontal left-right axis Ostiguy posits a ‘high-low’ scale, seeking to represent the cultural designations of different types of discourse, modes of identification and patterns of behavior – in other words, of “different ways of being and acting in politics” (p. 6). The high-low axis, we are told, is comprised of two components: the social-cultural and the political-cultural. The former refers to that which is colloquially described with the terms ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ – that is, “manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public” – as well as to the configuration of nativist or cosmopolitan facets of identity – with more refined, worldly dispositions associated with the ‘high’ pole, and the dominance of locally-based identities prevalent on the ‘low’ (pp. 7-9). The latter, politico-cultural dimension seeks to map attitudes towards authority – a proclivity for impersonal, sublimated, institutionally mediated forms of rule being on the ‘high’ pole, and an inclination towards unmediated, personalized leadership residing on the ‘low’ (pp. 10-11).

Within such left-right/high-low coordinate system, populism is itself a kind of flaunting, that is, a self-assertion of the ‘low’ in the public sphere, that finds its expression in discourse. Specifically, is an “agonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native, and of personalism as a mode of decision-making” (pp. 12). According to Ostiguy, populists of all stripes position themselves as the unmediated, ‘ballsy’ champions of the nativist, familial and unapologetically crass ‘low’ against the condescending, culturally alien and politically out-of-touch snobbery of the ‘high’ and its impersonal institutionalism. Populism is, thus, at the same time a “narcissistic affirmation” of the ‘low’ and the defiant reaction to the perceived political hegemony of the ‘high’ pole (Ibid).
The problem with understanding populism as a flaunting of ‘low’ ways of ‘being and acting’ in politics pertains to the task of discerning the nature of that which is being flaunted. What, exactly, does the high-low axis represent? Across its two sub-dimensions, the social-cultural and the political-cultural, sets of class-derived attributes seem to be lumped together with clusters of normative beliefs in an implicit, and ultimately obfuscating manner.

For instance, Ostiguy is careful to stress that “the “low” in politics is not synonymous with poor people or lower social strata” (Ostiguy, p. 7). To illustrate his point, Ostiguy notes that George W. Bush and Ross Perot are ‘lower’ than Al Gore and John Kerry, despite being richer than them. Now, as far as the ‘high-brow vs. low-brow’ sub-dimension of the ‘high-low’ axis is concerned, it is plainly derived from class – in this sense, to point out that some aristocrats lack posh manners does not question the plain fact that posh manners have been historically imposed by, associated with and maintained through the power of the aristocracy, and that, as such, they are clearly an expression of class. On the other hand, preferences towards different (charismatic or institutional) forms of leadership, delineating the political-cultural dimension of the ‘high-low’ axis, seem primarily (and inseparably) linked to normative beliefs about the comparative utility of authoritarian and liberal-democratic governance. As such, these preferences are essentially ideological in nature, thus unrelated per se to class affiliations. Finally, when the ‘nativism vs. cosmopolitanism’ spectrum is posited as a component of the social-cultural ‘high-low’ divide, it is unclear to what degree the worldly ways associated with cosmopolitanism are conjunct (or merely aligned) to a set of ideological presuppositions about the proper place of the nation-state as a framework of political decision-making. While this question is certainly contested, in Ostiguy’s account it is circumvented.

Unless we adopt the Marxist view that ideological beliefs are expressions of class identity, Ostiguy’s lack of distinction between the normatively charged and normatively neutral dimensions of the proposed ‘high-low’ axis is deeply problematic. Does a ‘low-brow’ cultural designation really go together with the dominance of nativist identity and an affinity towards charismatic leadership? Is it warranted to place a preference for institutionalism alongside a cosmopolitan identity and the property of being ‘high-brow’, as part of the same ‘pole’? These

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4 While normative attitudes towards liberal-democracy and authoritarianism could, in specific contexts, be brought into correlation with class affiliation, the history of modern authoritarianism offers a plethora of examples of widespread upper-class support for fascist regimes (e.g. Francoist Spain and Salazar’s Portugal). Overall, it is problematic to imply that people of ‘low brow’ culture tend to prefer forms of Führerprinzip to impersonal institutional rule.
sweeping assumptions would appear to demand considerable empirical backing, lest they be dismissed as manifestations of class prejudice. Thus, in our view, a more promising approach to understanding populism would be one that operates with a less ambiguous set of categories – such, we believe, is the ideational approach.

**Populism as ‘Thin’ Ideology**

The third and currently most popular way of conceptualizing populism – the so-called ideational approach – finds its formulation in the works of Cas Mudde, Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, and Ben Stanley (Mudde 2004) (Abts and Rummens 2007) (Stanley 2008). In the ideational approach, populism is considered not as a political strategy or a type of discourse, but as a distinct ideology. Specifically, proponents of the ideational approach understand populism to be a case of what Michael Freeden called ‘thin’ or ‘thin-centered’ ideology, (Freeden 1998).

In his paper “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?” Freeden offers a succinct articulation of his theory of ideology (Freeden 1998). Central to Freeden’s understanding of ideology is the notion of *interpretation* (Stanley, p. 98). ‘Ideas’, he posits, are individual interpretations of phenomena – to have an idea is to cognize one’s experience of the world in a certain way. When ‘ideas’ are formulated in language, they become ‘concepts’. Now, *political* concepts, being semantic formalizations of class of ideas, are inherently contestable – “the intension of any political concept” we are told, “contains more components than any particular instance can hold at a given time” (Freeden, p. 749). Due to this inherent indeterminacy of meaning, the selected route of interpreting any political concept is essentially arbitrary – of the countless possible meanings that could be assigned to a concept we select one, and this choice is not logically mandated. To select a specific interpretation of a concept, i.e. to set its meaning, is to *decontest* that concept. In this sense, Freeden defines ‘ideologies’ as interpretative frameworks, namely, as “configurations of political concepts” where some concepts are *decontested* (Ibid). Those *decontested* concepts, in turn, constitute an ideology’s conceptual ‘core’ that determines its defining characteristics. Beyond this core lies a set of ‘adjacent’ or ‘peripheral’ concepts that “color the core in different ways” – by way of these concepts, ideologies generate

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5 Even if a statistically significant correlation between the presence of these attributes in the population could be empirically established, for them to constitute distinct poles on a political frame of reference mere correlation would appear insufficient. Indeed, one would have to posit a compelling logical link between them.
ideology-specific answers to a range of political questions and, in so doing, “interact with, and shape, the concrete world”, (Ibid).

In Freeden’s view, ‘full’ ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism and socialism, provide a “reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate” (p. 750). A litmus test for assessing the width of this range is the “famous “who gets what, when, how” question, seen to be central to politics” (Stanley, p. 106). On the other hand, the conceptual structure of ‘thin’ or ‘thin-centered’ ideologies limited to their ‘core’ – for this reason, ‘thin’ ideologies, such as nationalism, feminism or environmentalism, are “limited in ideational ambition and scope”, being unable to offer ideology-specific solutions to a comprehensive set of political issues (Freeden, p. 750-751). As such, ‘thin’ ideologies require a host ideology to fill them with a breadth of content – thus we speak of liberal nationalism, nationalist conservatism or nationalist socialism.

According to the proponents of the ideational approach, populism falls within the class of ‘thin’ ideologies. As the earliest advocate of this classification, Mudde defines populism as “a [thin] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the […] general will of the people” (2004, p. 543). As the definition suggests, in Mudde’s view, the core of populist ideology is comprised of three decontested concepts: “the people”, “the elite” and the “general will” (2017, p. 6). In this account, “the people” are a central category, an instance of Anderson’s “imagined [yet not imaginary] community” (much like ‘nation’ or ‘class’) yet distinct for its complete lack of content – such an empty construct is said to contain whatever the populist projects into it (p. 7). Derived ex negativo from ‘the people’ is ‘the elite’ – the “corrupt” an “evil” group standing in a Manichean juxtaposition to the “pure”, righteous ‘people’ (Ibid). This antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is thus construed as being essentially ethical in nature, rather than ethnic, religious or national. The third core concept, the Rousseauian ‘general will’, rests on the idea that a homogenous ‘people’, as construed by populists, thinks with a single mind – representations of this ‘general will’ are those “common sense” solutions that, in the populists’ narrative, get ignored by an out-of-touch elite and its “special interests” (p. 8).

Stanley’s account of the ‘thin’ ideology of populism runs along very similar lines. In his view, populism’s conceptual ‘core’ is fourfold. It includes (1) the analytic imposition of a
dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, (2) an antagonistic relation between the two (3) the notion of popular sovereignty and (4) the “positive valorization of ‘the people’ and denigration of ‘the elite’” (Stanley, p. 102). While Stanley follows Mudde in construing ‘the elite’ as negatively derived from ‘the people’, he perceives their adversarial relationship in Carl Schmitt’s terms – as an iteration of the friend/enemy distinction that, in Schmitt’s view, is central to the constitution of a demos. The introduction of Schmitt’s distinction, with its claimed place in the democratic logic, is a welcome move in the context of discussing populism since, as Chantal Mouffe points out, the inability to adequately conceptualize Schmitt’s ‘us vs. them’ frontier is a consequential blind spot of liberal political theory (Mouffe 1997, pp. 4-5).

Finally, Abts and Rummens define populism as a “thin-centered ideology which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogenous body” (p. 409). This definition, as the authors note, is comparatively succinct – what Mudde and Stanley perceive as distinct features of populism’s core (i.e. the dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, their Manichean antagonism and the Rousseauian notion of a ‘general will’) are, in Abts and Rummens’s view, derived from the populist conception of ‘the people’. Drawing from Claude Lefort’s theory of democracy, Abts and Rummens argue that populism represents a degeneration of democracy’s original logic, according to which “the locus of power [cannot] be embodied by anyone, but has to remain an empty place” (pp. 412-413). In a constitutional democracy, this ‘empty place’ refers to the political stage in general and parliamentary institutions in particular, where the conflicts generated by an inherently diverse society transpose into political conflicts and get ‘resolved’ through institutionally mediated deliberation (p. 416). In the populist logic, however, this ‘empty place’ is filled by a “substantial image of the people as a homogenous body”. Now, the populists’ image of ‘the people’ is not construed to include all people – rather, its reference is limited to the real or common people (thereby excluding, for instance, immigrants or Muslims). It is a fictitious ideological construct, whose boundaries populism itself, due to its ‘thinness’, cannot draw. Instead, the image of ‘the people’ is colored according to the populists’ different complementary ideological (e.g. nativist or religious) hues (p. 414). In line with Schmitt’s ‘friend/enemy’ distinction, the supposed homogeneity of the ‘people-as-one’ mandates the exclusion of all that does not fit within its imagined boundaries – hence the “vertical

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6 “[The Elite’s] fundamental distinguishing feature is its adversarial relationship with the people” (Stanley, p. 103).
antagonisms” downwards, directed at the outlanders to the ‘people’s’ commonness and realness (e.g. the nativist’s immigrant, the Christian’s Muslim), as well as upwards, directed at ‘the elite’ (p. 418).

**A Critique of the Ideational Approach**

The ideational approach is not without its critics. In this regard, we should note Freeden’s own reservations about the applicability of the ‘thin’ attribute to populism qua ideology (Freeden 2017).

Freeden contends that, while ‘thin-centered’ ideologies are “structured so as to rely systematically on other ideological positions to fill [them] in”, populism exhibits, at best, a “limited overlap with segments of other ideologies” – as such, it does not nest well within established ideological families (p. 3). “A thin-centered ideology implies that there is potentially more than the center,” he explains, “but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential center for something broader or more inclusive” (p. 4).

Freeden’s argument does not seem empirically persuasive. Where, for instance, right-wing populism in Western Europe is concerned, we do, in fact, observe that unquestionably populist political parties successfully integrate recognizable bits of the right-wing conservative cannon, such as free-market liberalism, fiscal conservatism and traditionalism (UKIP being a case in point).

Nonetheless, we might discern two aspects of the populist phenomenon, the importance of which, in our view, has not been adequately stressed by the three above outlined representatives of the ideational approach. In the first place, due emphasis is not given to the notion that populism is elitist. In the second place, the essentially reactive nature of populism is neglected.

That there is something inherently elitist in the political phenomenon can be illustrated with a simple observation – namely, is it not true that, nowadays, when we say that ‘X’ is a
populist, we invariably refer to a political figure? This, we posit, is not due to the frequent (indeed, almost exclusive) use of the term in public discourse as a derogatory epithet – words such as ‘xenophobe’ and ‘bigot’ are also employed as terms of abuse, yet the claim that ‘X’ is a xenophobe’ does not necessarily bring to mind a public figure. The connotation of ‘populism’ which we here describe is, rather, akin to that of ‘demagoguery’ – it evocates wooing an audience in some way and, thereby, occupying an outstanding, elite position vis-à-vis the crowd. The frequent conflation of populism with demagoguery and opportunism, to which Mudde points out, might not be solely due to the widespread impression that populist leaders are manipulative conmen (2004, p. 543). It could also be seen as hinting a dimension of the multifaceted populist phenomenon that lies beyond the intension of populism qua ideology – namely, an elitist dimension.

