

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Beyond populism and institutionalism: Anti-populism and the management of austerity in Spain

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1 | INTRODUCTION AND FOCUS

In the wake of the electoral successes achieved by different populist parties throughout the EU and beyond, in the last few years a large volume of academic literature has been devoted to the study of the various elements surrounding the populist surge. Nevertheless, the one aspect that has gone unnoticed in this intellectual crusade has been the political discourse articulated by non-populist political actors to counter populist irruptions. In fact, a thorough review of the mainstream literature on populism suggests that until very recently there has been no systematic analysis of the discourses promoted by non-populist actors in their dealings with the electoral rise of populist forces. It is odd that the discursive responses articulated in reaction to the emergence of populism have so far not been reflected in the literature, especially since they constitute the argumentative terrain from which populism develops, and because of this, they form an essential element for an understanding of populism itself.

One explanation why this issue has been overlooked by mainstream research may be the fact that populism is still generally seen as an abnormal pathology which threatens “our” liberal democratic societies, and therefore as a bizarre exception that calls for interpretation. As Brekhus argues, by marking one specific side of social phenomena as deviant, social researchers tend to ignore the other side as epistemologically unproblematic: “by making a compound form for a special type we also passively construct the normative case or generic case by its absence of any linguistic signifiers” (Brekhus, 1998, p. 35). Hence, by presenting populism as the strange Other, political scientists have come not only to overemphasize the more “morally critical or factually exotic” aspects of populism and hence to reinforce common cultural stereotypes (Brekhus, 1998, p. 36), but also to render invisible those discourses that oppose it. These last discourses have remained within the realm of the taken-for-granted and therefore unnamed social reality. The fact that the scarce academic literature on how non-populist parties deal with populism takes as an explicit normative starting point the need to eradicate populism—so that their objects of study are not in themselves the discourses confronting populism, but the ways in which such discourses can contribute to the defeat of populism, as, for instance, in Art (2007) or in Kaltwasser and Taggart (2016)—seems to support this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, in recent years, different scholars working within the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis have coined the concept of anti-populism to draw attention to those political discourses that have opposed populist irruptions throughout Europe (see Glynos & Mondon 2016; Karavasilis, 2017; Katsambekis, 2015; Medarov, 2015; Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017).¹ These authors, who in general have

been critical of such discourses, have linked anti-populism to a putative transition from democracy to “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004), that is, from politicized modes of government based on political deliberation towards depoliticized modes of governance that aim to reduce politics to the mere technocratic management of non-conflicting affairs. Thus, anti-populist discourses are defined by the “rejection of disagreement and democratic dissent ... in the name of ‘economic necessity’” or ‘the nation’s salvation’” (Katsambekis, 2015, p. 576) and by the tendency to demonize any opposition to the existing institutional regime by labelling it populist.

Unsurprisingly, the scholars who have developed this notion of anti-populism are working within one of the few theories of populism that does not assume a negative normative standpoint in relation to it. As is explained in the following section, Laclau’s discourse-theoretical perspective on populism furnishes a purely formal approach to this phenomenon that, echoing Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language, understands it as “form without (pregiven) substance.” This theoretical move enables Laclau to isolate populism analytically from features that might regularly occur with it but that are not necessarily part of it. In this manner, this school of research avoids the widespread propensity among scholars of populism to denigrate their object of study, a practice that hinders comprehension of it as a political phenomenon.

Nevertheless, for any scholar trained in Laclau’s discursive theory of populism, the concept of anti-populism cannot but sound somewhat odd: did Laclau not theorize the “other” of populism in terms of institutionalism, reflecting both the two ideal-typical extremes of a continuum between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference? Does not Laclau’s work imply that populism and institutionalism the only two possible ways of structuring a political discourse? Is the concept of anti-populism incommensurate with that of institutionalism? In fact, such doubts about anti-populism as a conceptual category, and its relation to that of institutionalism, become even more disconcerting because the latter is not even mentioned in works on anti-populism.²

The central argument of this article is that, although the category of anti-populism has been developed by omitting the central concept of institutionalism in Laclau’s theoretical edifice, there remain good reasons to affirm anti-populism as a productive analytical tool for political investigations. More precisely, the attractiveness of the study of anti-populism emerges from its capacity to illuminate at least two critical developments characterizing contemporary politics. First, anti-populism not only uncovers something about (neoliberal) political elites’ attitudes when faced with the appearance of counterhegemonic popular demands, but also reveals how, through their very opposition to these demands, they reformulate existing social identities and redefine the established social order according to perceived interests. Second, by drawing attention to the ways in which populism is confronted by the ruling elites, anti-populism illuminates some crucial logics featuring the ongoing democratic decline of democratic capitalist polities and the associated changing modes of legitimation. In this aspect, the hypothesis of this article is that anti-populism, rather than being the political discourse organizing post-democratic practices, as argued by Katsambekis (2015) and Stavrakakis (2014), has come to articulate the political practices enacted by ruling elites when they are faced with the failure of post-democratic forms of governance, that is, when deep social dislocations emerge that cannot be depoliticized through institutionalist practices.

The article aims to provide both theoretical and empirical clarification. First, given that previous work on anti-populism has so far failed to provide a clear theoretical account of its role within Laclau’s discursive theory of populism, the article aims to grasp the formal logic governing anti-populist practices, as well as to situate it at the appropriate level of abstraction. As Althusser taught us, recognizing the existence of a phenomenon is not the same as knowing its proper theoretical place. Second, the article seeks to show how anti-populism can be deployed to frame a concrete populist conjecture. Related to this, in the third place, it aims to formulate some interpretive hypotheses about the significance of anti-populist politics under the contemporary conditions of austerity and crisis.

