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### **Populism as a pathological form of politics of recognition**

Since the rise of practical identity politics in the 1960s, it has become ever clearer that recognizing personal and cultural identities is one of the central themes of contemporary political discussion (Thompson, 2006: 2). On the one hand, there is an acute perceived need in multicultural societies to include minorities in the decision-making structures of the society and to get everyone's interests heard. Misrecognition and disrespect obstruct integration and, in the extreme cases, lead to actions that threaten the social order as those who have fallen to the margins of the society become indifferent or hostile towards it. On the other hand, the popularity of nationalist-populist movements that argue for stricter cultural separation at the societal level has been on the rise for the past twenty years. Thus, the stage is set for a political conflict endangering cohesion of the society through bipolarization of social relations.

This paper combines the theory of recognition with the recently rehabilitated idea of social pathologies to argue that the populist formulations of political goals in struggles for recognition are – despite their potential positive motivating force – socially pathological. As such it is an attempt at philosophical exploration through combining distinct theoretical frameworks. We start with short characterizations of politics of recognition and various conceptions of social pathologies. After that, we describe what we take to be the general features and logic of populist politics. Here we take our lead mainly from Ernesto Laclau who sees populism following a logic of equivalence and antagonism. While for Laclau populism is 'the very essence of the political' (Laclau, 2005: 222), we do not agree with this sentiment and argue instead that recognition theory provides a distinct set of conceptual tools to import normative considerations into analysis, giving support to more inclusive forms of politics. We acknowledge that there exists a broad and detailed academic discussion around the antagonist forms of politics. However, in the context of this paper, that discussion concerning the nature

of politics in itself has to be left to the margins as our main purpose is more modest: to show formally the usefulness of the recognition-perspective in the context of populism analysis. We see that populism is a phenomenon that has not been analyzed in the current recognition-theoretical discussions and this paper aims to do its part in rectifying that lack.

### **Politics of recognition**

The key idea behind recognition theories is that there are certain social and psychological mechanisms that underpin political struggles. Recognition, understood as positive attitudes and positive attribution of social statuses by others, is a ‘vital human need’ (Taylor, 1994: 26) as getting recognition from others is necessary for achieving positive self-understanding of oneself as a fully-fledged person. This makes recognition also a central political concept: if we need recognition to achieve good enough self-security and self-understanding to achieve a livable life, then the lack of social recognition drives us to struggle for it. Disrespect and misrecognition can truly cause us harm and, thus, avoiding them is seen to be the force behind social movements and, especially, the contemporary forms of identity-based politics (see, for example, Honneth, 1995 and Taylor, 1994). As Simon Thompson (2006: 9) summarizes, political theories of recognition maintain that it is exactly recognition that holds the key for determining what is just in a society and what a good society is. The society as a whole can be seen as a system of recognition where interpersonal forms of recognition have been institutionalized (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 138). The desirable structuration of a society and its recognition institutions are derived from an underlining theory of the meaning of recognition for human life. In the ideal case the arrangement is such that all parties can feel “at home” with their personal identities.

Described in the above manner, it is easy to see how recognition is closely connected to political struggles. Firstly, those political movements that strive for equal rights and equal respect – like civil rights movement or early feminist movements – are interpreted to take part in politics of *universal* recognition. The idea is that the demands for universal respect are based on our shared features or status as autonomous human beings. Secondly, identity politics can also be based on claims for esteeming *particular* identifying features of (minority) cultures and (disadvantaged) groups. Here the term recognition is used in relation to specific identifying features of those groups and their members. It is widely thought that

politics of recognition encompasses both – universal and particular – spheres (see e.g. Thompson, 2006; McBride, 2013).

In spite of being necessary for achieving positive self-understanding of oneself as a fully-fledged person, the dynamics of recognition do not always lead into fruitful outcomes. Firstly, we may have conflicting needs for recognition: while most modern political projects emphasize the respect of equality and equal rights, recognition as esteem for particular identities or particular contributions is always based on separation and difference from others (McBride, 2013: 128). Thus claims to recognition seem to include a fundamental tension between respect and esteem that enables political projects, which can emphasize either universality and similarity or difference and distinctiveness. A project that focuses on one form of recognition may come into conflict and be thwarted by other projects that emphasize the other pole of recognition. Secondly, there is also a strong possibility for failing to recognize others or to misrecognize others. For various reasons, we might just not care about their suffering, respect their rights or appreciate their deeds. The most famous example found in the literature is Hegel's master-slave relation where the master does not recognize the slave as a person but rather as an object for fulfilling his or her needs. For Hegel, the pure concept of recognition requires that the individual parties in recognition 'recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other' (Hegel, 1999: paragraph 19) but it is clear that such mutuality is not achieved in every case. For the recognition to count as proper recognition, it has to be valued and free. This is to say that in order to get recognition, one must also give it willingly. In the very experience of getting recognition from someone, one at the same time acknowledges that person as a recognizer. It is impossible to get recognition from the other unless one grants the status of a recognizer to him/her.