We can elaborate this point by considering Weyland’s criticism of the ideational approach. In his paper, Weyland contends that, “by omitting the crucial role of leadership”, the ideational approach “implicitly depicts populism as a bottom-up mass movement”, which, in his account, populism is empathetically not (2017, p. 9). While, considered in Weyland’s terms, this ‘omitted’ facet of populism pertains to its organizational structure, we should sooner perceive it as pertaining to the overall character of the populist phenomenon – it is not so much that populism is top-down in structure as that, for all its ideological anti-elitism, it is somehow elitist in nature. As aptly put by Freeden: “right-wing populism is not a grassroots phenomenon,” he writes, “in the real world populists actually inhabit, elites battle elites, as distinct from the ‘real’ world populists conjure up in their imagination” (Freeden 2017, p. 5).

It is not incidental, we maintain, that populist leaders exhibit markedly elitist features – Mudde himself makes note of this fact, albeit in passing. “Interestingly,” he posits, “the populist leader is not necessarily a true outsider […] [populist leaders] would be best described as outsider-elites: connected to the elites, but not part of them” (Mudde 2004, p. 560). Stanley, Abts and Rummens might indeed find this assessment consistent with their theories of populism. Nevertheless, the claim itself does not seem to be entailed by their conceptions of populism qua ideology.

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7 This was not always the case – as the US newspaper archive shows, the term “populist” was used to designate supporters of agrarian populist movement in the US in the early XIX century (www.newspaperarchive.com).
Another aspect of populism that the ideational approach does not seem to adequately address is a specific kind of *reactiveness* built into the core of the populist phenomenon. We here recall Margaret Canovan’s view that, intrinsic to populism, there is a “revolt against the established structure of power” – a retaliation against the power-holding elite and its values, undertaken “in the name of the people” (Canovan, p. 3). Now, as to Canovan’s subsequent claim that the reactive nature of populism makes populist beliefs too context-dependent to be considered an ideology, this charge appears to be successfully rebutted by the ideational approach. Populism, as previously explained, is a ‘thin’ ideology with anti-elitism in its conceptual core. This anti-elitism, i.e. the positive valorization of ‘the people’ and denigration of ‘the elite’, is couched in ethical terms – it is “moralistic”, as Mudde would have it, or Schmittean, as Stanley, Abts and Rummens would remark (Mudde 2017, p. 4) (Abts and Rummens, p. 415) (Stanley, p. 103). The antagonism between the two, we are told, is “Manichean” – the struggle of ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ reflects the eternal opposition of good and evil, purity and corruption (Mudde, p. 543).

Yet, on closer inspection, the anti-elitism depicted by ideational approach as part of populism’s conceptual core is not exactly that to which Canovan points out. To explain this difference, let us distinguish, for the purposes of this argument, two distinct types of antagonism, derived from the power relations that obtain between subject and object. The first type of antagonism is a contempt, emanating from a position of power, aimed at a powerless object – such is the totalizing urge to extinguish the other in order to monopolize a shared space of existence. The second type emerges from powerlessness and is directed towards power – to resent an oppressor is to antagonize him in this way. The ‘underdog’ anti-elitism that Canovan ascribes to populist movements falls squarely within the latter type. Could the same be said of the kind of anti-elitism posited by the ideational approach?

We might recall that, in the ideational approach, the notion of ‘the people’ occupies a central place in populism’s conceptual core, whereas ‘the elite’ is a negatively defined category. This means that, once ‘the people’ are posited, ‘the elite’ is construed as simply being antithetical to, and therefore entirely derived from, whatever ‘the people’ are. However, we should be careful to distinguish between the relationship that obtains between ‘the people’

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8 Here we quote Mudde’s claim that the elite is “the anti-thesis of the people”, defined *ex negativo* (2017, p. 7). We might also quote Stanley, who posits that “[the élite’s] fundamental distinguishing feature is its adversarial relationship with the people” (p. 103).
and ‘the elite’ as two core concepts of populist ideology, and their relationship within the “moralistic” paradigm of the ‘people vs. elite’ antagonism. The idea that the concept of ‘the elite’ is derived \textit{ex negativo} from the notion of ‘the people’ \textit{does not} necessarily entail that the ethical framework of ‘the good people vs. the evil elite’ is structured in such a way that ‘the elite’s’ \textit{evilness} is derived by negation from \textit{goodness} ascribed to ‘the people’.

To illustrate the importance of this distinction, let us consider how the juxtaposition between ‘the good people’ and ‘the evil elite’ might fit within our two postulated types of antagonism. On the one hand, the positive valorization of ‘the people’ might be given in the shape of narcissistic self-affirmation, and the denigration of ‘the elite’ construed as contempt for the \textit{other}, which, by its mere existence, hinders the totalizing assertion of ‘the people’s’ greatness. In this sense, ‘the elite’s’ evilness stems from ‘the people’s’ presumed ‘goodness’. On the other hand, ‘the people’s’ antagonism vis-à-vis ‘the elite’ might take a more reactionary form, the denigration of ‘the elite’ expressing resentment towards an oppressor that, by virtue of being an oppressor, is ‘evil’. Accordingly, ‘the people’s’ ‘goodness’ here derives from ‘the elite’s’ ‘evilness’.

In our view, the ideational approach fails to adequately address this distinction, and its lack of clarity in this respect accounts for the overall inability of the ideational approach to pay appropriate heed to the reactive character of populism’s inherent anti-elitism.

If the two outlined aspects of populism, \textit{reactivity} and \textit{elitism}, could indeed be emphasized more adequately within the framework of the ideational approach, then our intended contribution appears to be twofold. Namely, we ought to propose an account of populism as ‘thin’ ideology that brings to the fore (1) the centrality (or, as we might put it, the \textit{genealogical} primacy) of ‘the elite’ in the structure of the moralistic antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, (2) the elitist dimension intrinsic to the populist phenomenon. These are the respective themes of this paper’s two following Chapters.
A NIETZSCHEAN TURN

To inquire into the structure of the moralistic antagonism between ‘the good, pure people’ and ‘the evil, corrupt elite’ is, in a way, to venture into a hitherto unexplored domain of populism’s conceptual core. As previously hinted, one of the two tasks that befalls us is to articulate a conception of ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, as ethical categories juxtaposed within a framework of antagonism, in which ‘the elite’s’ evil exhibits genealogical primacy over ‘the people’s’ good. That is, we need to show that, while the concept of ‘the elite’ is derived from that of ‘the people’, ‘the people’ are ‘good’ and ‘pure’ because ‘the elite’ is ‘evil’ and ‘corrupt’, and not vice versa. With our task thus construed, it is impossible to overlook a theoretical framework that seems uniquely suited to serve as a heuristic device for our analysis – namely, Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogical account of the development of the so-called “slave morality”, as articulated in his “On the Genealogy of Morality” (henceforth, GM) (Nietzsche, On The Genealogy of Morality 1997).

The Slave Revolt – Outline of Nietzsche’s Account

The aim of Nietzsche’s philosophical project in GM is to provide a genealogical account of morality, that is, consider the conception of ‘the Good’ and its associated moral values within the historical conditions and life-circumstances that determined their contemporary, modern form. The necessity of such a genealogical account stems from Nietzsche’s understanding of morality as a contingent historical phenomenon, with moral values viewed as historically determined constructs, intimately related to the seeking and attainment of power (May, p. 11). To that end, Nietzsche puts forth a number of etymological, psychological and anthropological hypotheses to construct a compelling narrative about the origins and consequences of central event in the history of morality, namely, the ‘Slave revolt’.

Nietzsche posits the Slave revolt as taking place within the tripartite structure of the earliest historical communities. Atop of this structure stood a warrior caste, the ‘Masters’. These were the strongest, the most forceful and domineering members of early societies, whose qualities allowed them to establish their reign over the early societies by forming an aristocratic elite.
As the Masters’ exclusive prerogative of conferring names naturally extended into the normative domain, the ruling caste developed a normative understanding commensurate with its elevated position, the so-called ‘Master Morality’. This moral framework, we are told, was a spontaneous outburst of self-affirmation – to be “good”, in Master morality, meant to be the way the Masters perceived themselves to be: powerful, chivalrous and “noble” (i.e. possessed of strength and power *authentically*) (E1, §5, p. 14). To be “bad”, on the other hand, merely implied a privation – ‘bad’ was what was weak, powerless, and plebeian, that is, “lower [than us]” (§4, p. 13).

The designee of the ‘bad’ thus construed was the bottom caste of the early societal hierarchies, namely, the ‘Slaves’ toiling under the Masters’ yoke. Importantly, the Masters are said to “bear no grudge” towards the Slaves – there were no ill feelings on part of the dominant towards the subjugated, any more than there are in the attitude of predators towards their prey (§13, p. 26). The eagle, Nietzsche writes, does not *antagonize* the lamb – in fact, to the eagle “nothing is tastier than a tender lamb” (Ibid).

In their subjugation, the Slaves are said to have come to an awareness of the oppressive character of their predicament, and, with it, a reactive, antagonistic instinct towards their Masterly oppressors. This sentiment, which Nietzsche terms ‘*ressentiment*’, is posited to be the driving force behind the development of a new, rival framework of morality, i.e. Slave morality (§11, p. 24).

The novelty of Slave morality, in Nietzsche’s account, consisted in its retaliatory character – reacting to their suffering at the Masters’ hand, the lamb-like Slaves began to *scorn* those “large birds of prey” for “carrying off the little lambs” (§13, p. 26). Consequently, a new moral category was introduced to designate the Masters – *evil*. “These birds of prey are evil”, the lambs would say, “and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb, – is good” (Ibid). To be evil, then, meant to behave as the Masters did – aggressively, forcefully, oppressively. To be good, in turn, was to be unlike the Masters. Hence, whereas Master morality offered the dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, with ‘bad’ defined by negation, Slave morality juxtaposed ‘good’ to ‘evil’, with ‘good’ derived from ‘evil’.

According to Nietzsche, for the Slaves to be able to construe the Masters as ‘evil’, it was necessary that they perceive their predicament in normative terms, i.e. not as merely
unfortunate, but as deliberately imposed and therefore unjust. In other words, it was necessary that the Masters be perceived as oppressors by choice. In Nietzsche’s view, this meant that Slave morality assumed it possible “to ask strength not to express itself as strength”, that is, to ask of the Masters not to act in accordance with their defining characteristics (Ibid).

This assumption, in turn, presupposes the duality of subject and deed, i.e. an understanding of agency as existing autonomously of action. In the context of Slave morality, this erroneous duality carries an important suggestion – namely, that “the strong are free to be weak, and the birds of prey to be lambs” (p. 27). It is in virtue of this supposition that the Slaves could find their Masters responsible for, and, consequently, guilty of exhibiting masterly traits. Moreover, in Slave morality, the freedom of the strong to be weak translates into the notion that the weak, likewise, are free to be strong. In Nietzsche’s view, it is “as though the weakness of the weak were itself […] a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen, a deed, an accomplishment” (E1, §13, p.27). This latter notion is a “sublime self-deception”, employed by the powerless to moralize the grim reality of powerlessness (Ibid). In the same vein, Slave morality’s disavowal of aggression, violence and dominance, and the corresponding Judeo-Christian ideal of humility, is construed as a moralistic façade erected to conceal the fact that Slaves are inherently weak, and could not be strong if they wished to.

Nietzsche maintains that the task of articulating such an elaborate moral paradigm would have clearly surpassed the reflexive powers of the Slaves themselves. For this reason, he ascribes conceptual authorship of Slave morality to members of third stratum of primordial societies – the ‘Priests’ (§6-7, pp. 15-18). Occupying an ambiguous position within and, at the same time, below the Master caste, the Priests are described as cerebral, low-ranking members of the aristocracy, distinct for their great concern with purity (pp. 16-17).

It is the Priests’ confrontation with the Masters, in which the Masters overpowered the Priests, that incited hate towards the Masters amongst the Priestly caste – in their powerlessness, “the greatest haters in the world history, and the most intelligent” construed Slave morality as a mechanism of revenge (pp. 17).⁹ Hence the theodicy of Slave morality’s exhibits distinctly Priestly features – to account for the Slaves’ suffering, the category of ‘sin’

⁹ According to Nietzsche, the Priests’ conflict with the Masters’ is a real historical event – specifically, he identifies the Jewish priests, whose masterly status was relegated to that of the slaves’ during the period of Judea’s subjugation by Rome, as the architects of Slave morality.
is postulated, as the kernel of Masterly evil that ‘corrupts’ the purity of the Slavish soul (§16, pp. 94-95). Deliverance from sin, in the Priestly account, consists in pointing ressentiment inwardly, towards that chamber of the soul possessed of masterly aggression, vitality and strength (i.e. evil). In this act of self-denying, the ultimate goal is to arrive at what Nietzsche calls ‘ascetic ideals’ – notions such as ‘ultimate Good’, ‘pure Beauty’, ‘absolute Knowledge’, residing in a transcendent sphere beyond earthly existence and reflecting the Priestly obsession with purity in its most extreme and sophisticated iteration (§11, p. 85).

In Nietzsche’s view, Slave morality’s scope of influence extends to all domains of modern culture – in fact, all systems of evaluation wherein the value of something is defined ‘from the receiving end’, that is, by its effects it has on the receiver, are said to derive, in a way, from Slave morality (§2, p. 11-12). Such is, for instance, the case with the omnipresent “democratic idiosyncrasy of being against everything that dominates and wants to dominate” (E2, §12, p. 52). As May observes, “slave reactiveness” is posited by Nietzsche as being the “dominant form or structure of our thought and sensibility” (May 1999, p. 50).