To do all this, the article takes the Spanish political debate between 2014 and 2017 as a case study. This was a political period marked to a large extent by both the aftershocks of the post-2008 economic downturn and its austerity-based management, as well as by the striking emergence of an anti-austerity left-wing populist party, Podemos (We Can), which ended 32 years of two-party system. This political cycle therefore condensed the central ingredients that seem to prefigure an anti-populist conjuncture: first, obviously, the emergence of a populist actor; second, a deep crisis of legitimacy endangering the established political system; and third, a crisis management led by

elites not seeking to regain social legitimacy but attempting to hide their projects behind “depoliticized” (Hay, 2007) webs of governance featuring “democracy dodging” (Urry, 2014, p. 14). In fact, there are many reasons to think that this pattern of development did not only encompass post-adjustment Spanish politics, but was experienced throughout the indebted southern European periphery from 2010 onwards (Salgado & Stavrakakis, 2017).

Methodologically, the article follows what Glynos and Howarth call the “practice of articulation,” the overarching logic of research behind their “logics approach” to discourse-theoretical analysis (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This consists of three related strategies—problematization, retroductive explanation, and critique—in relation to which the article is structured. Thus, in the second section of the article an abstract approximation to Laclau’s theory of populism is introduced. In the light of this approach, the third section identifies the rhetorical practices that were deployed by the traditional political parties and the mainstream mass media to counter the emergence of Podemos and constitutes them as an object of study; that is, problematizes them. The material analyzed is a combination of public statements by leading party figures and by civil society actors that constitute articulations of a significant social salience given the prominence of the speakers as well as their coverage in mass media. Nevertheless, the aim of the article is not simply to engage in a (theoretically mediated) recharacterization aimed at uncovering the truths and falsehoods of a specific anti-populist discourse, despite the importance of this task (Glynos & Modon, 2016). The aim is rather to discern the rules governing the emergence of an anti-populist discourse, whose political efficacy operates socially without regard to hypothetical misrepresentations. This is dealt with in the fourth section. Finally, in the concluding section, the article advances a normative critique of anti-populism by briefly exposing some of the grounds on which it can be publicly contested.

2 | POPULISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM

Laclau’s theory of populism is based on the contraposition between populism and institutionalism as the two possible ways of structuring socio-political spaces. In a nutshell, according to Laclau, a populist rupture is structured in six steps (see Miró, 2017): (i) when in a situation of social dislocation, a set of social requests is not attended to in the existing institutional order, (ii) these requests progressively become demands against the institutional order itself, so that they begin to relate horizontally—that is, outside existing administrative channels—in such a way that a shared solidarity gradually emerges and eventually gives birth to a common push for institutional subversion common to them all. Therefore, in these constitutive moments, which are the cornerstone of the process of forming the collective identity, the only element that makes the different demands equivalent among themselves is their common dissatisfaction with the existing institutional regime; so that it is this creation of an antagonistic frontier in relation to the regime that produces their constitution into a chain of equivalences and thus engenders a new political subject. (iii) During this process, the identity of each social demand is progressively divided between its particular content, which differentiates it from the other demands and its shared situation with the rest of the demands, which makes it part of a more general identity. (iv) This second aspect enables the gradual condensation of the chain of equivalences around certain common symbols (the so-called “empty signifiers” [Laclau, 1996]) capable of embodying not only the common dissatisfaction with the existing regime but also a new collective project within which the range of actors with heterogeneous demands glimpse that the causes of their dissatisfaction will be resolved. (v) At the same time, however, to the extent that the new collective identity realizes that the sum of the causes of the different dissatisfactions constitutes too much of a general amendment to the existing regime to be resolved within it, that is, to the extent that it perceives the system itself as responsible for the evils of the community as a whole, that popular identity gradually perceives itself as the part of the community that best embodies the true *populus* upon which the new *demos* must be built. That is, it comes to identify its own chain of demands as the political project that best represents the interests of the whole community. This metonymic movement by which a particularity assumes the representation of the universality is what Laclau (2005) called hegemony. (vi) However, to the extent that no particular set of demands can fully represent all the demands of a society, such universality will always be a failed universality, a constitutively unstable object.

As we can see, the production of a new popular identity, of a new people, does not occur through a positive process—that is, through the direct positioning of some features that are common to all differential demands—but in a negative fashion, by the definition of what it is *not*.³ Or, in other words, the differences between the numerous demands gathered in the new collective identity are only (partially) cancelled out by the establishment of a greater difference between them and the existing status quo, a difference that obliterates their (now) internal differences and makes them mutually equivalent. Laclau calls this logic of production of the political the “logic of equivalence,” a logic that stimulates the combination of ignored social grievances into new collective identities and therefore the uncovering of suppressed political divides. However, as mentioned in points 3 and 6 in the last paragraph, the cancellation of a set of differences is always a partial cancellation, so that the chain of equivalences never actually ceases to be a chain of differences. In other words, the logic of equivalence always intersects with an opposite logic, the logic of difference. In fact, it is from this reasoning that Laclau theorizes two ideal-typical modes of development of politics: populism and institutionalism.

Populist discourses are those in which the logic of equivalence predominates, a fact that implies the drawing of an internal frontier within society: all differences are stifled by the extension of a central antagonism that articulates them and gives them meaning. We have only to think here in terms of the widespread characterization of populism as a kind of discourse that dichotomizes society into two antagonistic groups, the people and the elite or regime, and which argues that politics should be the expression of the people (Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 478). Conversely, in institutionalist constructions the logic of difference dominates, so that different social demands remain isolated, relating only vertically to the institutional system. Thus institutionalist discourses tend to reduce politics to the technical management of non-conflictual private requests. When they are successful, the political field becomes more complex, since the administrative apparatus segregates, processes, and absorbs the demands of the governed individually and thus avoids the emergence of internal political frontiers and the consequent development of broad counterhegemonic coalitions. As explained by Poulantzas (1978, p. 140), one of the state's primary functions is to “organize-unify the power bloc by permanently disorganizing-dividing the dominated classes.”