It is worth observing that the expectation of the full reciprocity of recognition also involves a potential motive for denying recognition. If one is afraid of what others might say, and wants to hide one's vulnerability to others' views, one may block this by denying their status as speakers or as recognizers (Ikäheimo, 2015). This is readily understandable when others' views are critical to one's own but it can also be the case when their views would differ from how the person denying the status prefers to see things. So one reason why someone might not want to get even positive recognition from others is that thereby he or she admits them the status as a relevant recognizer. As soon as one starts to listen, one has granted the other the status as a speaker whose views are to be counted as relevant.

Thus, apart from the direct forms of misrecognition or non-recognition, there are also interesting dynamics related to not accepting recognition from others. Excluding someone from having a voice or standing as a recognizer can be a defense mechanism. Whatever the motivating reasons, misrecognition (disrespect, objectification, misrepresentation) and non-recognition (exclusion, social invisibility) can be considered to be social evils or social *pathologies*. The aim here is to show how populism as a means of politics can be pathological from the recognition-theoretical perspective. We hope to argue that the concept of recognition, combined with the idea of social pathologies, can be used to introduce normative considerations into the populism analysis. We see that this is a standpoint that is somewhat lacking from the current research – although oftentimes quite purposefully – and we wish to add to the resources with the help of which relevant normative considerations can be soundly discussed and analyzed. Recognition theory as a critical social theory aims to evaluate social movements and other social phenomena and, therefore, political analysis, as practiced here, is not merely descriptive. However, before such normative considerations can be properly introduced, the concepts of social pathology and populism need a closer examination.

### **From social pathologies to pathologies of recognition**

In this section we aim, firstly, to give a general overview of what can be meant by the term social pathology in order to, secondly, concentrate on two relevant senses in which the concept can be linked to that of recognition.

The concept of pathology has been borrowed to social analysis from the medical sciences. It fits together with the idea of a society as a body and opens up the possibility to discuss society's diseases and dysfunctions. This idea can be traced back to Plato's Republic and since then it has been present in philosophy, social theory, political practice, and fiction (Honneth, 2014: 683–684). The popularity of the concept of social pathology has waxed and waned, perhaps largely due to its internal tensions. It is not particularly clear how literally one should follow the medical analogy or who exactly is ill in the case of a sick society. However, recently the concept has been revived in the critical social theory (see Honneth, 2014; Laitinen et al., 2015). The particular reasons for employing the concept vary but the key insight that we want to hold onto here is the diagnostic model of social theory. Speaking of social pathologies enables us to show wrongs in social arrangements that would go

unnoticed in merely descriptive political theory. Pathological states are connected, and have been connected, in various ways to corresponding normal, or healthy states – as Canguilhem (1991) shows in the context of medical sciences – and analysing social phenomena in terms of pathologies is a normative enterprise throughout. However, at the same time we do not want to make a moralistic argument. Indeed, we remain open to the idea that the specific formulations of the normality, and the norms included in them, are contingent and open for debate.

Although the concept of pathology is linked to normativity, what is meant by the pathologies of the social varies. Following the work of Laitinen and Särkelä (see especially their contribution to this issue), we identify four (A-D) alternative senses of pathology. Out of these we develop two working conceptions: a thin metaphorical sense of pathology and a stronger ontological sense of pathology. Both of these are then connected to the idea of recognition.<sup>1</sup>

A) One way to understand social pathologies is to understand them as deviations from social norms.<sup>2</sup> In this thin sense of the word pathology the medical and organic connotations of the word are left behind (compare with C) and any failure to follow the normative order of a society is a pathology. The problem of this view is that it either assumes that the prevailing normative order is the reference point of the social pathologies or, alternatively, the proponents of this view need to spell out the norms that are in some sense central for the functionality of the society. Furthermore, it seems that we need to distinguish accidental individualistic deviations from the more reoccurring and systematic deviations. Although this sense of social pathology retains the key sense of a pathology as connected to normativity, it does not seem to capture the systematic nature of *social* pathologies.

B) The second sense of social pathology claims that pathologies are such deviations from the social norms that share a certain common structure. For example, Christopher Zurn (2011) combines this idea with a theory of recognition and suggests that social pathologies of recognition are socially caused and pervasive second-order disorders. This means that all social pathologies share the structure that for some social reasons we lack reflexive comprehension of our experiences of the social reality. Although Zurn's definition is stricter than the merely metaphorical conception of deviation from social norms (A), it can be argued that, like the first sense, it does not capture the often used medical or biological connotations of the concept of pathology (Laitinen et al., 2015: 11). Although this 'loss' might well be

acceptable for those who do not wish to see any medical or organic connections, there is also a bigger problem with “common structure” models: they might not manage to capture all the relevant social problems.<sup>3</sup> This is so because specifying any specific (conceptual) structures will leave others out of the classification and it is highly doubtful that there is only one structure of pervasive social suffering. It seems that any ‘common structure’ model will suffer from the same problem unless the structure is formulated in such an abstract and broad fashion that we are back at the thin concept of pathology.