‘The People’ vs. ‘The Elite’ – A Nietzschean Approach

The outline offered in the previous section is, by no means, a comprehensive summary of Nietzsche’s complex genealogical endeavor; rather, it is an attempt to present those aspects of Nietzsche’s account that are most pertinent to this paper’s thesis. By analogy, this Chapter’s aim is most certainly not to unreservedly transpose the populist phenomenon into Nietzsche’s framework and depict the rise of populism as a contemporary Slave revolt. Rather, our ambition is to employ Nietzsche’s framework as a heuristic device to articulate the anti-elitist facet of populism’s conceptual core in such a way as to encompass the reactiveness that, in our view, has so far been overlooked. Moreover, as we shall see, our reliance on the Nietzschean framework will pave the way for a theoretically articulation of the broader dynamics within which anti-elitism emerges a core facet of populism’s conceptual structure.

Our thesis, then, is simple: the specific kind of reactiveness which Canovan ascribes to populism can be construed as Nietzschean ressentiment.
Earlier we distinguished between two types of antagonism within which populism’s moralistic juxtaposition of ‘the people’ to ‘the elite’ could fit. To propose that, in populism, this antagonism belongs to the second type, i.e. that it emanates from a position of powerlessness and is directed towards a powerful object, suggests that, from the populist perspective, ‘the elite’s’ evilness stems from its oppression of ‘the people’. Hence, in line with Freedén’s observation that populism is commonly seen as “an ideology of the dispossessed”, we maintain that the populist brand of anti-elitism carries a distinct bottom-up resentment (2017, p. 5).

Now, while it may appear appealing enough to use the word ‘resentment’ without the added Nietzschean connotation, Canovan’s point would thereby be missed. Let us recall that, for Canovan, what distinguished populist politics from other anti-system movements is that “populism challenges not only established power-holders but also elite values” (p. 3). In other words, populists do not merely resent ‘the elite’ for oppressing ‘the people’ – by viewing ‘the elite’s’ way of life as a threat to theirs, populists perceive ‘the elite’s’ oppressive character as stemming from its peculiar ‘morality’. Indicative in this respect is Mudde’s citation of an American conservative populist’s depiction of ‘the elite’ as “latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, Hollywood-loving [liberals]” (2017, p. 7). Said attributes not merely tokens of socio-economic status – evidently, they testify to a system of values that shapes the manner of ‘the elite’s’ oppression of ‘the people’.\(^\text{10}\) For this reason, the populist does more than resent ‘the elite’ qua oppressors. In populism, there is ressentiment – at once a revolt against the Masters as well as, in itself, a refutation of Master morality.

In the populism’s ressentiment of ‘the elite’ we can recognize that “sublime self-deception” that Nietzsche identified as the starting point of Slave morality (E1, §13, p.27). Namely, in populist discourse, ‘the elite’ is not perceived as originally alien but rather as fallen from grace – ‘the elite’, we hear, is corrupt, which implies that once it was pure, good and decent (just like ‘the people’). As Mudde aptly puts it, “populism presupposes that the elite comes from the same group as the people, but have willingly chosen to betray them” (2017, p. 4). Yet, in the populist logic, ‘the elite’s’ eventual corruption is not a necessary consequence

\(^{10}\) In this sense, the form in which ‘the elite’s’ perceived oppression of ‘the people’ is said to take place depends on the manner of construing ‘the elite’s’ morality. Hence, for instance, an anti-religious ‘elite’ would oppress ‘the people’ by waging War on Christmas, whereas a globalist ‘elite’ would subjugate ‘the people’ by tearing down the nation-state.
of an external cause, as Lord Acton’s dictum would suggest. Rather, it is *deliberate*. This we can infer from the “revivalist flavor” that Canovan observes in populist rhetoric – the populist promise of a “great renewal” carries the suggestion that, in an imagined future, those in power will once again possess their long-forsaken purity (p. 6). Hence, populism does, in fact, imagine it possible that a ruling class be ‘pure’ (*again*). This is why in populism, unlike, for instance, in socialism, anti-elitist sentiment stands in intimate connection to the tendency to romanticize an imagined past, when ‘the people’ were led by ‘pure’ leaders (e.g. the contemporary populist rallying cry “Make America great *again!*” is fittingly followed by waxing lyrical about the virtues of Honest Abe). In the populist view, then, ‘the elite’ is held responsible for its corruption, much like, in Slave morality, the Masters are blamed for exhibiting Masterly traits.

The populist perception of ‘the elite’ as being corrupt stands in sharp contrast to the so-called ‘elitist’ view of ‘the people’. Described by Mudde as a “mirror-image of populism”, elitism is said to share populism’s Manichean division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, with the difference of valorizing ‘the elite’ as the pure, virtuous “the moral majority” whilst denigrating ‘the people’ as “amoral” and “impure” (Mudde 2004, pp. 543-544) (2017, p. 9). In Mudde’s view, elitism is as anti-democratic and averse to compromise as populism is – in the elitist understanding, politics should express the will of an enlightened “moral majority”, not ‘the people’ (Ibid). These parallels between populism and elitism notwithstanding, we contend that there is an important difference in their respective perceptions of the ‘impurity’ embodied by the denigrated other. For elitists, ‘the people’ are impure because they are unenlightened, backwards-looking, narrow-minded, ignorant, inept and therefore susceptible to prejudice and bigotry. Their amorality, in the elitist view, stems from a *deficiency*, i.e. a lack of rationality, education, expertise and worldly sophistication. In other words, ‘the people’ do not measure up to ‘us’. Considered in Nietzsche’s terms, does this not resemble the notion of ‘bad’ in Master morality? Comparing elitism and populism’s respective perceptions of the *other’s* vice, we can discern two radically different modes of moral evaluation. In our view, they correspond to Nietzsche’s distinction between the workings of Master morality and Slave morality.

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11 Here I refer to Lord Acton’s famous remark in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton: “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

12 This is not to say that, for instance, the aforementioned American populist expects members of ‘the elite’ to abandon their latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving ways, but that, in an imagined future, those who govern will be expected to exhibit the American populist version of purity.
Priests and Slaves – a Nietzschean View of Populist Politics

Our reliance on Nietzsche’s theoretical framework in exploring the different facets of populism’s conceptual core invites us to consider the broader dynamics of populist politics through the same lens.

As previously noted, Nietzsche’s account of Slave morality can only be understood in view of the specific historical context within which it is situated, namely, in view of the tripartite structure of early historical communities. Now, by positing the populist antagonizing of ‘the elite’ as Slavish ressentiment, we do not suggest that the structure of contemporary societies, within which populist movements emerge, is in any way divisible along Nietzsche’s lines. Our argument is simply that, where the ideological production of populism is concerned, the rapport between populist leaders and their supporters mirrors that of the Slaves and the Priests in Nietzsche’s description of Slave morality.

Before we elaborate this point, it serves to observe that the ‘thin’ ideology of populism, unlike its more established, ‘full’ counterparts, exhibits a distinct lack of systematicity. As Stanley notes, there is no canon of populist texts, nor are there any shared philosophical-political institutions that transcend individual populist movements, parties and leaders (p. 100). Hence the point that ideology is constantly in the making, shaped by a myriad of contingent ideational, cultural and socio-economic currents, holds especially true in the case of populism. In spite of that, it does not seem unwarranted to maintain that, even in the case of populism, the distinction between the ideology’s primary producers and consumers obtains. By and large, supporters of populist organizations who identify with ‘the people’ can be said to consume the ideology, rather than contribute to its articulation in a meaningful way. As argued in Chapter I, populist politics are a top-down affair, ideationally as well as structurally – populism’s strong association with demagoguery implies not only the elitist character of populist public figures, but also the passivity and essential lack of agency of the populists’ audience. In this sense, populism is of ‘the people’ and for ‘the people’ without necessarily being by ‘the people.

With the supporters of populist organizations construed as mere consumers of ideology, how might we account for its production? As previously suggested, the absence of recognizable political-philosophical institutions that systematically frame the populist creed makes it
difficult to single out, amongst the plethora of indistinct voices that generate the populist Zeitgeist, any one original ideological ‘workshop’. Nonetheless, we posit that, however topsy-turvy the ideological production of populism may be, the class of populist leaders can be discerned as perhaps the only concrete, identifiable agent in the process of articulating populism qua ideology.

To ascertain this point, let us recall that the preferred rhetorical tool employed by populist leaders to legitimize their agendas refers to what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann termed the ‘spiral of silence’. By professing to “say out loud what everyone’s thinking”, populist leaders present themselves as the megaphones of a supposed majority (‘the people’) that feels uncomfortable expressing its political views publicly, due to the perceived stigma attached to these views by the mainstream. In positing themselves as the sorely needed voice of that ‘silent majority’, populist leaders seductively offer to break the spiral and empower ‘the people’s’ long-silenced political expression. Yet, in this transaction, ‘the people’ get more than they bargained for. Populist leaders do not merely transpose ‘the people’s’ discretely held beliefs onto the public stage – in the process, they bind these beliefs together within a single narrative structure, thereby formulating them as a ‘thin’ ideology.

This dynamic can be illustrated by considering Mudde’s study of the populist radical right in Europe (2010). Defining the populist radical right as an ideological mixture of populism, nativism and authoritarianism, Mudde cites various EU-wide public opinion surveys to argue that the prevalence of strongly populist, nativist and authoritarian attitudes among respondents is far from marginal (pp. 1175-1178). Yet these figures, by themselves, do not suggest that such-and-such a percentage of EU citizens are radical right-wing populists – at best, they might indicate a propensity for supporting the populist radical right. There is a long road between ‘silently’ holding stigmatized views that Nigel Farage vows to voice and buying into UKIP’s ideological shtick. On that road, the decontested meanings of the concepts in the populist core are adopted and bound with the thread of populism’s peculiar structure. Our

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13 For a succinct elaboration of Noelle-Neumann’s notion of ‘the spiral of silence’, see (Noelle-Neumann 1974).
14 Specifically, according to the 2003 European Social Survey, 19% of respondents opine that ‘immigrants should not have the same rights as everyone else’, while, according to the 2003 Special Barometer 181, 78% of EU-15 citizens believe that ‘young people would commit less crime if they were taught better discipline by their parents or at school’ (Mudde, 2010, p. 1176). Moreover, a 1999 Eurobarometer survey shows 40% of EU-15 respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their national democracy (p. 1177). These figures are amongst those employed by Mudde’s analysis of the prevalence of nativist, authoritarian and populist attitudes in the EU.
contention is that, in this process, the narrative peddled by populist leaders plays a crucial part, albeit heuristically and unsystematically.

If there is truth to this account of the relationship between the supporters of populist organizations *qua* consumers and populist leaders *qua* producers of populist ideology, does it not resemble Nietzsche’s description of the Priests and the Slaves’ respective roles in the workings of Slave morality? According to Nietzsche, while Slave morality innovatively adopts the perspective of the lamb-like Slaves, its architects are members of the Priestly caste, in whose hands Slave morality becomes an instrument of revenge against the Masters. In this sense, are populist leaders not, by analogy, the Priests of populism?

Admittedly, it may be difficult to imagine the likes of Donald Trump as the High Priests of anything. Yet, paradoxically, the Priestly obsession with ‘purity’ in Nietzsche’s account finds its direct analogy in the behavior of populist leaders. As is often noted, populists like to present their policy solutions as disarmingly simple, in contrast to their opponents’ unintelligible proposals. This is not solely due to the ambition, shared by all politicians, to portray themselves as straight-talkers and their opponents as evasive – for populists, policy simplicity is itself a sign of virtue. As Canovan observes, populists depict “[policy] complexity [as] a self-serving racket perpetuated by professional politicians” to conceal the elite’s unwillingness to rock the boat (p. 6). In the populist rationale, ‘complex’ equals ‘elitist’ equals ‘fraudulent’. Accordingly, *real* solutions are invariably posited as exercises in plain, old-fashioned common sense – as Mudde points out, “for populists […] the consciousness of the people, generally referred to as common sense, is the basis of all good (politics)” (2004, p. 547). ‘Simple’, then, equals ‘commonsensical’ equals ‘popular’ equals ‘pure’ – to uphold simplistic policy solutions is to stay true the ‘common sense’ of ‘the people’ whom the populist politician claims to represent on the public stage. In populism, ‘common sense’ thus construed is akin to a moral precept, by which original purity is kept and elitist corruption is avoided. In this sense, as an arch-practitioner of simplistic policy-talk, Donald Trump can indeed be considered the High Priest of populist purity.

**Elites and ‘Outsider-Elites’ – The Implications of a Nietzschean Approach**
In our analysis of populism’s conceptual core and the broader dynamics that informs its constitution, Nietzsche’s theoretical framework offers further insights into that which, in Chapter I, we identified as the neglected elitist dimension of contemporary populism.

When identifying the populist leaders as important agents in the continuous process of populism’s constitution as a ‘thin’ ideology – a function that we compared to that of the Priestly caste in Nietzsche’s account of Slave morality – we are reminded of Mudde’s description of populist leaders as “outsider-elites: connected to the elites, but not part of them” (2004, p. 560). Indeed, contemporary populist figures fit this description remarkably accurately – Thierry Baudet is practically an embodiment of the Dutch upper class, Marine Le Pen is a political aristocrat, Beppe Grillo is a multimillionaire, and Trump nowadays rallies against the same Hollywood ‘elite’ whose top echelons he had spent decades courting as a second-rate celebrity socialite. Considered as private individuals, these populist champions of ‘the people’ would doubtless be classified as ‘the elite’ from the perspective of that ‘people’ whom they claim to represent. In this sense, the ambiguous social status of populist leaders bears striking resemblance to that of the Priests in Nietzsche’s account.