Laclau understands both kinds of logic as different forms of building up what has been called hegemony. Both populism and institutionalism presuppose practices aimed at ensuring that leading social actors successfully represent the universality of society. In the case of populism, these practices imply the making and bracketing of political coalitions, that is, the articulation of heterogeneous interests into a new collective will with universal appeal. In the case of institutionalism, they refer instead to “forms of rule” (Howarth, 2013, p. 202); that is, to practices of negotiation, compromise, and bargaining whereby the leading coalition, earlier instituted through populist practices, is later able to secure the complicity of a range of social actors, even though some of them may have previously resisted. Or, in other words, while the populist moment corresponds to the historical moment of the construction of hegemony, the institutionalist moment is equivalent to the reproductive period of such hegemony.

However, in no social formation does one of these two dimensions of hegemony operate alone, so that populism and institutionalism, equivalence and difference, always coexist in an unstable tension: there can be no “purely institutionalist regime rendering one-hundred percent impossible popular equivalences, nor one so purely populist that it lacks any institutional anchoring” (Laclau in Follari, 2012, p. 86). In fact, the type of logic that will predominate in each given historical conjuncture depends on the existing degree of societal dislocation: the greater the decomposition of the identities that are hegemonic in the established system of representation, the greater the possibilities for their re-articulation as equivalences to challenge those responsible for such decomposition.

3 | POPULISM, ANTI-POPULISM AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN SPAIN

3.1 | The upheaval of Spanish politics

The global financial crisis hit the financialized Spanish model of development, which was sustained by a massive real estate bubble, with special force. The simultaneous banking, fiscal, and economic crises it triggered from 2009 onwards had, among other consequences, the closure of thousands of businesses, a rampant rise in unemployment to over a

quarter of the labor force, and the collapse of property prices. Consequently, people from many social strata saw their standards of living and future expectations seriously affected, thereby dislocating the net of political identities that had been hegemonic in Spain since the late 1970s. The dual economic and political crisis was further aggravated from 2010 onwards by the implementation of a harsh fiscal consolidation program by the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2011).

Beginning in 2010, the groundswell of popular frustration was progressively transformed into a rise in social protests. These gained momentum in May 2011 with the formation of the *Indignados* (The Outraged) movement. This movement represented a decisive turning point in the interpretation and development of the economic crisis in Spain: by singling out the people responsible for the economic disaster as well as by naming victims and identifying solutions, the *Indignados* movement politicized a number of pressing social concerns (such as the political system's lack of responsiveness and transparency, high unemployment, financial speculation or the dismantling of the welfare state) that the Spanish political elites had attempted to depoliticize until that time.

The *Indignados* put forward a new anti-austerity discourse that emphasized an enhanced notion of citizenship rather than class antagonism, with the aim of mobilizing the disparate social groups affected by economic hardship against the entrenched power of the political and economic elites (Gerbaudo, 2017). The popularity that the movement acquired in Spanish society was striking: according to data from the Spanish public survey research center, in June 2011 more than 66% of respondents declared their sympathy for the movement (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2011). The movement thus prefigured a populist breach between average citizens and traditional political parties—the opening motto of the movement's rhetoric was the emphatic accusation “They don't represent us!”—that in the following years would nurture a wave of anti-austerity protests mainly centered around movements to defend public health and education (Las Mareas) and the movement against evictions led by the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH—Platform for the Mortgage-Affected).

Nevertheless, until May 2014 most of the complaints against austerity, unemployment, and corruption attracted only marginal expression in the party system. In fact, in the 2011 national elections, celebrated a week after the upsurge of the *Indignados*, the conservative PP (Popular Party) won with an absolute majority. This meant the state institutions remained closed to the *Indignados'* demands over the following years, and indeed, austerity measures were sharpened.

Podemos was conceived within this context. It appeared on the Spanish political scene in the European elections held in May 2014, only five months after its foundation, when it managed to obtain 7.58% of the vote with a radical anti-neoliberal program. This program centered on six key objectives: (i) the immediate end of austerity policies; (ii) the downward redistribution of wealth; (iii) the expansion of social rights; (iv) the constitutional recognition of the plurality of the Spanish state; (v) the renewal and stimulation of democracy; and (vi) the fight against corruption (Podemos, 2014). *Podemos'* program, coupled with a participatory methodology and a rhetoric that pitted the people against the caste in order to cut across pre-existing political allegiances, successfully condensed the most important demands by anti-austerity groups that had been excluded from policy debates by PP-PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) governments during the previous years. *Podemos* was a clear product of the crisis of representation of the Spanish political framework; that is, of the dwindling capacity of traditional parties to address the demands provoked by the aftershocks of the economic recession. Survey data show that *Podemos* drew its main support from young people, students, and those without work (Fernández-Albertos, 2015).

3.2 | Characterizing the anti-populist surge

The previous section has shown how, in the post-2008 Spanish political cycle, *Podemos'* irruption onto the scene neatly reflected Laclau's theorization on the formation of populist agency. What this section seeks to show is how, in contrast, the reaction of the hegemonic power bloc to this irruption did not correspond as clearly to the institutionalist choreography anticipated by Laclau.

In fact, a certain institutionalist drive did actually make an appearance within the discourse articulated by the Spanish elites against *Podemos*. Indeed, during the first months of *Podemos'* existence, a relatively popular diagnosis of the situation among the Spanish political class understood its emergence as the expression of the temporary

unease of certain parts of Spanish society (mainly young people) with the difficult but unavoidable process of fiscal consolidation. In this view, the problem was the new party's populist way of doing politics, rather than the grievances it voiced. As noted in the editorial of the most read Spanish newspaper, *El País*, the day after the European elections:

Podemos has entered like an whirlwind into the electoral game and has become the great novelty of Spanish politics. It relies essentially on the frustration of the lost generation, uses cheap and modern communication tools (television shows, social networks) and has been used as a punishment vote against crisis management. It is easy to perceive populist accents in its discourse about the people against the political class ("the caste") and in its leader, Pablo Iglesias, who declares himself ready to continue the fight until the PSOE and the PP are "thrown out." (El País, 2014d)