C) The third alternative is to take the medical or organic sense of the word pathology seriously and understand social pathologies as “illnesses” or “diseases” of society. In this picture society is seen as a whole with reproductive goals and ill social organs fail to serve those reproductive ends. A view of this kind has been recently supported by Axel Honneth (2014) who argues that any serious use of the term pathology would require rehabilitation of the concept of social organism. However, the organic view of societies has been challenged on multiple fronts. Firstly, the socio-ontological background assumptions remain questionable and it is unclear in what sense a society is an organism with its own goals (Laitinen et al., 2015: 13; also Laitinen and Särkelä in this issue). Secondly, the organic model can be claimed to be conservative or morally irrelevant as it places social reproduction at the epicenter of social diagnosis; speaking of reproduction merely preserves the current social order that might as well be unjust. In other words, the well-being of individuals is subordinate to the collective reproduction of a functional social whole.

D) The fourth option is to see pathologies as ‘disturbances in the process of social life’ (Laitinen et al., 2015: 13) or as ‘degeneration of social life’ (Laitinen and Särkelä in this issue). The key difference to the organic model is that the static sense of social organism is replaced by dynamic conception of progressing social life. What is pathological according to this model are the deviances that hinder social life as a developing process. In other words, the social order is still seen as a functional whole but the key function is not mere reproduction but instead social life as a process. This is a view that can be arguably found from the Hegel as well as from Dewey (see, for example, Särkelä, 2017). Although this model avoids the conservative tendencies, there is no guarantee that enabling mere social change will necessarily lead to a better society, especially if the conditions of social progress are left unspecified.

We do not want to make a strong commitment to any of the separate conceptions of social pathology. Instead, we can glean at least two relevant senses in which recognition and social pathologies can be understood to be linked. In a *thin sense*, actions and behaviors can be counted as pathological so far as they represent systematic and pervasive deviations from those social norms that are central in a society or relevant for the functioning of the society. This is the main insight of the two first senses of pathology (A-B) and, while it is skeptical of the possibilities of finding one particular conceptual form of pathology, it takes seriously the idea that pathology is a systematic and re-occurring divergence from the normal functional state of the society. In the recognition-theoretical perspective these key norms, from which deviations occur, are defined in terms of the norms of recognition. In short, the thin notion of a pathology aims to capture the wrongness of misrecognition and non-recognition.

The *thick sense* of social pathology of recognition combines elements from the last two notions of a social pathology (C-D). Here the society is understood as a functional whole and pathology as sickness is dysfunctionality of that whole. Although we make no strong commitment what the actual function in itself is – reproduction or social life-process –, it is possible to connect this sense of a pathology also with the recognition-theoretical perspective that sees the society as a system of recognition. Deviations from the social progress would in this context be such realizations of social practices and such institutions that do not fully realize the recognition potential or normative promise of recognition that is built into those practices and institutions.<sup>4</sup> Examples include ossification of institutions, anti-democratic tendencies that do not allow people freely organize their recognition relationships, and reification and essentializing institutional practices. The stronger sense of pathology shifts the focus from particular (systematic) occurrences of misrecognition and non-recognition to the health of the whole institutional system of recognition and its possibilities for reorganizing itself critically.

Now with the thin and strong sense of social pathologies conceived as pathologies of recognition, we proceed to show how populist forms of politics can be pathological in both of these senses. The idea is that the human need for recognition and the view of social institutions as functional systems of recognition will provide a normative basis for evaluating populism as a form of politics. However, to do this, we need to have an understanding of what populism itself entails.



## **Characterizing populism**

The elusive and protean nature of populism has been pointed out from time to time (e.g. as early as Gellner and Ionescu, 1969: 1). In this section, we offer a glimpse at the complexities involved in attempts to grasp populism. The primary purpose, however, is to introduce necessary conceptual background and resources for the development of our main argument. The outline presented here is by no means intended to give a full picture of populism but to home in on those features of populism that make it a suitable object of study for us.

Populism is prevalent across countries and regions, and populist political movements have emerged in different historical periods. In the European context, populism has been most often used to refer to anti-immigration policies and xenophobia. (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; see also Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 3–5). In recent years, it can be argued, left-wing populist tendencies have gained more traction during the Eurozone financial crisis. All in all, it is commonly acknowledged that populism cuts across ideological cleavages, and various political agendas and policies could be described as populist in right circumstances. Moreover, populist movements have no common history (e.g. in the form of defining texts or prototypical cases), “thick” ideology, or social base that would provide a degree of coherence across its various manifestations (Canovan, 2004: 242–244; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 493–495). The sheer number of suggested applications – which can be taken as a sign of conceptual confusion – raises the question whether the concept of populism is useful in the social sciences.

In spite of the difficulties encountered in applying the concept of populism without contestation, it seems relatively easy to identify the basic concepts around which populist discourses tend to take place: the people, the elite, and the general will (see, e.g., Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 500–506). These are combined in manifold ways with each other and other related concepts such as sovereignty, authenticity, and nationality.