In another sense, however, the comparison does not hold – according to Nietzsche, the position of the Priestly caste within the tripartite structure of early historical societies is determined by qualitative distinctions (i.e. an obsession with purity and a lack of Masterly traits). Surely, populist ‘outsider-elites’ cannot be said to exhibit distinguishing character traits – in fact, quite a few contemporary populist figures could have easily been imagined as fitting with the crème of ‘the elite’. Rather, then, populist leaders become perceived as ‘outsider-elites’ at the point when they, in their own way, begin to rebel against ‘the elite’.

A further inadequacy of Nietzsche’s sociological framework can be identified by contrasting the previously described anti-elitism in populism’s conceptual core with the way the populist ‘outsider-elite’ antagonizes ‘the elite’. Whereas, in the populist narrative, ‘the elite’ and its peculiar ‘morality’ are resented for their hegemonic oppression of ‘the people’, the portrayal of ‘the elite’ by the populist ‘outsider-elite’ suggests a somewhat different power dynamics. In addition to vilifying ‘the experts’, ‘the Eurocrats’ and ‘the mainstream media’ qua ‘elite’ in the above-mentioned way, populist leaders often deride ‘the elite’ as emperors with no clothes. These experts, we are told, are deluded; the Eurocrats are incompetent, and the mainstream media is blinded by political correctness. Decadence, weakness, worthlessness
– these are the attributes used by ‘outsider-elites’ to depict their ‘elite’ counterparts, thereby expressing a sentiment perfectly encapsulated by Peggy Noonan’s fulmination: “We are being patronized by our inferiors”. The populist ‘outsider-elite’s’ stance vis-à-vis ‘the elite’ is, then, too daringly bullish to be described as Slavish resentment.

These two last contentions emphasize the fact that, as a heuristic device, Nietzsche’s theoretical framework has its limitations. Nonetheless, in assessing what a Nietzschean perspective can and cannot relate about the nature of the populist phenomenon, we are reminded that underlying Nietzsche’s genealogical account of the Slave revolt there is a view of moral frameworks (and morality itself) as contingent historical phenomena, whose genealogy is taken to reflect the power structures wherein they emerged.

Following this idea, we posit that, in a similar vein, the semiotics of the core features of populism as a ‘thin’ ideology is intimately related to the power dynamics that obtain between ‘the elite’ and the populist ‘outsider-elite’. Consequently, and consistent with the ideational approach, we attempt to develop an account to populism that encompasses both planes on which the populist phenomenon can be perceived. To elaborate this suggestion, we (1) propose a descriptive model of the dynamics of ‘the elite’ and the ‘outsider-elite’s’ interaction, and (2) offer an account of the constitution of populism, qua ‘thin’ ideology with a view of that dynamics.

To fulfill our twofold task, in the following two Chapters we consider the theoretical framework of the so-called ‘elite theory’, wherefrom we extrapolate a model of elite change with which we attempt to provide an account of the populist phenomenon.

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15 See: https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-decadent-leadership-class-1476400544
‘Elite theory’ refers to a broad and heterogeneous intellectual tradition in political sociology which has exerted substantial, if somewhat unacknowledged influence in many domains of political theorizing. Elite theory found its initial expression in the works of the so-called classical elite theorists of the interbellum period, the most notable of which were Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels. Thenceforth, elite theory has been reformulated by Joseph Schumpeter and eventually developed into its contemporary form – known as the new elite paradigm or new elitism – articulated today by political theorists such as John Higley and Jan Pakulski (Higley 2008) (Higley and Pakulski 2009) (Pakulski 2012).

Elite Theory – Classical and Contemporary Variants

Central to all elite theories, classical and contemporary, is the notion of the inevitability of elites. Elite theory begins by postulating that, in any organized human collective, decision-making largely lies in the hands of a relatively small group of individuals, designated as the governing or ruling elite. For elite theorists, the inevitability of elites is a “social fact” – an empirically undeniable proposition about the nature of society. Yet, while it serves as a basis for much elite theorizing, this ‘social fact’ is not postulated as a first principle – in fact, the premises from which the inevitability of elites is derived, as well as the ways in which the concept of ‘elite’ is construed, vary across different classical and contemporary elite theories.

For Pareto, the term ‘elite’ refers to a normatively neutral, wholly meritocratic category. Leaving aside considerations “as to the good or bad, useful or harmful, praiseworthy or reprehensible character of the various traits in individuals”, Pareto maintains that the ‘elite’ is composed of those individuals whose abilities score high, on a 1-10 scale, in some determinate activity (Pareto, The Circulation of Elites, §2026-§2027). Therefore, for Pareto, the elite is purely an “elite of achievement”, as Kolegar puts it (Kolegar, p. 367). Moreover, Pareto differentiates between two types of elite. Those members of the elite who “directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government” Pareto calls the ‘governing elite’, whereas the rest (such as, for instance, the ablest surgeons or chess players) comprise the ‘non-governing’ elite (§2032).
This conception of the elite, like many of Pareto’s other sociological views, is strongly influenced by his economic theory of the dynamic equilibrium – as Christensen notes, Pareto’s treatment of wealth inequality as an economic given (i.e. his belief that “unequal distribution of wealth is a constant feature of economic systems”) translated into the view that the unequal distribution of capabilities brings forth, as a matter of ‘social fact’, the elite/non-elite distinction (Christensen, p. 8).

On the other hand, according to Mosca, the distinction between elite (the ‘ruling class’, as he terms it) and non-elite has nothing to do with the distribution of some quantifiable individual capabilities; instead, it rests on a fundamental relation of “esteem” and “influence”. Elites, we are told, distinguish themselves by being the most “esteemed and influential” in their societies, in virtue of some “real or apparent attribute” they possess (Kolegar, p. 362). Yet, while such attributes seem to make elite status contingent upon perception, there is one positively held feature that Mosca bestows on the elite to account for its existence – namely, the predisposition towards organization.

As Kolegar notes, Mosca posits that all societies exhibit an inherent need for order, and that this need translates into the demand for a “classe dirigente” that would bring order about (Ibid). The non-elite is, by definition, disorganized – as soon as a group of individuals organizes around a certain purpose, it ceases to belong to the non-elite and becomes a minority qualified to compete for leadership (Christensen, p. 5). Hence, for Mosca, political power can only ever lie in the hands of an organized minorities, “which have had, and will have, the means, varying as the times vary, to impose their supremacy on the multitudes” (Mosca, p. 326).

Numerous aspects of Pareto’s conception of the ‘elite’ immediately strike one as problematic. For instance, if excellence is quantifiable on a 1-10 scale, is the ‘cutoff’ score for elite status (e.g. an 8/10) not arbitrarily determined? Moreover, how does one go about objectively quantifying someone’s ability – what is the proper measure of an ‘excellent’ artist, as opposed to a mediocre one? Do judgments of an individual’s excellence in a specific field not depend, to a large degree, upon the perspective from which they are made? History is full of figures whose merit is periodically questioned and rehabilitated.
Another obvious problem of Pareto’s understanding of the ‘elite’ in the broader sense (i.e. encompassing both the governing and the non-governing elite) can be exposed if Pareto’s meritocratic criteria are applied to that infamous ability commonly associated with the contemporary politician – namely, the ability to take credit for others’ achievements. If, according to Pareto, even a good con man may claim elite status based on his excellence in deceptiveness and misrepresentation, would then a thoroughly mediocre public official belong to an ‘elite of achievement’ if he managed to convince his constituents that others’ successful policy initiatives were, in fact, his own? If Pareto’s notion of ‘merit’ is to encompass even to those who skillfully emulate merit, then the notion itself becomes too vague to serve its intended differentiating function.

A crucial and broadly criticized shared feature of Pareto’s ‘governing elite’ and Mosca’s ‘ruling class’ is aptly summarized by Carl J. Friedrich, according to whom both theorists are guilty relying on two unproven assumptions, namely, “(a) that those who play a role in government constitute a coherent group, and (b) that they possess distinguishing characteristics” (Zuckerman, p. 332).\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, if one accepts that ‘those who govern’ cannot be treated as a sufficiently coherent unit of analysis, not much elite theory remains to be discussed. The latter charge, however, is one that contemporary elite theories manage to avoid, as they radically depart from Pareto and Mosca in their understanding of what elites are and why they are inevitable.

Contemporary elite theories offer a number of competing definitions of the term ‘elite’. For some, the ‘elite’ is taken to mean ‘the power-holders’; for others, it is ‘the decision-makers’; for others still, a ‘preference-imposing minority’, or, alternatively, ‘those who wield actual authority’ – to note but a few prominent definitions of the term covered by Zuckerman’s survey of contemporary elite theories (Zuckerman, p. 326). In all cases, membership in the ‘elite’ is not construed as being held in virtue of some inherent personal trait, but rather as being a description of one’s relative standing in society. In this sense, contemporary elite theories narrow the scope of their explanatory ambitions: while Pareto and Mosca sought to

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\(^\text{16}\) The former charge can be understood as part of Friedrich’s more general criticism of all elite theories, whose denial of the “common man’s” subjectivity, in his view, rendered them incompatible with the democratic creed (Friedrich, p. 422).
account for (1) why elites exist and (2) which inherent features indicate an individual’s elite status, contemporary thinkers such as John Higley limit themselves to the former question.\textsuperscript{17}

In line with this general understanding of the term, Higley defines (political) elites as persons “who, by virtue of their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially” (Higley 2008, p. 3).\textsuperscript{18}

There are at least three reasons to select Higley’s conception of the political elite as a working definition for the purposes of this analysis. First, Higley’s wording tactfully avoids employing the elusive concept of “power”, thus preempting the persuasive lines of criticism leveled against attempts to account for a semiotically muddy \textit{explanandum} with an even muddier \textit{explanans}.\textsuperscript{19} Second, Higley’s definition escapes the problems of the formal-institutional approach that, due to its privileging of wielding formal decision-making over exerting (informal) influence, struggles to account for the proverbial ‘power behind the throne’. In this sense, to describe one’s position as having a ‘strategic location in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements’ seems altogether more flexible than simply to say that one holds public office.\textsuperscript{20} Third, it would be overly demanding to criticize Higley’s use of indeterminate attributes (‘regular’ and ‘substantial’) in describing the political elite’s influence of political events – as most other sociological notions, the notion of a ‘political elite’ is an inherently imprecise one, and its definition can hardly be expected to be semiotically water-tight. For these reasons, our discussion will henceforth adopt Higley’s definition of the political elite.

\textsuperscript{17} John Higley has been widely recognized as a leading contemporary proponent of elite theory (Lopez, p. 1).
\textsuperscript{18} An initial reason for selecting this particular definition is that it represents the most complete attempt Higley has made to define elites. In earlier writings, Higley conceives of elites as “people who are able, through their position in powerful organizations, to affect national political outcomes individually, regularly and seriously” (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 296). Apart from raising numerous additional problems – e.g. are elites not able to affect \textit{transnational} politics as well? Can they not exert influence \textit{collectively}, and not just individually? – this prior definition is susceptible to the subsequently cited critique of the formal-institutional approach.
\textsuperscript{19} One typical instance of a definition problematic in such a way, provided by Zuckerman, is that of T. B. Bottomore, according to whom the ‘political elite’ refers to a small group within the ‘political class’, which “comprises those individuals who actually exercise political power in a given society at a given time” (Zuckerman p. 326). Bottomore’s definition has been criticized for sneaking in an undefined concept (i.e. how does one construe ‘power’?), for the empirical problem it poses (that of “identifying those individuals who in fact exercise political power in that society”), as well as for its susceptibility to infinite regress (i.e. what if “the ‘real’ political elite is so powerful as to be hidden from view”? (p. 327).
\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, Higley’s notion of ‘elite’ thus construed is said to encompass “not only prestigious and “established” leaders – top politicians, important businessmen, high-level civil servants, senior military officers – but also [leaders of] trade unions, important voluntary associations, and politically consequential mass movements” (Higley 2008, p. 3). Importantly, Higley’s ‘elite’ includes “counter-elites”, which will be discussed later (Ibid).
A second respect in which contemporary elite theories differ from their classical counterparts concerns the underlying causes of the ‘social fact’ of elites. While, for Pareto, the inevitability of elites is derived from the principle of unequal distribution, which obtains in the social sphere as well as in economics, for Higley, the “fundamental and universal fact of social life” causing the existence of elites is “the absence in any large collectivity of a robust common interest” (Higley, p. 2). According to Higley, the survival of a sufficiently large polity demands constant decision-making that ‘transcends’ individual interests to attain the ‘common good’. Since such decisions cannot be borne out of popular consensus, they fall into the hands of a small group of strategically located decision-makers, able to bend the community towards their vision of the ‘common good’, and this group thereby forms the polity’s elite (Ibid, p. 3). Paradoxically, this contemporary account of the inevitability of elites is less contemporary than its classical counterpart – while in Pareto’s postulation of the unequal distribution of abilities a whiff of social Darwinism can be discerned, the notion that elites exist because the constituents of a commonwealth require a ‘common power to keep them all in awe’ is as old as Hobbes.