Hence, in this initial period, the discursive frame that came to dominate the anti-Podemos reaction combined criticism of its populism with a paternalist call to solve some of the reasons behind its emergence. The hope was to tame Podemos's populism by satisfying some of the demands that were perceived as being at the root of its rise while waiting for the institutionalization of the party. In the words of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy when evaluating the emergence of populism throughout the EU:

This is undoubtedly due to many reasons that we must study and react to. Probably in the European case, a very important factor is the serious crisis that we have experienced. These things generate discomfort ... I believe that this is so and that what the main parties have to do is to work, to listen to people and to recognize what our mistakes are. (Huffington Post, 2014)

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, this institutionalist discourse co-existed with a more antagonistic rhetoric. In fact, one week after the European elections Podemos had already been branded by the leaders of traditional political parties as "lepenists,"⁴ "anti-system,"⁵ "dangerous for democracy,"⁶ "full of freaks,"⁷ "threat to the Welfare State,"⁸ and above all, "populist."⁹ It was the last adjective that structured the elites' perceptions of Podemos, serving as a linchpin from which to depict Podemos as an existential threat to liberal democracy in Spain. Such rhetoric acquired much of its popular purchase thanks to its resonance with an Orientalist imaginary over Latin American politics—especially about Chavism (Franzé, 2018, p. 53)—that had been present in Spain for decades and that had imagined and constructed the Spanish national identity as modern and rational by opposing it to Latin America's 'banana republics.' It was a rhetoric that sought to disqualify Podemos not only through its association with the irrationalism of populism but also through the depiction of the new party as a "geographical outsider" coming from abroad (Seguín, 2015, p. 25).

In the following months Podemos's populism progressively came to be commonly portrayed in the mainstream political debate as of the greatest danger to Spain, demolishing any trace of agonism in its treatment. For instance, in April 2015 Joaquín Leguina, the former socialist president of the region of Madrid, affirmed that Podemos constituted a "public danger to Spanish society," expressing his "continued, always held hatred of populism" (*El Confidencial*, 2015). In turn, the Spanish Socialists Workers' Party's (PSOE) former Prime Minister Felipe González declared that the victory of a "regressive utopia ... a Bolivarian alternative in Spain would be an unmitigated catastrophe" (*El País*, 2014b), while the PSOE's leader Pedro Sánchez declared that he was not going to make any pacts with Podemos because its populism rooted in Venezuela meant a path towards "rationing lists, a lack of democracy, and greater inequality" (*Europa Press*, 2015). In turn, one of the founding fathers of the new liberal political party *Ciudadanos* (Citizens), Francesc de Carreras, declared in a conference entitled "Populism versus Democracy" that the greatest danger to Spain was that "in the next general elections the main party of the left would not be the PSOE but a populist one" (ABC, 2015). In the same vein, during this period the opinion sections of Spanish newspapers began to fill with editorials and op-eds denouncing the perils of populism: the second most read Spanish newspaper launched a debate under the heading "Is Podemos a danger to democracy?" (*El Mundo*, 2014b), while *El País* wrote in an editorial in October 2014 that

It is very unclear how this party seeks to become a "majority." ... It is clear that it is trying to leave the traditional right/left axis, but it continuously gives us reason to believe that it wants to replace it with populism, which is

understood as the political strategy that pits the people against the institutions, even if they are democratic.
(*El País*, 2014c)

The headline of the cover of *El País* on the day that an opinion poll had for the first time given first place to Podemos in the general elections was illustrative of this narrative. It was entitled “Citizen Rage Drives Podemos to the Top Spot” (*El País*, 2014e), thus implying that the party's success was the expression of dangerous and irrational emotions but that it was not a viable political alternative. The mainstream discourse had come to present Podemos as the product of convulsive times, destined to disappear when things returned to normal.

However, the culmination of the anti-populist offensive came in early 2016, when after the electoral breakthrough of Podemos in the December 2015 elections, in which it obtained 20.7% of the vote and became the third largest political force, it started negotiations with the socialist party to form a new government. During these months the cascade of accusations against Podemos was impressive in its intensity. A recurrent line of argumentation associated Podemos with the Basque separatist armed group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). For instance, the Interior Minister claimed that “ETA would like a government with Podemos in power” (*Eldiario.es*, 2016) while the Minister of Justice argued that “Podemos belongs to a political environment that has close links with the ETA movement” (*Europa Press*, 2016).

Linking Podemos and terrorism made the basic argument against populism more credible; namely, its radical and anti-democratic character. In this way, according to the PP's spokesman in Parliament, Podemos was following the “the putchist's handbook,” seeking to “occupy important positions of power within the Army, the Police, the CNI (intelligence services) and public television” (*El Periódico*, 2016b). Podemos was thus progressively being depicted as a “peril to Spain,” in the words of the Minister for Foreign Affairs García-Maragallo (*La Sexta*, 2016), as a “peril to democracy,” according to the director general of the Police (*El Periódico*, 2016a), or, as a consequence of its “populist character,” as a “threat to the rule of law, the independence of justice and a free democratic system,” as stated by the former conservative Prime Minister José María Aznar (*Expansión*, 2016). According to editorials in the *El País* newspaper, Podemos had hidden “obvious autocratic temptations” (*El País*, 2016a), while its leader, Iglesias, questioned “the fundamentals of the constitutional system every day without explaining what his party intends to establish in its place” (*El País*, 2016c).