The notion of “the people” is, according to Margaret Canovan, ‘extraordinarily open and variable in its significance’, and ‘[w]hat the term signifies is perhaps not so much a concept as a series of discourses about political identity, discourses used by partisans of many different causes to fight many different political struggles’ (Canovan, 2004: 247). It follows that, in this sense, “the people” is a construction which is able to, at best, refer to a specific interpretation and simplification of reality (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 501). Nevertheless, in evaluating the various, populist ways to engage in political struggles, the referents of the

key terms may well vary without a loss in the fruitfulness of the theoretical enterprise – as long as the conceptual relations between the uses of those terms remain constant enough in the different empirical instances.

For the purposes of this paper, “the people” can be seen as a unifying concept that is employed implicitly or explicitly in the course of populist politics, hence affecting the everyday identity-work of those subscribing to the message of populist politicians. The issues encountered in many manifestations of populism, the issues that are related to the self and to the group-identity, can also be discussed within the framework of recognition in a complementary fashion. To do exactly that, it is imperative to discuss the mode, or manner, of how the issues of the self and the group-identity manifest around the concepts characteristic to populism.

The concept of the people, alone, lacks power to mobilize citizens, constituents, or *populus*. According to Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), addresses to the interests and ideas of “the common people” are appeals that are usually labelled populist in the scholarly debate. However, the point is not only to unite a silent or angry majority but also to mobilize it against a defined enemy, “the elite” (or, “the establishment”). Furthermore, Mudde and Kaltwasser observe that the ‘anti-elitist impetus has an elective affinity with the critique of institutions such as political parties, big organizations, and bureaucracies, which are accused of distorting the generation of “truthful” links between populist leaders and “the common people”’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 502). In this sense, the message that people are lied to or otherwise deceived seems to accompany much of everyday discourse of populist politics, although it might not form an integral part of the conduct of *all* populist movements (yet, cf. below). Nonetheless, where the allegations of deception and betrayal rule the day, a concrete element of distrust is introduced into social and political relations between people and further cultivated. The main distinction is also a moral distinction: “the people” is seen as pure, authentic, or representative of true interests of people while “the elite” is taken to be corrupt, inauthentic, or representative of a small minority composed of economic and/or cultural elite<sup>5</sup>. The elite are not only ignorant but actively working against the interests of the country and the people in large. Thus, the concept of the people is paired with the anti-elitist impetus, or logic, giving the resulting conceptual constellation a moral character that has the force to mobilize the *populus*. As Jan-Werner Müller states it, ‘populism is a distinctively moral way to imagine the political world and necessarily involves a claim to exclusive representation’ (Müller 2016, 38). If this is accepted, the formation of the people as moral,

homogenous entity in contrast to the immoral elite (or the other) becomes one of the deciding criteria of populism. Populism is about making the moral claim that is specified by drawing from various political doctrines and agendas (Müller 2016, 93, 101).

With the (moral) interests of the country and its citizens the notion of general will enters the stage. Rousseau famously distinguished between the general will (*volonté générale*) and the will of all (*volonté de tous*) in his critique of representative government. A state can be legitimate only if it is guided by the general will of its members, and the general will is willed by each and every citizen. Thus, for Rousseau, freedom and the authenticity of individuals are guaranteed through self-government that stands in a tension with submitting oneself under the rule of others<sup>6</sup>. An idea of general will is loosely connected to a democratic ideal of citizens ruling themselves through democratic process in which their combined will manifests itself (directly or indirectly). With the distinction between the elite and the people, populists reinforce the otherwise contested idea of a general will, and are able to appeal to the democratic values typically held in high regard. Kaltwasser observes that by giving voice to the marginalized in a society, populism can certainly serve as a democratizing force that stands as a corrective to current practices. However, by emphasizing the idea of popular sovereignty and the generality of the people's will, populism can also serve other political, less agreeable goals, such as exclusion of ethnic minorities. (Kaltwasser, 2012: 184–185.)

Müller contends that the hope of populism as the corrective to liberal democracy, that has become too remote from the people, is misplaced. “Populism” often serves as an imprecise placeholder for “civic participation” or “social mobilization” which clouds from the view other important distinctions like that between *popular* constitutionalism and *populist* constitutionalism (Müller 2016, 61). The trajectory of openly populist politics leads to attacks on liberal rights that are essential to functional democracy. Moreover, when constitutional changes that are meant to disable pluralism are put into effect, the democratic process is distorted even more. Whereas Rousseau criticized (non-direct) representation of citizens' interests in general, populists have no qualms with the representation of interests, provided that the interests represented are “the right interests”. Populist representation of the right kind of “symbolic substance” – substance, spirit, true identity etc. – can replace actual participation that is the requirement of Rousseau's general will (Müller 2016, 29–30). Populism is thinkable only within representative democracy, and not as the direct channeling of the people's will (Müller 2016, 76–7, 101). Through various political measures – by colonizing or “occupying” the state, by engaging in mass clientelism or discriminatory

legalism, and by systematically repressing the civil society – populists ‘create the homogenous people in whose name they had been speaking all along’ (Müller 2016, 49). Thus, populism is fundamentally hostile to open-ended and pluralist political contestation process: it is populists ‘who break off the chain of claim making by asserting that the people can now be firmly and conclusively identified’ (Müller 2016, 72, 101).