The baggage that comes with deciding to refer to the frequently problematized notion of the ‘common good’ makes this latter aspect of Higley’s elite theory less attractive for employment than the former. Therefore, while subscribing to a contemporary understanding of the political elite as articulated by Higley, this paper does not accept Higley’s account of the elite’s raison d’être. Instead, on this matter we hold to classical elite theory and suggest, following Robert Michels, that, in any organized collective, an “iron law of oligarchy” can be said to obtain – that, if organization entails division of labor and therefore specialization, and if specialization entails expertise, then stratification (initially along the lines of expertise) follows and hierarchy necessarily develops (Michels 1915/2009, pp. 27-28, 58, 64-65).

Hence, with the main features of classical and contemporary elite theory thus outlined, what follows is an exploration of two pertinent aspects of Pareto’s and Higley’s respective theories, which will be employed in this paper’s proposed analytical model: Pareto’s notion of ‘elite cycles’ and Higley’s typology of ‘elite configuration’.
Lions and Foxes – Pareto’s “Elite Cycles”

“History,” Pareto wrote, “is the graveyard of aristocracies” (Pareto, The Circulation of Elites, §2053). Given Pareto’s previously outlined meritocratic conception of the governing elite, this oft-cited thought points to an obvious explanatory challenge. Namely, if the governing elite is truly composed of the best and brightest, how does one explain its inevitable eventual downfall (Kolegar, p. 358)?

Pareto was keenly aware of this challenge – to account for the manifest historical changes in the structure and composition of governing elites, he put forth an ambitious and theoretically consequential description of the “circulation of elites” (Pareto, §2026-§2054). According to this thesis, every major political occurrence, such as a regime change, a revolution or a significant turn of the political tide, reflects a change in the structure and composition of the elite, and this evolutionary process unfolds through history in a cyclical manner – in consecutive long elite cycles, each of which is said to encompass several short elite cycles. While the end of a short elite cycle may manifest itself in something as ordinary as an electoral landslide and may take place within a generation, long elite cycles are said to define entire epochs, marked by great tectonic shifts.

To fully understand the dynamics of Pareto’s elite cycles, we should make note of two pertinent aspects of Pareto’s thought, namely, his anti-positivism and his Machiavellianism.

In stark contrast to the (still) prevalent rational choice theory in neoclassical economics, Pareto maintains that most human behavior – elite and non-elite alike – is ‘non-logical’ (Pareto, On Logical and Non-Logical Action, §154). While, for Pareto, ‘logical’ actions originate in ‘reasoning’, he locates the origin of ‘non-logical’ actions in “definite psychic states, sentiments, subconscious feelings, and the like” (Pareto, §161). Thus, in Pareto’s view, the chimeric pull of sentiment, impulse and instinct plays a determining role in individual action and, by aggregation, in charting the course of societal life, more so than individual economic or preference-maximization interests. Combinations of such sentiments, impulses at

21 According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘rational choice theory’ is a descriptive model of decision-making based on the assumption that individuals choose a course of action that is most in line with their personal preferences (Amadae 2017). Inherent in this model is the view of preference as quantifiable in terms of utility. The rational choice theory remains an important pillar of much neoclassical economic thinking.
the collective level Pareto calls “residues”. These ‘residues’ of a group’s behavior tend to be formally codified by way of theoretical frameworks, traditions, social mores and political ideals; such codifications of ‘residues’ Pareto terms “derivations” (Christensen, p. 9).

Where the behavior of elites is concerned, Pareto emphasizes two classes of residues that play a dominant role in shaping an elite’s worldview (Higley and Pakulski 2009, p. 116). These are the residues of combination, or “propensities to combine things in an innovative way” associated with rationality and progressivism (Class I), and residues of group-persistence, or “propensities to keep or restore things to traditional forms and ways”, associated with traditionalism and forcefulness (Class II) (Ibid). In a distinctly Machiavellian fashion, Pareto relates a governing elite’s Class I and Class II residues to, respectively, ‘foxlike’ and ‘leonine’ qualities of Princes.22

Governing elites amongst which Class I residues dominate tend to be ‘speculators’ – such elites, we are told, act in cunning, innovative and manipulative ways, much like Machiavelli’s fox (Pareto, §2235). On the other hand, elites in whose ranks Class II residues prevail are ‘rentiers’ – they behave in a forceful, bellicose, dutiful and idealistic manner, akin to Machiavelli’s lion (Ibid). As Femia notes, one important difference between leonine and foxlike elites concerns their preferred methods of maintaining power: whereas lion-like elites easily resort to force and violence to quash dissent, foxlike ruling classes tend to rely on deceit, bargaining and manipulation (Femia, p. 291).

With the behavioral patterns of elites thus construed, Pareto follows Machiavelli in positing that a governing elite’s long-term ability to maintain, much like the virtuous Prince, a proper balance between foxlike and leonine propensities is a recipe for lasting reign. However, as Pareto contends, throughout history no governing elite has managed to do that. Hence Pareto’s grim dictum about the ‘graveyard of aristocracies’, as the inevitable eventual misbalance in governing elites’ two classes of residues necessarily spells their doom.

22 Machiavelli famously compared the behavioral features of rulers with the symbolic traits of a fox (cunning, duplicitous, manipulative) and a lion (charismatic, bold, valiant). According to Machiavelli, a Prince possessed of virtu will be endowed with the qualities both of a lion and of a fox, knowing intuitively when to manifest either of them.
In Pareto’s view, an ‘elite cycle’ begins when one or the other class of residues comes to dominate a governing elite’s collective outlook and behavior. When this happens, a governing elite becomes closed off and self-centered, uniform and narrow-minded. Such an elite falls prey to *groupthink*, encapsulates itself in a proverbial echo-chamber and develops an increasing intolerance of individuals with sensibilities different than its prevalent one. Moreover, the prevalent class of residues is codified, by way of ‘derivation’, into a doctrine to which the elite then rigorously adheres.

As a result, what Pareto calls “*routine* elite circulation” becomes dangerously low (Pareto, §2056). According to Pareto, while society’s elite/non-elite stratification is itself a given, there is nevertheless a constant flow of between the elite and the non-elite. In line with Pareto’s meritocratic principles, non-elite individuals with appropriate talents and propensities may make their way into the elite, while elite members destitute of commensurate qualities eventually descend into the non-elite (Ibid). Thus, an elite is, even at its most static, in a state of “slow and continuous transformation” (Ibid).

As the pathways of elite/non-elite circulation are obstructed, two things ensue. On the one hand, the encapsulated elite *deteriorates* – having clogged the mechanisms of positive selection, it soon becomes filled with mediocrities, syncopates and narrow minds whose intellectual nullity assures utter conformity to the dominant paradigm (Pareto, §2054-2057). On the other hand, frustration builds among the growing class of able and meritorious non-elite aspirants to the governing elite, whose advancement is denied by the cliquish closure of the powers that be (Ibid).

What usually follows from these two developments is some sort of crisis, marked by (1) a challenge eventually mounted against the governing elite, and (2) the governing elite’s inability to adequately respond to that challenge (Pareto, §2365). Importantly, in reacting to a crisis, governing elites blunder and miscalculate according to their character – as Femia puts it, the leonine elites’ aversion in innovation and inability to compromise ultimately fails to avert the masses’ uprising, while the foxlike elites’ preference for ‘wheeling and dealing’ over direct confrontation sooner or later erodes its authority (Femia, p. 291-292). Or, as Higley and Pakulski see it, the crises that spell the end for leonine elites usually feature military over-extension and fiscal ruin, whereas, for foxlike elites, the symptoms include institutional gridlocks and insufferable cronyism (Higley and Pakulski, 119).
Ultimately, then, this process results in the governing elite’s eventual downfall and replacement with new, vigorous class of successors through whom Pareto’s meritocratic principles are renewed. As a period of elite renewal follows a period of elite degeneration, one elite cycle is completed and another one begins. This, in summary, is the story of Pareto’s elite cycles.

“Elite Configurations” – Contemporary Elite Theory

To state the obvious: Pareto’s theory of elite cycles cannot stand – at least, not in its original form – apart from its encompassing elite theory. The dynamics of elite cycles is guided entirely by the principles that inform Pareto’s meritocratic conception of the elite – elite change is all about the deterioration and reinvigoration of a governing elite’s abilities, its classes of residues and corresponding derivations. If, in defining what an elite is, one rejects Pareto’s initial framework in favor of a more contemporary one – as this paper has done – it becomes hard to find explanatory use in Pareto’s notion of elite cycles. Yet this paper does attempt to find an adequate way to salvage and utilize the original idea behind the theory of elite cycles. Concretely, this paper aims to propose a theoretical model that describes the dynamics of elite change in accordance with Pareto’s cyclical account, yet with the variables redefined – that is, with the contemporary notion of ‘elite configurations’ operating in place of Pareto’s original concepts. In this endeavor Higley and Burton’s theoretical model of the dynamics of elite change – the so-called new elite paradigm – provides a fitting starting point.

Much like Pareto, Burton and Higley seek to describe the ways in which elites’ structures and behaviors vary between different societies and at different points in time (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 296). Yet, instead of classes of residues and derivations, they speak of three distinct configurations of elites (p. 295-296).

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23 The new elite paradigm or new elitism is a theoretical model, principally developed by John Higley and Michael Burton – see (Burton and Higley 1987) and (Higley and Burton 1989) – is widely regarded as having provided the basis for much contemporary elite theorizing (Lopez, p. 4).

24 While the initial empirical scope of Higley and Burton’s study was quite limited – specifically, they focused on four countries (17th cent. England, 19th cent. Sweden, and 1950’s Colombia and Venezuela) – their subsequent study covered significantly more ground (Higley and Burton, pp. 20-22).
According to Burton and Higley, throughout history, as well as in much of the contemporary world at the time of writing, national elites could be described as being in a *disunited* configuration (p. 295). Such elites, we are told, share few preconceptions about the properties of political conduct – deeply hostile to (and mistrustful of) one another, they are hardly able to establish even the minimal common ground for political coexistence (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 19). Consequently, the rein of disunited elites is inherently unstable – since they are no ‘rules of the game’, warring elites seek to exterminate their competitors, stopping at nothing to hold on to their reign, thus rendering peaceful transitions of power far less likely than coups, juntas and violent upheavals (Ibid).

Hence, in Burton and Higley’s view, stable regimes can only result from *united* elites, of which they discern two types: *ideologically* united (“totalitarian”, “monocratic”), and *consensually* united (“pluralistic”, “competitive-coalescent”) elites (Burton and Higley, p. 296).

The former type, of which the Soviet Politburo is an example, is described as rigid, doctrinaire and authoritarian in its hierarchy – if an elite is ideologically united, its outward appearance is that of an ideological monolith whose members dare not publicly challenge the official doctrine (p. 297). Such an elite tends to rule with an iron fist – through repressive mechanisms it disciplines its members, resolves conflicts internally, suppresses dissent and ensures the stability of its regime.

Finally, the latter type – namely, the consensually united elite – is one whose members share a tacit understanding of the rules of acceptable political conduct, amounting to the norm of “restrained partisanship”, thus assuring peaceful competition and equitable access to office. (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 19). A consensually united elite is *pluralistic*, in the sense that its members are free to publicly support different policies, and *cooperative*, meaning that, for its members, occasionally crossing the lines of factional separation is not taboo (Ibid). According to Higley and Burton, a consensually united elite is a necessary if insufficient condition for the development of stable democratic politics (p. 297).

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Higley and Burton stipulate that consensually united elites can come about in two ways. First, through what they term “elite settlements” – grand historical occasions in which elite factions, hitherto locked in costly and unresolvable conflict, agree on a minimal *modus vivendi* (p. 295). Second, through anticolonial uprisings, during which native elites unify around a common cause (pp. 297-298). Finally, Higley elsewhere posits a third possible course of development, one especially applicable to contemporary post-industrial societies in democratic transition, namely, “elite convergence” (Higley, p. 8) As Higley explains, elite convergence obtains when a formerly hostile minority faction gradually comes to recognize the given institutional framework provides the only viable path to power – as it renounces its radical anti-systemic pretensions, such a faction acquires the status of a legitimate political contender and, with it, access to office (Ibid).

**This Paper’s Proposed Model**

The three above outlined types of elite configurations and the three mentioned paths of a consensually united elite’s formation make up the conceptual foundation of Higley and Burton’s theoretical scheme and, by extension, of the *new elite paradigm*. Thus construed, their model has inspired numerous critical efforts, the most pertinent of which being the one articulated by Paul Cammack (Cammack 1990). One of the lines of criticism developed in Cammack’s essay is directed against Higley and Burton’s account of elite settlements.