At this point, the signifier populism—a term that, as demonstrated empirically by Santiago (2015), had not been historically used very much in Spanish politics—had come to condense all the anxieties of the Spanish political elites, thus becoming an omnipresent point of reference in opposition to which traditional political actors based their democratic credentials. In Laclauian terminology, populism had become a “nodal point” (Laclau, 2005) of the pro-status quo discursive coalition, that is, a signifier partially unifying the discursive elements of such a coalition, or in other words, an element “to which ‘things’ themselves refer to recognise themselves in their unity” (Žižek, 1989, p. 96). Indeed, from 2015 onwards the populist label had begun to be deployed not only against Podemos but also against any political actor who deviated even slightly from the dominant austerity discourse upheld by the PP and the conservative faction of the PSOE. For *El País*, a newspaper traditionally associated with socialists, the intention of Pedro Sánchez to put his position as PSOE's general secretary to party elections was “populist” (*El País*, 2016b), while afterwards, for the rival candidate to Sánchez in the PSOE primaries, Susana Díaz, “the populist proposals” of Sánchez were “taking the party away from the voters” (*El Periódico*, 2017). Later, from the same newspaper, the victory of Pedro Sánchez in the party's primary elections represented the “Spanish populist moment,” equivalent to Brexit or to Trump's victory (*El País*, 2017). In turn, Catalan nationalists, who were traditionally attacked for their nationalism, also began to be accused of populism: for the PP's general secretary, the President of Catalonia was leading the region to “populism and dictatorship” (*El PuntAvui*, 2015), while for another PP leader the main Catalan independence party was “the most populist party in Spain” (*Europa Press*, 2017).

Furthermore, the growing presence of populism in the Spanish public debate was accompanied by an increasing demonization of the term. Populism was very often metaphorically described as a malaise, a virus or a plague:

Populism is rancor and not concord. It acts like a virus; it confuses the immune system of democracy with words that seem democratic. Anti-politics uses politics to destroy democracy. With nationalism and populism, you cannot do politics, but you destroy it. (González Pons (Interior Minister), *Europa Press*, 2017)

Communism is no longer the main enemy of liberal democracy—of freedom—but populism [is]... It is not an ideology but a viral epidemic—in the most toxic sense of the word—that attacks both developed and backward countries alike, adopting for each case different masks. (Vargas Llosa, 2017)

Logically enough, when your political adversary is defined in an extra-political way, no agonistic debate with it is possible (Mouffe, 2005). It does not represent an alternative political project but a virus that must be politically eradicated, so that neither having any dealings with it nor appropriating (some of) its proposals are viable options. In this context, the mere attempt to enter into a dialogue with the populists becomes an act of betrayal to Spain, just as the fierce campaign against PSOE's party general Pedro Sánchez demonstrated.¹⁰ In sum, the reaction of the Spanish political elites when faced with the appearance of Podemos consisted in demonizing and overt confrontation with the new political force. Neither the PP nor the PSOE sought to establish any sort of compromise with Podemos, but instead reacted defensively, as if they were fiercely trying to protect the arena of political representation from intruders. In this context, populism emerged "as a vessel capable of accommodating an excess of heterogeneous meanings, becoming the synecdoche of *an omnipresent evil* and associated with all its manifestations imaginable: irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism" (Stavrakakis, 2014, p. 509).

4 | ANTI-POPULISM AS A POLITICAL LOGIC

This section moves on to develop a more precise formulation of anti-populism as a political logic, or, in other words, to refine the definition of what is specific about anti-populist discourses. In their *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, Glynos and Howarth put forward the concept of logic as capturing "the rules or grammar" governing discursive practices as well as "the conditions which make the practices both possible and vulnerable" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 136). Political logics, more specifically, aim to conceptualize how regimes of social practices are instituted or de-instituted through meaning-making struggles that contest, defend and/or transform the discursive fields that organize social reality. The aim of political logics is to grasp the processes of constitution and dissolution of political identities through the identification of relations of difference and equivalence between social demands. This differs from social logics, which identify the routine forms of action through which already existing social practices are reproduced (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 105).

As a political logic, anti-populism preempts the articulation of demands for political change through the radical disavowal of the legitimacy of the worldviews of counterhegemonic actors. Thus, the key component of anti-populist politics is a discourse of fear that interpellates citizens "as members of a threatened social order"¹¹ (De Cleen, 2017), and through this very defensive reaction, re-makes the social order itself. The result is an elitist governmental rationality that overwhelmingly relies on the erosion of the possibilities for collective agency. This section analyzes these three elements of anti-populism in turn, with reference to our case study.

4.1 | Pre-empting public contestation

In the Spanish context the anti-populist surge had as its primary aim the curtailment of the electoral rise of Podemos, understood as a crucial step towards the marginalization of critical anxieties about EU-led austerity. Nevertheless, these aims were not predominantly pursued by developing a persuasive rhetoric about the benefits of austerity as an economic policy, but rather by relying on a discourse of fear aimed at sparking panic among constituents: "we may not be fantastic politicians, but after us there is only chaos," could summarize Rajoy's governmental discourse. Interestingly enough, the PP's reliance on the fear of the populists as a political resource was noted by the right-wing political analyst Asís Timermans, who in a 2014 book wrote:

To the extent that the Rajoy-led and Arriola-advised PP refused to promote an ideological project, to oppose Spain's crisis with an idea of the Nation, to offer an economic and social model to resolve unemployment and

the difficulties of a significant part of the population ... the PP was only left with a strategy of fear. The fear of Podemos. (Timermans, in Seguin, 2015, p. 30)

In this way, the attempts made to disarticulate a growing counterhegemonic chain of popular demands were rather scarce. Instead, the preponderant focus on populism as a threat to Spain, democracy, and economic stability reinforced the very antagonistic frontier prefigured by Podemos. Furthermore, it also facilitated the non-problematisation of the Spanish model of development presupposed in the discursive construction of this threat, as well as the austerity-based recovery that in fact reproduced such model. In this manner, and in conjunction with other rhetorical strategies such as “there is no alternative” discourse (Séville, 2016), the depoliticizing economization of politics (Borriello, 2017), or an emergency rhetoric that, under the pressures from rising bond yields, made a virtue of haste (White, 2015), the Spanish elites sought to deny the political character of economic decision-making and thus hid decisions of lasting consequence from public debate.