Nevertheless, there is a certain demand for populist politics in uncertain political or economic conditions. Canovan notes that the democratic project, hoping to bring the masses into politics by empowering them, is a massively difficult enterprise in the highly complex conditions of the contemporary world. Even the democratic mechanisms geared to put power in people’s hands, i.e. fair electoral processes, and the many channels to voice one’s political grievances, may ‘add up to a tangled network that cannot make sense to most of the people it aims to empower’ (Canovan, 2004: 245). Democratic ideology centered on the notion of the sovereign people ‘generates expectations that are inevitably disappointed’ (Canovan, 2004: 245). Citizens do not see their own handprint on the political agenda, nor can they envision a collective that represents their interests. In this kind of general political atmosphere in a society, populists can make their case much more plausibly that the power has been stolen from the people.

In arriving to the more complete analysis of the populist politics, the supply side factors need also be acknowledged<sup>7</sup>. Views held by citizens can be affected actively, and populist messages that give simple explanations for the experienced social suffering can be efficacious in molding political identities of those who feel marginalized. When populism is primarily viewed as tapping into identity-political possibilities of the people–elite distinction with the clear moralistic character, the feeling of marginalization is connected to distrust towards those conceived as a part of the elite. After first kindled, that distrust can be further cultivated by the populist message transforming the initial demand for the non-marginalization to better serve populist goals.

From the standpoint of recognition, then, both demand-side and supply-side should be taken into account. On the one hand, individuals have normative expectations that, if unfulfilled, result in feelings of disrespect and experiences of misrecognition. On the other hand, populist movements do not only give public conduit for feelings of disrespect (and hence, injustice) but try to guide the formation of social identities of “the people” in direction where those disagreeing are seen as part of, or at least working in concert with, the (immoral) elite. Or, in

other words, in populism the (possibly) legitimate normative expectations are guided in a certain, exclusionary way in an attempt to form social identities around feelings of disrespect and experiences of misrecognition.

This general characterization of populism aims to show that despite the variations in the specific goals of populist movements, there are certain features or tendencies that are taken to be characteristic of populism. Those are the moralistic divide between the people and the elite and the idea that the populist movement can correctly represent the assumed general will, or the will of the homogenous people, even though its representation through a symbolical substance might be hazy. Thus, while the contents and goals of populist movements vary, one could argue that they share at least a certain conceptual structure.

### **The logic of populism**

In this section, we follow the discourse-theoretical findings of Ernesto Laclau to show that the relations of the key concepts of populism introduced in the previous section are based on a logic of separating “us” from “them”. Despite the fact that populism may well have legitimate basis in social discontent and suffering, its logic will turn out to be pathological from the recognition-theoretical perspective. Through the analysis of the logic of populism, we aim to elicit conceptual resources needed to distinguish harmful manifestations of populism from more or less everyday modes of politics.

Laclau has argued that populist identity-logic revolving around concepts such as “the people” and “the elite” is based on the fundamental exclusion of the other which, through the equalization of differences, makes it possible to conceive heterogeneous individuals, and their different political demands, as a totality. In populist discourses, terms such as “the people” are, therefore, *empty signifiers* (see Laclau, 1996, 2005) that do not refer to any concrete features of the social reality<sup>8</sup>. It can be claimed that any identity is based on similar kind of separation from the other (Appiah, 2005) but that does not mean, in turn, that all ways of conducting politics, or participating in it, are equal in terms of their consequences for recognition relationships. Indeed, individuals’ identification with an empty signifier(s) is highly problematic because empty signifiers require drawing a definitive frontier of exclusion, and that which is beyond the limit ‘is reduced to pure negativity – that is to the pure threat that what is beyond poses to the system’ (Laclau, 1996: 38). There are two closely

related aspects at issue here: 1) Only by becoming the signifier of the pure threat, of the simply excluded, the other can serve its constitutive role in establishing limits and, thus, the system (of an empty signifier); 2) If the exclusionary dimension were to be weakened, the limits of the system would be blurred (Laclau, 1996: 38). This is why the supply-side of populism is relevant: in order to mobilize people effectively, the threat of the other must be stirred up constantly because to do otherwise would be to endanger identification with the empty signifier, i.e. “the people”.