Why is it, asks Cammack, that divided elites decide to reach a settlement (p. 417)? As he notes, Higley and Burton present elite settlements as instances when elites manage to “compromise on questions of principle without strong pressures to stand firm” (p. 418). Hence, in Higley and Burton’s account, parties to an elite settlement presumably possess some pragmatic *interests* that outweigh whatever (disinterested) *principles* they hold. Yet what, exactly, might those interests be? If weariness of permanent, destructive conflict and thirst for peace are the pragmatic incentives for elites to settle, how come elite settlements are so rare (p. 418)? Since continuous strife is said to be the inherent state of divided elites, should we not

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26 Elite settlements are defined as “relatively rare events in which warring national elite factions suddenly and deliberately reorganize their relations by negotiating compromises on their most basic disagreements” (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 295). A strong emphasis is placed on the deliberate nature of elite settlements – they are “the result of relatively autonomous elite choices and thus cannot be predicted or explained in terms of social, economic, and cultural forces” (Burton and Higley, p. 304).
expect \textit{all} divided elites to be equally disposed to settle? For Cammack, it appears that “no account is taken of the substantive interests of elites, although it is assumed that after a settlement those interests are assured” (Ibid).

Cammack’s point about the lack of clarity in Higley and Burton’s account of elites’ motivation (i.e. their \textit{interests}) in achieving consensual unity, persuasive as it is, hints at deeper problem residing in the very conception of a ‘consensually united’ elite. Namely, in Higley and Burton’s model, consensually and ideologically united elite types are juxtaposed. The former, we are told, are assembled by \textit{interest} and held together by common adherence to previously outlined mutual arrangements (most importantly, to the norm of ‘restrained partisanship’), whereas the latter originate in revolutions and persist through disciplined, authoritarian dogmatism (Higley 2008, p. 6). The clear-cut division between interest and ‘ideology’, implicit in the juxtaposition of the two types of elite unity, is problematic.

Higley and Burton seem to call ‘ideology’ what is, in fact, merely political \textit{doctrine} – hence, in their view, the tendency of all elite members to publicly advocate the same policies connotes that elite’s \textit{ideological} unity. Yet, as we adopt Freeden’s understanding of ideology, we may observe that one’s ideology does not primarily refer to one’s political positions, but to a set of concepts decontested in an ideology-specific way, of which one’s policy preferences are surface manifestations. Moreover, ideology construed in this more fundamental manner informs one’s worldview – it dictates which notions are core and which are not, how ‘interests’ are perceived and what can be settled for.

Following Freeden, then, we posit that the stark distinction between the ideological and the consensual does not hold. Rather, we claim, (1) that the formation of consensually united elites necessarily involves consensus over a ‘thin-centered’ ideology, (2) that, in the long term, the ideological consensus of consensually united elite ‘thickens’ to the point of becoming a full-fledged ideology, formally expressed by a political doctrine, and that (3) this ‘thickening’ process generates a crisis, which, in turn, demands a reconstitution of a consensually united

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\textsuperscript{27} In fact, even on Higley and Burton’s terms, the lack of public dissent does not necessarily imply the existence of homogenous political doctrine – it merely suggests that a tyrant rules by fear.

\footnotesuper{28} To reiterate, Freeden understands ideologies as configurations of \textit{decontested} concepts, that is, frameworks wherein “particular interpretations of each constituent concept have been selected out of an indeterminate range of meanings they may signify” (Freeden, 1998 p. 749)

\footnotesuper{29} Hence, for instance, persons sharing the same exact conceptual framework might well disagree about the merits of a particular policy decision, such as the appropriate tax rate.
This proposed model, as we show, employs the concepts associated with contemporary elite theory while remaining true to the cyclical dynamics of Pareto’s theory of elite change.

1. In Higley and Burton’s account, the formation of consensually united elites is presented as a process led primarily, if not exclusively, by pragmatic (i.e. self-interested, normatively-neutral) considerations. Elite settlements, we are told, are essentially “arrangements for sharing power” (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 24). Likewise, elite convergence is said to commence when a hostile minority realizes that “there is nothing approaching majority support for their programs and no real chance of taking power forcibly”, and succeed when the majority becomes assured “that their basic interests are no longer threatened (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 297). Yet to claim that a process is driven by motives that revolve around power is not to say that the process itself is only about power. In fact, Higley and Burton’s own account gives cause to infer that there is more to elite settlements than simple actuarial work. Reflecting on a historical example of an elite settlement – namely, the end of the English civil war in 1689, formalized by the adoption of the Declaration of Rights – Higley and Burton observe that the parties to the settlement had to agree on a number of questions, such as “Who would be king, or queen? What would be the line of succession? What would be the relative powers of the monarchy and parliament? What would be the nation’s religious posture?” (p. 299). Now, considered in their historical context, these are all ideological issues, pertaining to the ways in which a concept (e.g. a ‘king, or queen’) is decontested. In this sense, negotiation on any of these issues is an ideological affair, and the resulting elite settlement is an ideological settlement. In the same vein, if elite convergence is said to involve a “gradual attenuation of radical, antisystem stances” on part of the hostile minority, then the nature of this convergence clearly involves an ideological shift (p. 297). Therefore, the formation of consensually united elites inalienably involves the attainment of an ideological consensus. Now, the subject-matter of this consensus is, of course, minimal, as it is built of mutual concessions (and concessions are, by their nature, minimal, since no side concedes more than it must). Thus, the ideological consensus that accompanies elite settlements does not amount to a full-fledged ideology – the Declaration of Rights of 1689, the Swedish Constitution of 1809 or Colombia’s 1957 Pact of Sitges are

30 In this case, the consensus on “who would be king, or queen” involves decontestation of the long-contested notion of a reigning monarch– a notion historically associated with much theoretical debate and different doctrines (e.g. the divine rights of kings) pondering the monarch’s rightful place and prerogative. In this sense, the cited question is a heavily ideologically charged one.
Far from comprehensive blueprints for governance. Rather, in line with Freeden and Stanley’s understanding, the result is a framework of deontosted concepts limited in ambition and scope – a ‘thin’ ideology.

2. According to Higley and Burton, the norm of ‘restrained partisanship’, being the basis of an elite’s consensual unity, is prima facie procedural. Restrained partisanship, they write, is “an agreement on the rules of the political game” in virtue of which parties “refrain from pushing their disagreements to the point of violent conflict” (Higley and Burton 1989, p. 19). Yet this norm clearly pertains to more than procedure – it allows consensually united elites to form a “flexible joint hegemony”, that is, to “quietly cooperate on the big issues while publicly competing with each other on the smaller issues” (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 303). How might this ‘cooperation’ go about? The so-called norm of restrained partnership, as originally construed by John F. Manley, stipulates that, in committee work, members of the US Congress should not let their evaluation of legislative proposals be influenced by partisan affiliation, but should, instead, be guided by “a thorough study and complete understanding of the technical complexities of the bills they consider” (Manley 1965, p. 929). Underlying this principle is the assumption that, beyond the realm of combative, ideology-laden ‘partisanship’, there exists a domain of backroom committee meetings, supposedly ideologically neutral, where policies are deliberated objectively, that is, factually and rationally, and where decision-makers speak the same language – the language of cooperation. As the pitfalls of the “rationalist-universalist” approach, encapsulated in this underlying assumption, will be discussed in detail in subsequent Chapters, at this point we limit ourselves to positing that the outlined principle is color-blind to the richness of ideology that permeates all political deliberations – especially those of congressional committees (Mouffe 2000, p. 63). Our claim is, then, that, in addition to manifesting attained ideological consensus, agreement on the proverbial ‘rules of the game’ (e.g. the norm of restrained partnership) facilitates space for widening the initial scope of consensus – that is, for the ‘thickening’ of the initially ‘thin’ common ideological denominator of a consensually united elite. We can observe that the reign of any political elite is marked by the proliferation of institutions created by that elite. Institutions are an elite’s peculiar creation and legacy – elites govern by designing and administrating a web

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31 These are three examples, provided by Burton and Higley, of legal and political documents through which respective elite settlements were formally articulated (Burton and Higley 1987, p. 299).

32 For a comprehensive, scathing criticism of the “rationalist-universalist” approach, see (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 62-67). Mouffe’s critique of the ‘rationalist-universalist’ conception of justice as universally intelligible and discernable by way of ‘objective’ and ‘impartial’ deliberation will be discussed in subsequent Chapters.
of institutions that increases in complexity with each new challenge, crisis or strategic goal their societies face. This continuous expansion, in turn, demands the adoption of additional concepts whose meaning is, in Freedon’s sense, decontest ed – as the proverbial ‘game’ becomes more complex, the number of its ‘rules’ increase. Consequently, the initially ‘thin’ ideological consensus of consensually united elites inevitably develops into a ‘fuller’ ideology. Freedon’s theory seems to anticipate this course: “[ideological] fullness”, he writes “exists either by design, or by default as a reaction to the challenges of ideological rivals” (Freedon 1998, p. 750). To his claim, we here add the precipitating causes of said ‘fullness’ are not limited to ideological rivalries, but include events themselves – the invention of the internet, for instance, opened the possibilities for the development of liberal and conservative stances vis-à-vis internet freedoms and, thus, for further ‘thickening’ of these ideologies.

3. The ‘thickening’ of the ideological consensus accompanying the consensual unity of a political elite is not an indefinite process – conceivably, at some point an elite’s common ideological denominator attains the status of a ‘full’ ideology. At that point, the minimal set of ideological commitments required for legitimate participation in political life becomes a comprehensive ideological construct. As soon as this happens, the ideological nature of this construct is denied, presented instead as the “common sense” of a liberal-democratic society, while the resulting status quo is naturalized and “made into the way 'things really are’” (Mouffe 2000, pp. 5-6). Hence the 10-point Washington Consensus of 1989, unanimously embraced by the political elite of the time, was not seen to be a clear-cut expression of neoliberalism, but – in the words of its author – a set of neither-left-nor-right commonsense proposals for “hopefully no-longer-political issues” (Williamson 1993, p. 1329). Now, a consensually united elite’s ideological ‘closure’ narrows the sphere of acceptable political competition – as this process advances, an increasing number of prospective members of the political elite is disqualified from access to governance. Hence, much like in Pareto’s narrative, with the closure of an elite’s ranks frustration builds among

33 Interestingly, a similar rationale can be found in Mosca’s writings (Mosca, pp. 116-117). According to Mosca, “ideologies” serve the purpose of legitimizing the fundamental relation between the rulers and the ruled. As forms of legitimation, ideologies must be based on some moral principle or ideal that facilitates the group’s cohesion by restraining the centrifugal force of the respective ‘selfish impulses’ of the rulers and the ruled. In modern societies, these legitimizing principles are expressed through a system of institutions that formalize moral restraint (such is, for instance, a country’s judiciary).

34 The point at which the threshold is crossed is not set in stone, because Freedon’s criteria for ideological ‘fullness’ are not exact. A ‘full’ ideology, in his view, “[provides] a reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate” (Freedon, 1998, p. 750). What, in this context, constitutes reasonable breadth is anyone’s a matter of individual assessment.
its aspirant class, and this growing discontent eventually generates a political crisis that presents a challenge to the ruling elite.\footnote{While Pareto uses the term “non-elite’s elite” to describe this aspirant class, Mosca talks of “plebeian leaders”, a group hostile towards the ruling class, that, in the eventuality of a conflict, seek to position themselves as the lower classes’ champions (Mosca, pp. 116).} Here the ‘fullness’ of a consensually united elite’s ideological consensus becomes a double-edged sword – having depoliticized its “big issues” and naturalized its ideology as (rationally evident) common sense, such an elite will lack the capacity to effectively engage its opponents. As it happens, exempting a range of ideological positions from contestability has the inadvertent effect of rendering those who adhere to them incapable of defending them credibly on ideological grounds. Hence, when faced with political questions that have the potential to uncover the existence of an alternative to the postulates of the elite’s ideological consensus, a ruling elite will tend to dodge the question – that is, to “distort, partially suppress, or simply confuse [problematic] issues if doing so seems necessary to maintain institutional stability” (Higley 2008, p. 10). Of course, such an elite cannot indefinitely deny the legitimacy of its challenge. Eventually, in the verse of W.B. Yeats, “things fall apart/the centre cannot hold” – the political elite’s ‘thick’ ideological consensus becomes unsustainable and a period of intensive elite change ensues. This change in the political elite’s composition is followed by the emergence of a new ‘thin’ ideological consensus, one that reflects the newcomers’ ideas and aspirations.

This has been the outline of this paper’s proposed model of elite change. In the remainder of this paper, this model will be applied to the contemporary phenomenon of populism.
POPULISM AND ELITE CYCLES

Within the contemporary academic discussion of populism, there is broad agreement about an anti-institutional property intrinsic to the populist phenomenon. In one way or another, the logic of populism and its associated normative ideas are consistently juxtaposed to the core liberal-democratic notion of institutional mediation.

This juxtaposition is manifest in the works of the proponents of the afore-mentioned ideational approach to populism. According to Mudde, populism exhibits an attraction to majoritarian tyranny – an “extremist interpretation of majoritarian democracy” – that makes it “inherently hostile to the idea and institutions of liberal democracy and constitutional democracy” (2004, p. 561). Populists, we are told, have little regard for an independent judiciary, an autonomous central bank, or a sovereign parliament, as these institutions constitute the systematic guarantee of the sort of liberal pluralism to which populism stands opposed (Ibid). Similarly, in the view of Abts and Rummens, populism’s fixation with ‘the People’ and the supremacy of vox populi (i.e. the “phantasmal image of the organic unity of the political community”) carries a proto-totalitarian strain (p. 414). In this sense, populism is averse to all mediate modes of collective deliberation – for populists, an authentic expression of ‘the people’s’ will can only ever be immediate (i.e. not by representation but by popular acclamation). Hence a populist critique of liberal-democratic governance does not target the contingent features of the representative system, but “the representative system as such” (p. 416).