The results of this legitimization strategy in terms of popular support towards the fiscal consolidation program implemented between 2010 and 2013 were rather poor. For instance, according to Eurobarometer data, in 2012 only 18% of Spaniards believed that deficit reduction should be the main policy tool for overcoming the crisis, while 32% thought that spending measures were a better policy for this goal (European Parliament, 2012). Or, according to a 2013 opinion poll, up to 80% of Spaniards believed that there were better economic alternatives to austerity (Gallup, 2013). In addition, one year previously, according to an opinion poll carried out by Metroscopia, 91% of Spanish citizens agreed that “In Spain the crisis is being paid for by everyone but the rich and the banks,” while 60% agreed that the budget cuts had not produce and would not produce the expected results. In fact, the same survey showed that up to 77% of Spanish citizens approved of the motives of the “Surround the Congress” (*Rodea el Congreso*) anti-austerity demonstration, which attempted to block the approval of budget cuts (*El País*, 2012).

These figures illustrate the inability of the Spanish ruling elites to develop persuasive legitimization strategies—understood as “programmes attempting to mobilise a base of popular support by constructing themselves as in the general interest” (Lavrey, 2018, p. 3)—around their state project. Instead, they crafted responses to the crisis without really searching for consensus among the citizens. As León, Pavolini, and Guillén (2015, p. 192) explain, in southern Europe the reforms did not use a “‘divide and rule’ strategy by either compensating some of the potential opponents of the reform or delaying the implementation of cuts, as in many other countries,” but from 2010 onwards “the reforms hit ‘insiders’ in the labour market and in the welfare state.”

In the case of Spain, the political elites, once confronted with the emergence of a generalized social discomfort caused by austerity, did not seek to display an institutionalist strategy intended to expand the relations of difference and to disarticulate growing antagonisms by absorbing some strategic elements of public opinion while neutralizing others. Instead, they articulated an overtly fearmongering and confrontational discourse against the different grievances unleashed by the economic storm.

4.2 | Grounding regressive advances through crisis management

The second element characterizing anti-populism is its ability to reconstruct the social order it claims merely to defend (De Cleen, 2017). We have only to think here about how often anti-populist actors ask reluctant populations to accept unpopular policies because they allegedly constitute the only alternative to populism. In the contemporary conditions of austerity, anti-populism is usually developed to expand neoliberal practices in economics and politics (Karavasilis, 2017).

In our case study the aggressive reforms introduced first by the Socialist Party and then by the PP constituted a *tout court* political offensive against the Fordist social pact upon which the Spanish state had been built since the early 1980s. What was striking about the public sector reforms, budgetary cutbacks and structural reforms was their intensity; this severity raises serious doubts about the feasibility of reversing their effects in the mid-term and prefigures the possibility of an “age of permanent strain” for the Mediterranean model of welfare (Pavolini, León, Guillén, & Ascoli, 2015). One example—of crucial importance—illustrates this development.

TABLE 1 Spanish population income variation, divided in deciles, between 2008 and 2015

Decile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Variation in income	−21.8	−11.2	−6.9	−2.7	−2.2	−1.6	+0.2	+0.2	−0.1	+0.1

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2015).

In Spain—as well as in the rest of the Eurozone—the implementation of austerity was accompanied by a process that reformed the fiscal governance structure. The cornerstones of this process were the 2011 amendment of Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution and the subsequent 2012 Organic Law on Budget Stability and Financial Sustainability. These legislative initiatives effectively placed the servicing of public debt above any other considerations¹² and established stringent limits on structural deficits and public debt levels. Based on them, the Spanish state's debt ratio was not allowed to not exceed 60% of GDP, while structural deficits of public budgets were banned outright for all public administrations.¹³ Structural deficits were therefore made irreconcilable with the principle of budgetary stability, so that the latter was narrowly defined as a position of balance or surplus. In consequence, by excluding structural deficits as a form of financing public spending, the implementation of counter-cycle economic policies was effectively ruled out.

The consequence of these reforms, in parallel to the building of the so-called new European economic governance regime that in fact gave birth to them, was the structuring of an institutional terrain that seriously reduced the autonomy of the Spanish national government and parliament to respond to the political preferences of the population, and thus also reduced the pluralism and responsiveness of the Spanish political system. In this sense, the crisis management undertaken not only implied the temporary implementation of a set of neoliberal recipes and the fueling a socially regressive dynamic of upward redistribution of income, but also the modification of the institutional morphology of the country, entailing a shift to the right in the correlation of forces. In other words, the Spanish neoliberal elites took advantage of the crisis to advance important—material and ideational—positions in their program for restructuring Spanish capitalism and thus in undermining some of the traditional social niches of the Left, such as the public sector, workplaces, and universities.

Overall, the post-adjustment Spanish public administration suffers from severe restrictions in the means by which it can hope to secure social cohesion and hence political stability. Where this is most clearly reflected is in skyrocketing levels of economic inequality. For instance, in 2015 Spain had the widest gap between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% in OECD countries (OECD, 2015). Given that the Spanish fiscal consolidation program largely consisted in reducing expenditure rather than raising taxes (Perez & Matsaganis, 2018), and insofar as the retrenchment of state activities affects the segments of the population whose low incomes make them most reliant on public services, the economic crisis in Spain disproportionately hit the most vulnerable segments of the population. As Table 1 shows, between 2008 and 2015 the group that lost most income corresponded with the poorest 20% of the Spanish population. These in the average income brackets were affected to a lesser extent while the wealthier classes hardly experienced any change during the recession.

Furthermore, these regressive distributional trends were further accentuated by the internal devaluation strategy for recovery pursued by Spanish authorities under the auspices of EU institutions that sought to achieve increases in competitiveness exclusively by reducing labor unit costs (thus provoking a steady reduction in the component of wages in the primary distribution of income and a concomitant increase in capital rents) (Taifa, 2016). The implementation of a selective interventionism, one that bailed out private banks while cutting social expenditure, contributed to popularize the idea further that the crisis management had favored the wealthiest, making it increasingly difficult to sustain a crisis discourse based on the claim that “we are all in this together.” This narrowing of the range of interests represented in the established Spanish state project (Jessop, 1990) is understood here as an expression of the hegemonic weakness of its dominant socio-political block. This is because the degree of pluralism accepted by an established political regime stands in proportion to the hegemonic capacity of the logic of differences sustaining it, that is, in the ability of its hegemonic coalition to integrate a plurality of interests in its worldview. There is thus an argument to be made that the centrality of politics in the anti-populist register in Spain indicates exactly this lack of hegemonic capacity of the Spanish ruling elites.