In order to unify different (democratic) demands under one banner, thusly enabling the political mobilization of otherwise separate individuals, equivalential link(s) between various demands must be formed. According to Laclau, the ‘autonomization of the equivalential moment’ is one of the conditions of the emergence of popular identity, and the tension that moment brings out in inscribing unity to difference is ‘inherent in the establishment of any political frontier and, indeed, in any construction of the “people” as a historical agent’ (Laclau, 2005: 129). A wide variety of views professed by populists can be considered as the part of the same political movement when the views are articulated in opposition to the views of the common enemy. The unity of the group, and hence its political identity, is the result of an articulation of the demands (Laclau, 2005: ix). Therefore, ‘an *antagonistic* camp is fully represented as the negative reverse of a popular identity which would not exist without that negative reference’ (Laclau, 2005: 139–140). The assertion of the opposition being represented as the negative reverse is well illustrated in the rhetoric about “the corrupt elite”, “traitors of the people”, and so forth, which can be easily identified especially in far-right nationalistic discourses (see, for example, Mudde, 2007: 65–66).

The frontier separating the people and the elite, which is needed to constitute the respective empty signifier, may sound like something stable but in reality, political frontiers and allegiances shift all the time. Thus empty signifiers are actually *floating signifiers*<sup>9</sup>. How the meaning, and hence the frontier, and hence the political identities, is fixed ‘will depend on the hegemonic struggle’ (Laclau, 2005: 132). Floating dimension becomes most visible in the periods of crisis putting pressure to the democratic demands and their reformulations. Here Laclau’s discourse-theoretic approach meets the distinction made between the demand-side and the supply-side of populism. The content of the actual demands need not change even if they are articulated in opposition to the different “antagonistic camp” as the result of the hegemonic struggle. The newly drawn political frontier means that the space of representation within which the particular demands get to be heard has changed, and as the

result some demands that were prominent before might now lose their traction altogether, or they retain their motivating force through new conceptualizations.

What is crucial for our argument is that Laclau distinguishes between the *content* of a politics and its *form* (esp. Laclau, 2005: 132). This makes way for the realization that, in right circumstances, a person might very well be inspired by the, often radical, form of politics rather than its actual content. What is significant for the person of that type is radicalism in itself; his or her political identity is based on the radical *form* of politics – the logic of exclusion and simplification. This form of politics can be conceived as “pure” populism; as a mode of orientation in relation to others recognized as a part of the antagonistic camp. In far-right nationalism, the form of politics is combined, roughly speaking, with xenophobia and the overt patriotism as its content, but that content could also be something else (see e.g. Müller 2016 for a number of examples from both the right and the left<sup>10</sup>). This is one of the key characteristics of populism that we have already observed but now grasp with more conceptual clarity: populism cuts across ideological cleavages and is highly malleable for different political purposes.

### **Populism as a pathology of recognition**

In the previous sections we have tried to show, firstly, the importance of social recognition, secondly, how one can conceptualize – either in a thin or thick sense – pathologies of recognition and, finally, what is at stake when we talk about various manifestations of populism, and its characterizing logic. In this concluding section we bring these threads together to show how populist politics can be considered as pathological for recognition. We put forward the argument that the populist mode of characterizing the fabric of social and political relations obstructs discursive identity-formation which, in turn, prevents those who struggle to get their identities affirmed from gaining genuine mutual recognition.

We characterized the thin sense of social pathology as systematic and pervasive deviations from the norms of recognition that manifests as misrecognition and non-recognition. The thick sense of social pathology was, in turn, characterized as malformation or dysfunctionality of the social whole that obstructs the realization of the recognition potential (or normative promise of recognition) that is built into our social institutions. In the context of the pathological institutions of recognition this means that the ability of the institutions to

freely organize themselves, and the ability to define and contest the actual forms and content of recognition, disappears. Instead of being dynamic, the institutions appear ossified, static, or “dead”.

Populism, on the other hand, was characterized as a form of politics in which a strict and moralistic difference is being made between the people and the elite – or more broadly, between us and them. Lines are drawn between two identity groups and the political goals are centered on the demands of the suitably defined people. Here it is good to note that the division into antagonistic camps does not give a full description of populism. However, the reliance on the arguably necessary distinction between the people and the elite gives direction and motivation for political action by virtue of spelling out the active group and the opposed group. It also helps to voice real frustrations, a number of which may be perfectly legitimate. The populist identity that is articulated through the hegemonic struggle offers ‘a semantic bridge between the impersonal aspirations of a social movement and their participants’ private experiences of injury’ (Honneth, 1995: 163). The dynamic of populist identity formation has clear consequences for the possibilities of the formation of recognition relationships, both between the groups and inside them.

First of all, *the stark oppositional logic of the distinction obstructs the recognition of the “other” as something else than just pre-identified other.* It is clear that the populist politics needs to be rooted in some real needs (for recognition) that are shared in the group but, at the same time, the construction of two antagonistic identity categories forecloses the avenues available to the opposing side to effectively define itself – despite the fact that the signifier of the populist identity is floating to some degree. Even if those seen as forming the opposing side actually try to define themselves as something else, the populist ascriptions are not sensitive to their self-definitions but rather pre-describe identities like the corrupt elite or the dirty and untrustworthy immigrant. For example, it is self-evident that xenophobic far-right nationalism, that sees increased immigration as an influx of criminals and rapists and comparable to non-personal force of nature that must be stopped at any cost, does not recognize these people in any relevant positive manner.