The same juxtaposition can be found in Chantal Mouffe’s model of “agonistic pluralism”, according to which liberal-democratic societies encompass the tension between two mutually opposed traditions: the liberal and the democratic (1999, p. 745) (2000, p. 9). With the liberal tradition having, at its core, the values of individual liberty and protection of diversity, and the democratic tradition emphasizing popular sovereignty the preservation of a collective identity of the demos, Mouffe’s proposed model represents an attempt to acknowledge the paradox constitutive of liberal democracy and reconcile the two traditions

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36 As Abts and Rummens explain, “the crucial difference between [populism, as proto-totalitarian, and totalitarianism proper] is that populism still respects differences between the political domain and other domains such as the economy, law, education or culture” (Abts and Rummens, p. 414).
(2000, pp. 112-126). In this context, populism’s anti-institutionalism is brought to the fore as a reaction against the preeminence of the values associated with the liberal tradition in contemporary politics.

Canovan, too, posits anti-institutionalism as being an important feature of the populist phenomenon (1999). Following Oakeshott’s distinction between ‘the politics of skepticism’ and ‘the politics of faith’, Canovan maintains that populism thrives on the tension between two traditional ways of understanding democracy, namely, between the so-called *pragmatic* and *redemptive* ‘faces’ of democracy (p. 8). In the pragmatic understanding, the purpose of democratic politics pertains to ensuring peaceful resolutions of conflicting interests in society through an elaborate web of rules and institutions – construed in this way, “democracy means institutions” (p. 11). In the redemptive approach, democratic politics is more of an emancipatory enterprise, carrying the “promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people” (p. 10). Populism, in Canovan’s view, is clamant to democracy’s ‘redemptive’ vision, stymied by untampered pragmatism and its “grubby business of [pragmatic] politics” (Ibid). As such, populism exhibits a “romantic impulse to directness” that informs its hostility towards the liberal-democratic web of mediating institutions (Ibid).

**Populism versus (Party) Democracy**

With the afore-mentioned interpretative thread present throughout the contemporary discussion of populism, we deem it important to point out that the extension of populism’s anti-institutionalism is rarely specified. Which institutions, exactly, are populists said to disdain? Parliaments? Judiciaries? Governmental bodies? It appears that populism’s indiscriminate hostility to any and all forms of institutional mediation, which Abts and Rummens explicitly contend, is elsewhere tacitly assumed.

There are two problems with this assumption.

First, it does not square with the observable behavior of populist parties in the political arena. Populist leaders do not exactly rally their followers around the idea of burning the Reichstag, and empirical evidence to suggest that, when in power, populists invest systematic
efforts in dismantling the institutions of governance is inconclusive at best. Whether or not there be a kernel of proto-totalitarianism in populism’s ideational core, empirically speaking, it seems far more appropriate to maintain that populist actors seek to subdue and exploit the power of liberal-democratic institutions, not do away with them in a (proto)totalitarian fashion. In this sense, we argue, with Mudde, that populists are “reformist rather than revolutionary” (2004, p. 546).

Second, the tendency to perceive the populist hostility towards the system of representative institutions as indiscriminate runs the risk of depicting the populist phenomenon as an iteration of Ortega y Gasset’s ‘revolt of the masses’, thereby summoning to the discussion the contentious elitist notion of ‘the mass’ (1993 (1930)). The mass, according to Ortega y Gasset, is the antithesis of civilization, the enfant terrible of a ‘self-satisfied’ age that takes for granted its unprecedented economic, scientific, cultural and socio-political achievements. An intellectual barbarian, the mass-man is the ‘spoilt child of history’, defined by his aversion to all standards of authority and hierarchy – he has no regard for truth, no patience for discussion and no ability to think, other than consume ready-made ideas. Such an amorphous mass is the supreme destructive force of our time – its sole mode of political expression is to tear down all institutional constrains to the assertion of its power. Hence, “when the mass acts on its own, it does so only in one way, for it has no other: it lynch[es]” (p. 116).

Construed in this way, Ortega y Gasset’s mass resembles Gustave Le Bon’s ‘crowd’ – an amorphous collective defined by its negation of individualistic qualities associated with civilized forms of life (e.g. rationality, logical reasoning, critical reflection, self-control) (Le Bon 2018(1895)). Without an (institutional) buffer protecting the individual from the crowd, the crowd swallows the individual, dragging him down “several rungs in the ladder of civilization” (Le Bon, p. 8). In a similar vein, Ortega y Gasset’s mass disdains the institutional barriers that prevent it from reducing civilized society to its own cultural nothingness.

37 There are various governmental institutions that populist elected officials would, technically, be able to eliminate, were that their policy priority. However, we do not see this happening in practice. For instance, upon his election to the U.S. Presidency, Donald Trump had the constitutional authority and sufficient political capital to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education – as of the time of writing, there is no indication that the Trump Administration is considering anything of the sort. See: https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/how-trump-could-abolish-department-education/
In our consideration of populism’s anti-institutional feature, we seek to avoid the line of thought that would lead us in Ortega y Gasset’s direction, lest we fall prey to an elitist oversimplification of the populist phenomenon that carries the whiff of class disdain. Instead, we posit that the populist anti-institutional ire is not evenly spread among the various facets of the liberal-democratic system of mediate representation, but concentrated, in large measure, upon one particular set of institutions, namely, political parties.

Populists typically disdain the mainstream media; they usually nurture a strong distaste for the academia and a dose of contempt for supra-national organizations (e.g. the European Commission) – yet, virtually without exception, populists absolutely abhor political parties. This, we submit, is not only due to the exceptional unpopularity of political parties, which makes them the easiest targets of anti-establishment vitriol – in a sense, the populist hostility towards the various liberal-democratic institutions can be said to stem from the populists’ perception of political parties. In the populist narrative, these institutions are all, to some degree, corrupted by the influence of the ‘partitocrazia’, or the ‘party-cartel’ – hence the populists’ task is to purge them of that corruption by infusing them with populist purity, to ‘drain the swamp’, as Trump would say, not of the Congress per se, but of Democrats in Congress. This is not to suggests that populists oppose the party system as such – as Mudde aptly puts it, populists “oppose the established parties, not parties per se” (2004, p. 546).

There is a further reason why, when considering populism’s anti-institutionalism, an emphasis on populism’s stance vis-à-vis political parties might be warranted. Namely, in a long and influential tradition of contemporary political theory, political parties are considered the central pillar of the liberal-democratic institutional system. Within this tradition, political parties are understood either as being the primary institutions of intra-societal mediation, or as the mechanisms enabling the functioning of all other liberal-democratic institutions. Hence William Riker speaks of liberal democracy as “party democracy”, juxtaposing it to the notion of “populist democracy”, while Katz and Mair place political parties along civil society and the State as essential constituents of the liberal-democratic deliberative framework (Weale

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38 Throughout his treatise, Ortega y Gasset takes great pains to stress that ‘the mass’ is a culturally based category entirely unrelated to class. Nonetheless, around page 1 it becomes obvious that ‘the mass’ has an unmistakable class connotation, as Ortega y Gasset begins his argument by lamenting the full occupancy of theaters and other halls of high culture that were once exclusive to the (wealthy) few (p. 1-2).

39 In Chapter 1 of their book, Muller and Narud provide an outline of this intellectual tradition encompassing a plethora of thinkers ranging from Bryce (1921), Kelsen (1929) and Friedrich (1946) to Neumann (1956), Sartori (1976) and Ware (1987) (Müller and Narud, p. 1-12).
1984) (Katz and Mair 1995). At any rate, there seems to be general agreement in contemporary political theory about the indispensability of political parties for the liberal-democratic system (Müller and Narud, p. 2). Therefore, focusing on populism’s attitude towards political parties might offer important insights into populism’s broader evaluative perception of the liberal-democratic institutional framework.

**The Consensus ‘Thickens’ – Convergence and Technocratization**

In his discussion of populism and political parties, Kenneth M. Roberts brings the rise of populism in relation to a “representational deficiency” – a sense of political exclusion widespread among European and Latin American electorates (pp. 6-7). According to Roberts, this democratic deficit is caused by three interrelated phenomena: programmatic convergence between established political parties, cartelization of partisan organizations and a set of performance failures on the governing elites’ part (Ibid).

Programmatic convergence, as understood by Roberts, refers to the gradual alignment of policy platforms of established political parties in Europe and Latin America (pp. 10-11). Namely, political parties, whose traditional mission was to articulate meaningfully different sets of political preferences, have become too similar, converging on an increasingly narrow set of policy choices. This process said to have begun in the 1980s (in Latin America) and in the 1990s (in Europe) (Ibid). In Roberts’s view, programmatic convergence seemed to have intensified in the wake of the 2008 Recession, with a strong consensus among the Governments of EU Member States on the merits of fiscal austerity policies.

In their paper on the changing models of party organization, Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair describe a very similar development (1995). According to them, during the 1945-1970 period, a new model of partisan organization, the so-called ‘catch-all party’ had gradually replaced the hitherto dominant ‘mass party’ model (Katz and Mair, pp. 10-12).

Itself a result of mass enfranchisement and radical expansion of civil society’s domain in the 1880-1960 period, the ‘mass party’s’ mission was to mobilize a class-based demographic, and advocate reforms preferable to its class of supporters. In this context, mass parties were understood as being the principal links between their respective class-based
factions and the State. Due to a variety of socio-economic developments, including the economic boom and expansion of the welfare system, the post-WWII period brought with itself the weakening of traditional class identities in Western societies (p. 13). This held important ramifications for political parties - to win elections, parties had to come up with strategies to reach beyond their traditional bases of support and, rather than emphasizing class homogeneity, generate support through policy proposals designed to reach across the ideological spectrum (Ibid). This led to the rise of the ‘catch-all party’ – a model of party organization less ideologically distinct than its ‘mass’ counterpart. Catch-all parties drew support from a loose and heterogeneous coalition assembled around widely appealing policy proposals, staking their political capital on the effectiveness of its policies (p. 18). Elections, in turn, became more the business of choosing the right leaders, instead of rallying behind the purported advocates of one’s class-defined interests.

With respect to these two mirror processes, namely, the programmatic convergence of which Roberts speaks and the rise of the catch-all party observed by Katz and Mair, we may put forth an uncontroversial suggestion: the above outlined systematic alignment in policy positions indicates growing ideological alignment among political actors. Consistent with points (1) and (2) of the model proposed in the previous Chapter, in the writings of Roberts, Katz and Mair we see the description of the ‘thickening’ of an initially ‘thin’ ideological consensus of European and Latin American consensually united elites. In the 1930s, Roosevelt’s Democrats and Hoover’s Republicans in the U.S. could be said to have shared an understanding of the ‘rules of the game’ (a ‘thin’ ideological consensus); in the 1970s, Carter’s Democrats and Ford’s Republicans shared an immensely greater set of beliefs about governance.40 In other words, the governing elite’s ideological consensus ‘thickened’ over time.

As ideological consensus between the factions of the political elite ‘thickens’, issues encompassed by it become depoliticized. This process, as Bickerton and Accetti-Invernizzi define it, amounts to “the progressive relegation of contentious policy issues outside the remit of party politics, and into the hands of “neutral” or “independent” bodies, such as central banks

40 With respect to the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S. this trend of programmatic convergence continued well into the 2000s, with the candidates’ substantial policy differences playing a historically marginal role in the 2000 Bush vs. Gore contest (https://news.gallup.com/poll/2929/little-difference-between-gore-bush-important-dimensions-election.aspx).
and other “expert” authorities.” (p. 10). Simply said, there is no reason to debate issues on which all debaters agree – these issues are, instead, left to the administration of “actors and institutions drawing legitimacy from their technical competence and administrative expertise”, that is, to the class of technocrats (p. 2). Technocracy, as Jan-Werner Muller observes, remains “curiously apolitical” in its general belief that “there is only one correct policy solution” (Ibid). If we understand the depolitization and consequent ‘technocratization’ of hitherto contentious political issues as consequences of programmatic convergence, the curiosity disappears. Namely, the technocrat holds that there is one correct policy solution precisely because all established political parties have agreed on it; technocracy is apolitical because the issues delegated to its jurisdiction have been divorced of their political dimension.

Therefore, in our analysis, programmatic convergence, the development of the catch-all party model, depolitization of contentious political issues and the rise of technocracy are all positively correlated facets of the same process, i.e. of the ‘thickening’ of the ideological consensus of contemporary political elites.