4.3 | Dominance without hegemony

Using the discursive theory of hegemony expounded above as a starting point, anti-populism seems to constitute a puzzle that is difficult to situate in the continuum between populism and institutionalism. On the one hand, anti-populist discourses are deeply populist in the sense of instituting an antagonistic frontier that divides society into two opposed camps: those who want an open society and those who want it closed, between those economically responsible and those who are profligate, between those who speak truths and those who utter post-truths, between the democrats and the proto-totalitarians, and so on. In this manner, like the populists, the anti-populists tend to deconstruct the old left-right divide, but in order to constitute a united anti-populist front *à la* Macron. This operation implies not only the aggregation in a common poll of all those actors opposed to the populists, but also the expansion of the populist camp to encompass in a common enemy all those positions diverging from the moderate center, thus resonating with the old liberal “theory of symmetrical extremes” (D'Eramo, 2013, p. 21). Paradoxically, this very often leads anti-populism to blossom into an extreme center that primarily builds its political legitimacy on excluding the extremes of the spectrum.

Furthermore, anti-populism, like populism, also flourishes in moments where previously hegemonic structures become dislocated, though it discursively constructs this dislocation as being provoked or at least amplified by the populists, unleashing full-scale demonizing processes that echo those theorized by moral panic research (see Flinders & Wood, 2015). Related to this, anti-populism also resembles populism in its highly moralistic style of politics, so often attributed to populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). Thus, despite usually attacking populism because of its allegedly simplistic, passionate, and outraged rhetoric, which presumably helps the populists to capture the headlines, counter-populists also foster a highly emotional, Manichean, and moral discourse. By placing full emphasis on responsibility and stability, anti-populists tend to exaggerate the threat to the integrity of society that populism represents, eventually producing a kind of moral authoritarianism sustained on the identification of a series of enemies within (Clarke & Newman, 2012, p. 311).

Nevertheless, anti-populism appears as an unpopular populism in the sense that it barely makes references to the people—or equivalent empty signifiers—upon which collective identities can be built. Despite the antagonism upon which it founded, anti-populism is less obviously involved in the constitution of new political identities than populism. This points towards the crucial difference between anti-populism and populism: a difference that does not allow us to speak about a mere governing populism: anti-populist discourses are not developed from the emergence of aggregations of excluded demands, of new chains of equivalences, and empty signifiers, but through the marginalization of popular demands. This is because, in the last instance, anti-populism carries out a task that in principle is reserved for institutionalist discourses; namely the maintenance of an existing institutional regime through the neutralization of counterhegemonic alternatives. Like institutionalist practices, anti-populism seeks to conceal the traces of power inscribed in any institutional order and thus to negate its open character, ultimately closing the field of possible choices regarding its constitution. Anti-populism, like institutionalism, constitutes a depoliticizing discourse to the extent that it attempts to circumvent the realm of choice and deliberation while it expands that of “fate and necessity” (Hay, 2007).

However, anti-populism constitutes a failed institutionalism, since by instituting an internal frontier dividing society it suppresses the fiction of a full and hence apparently neutral consensus and uncovers the “political dimension” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) of the social order. If institutionalist discourses are the discourses that cover up the frictions that (always) jeopardize existing social relations in order to prevent potential “public contestation” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), in presenting the established social order as taken for granted and natural, anti-populist discourses are performed when public contestation has already become widespread throughout the social field, so that the contingency of existing social structures is fully visible. In less ontological terms, the key difference between institutionalism and anti-populism is that, while the first corresponds to the discursive practices displayed by governing elites to integrate the ruled classes in a passive manner and to concede to them a subaltern place within the existing social order (what Gramsci called transformism), the second refers to a discourse enacted to confront the consequences of the inability to carry out such a task of integration.

Because of this, the development of anti-populist discourses seems to point to a turning point in the forms of governance in southern Europe. Insofar as anti-populist discourses renounce the construction of hegemony, that is, rejecting

increasing support for themselves by absorbing some of the popular discontents in order to disarticulate the opposition and weave a certain passive consensus, they cannot be defined either as populist or as institutionalist.¹⁴ Instead, anti-populist discourses promote open confrontation with opposing forces, irrespective of the popularity of the latter. In fact, at times it even seems that they believe in a seemingly elitist way (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013) that they can directly ignore public opinion: it was not necessary to convince Spanish citizenship that austerity was the best strategy for recovering economic growth in order to be able to implement it immediately. Although anti-populism does, of course, have a certain amount of social support, it clearly disregards the task of developing persuasive narratives with universal appeal. In Gramscian terms, anti-populism remains within an economic-corporate rather than a hegemonic outlook.¹⁵

In this manner, anti-populism seems unwilling to cement (or is incapable of cementing) a strong political block with a new common sense, and thus obtaining a cultural, moral, and intellectual leadership. In contrast, it relies on the spread of what Clarke and Newman (2012, p. 309) call “disaffected consent” through limited sectors of the population. In consequence, Laclau’s theory of politics—within which both populist and institutionalist discourses are two different “species of the genus of hegemony” (Arditi, 2010)—cannot but have problems in explaining anti-populist politics. In fact, the modes of governance currently emerging in southern Europe seem better captured by what Guha (1997) called “dominance without hegemony,” or by what Schoor (2017) defines as “elitism,” than by the Laclauian notion of hegemony.¹⁶ In non-sovereign polities “governed from above and from the outside,” in which the task of the representing the universality is no longer the foundational political task, Laclau’s theoretical idiom of consensus might need to be reinforced by other theoretical idioms that are more honed in the analysis of coercive forms of government. This is what the notion of anti-populism is about.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our argument has taken as its starting point the development of an opposition between populist and anti-populist discourses as the emerging dominant cleavage structuring the discursive production of political spaces in the European periphery. In contrast with most of the literature on this issue, this article has directed its analytical focus towards the second element of this pair, that is, anti-populism; bringing to the fore the paradox that studying the political usages of the signifier populism equates to the study of anti-populist rather than populist discourses.