Secondly, *the predetermination of identity categories has similar obstructing effect on the self-recognition of the participants of the populist movements.* In other words, populism limits the self-understanding of “the people” themselves by narrowing available identity categories and also by defining themselves only in opposition to an imagined other.



Moreover, populism also limits the number of potential recognizers themselves through the active exclusion of the other. Those with conflicting political views are seen as a (moral) threat to the pure people, and the same applies to those working in collaboration with an already objectified enemy. In recognition-theoretical terms the status of a valid recognizer is taken from the other thereby limiting the potential opportunities for being recognized. This involves a strange, almost tragic, dynamic where recognition is struggled for and yet the status of a valid recognizer is denied from the others.

It is clear though that not all possibilities for positive recognition will be forfeited. What is left is the in-group recognition between the members of the populist camp. Although this is in some sense enough for the constitution of a good-enough self-security, it is also clear that the populist camp needs the external other to draw and define its own identity.<sup>11</sup> The recognition theorists assert that when this other is not fully recognized, the identity group cannot fully understand the conditions of its own self-understanding and identity. Populism that is motivated by feelings of personal marginalization, accompanied by resentment towards the defined enemy, limits the potential pool of recognizers of those with populist views by ostracizing the other and, thus, deepening the marginalization. This, in turn, can lead to increased resentment towards that enemy. In Hegelian terms the populists are stuck in a struggle for life and death where they aim to eliminate the other while the road to self-realization would be found in recognizing the other.

The third *consequence of populist identity formation is that it limits the possibility of social progress by ossifying identities*. The gist here is that when “we” and “them” are defined in a relatively stable manner – for example, with a reference to a conservative view of national identity – and when these identities are assumed to reflect objective features of social reality, the opportunities for discussion of the contents of the identities are being closed. If we understand social progress as developing a new understanding of social world and our role in it, this practice of closing identities hinders the prospects of alternative forms of self-understanding.

These all are tendencies that go directly against the inherent norms of recognition: strong demand for mutuality, openness, and seeing oneself in the other. In other words, populist politics limit the opportunities of mutual recognition and in doing so contribute to feelings of alienation and social marginalization – the social feelings that are most likely to be the sources for the struggles of recognition in the first place. In addition to limiting the

opportunities for mutual recognition, it is possible to see that populist politics constitute *pathologies* of recognition in two separate senses.

The first one is the thin sense of going against social norms that are deemed necessary for the functional individuals and societies. From the Hegelian perspective populist form of politics sits on the wrong side of master-slave dialectics: identities and identifications are made in relation to others and closing the possibilities of negotiation and open discursive relationships will affect negatively both, the understanding of the other and of the self. Populism is pathological in the thin sense as it is necessarily harmful for the understanding of the other as well as populists' self-understanding. The populist form of politics requires ways of constructing one's identity, or identity-work, that actively denies the other in a way that rejects the demands of genuine reciprocal recognition.

Secondly, the reliance on an "original" identity – although under-defined or floating – had the effect of closing the prospects of development. It is clear that this does not hinder the progress of a society as a whole but it does so in relation to those conceptualizations, categories, and institutions that constitute these identities. Thus populist politics is pathological in the thick sense too as it relies on an assumed identity that, despite its indeterminate nature, is not practically open for discussion or development. This objectifies and ossifies the identity category in a manner that does not understand the developing dialogical nature of identities. This is exactly the pathology of the thicker sort where the evolving life of a social system is artificially stopped by assuming and fixing certain identity categories as given facts.

The thicker sense of pathology is grounded on a certain view of a progressive society or a view of a society as a functional or organic whole. It is clear that especially the organic view of a society is currently unpopular amongst social theorists. However, we hope to state here only the minimal claim that populism as a form of politics assumes stagnant identities and, as such, it can be considered as pathological in the exact sense that has been widely discussed in the identity politics literature: social and political identities are not this sort of entities but rather discursively defined and relational (see, e.g., Taylor, 1991). Thus, it is possible to claim that populism not only rejects the social norms of recognition currently needed for the self-understanding of citizens as social beings but it also reinforces a trajectory of social development that precludes the expansion of spheres of recognition. Stagnant populist representations of social identities could be regarded as regressive in relation to the normative

recognition-potential already perceived in our current social institutions (e.g. the ideas of freedom, equal rights, and equal possibilities for all).

Although the ontological commitments do not present a great worry, there is another theoretical issue that might cause problems for combining recognition-perspective and populism analysis. Namely, does recognition rely on a “positive” and friendly view of humanity that would be against Laclau’s (or Schmitt’s) idea of the necessity of the friend-enemy divide for politics? The worry here is that recognition-theories, in criticizing the populists’ reliance on us–them-distinction, at the same time washes the baby out with bathwater and destroys the possibility of politics altogether. Here we cannot do justice to the deep theoretical discussions around this issue. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that recognition theories might harbor a more harmonious picture of humanity on the background but we believe that there is still room for disagreement in politics of recognition. Recognition theories do not necessarily prescribe a fully perfectionistic system of recognition, or provide detailed policy advice.