Crisis Ensues – Party Cartelization and The Crisis of Representation

Throughout the contemporary literature on party democracy, there is a popular notion that political parties are facing some sort of ‘crisis’. Modern democracy, we are told, “has somehow been hollowed out”, with political parties drifting away from the voting public and losing their capacity to serve as mediators between the civil society and the State (Katz and Mair 2009, p. 762). Overall, it seems that in contemporary political theory there is an established belief that citizens are less inclined to affiliate themselves with political parties, participate in partisan activities or care about the differences between them (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein, p. 98). This notion seems to find strong support in empirical research: OECD’s 2013 report showed that, between 2005 and 2013, in OECD countries the level of trust in political parties has generally been lower than in national Governments, while the European Social Survey found that, in the 2002-2010 period, party membership and party identification in Europe have steadily declined (OECD 2013, p. 30) (Hooghe and Kern, p. 8). As Katz and Mair succinctly put it, “the parties do not act as agents of the voters. But then the voters appear to have little interest in acting as principals of the parties” (2009, p. 762).
Where might the roots of this crisis lie? In their paper, Accetti-Invernizzi and Wolkenstein consider the crisis of party democracy in terms of demand-side and supply-side causes, the former concerning the voters’ incentives to support political parties, the latter pertaining to what parties offer to the voting public (p. 99). On the demand side, these authors point to the trends of depolitization, construed as the growing retreat of the individual from participation in political affairs into private (material) pursuits, and cognitive mobilization, denoting to the contemporary preeminence of individualistic modes of judgment formation at the expense of collectivist outlooks (pp. 99-100). Put in this way, these demand-side causes manifest themselves in what Bickerton and Accetti-Invernizzi define as the individualization of voters that once firmly belonged to the established parties’ voting bases (p. 9). On the supply side, Accetti-Invernizzi and Wolkenstein emphasize the emergence of new media as an alternative to the mainstream media outlets traditionally aligned with the established parties of government, as well as the challenge posed by globalization to the national parties’ capacity to single-handedly address an increasing number of political problems with local pertinence and a global dimension (Ibid). In addition, the crisis of ideologies is included in the set of supply-side causes, referring to what Roberts meant by programmatic convergence (Roberts, pp. 6-7).

This compilation of proposed causes for the crisis of party democracy, we should note, is methodologically disparate – some appear to be derived from a sociological or anthropological analysis, others from political science. Moreover, they are presented as being empirically coincidental, without positing a clear link of mutual contingency obtaining between them. By applying our proposed model of elite change, we attempt to provide this link, subsuming the above identified phenomena under what, in point (3) of our model, we defined as the closure of a consensually united elite, brought about by the ‘thickening’ of its ideological consensus.

Namely, we submit that the common theme running through most of the above described processes is closure. Depolitization and cognitive mobilization can be taken to represent the closure of an individual within his private sphere; similarly, programmatic convergence among political parties is a kind of ideological closure on part of the political elite. As suggested in the previous Chapter, the ‘thickening’ of an ideological consensus runs parallel to its “naturalization” into the way “things really are” (Mouffe 2000, pp. 5-6). As a political elite’s consensus ‘thickens’, the scope of depoliticized issues, the approach to which has been ‘naturalized’, expands. Accordingly, the domain of legitimate contestation within the
political elite narrows. Hence, when this ideological consensus ‘thickens’ to the point of becoming a ‘full’ ideology, what ensues is a complete ideological closure of a political elite—what Chantal Mouffe identified as the inviolable “rational consensus [of the center]” or, in Philine Merliere’s words, the “circle of neoliberal thought” (Mouffe 2000, p. 7) (Merliere 2013).

This ideological closure, we maintain, triggers the closure of a political elite’s ranks—an increasing strictness of ideological criteria of admission to the political elite, accompanied by a hostility towards those prospective elite members who would deviate, ever so slightly, from the naturalized ideological consensus. This development is clearly manifested in notion of the ‘cartelization’ of political parties, introduced by Katz and Mair (1995) (2009).

‘Cartelization’, as Katz and Mair explain, refers to a set of strategies employed by political parties to heighten the barriers to entry to partisan politics. In order to preserve a shared monopoly over the privileges associated with having a share in government, political parties are said to adopt collusive tactics to keep ahead of the competition (1995, pp. 16-18). Katz and Mair argue that, in many European countries, the deepened embeddedness of political parties in the State yielded the institution of State-sponsored financial support for political parties—established parties, effectively, designed for themselves a welfare system that would serve as a new primary source of funding, thereby making themselves less dependent on (mass) membership contributions. This, in turn, lowered the financial stakes of winning or losing elections (pp. 16-17). Furthermore, numerous European democracies saw the increase in the number of parties that could be said to partake in governance at a given point—as Katz and Mair observe, “almost all substantial parties may now be regarded as governing parties” (Ibid). In the view of Katz and Mair, this continuous clinging to power erodes the parties’ anchoring in society—such parties, in Roberts’s words, resemble a “closed and powerful political cartel that shares in the spoils of public office and excludes alternative voices from effective representation” (Roberts, p. 8).

In the cited literature on political parties, there is disagreement on whether the rise of cartelization is a cause of the crisis of party democracy, as Roberts would suggest, or a coping strategy adopted by parties facing a crisis of legitimacy, as Bickerton, Accetti-Invernizzi and Wolkenstein maintain. According to our proposed model, the cartelization of political parties
is a direct consequence of what we identified as the ideological and compositional closure of political elites.

Namely, in the process of depolitization that follows the ‘thickening’ of a political elite’s ideological consensus, the political class cedes policy-making authority to the technocratic class. As a result, the domains of government and governance diverge, with the politician’s role relegated to occupying elected office with an ever-narrowing policy-making mandate. With the tasks thus divided between the politician and the technocrat, what is left for the political class to do? The answer, we suggest, is cartelize. Insofar as the extent of the ideological consensus is concerned, the relationship between technocracy and the political class is symbiotic, since both sides effectively get what they desire.

Now, this symbiotic relationship is not without its tensions. In this sense, the technocratic critique of liberal-democratic procedures and its trivialization of the political process, to which Bickerton and Accetti-Invernizzi point, can be understood as a display of technocratic hubris, commensurate to the increasing decision-making authority wielded by technocracy (p. 9). Nonetheless, in the presence of external challengers, the political and the technocratic class find themselves aligned in jealously guarding the established ideological consensus and the corresponding status quo.

It is within this framework, we suggest, that the crisis of party democracy (or, in Roberts’s terms, the ‘crisis of representation’) should be understood – not as a contingent outcome of a variety of largely independent developments, but as a necessary consequence of a political elite’s ‘thickened’ ideological consensus. We might emphasize two reasons why that should be so.

For one, this fact is empirically plain – whatever ideological consensus a political elite may establish, there will always be a share of the voting public whose political beliefs are not

41 With respect this point, perhaps the clearest contemporary illustration of the diminution of the politician’s mandate was provided by WikiLeaks’s 2016 publication of Hillary Clinton’s e-mail correspondence during her tenure as Secretary of State (2012-2014). Interestingly, the exuberant media coverage of this e-mail archive neglected to emphasize the truly shocking fact about Mrs. Clinton’s correspondence – namely, a large majority of the 30,000 published e-mails contained discussions of political tactics, while very few bits of her daily e-mail conversations featured thoughts on the merit of specific policies. See: [https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/](https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/)
encompassed by it. The ‘thicker’ the ideological consensus in terms of presupposed policy positions, the larger the number of those excluded from the consensus.

For another, the existence of a ‘thick’ ideological consensus represents in itself a denial of what Mouffe identified as the ‘agonistic dynamics’ intrinsic to democratic societies (1999). Democratic communities, as Mouffe persuasively argues, are composed of ineradicably different ideological camps without a ‘common (ideological) denominator’ – these camps, we are told, base their worldviews on unique sets of ideological presuppositions, akin to different languages. Hence, in Mouffe’s view, it is impossible to establish a universal ‘language’ of collective deliberation, intelligible to all participants in the public sphere, since any such language is determined in an ideology-specific way (pp. 60-80). In this sense, the formation of any ideological consensus presupposes a common, ideological language of deliberation, which can never be everybody’s language – that is to say, by virtue of the agonistic nature of democratic societies, no ideological consensus can be universally representative.

The Cycle Ends – Populists at The Gates

The notion of an ideological consensus that obtains within a political elite runs against that which, following Mouffe, Dzenovska and De Genova articulated as the inalienable liberal-democratic “desire for the political” (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018). In liberal democracies, the public sphere does not merely serve to facilitate the exercise of collective decision-making – it is a forum where the identity of the demos is continuously reinterpreted and reaffirmed. Due to the defining role of the desire for the political in the life of a liberal democracy, no liberal-democratic community can afford to renounce this desire altogether, no matter how appealing or, indeed, how naturalized an elite’s ‘thick’ ideological consensus may appear to be. Therefore, a crisis of representation, entailed by the political elites’ exclusionary

42 As Abts and Rummens put it, “the political stage refers to the non-substantial political unity of the community and provides the common symbolic space in which democratic conflicts can be represented and integrated” (p. 419).
ideological consensus, is bound to provoke a reaction. Katz and Mair make this suggestion: “attempts at exclusion may prove counter-productive, offering to the excluded neophytes a weapon with which to mobilize the support of the disaffected” (1995, p. 24).

Consistent with point (3) of our proposed model, we suggest that the crisis of representation yields the constitution of an increasingly potent ‘outsider-elite’, gathering at the gates to demand a share of power denied to it by the governing elite. Today’s populists, we claim, play the role of that ‘outsider-elite’.

According to our model, the principal political goal of populist parties and movements is to break the ‘thick’ ideological consensus and negotiate a new, ‘thinner’ one. To clarify this point: that prospective, ‘thinner’ ideological consensus does not amount to the ‘thin’ ideology of populism – rather, populism, qu’a ‘thin’ ideology, contains a rallying cry for the reversal of the depolitization process and the ‘thinning’ of the political elite’s ‘thick’ ideological consensus. This interpretation corresponds to Mouffe’s understanding of the populists’ mission – populists, she argues, seek to re-politicize hitherto ‘depoliticized’ questions of public life – “in many cases they are the only ones denouncing the ‘consensus at the center’ and trying to occupy the terrain of contestation deserted by the left” (2000, p. 7) In other words, populists fill the gap of representation generated by the political elite’s ‘thick’ ideological (i.e. ‘rational’) consensus. As this consensus ‘thickens’, the gap widens and populist movements gain ground.

Drawing from the elite theory perspective, we perceive these ideological features of populism within the framework of elite change – in this sense, populism’s aim to “cash in democracy’s promise of power to the people” finds its analogy in the populist ‘outsider-elites’’ reliance on the democratic logic as a source of legitimation in front of a political elite that is unwilling to cede some ground to its demands (Canovan, p. 2).

As indicated in the previous Chapter, the political elite’s default reaction to the populist challenge of the established consensus is to discard it – that is, to “distort, partially suppress, or simply confuse [problematic] issues” for the sake of maintaining institutional stability (Higley 2008, p. 10). Is this not exactly how elitist anti-populist discourse, prevalent in much of the U.S. and Western European media, approaches the substance of populism’s challenge? From the elitist standpoint, populists are acknowledged as a threat for their political strength, but consideration of that threat is confined to the question of how to respond to it, suppress it
and protect from it, without really engaging with the substance of the populist challenge. In the elitist view, populism is a term of abuse, and populist ‘outsider-elites’ are depicted as barbarians at the gates, retrograde agents that seek to plunge society back into a dark past of which they are remnants – that is, into a time before the ideological consensus had ‘thickened’.

This process, we contend, cannot go indefinitely, as the crisis of representation ensures the gradual erosion of the governing elite’s authority. We can see this dynamic reflected in the rhetoric of populist parties – while the ‘party-cartel’ and the ‘technocrats’ are equally vilified, the political elite is invariably depicted as being ‘in the pocket’ of the technocratic elite, and calls are made to elect politicians that will ‘stand up to Brussels/Eurocrats/bankers/etc.’. This rhetoric indicates that the populist view of the governing elite’s ideological consensus differentiated between an active and a passive agent in the maintenance of the consensus – the political class being the passive, and the technocratic class the active counterpart of the duo. Another case in point are the populists’ constant lamentations about the political elite’s obsession with political correctness, which serves to stress the political elite’s weakness vis-à-vis different interest groups (minorities, etc.), whom mainstream politicians are afraid to confront. Hence populism’s rallying cry for politicizing ‘depoliticized’ issues, for ‘thinning’ the ‘thick’ ideological consensus, for reclaiming “democracy’s promise of power to the people” is, paradoxically, at the same time a plea for re-empowering the authority of the political class vis-à-vis the technocratic class.

In view of these considerations we may conclude that, according to our model, populism is a ‘thin’ ideology of an ‘outsider-elite’ that seeks to claim its place within the political elite by renegotiating a ‘thinner’ ideological consensus. Venturing into the area of sociological prediction, we might further suggest that the rise of populism heralds the end of an elite cycle and the beginning of a new one.
CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to chart an interpretative route towards an elite theory of populism.

To this end, we have outlined three dominant contemporary approaches to the nature of populism, selecting the ideational approach to populism as the most promising of the three. In our critical assessment of this approach, we have identified two aspects of the populist phenomenon which, in our view, were inadequately stressed by the proponents of the ideational approach: namely, the reactivity inherent in populism’s conceptual core and the elitism intrinsic to the socio-political dynamics of populist politics.

In an attempt to provide an adequate articulation of these neglected features of populism, we have borrowed from Nietzsche’s theory of morality and employed the notions of the Slave revolt and ressentiment to articulate the kind of reactivity that we found inadequately emphasized by the ideational approach. Moreover, we have drawn from classical and contemporary elite theory – in particular, from the works of Pareto and Higley – to construct a model of elite change that we could apply in interpreting the various salient features of the populist phenomenon.

In this endeavor, we hope to have contributed an initial step towards developing an elite theory of populism, acknowledging full well that the demands of adequately articulating such a theoretical perspective widely surpass the limited scope of this paper. In order to make a compelling case for an elite theory of populism, significant empirical research, as well as work on further developing the notions introduced in this paper, remains to be done.
Bibliography