The article has argued that the striking centrality acquired by anti-populist discourses in southern European societies discloses a fundamental shift in the modalities through which the neoliberal ruling elites attempt to maintain political dominance in times of organic crisis. In the post-adjustment context of the EU periphery, anti-populist discourses index a new modality of relationship between the political elites and the citizens, whereby acquiring social consensus for key policy reforms is no longer a necessary precondition for their being implemented.

The emergence of anti-populism seems to encourage “dusting off older elite theories of power” (Engelen, 2017) and inspires us to rethink those conceptualizations of power in the context of the democratic revolution (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), like Laclau’s theory of populism. Probably because of this, anti-populist discourses seem to destabilize the strict Laclauian distinction between populism and institutionalism: some of the logics corresponding to institutionalist discursive regimes, such as for instance the death of the political that they seek to bring into effect, the prevention of the formation of counterhegemonic populist subjects or the promotion of a demophobic ethos, are also some of the defining characteristics of anti-populism. Nevertheless, at the same time, other constants of anti-populist discourses, such as the institution of an antagonistic frontier structuring the political terrain or the fueling of a highly moralistic framing of politics seem to correspond to populist discursive formations. Anti-populism thus emerges as a distinctive discursive repertoire that animates unpopular populist practices articulated in the shadow of failing institutionalist discourses.

The article has substantiated these arguments by analyzing the management of the economic crisis in Spain. After 2009, faced with widespread popular discomfort with the austerity program and a consequent widening breach between citizens and the political class, both Socialist and Conservative governments shifted their political decisions away from the *demos* instead of trying to secure popular support. In this context, anti-populism appeared as a master

political logic, which, in a twofold move, delegitimized those anti-austerity demands as being populist while at the same time consolidating the precrisis neoliberal model of development.

Many unresolved issues stem from this argument, chief among them the recognition that our understanding of the relationship between democratic closure, populism, and anti-populism should be revised. If we assume that the current rise of populism is a consequence of the post-political closure of discussion of the issues that most affect the social conditions of the subaltern sectors, does not the articulation of anti-populist discourses critically reinforce the very forces behind populism? In this way, issues such as the effectiveness of anti-populist discourses in countering populist irruptions (do they lead to the radicalization or to the softening of the populisms involved?) or such as their consequences on the quality of democratic confrontation in democratic capitalist societies are some of the challenging questions that must be investigated in future research.

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NOTES

¹ Some scholars working outside the Essex School of discourse analysis have also used the notion of anti-populism. See, for instance, Krastev (2007), Müller (2014), and Verbeek and Zaslove (2016).

² The relationship between populism, institutionalism and anti-populism is addressed only in a footnote in Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioukiolis, Nikisianis, and Siomos (2017), in which institutionalism and anti-populism are presented as synonymous.

³ This reasoning leads to the often controversial Laclauian idea that no specific ideological content is inherently associated with populism: the ultimate character of a new popular identity is generated retroactively by the postulation of a concrete externality (for instance, the 1%, the centralist state, Brussels' bureaucrats, or the partitocracy), in opposition to which the equivalential logics develop a coherent identity. The identity of the new people thus depends on the specific (conferred) identity of its constitutive outside (Laclau, 1990).

⁴ Stated, for instance, by Rosa Díez, leader of the centrist party UPyD (*La Sexta*, 2014).

⁵ Stated by the conservative mayor of Valencia, Rita Barberá (*La Vanguardia*, 20142014).

⁶ Stated by Soraya Sáez de Santamaría, vice-president of the Spanish government (*RTVE*, 2014).

⁷ Stated by the head advisor of Mariano Rajoy, Pedro Arriola (*El País*, 2014a).

⁸ Stated by of Pedro Sánchez, PSOE's general secretary (*El Mundo*, 2014a).

⁹ Stated by the leader of the PP in Madrid, Esperanza Aguirre (*Público*, 2014).

¹⁰ The campaign ended with the resignation of Sánchez as the party's general secretary.

¹¹ This element of the definition is taken directly from Benjamin De Cleen's definition of conservatism (2017). In fact, the resemblances between anti-populism and conservatism (as theorized by De Cleen) are indicative of the extent to which anti-populism constitutes a logic aimed at the conservation of the existing social order.

¹² Article 14 of the Organic Law 2/2012 establishes that, when preparing the budgets of a public administration, "the payment of the interest and the capital of the public debt of Public Administrations will enjoy absolute priority over any other expenses."

¹³ Only in the case of structural reforms affecting public finances in the long run and in emergency situations, structural deficits up to 0.4% of GDP are allowed for the central government and the autonomous communities, while the budgets of local councils must be balanced or in surplus with no exception. In this sense, Organic Law 2/2012 went beyond the EU's golden rule that permits a maximum annual structural deficit adjusted for the cycle of 0.5% of GDP.

¹⁴ Just as in the relationship between populism and institutionalism, there is no discursive formation which is purely institutionalist or purely populist, so neither in the relationships between populism, institutionalism and anti-populism is there the possibility of a purely anti-populist regime, that is, a discursive formation exclusively based on the criminalization of the opposition. Hence, the anti-populist moment will always refer to a discursive formation in which the counter-populist logic acquires predominance in the organization of political loyalties.

¹⁵ For instance, as aptly described by Seguin (2015, p. 29), again drawing on Timermans, Rajoy's political strategy consists more of "racking up numbers" than building an ideological project," by which he means a strategy of counting votes to surpass the minimum threshold of necessary votes for remaining in power.

¹⁶ Which, in Schoor's threefold classification of political styles, would correspond to both populism and pluralism.

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