That said, a part of the aim in this paper is to provide a normative basis for the evaluation of populism. To achieve that goal, the recognition-perspective was introduced as a framework that provides certain background norms of human interaction. This move provides a normative leverage to evaluate populist politics in a manner that has real bite. Our analysis above is highly formal and deals only with the political form of populism and the forms of interaction that populism entails. The content of actual political movements is not analyzed here, and the possible good consequences of practical policies brought about with populist means are left beyond the scope of the current analysis. In other words, even if the pathology of recognition is built into the fundamental logic of populism, we are not denying that populist politics could not have any positive effects. For example, a populist movement could well lead into more just redistribution of resources within a society. However, on an analytical level it is possible to look at two quite different things when evaluating political movements: the logic of the movement and the actual goals of the movement. We have aimed to show above that the logic of populism includes necessary features that go against recognition, and as long as populism is understood as means to fulfil certain recognition needs or achieve identity-political goals, it fails in that just because it fails to establish a recognitive relation to the others – a relation that is deemed necessary to fulfil recognition needs.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have claimed that it is possible to understand populism as politics of recognition that can be based on legitimate needs for recognition. However, we have also aimed to show that striving to fulfill these needs through populist means leads into pathologies of recognition. This is so because, firstly, populist forms of politics rely on harmful misrecognition and non-recognition and, secondly, populism promotes a picture of a static and “dead” society.

On a practical level our analysis suggests the danger of exclusionary politics for self-esteem, self-respect, and social relations and aims to provide the basis for advancing inclusive forms of politics like, for example, deliberative democracy. What is more, we have tried to challenge the notion that normative considerations have no meaningful place in the study of populism by highlighting a theoretical opening, which states that the recognition-theoretical perspective has a place in discussions concerning populism. The recognition-theoretical perspective can be used to introduce normative principles that can be used to distinguish harmful manifestations of populism from “positive identity politics” in a disciplined manner.

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<sup>1</sup> We use Laitinen and Särkelä’s conceptualization of social pathologies precisely for the reason that it also has close connections to the concept of recognition. In fact, their conceptualization originated partly as an attempt to analyze pathologies of recognition (see Laitinen et al. 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Here we deviate partly from the characterization introduced by Laitinen and Särkelä (this issue). Their first conception identifies any social wrongs with social pathologies and while we introduce a similarly broad “metaphorical” or “anti-theoretical” view of social pathologies (A), we also want to hold onto Canguilhem’s (1991) insight that the concept of pathology is tied to the concept of normality and to norms of normality.

<sup>3</sup> As Laitinen et al. (2015: 11) argue, ‘Hegel’s story of “Lord and Bondsman,” Adorno’s concept of “damaged life,” and even Durkheim’s diagnosis of “anomie” all clearly share a fundamentally pathology-diagnostic claim, yet their diagnoses do not necessarily feature a disconnect between first and second orders’. See also Laitinen and Särkelä (this issue).

<sup>4</sup> Here we follow Axel Honneth’s idea that moral progress can be understood as expansion of the spheres of recognition (Honneth 1995, 168).

<sup>5</sup> When the distinction between the people and the elite is not only moral, which is essential to populism, but also ethnic, which is fundamental in nationalism, the elite are considered alien themselves (see e.g. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 504).

<sup>6</sup> Rousseau controversially claimed that the origin of inequality lies in social dependence on others (Rousseau 2012a). People are free by their nature but their constant struggle to advance their social status in the eyes of others shackles them to outside interests. The political solution to the dilemma is given in *the Social Contract* in the form of general will reconciling the will of all with the will of individual (Rousseau 2012b).

<sup>7</sup> Mudde (2010: 1168) cites Betz, 2004; Carter, 2005; Givens, 2005; and Norris, 2005 as authors in this matter.

<sup>8</sup> In Preface of *On Populist Reason*, Laclau notes that he has not attempted ‘to find the *true* referent of populism, but to do the opposite: to show that populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political’ (Laclau, 2005: xi).

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<sup>9</sup> This is a very simple presentation of Laclau's notion of a floating signifier. The reader is advised to consult *On Populist Reason*, pp. 131–156 to get a fuller picture.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Müller sees left-wing strategies selectively drawing 'on the populist imaginary to oppose a neoliberal hegemony' as problematic. The trouble is with the schemes inspired by Laclau's 'maxim that "constructing a people is the main task of radical politics".' (Müller 2016, 98.)

<sup>11</sup> Appiah (2005: 64) has called this a 'dynamic of antagonism' and he adds that cultural norms are constituted 'not only by what they affirm and revere, but also by what they exclude, reject, scorn, despise, ridicule' (Appiah, 2005: 139).

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