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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Populism as a fantasmatic rupture in the post-political order: integrating Laclau with Glynos and Stavrakakis

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### ABSTRACT

The recent challenges of populist movements to the ‘post-democratic horizon’ in Greece and elsewhere have highlighted its possibilities as a political force able to mount a challenge to the technocratic logics of the neoliberal consensus. The theoretical perspective of Ernesto Laclau, which focuses on the rhetorical act of naming ‘the people’ and extrinsic representative form over intrinsic content, thus becomes increasingly valuable to explore such possibilities and to account for the current ubiquity of populist articulations both here in New Zealand and further afield. However, the need to clarify and iron out any inconsistencies in Laclau’s approach also increases, and the main task of this article is to raise the consideration of how it could be supplemented by, and articulated with, the Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts of fantasy and jouissance. Analysis of a selection of John Key’s populist articulations in the New Zealand media, and photographs from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) protests, reveal that both forms of populist articulation, while constructing very different visions of ‘the people’, hinge on the fantasmatic representation of an other; an antagonistic power who steals our enjoyment. However, I conclude that a normative assessment of populist articulations is both possible and necessary.

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## Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the potential of populism as a rupturing and repoliticising element within the specific political and social context of New Zealand. I argue that the work of Ernesto Laclau in conceptualising populism as an articulatory logic, potentially emanating from any place at any time via the unifying rhetorical act of naming ‘the people’, has great potential to disrupt the dominant contemporary logics of technocratic and post-democratic neoliberalism. As has been witnessed in Europe and South America, the populist movement is unique in providing a unificatory point of identity which is capable of both speaking to the frustrated demands of the voiceless, and mobilising the disenfranchised to political action.

However, the increasing significance of Laclau’s work to the contemporary post-democratic milieu means the need to clarify and iron out any inconsistencies in Laclau’s approach also increases. This means addressing the unavoidable conclusion that any

populist unificatory identity necessarily hinges on a point of disidentification with an *other*, that acts as a cohesive point of shared resentment, which Laclau curiously negates. Whether populist articulations communicate ideologies from the left or right of the political spectrum, they rely on representations of a *them* that is designated as not only *not* ‘the people’, but as its film negative; an image of what society should not be, providing the movement with much of its affective impetus.

A secondary task of this article is therefore to raise the consideration of whether Laclau’s theory of populism could be effectively supplemented by the Lacanian psycho-analytic concepts of *fantasy* and *enjoyment*, as developed by Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis. This undertaking is explored through analysis of both a selection of John Key’s articulations in the run-up to the 2014 general election and photographs from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) protests in March 2015. While the former act to strengthen an established hegemonic structure which encourages political cynicism, the latter is a potential point of rupture to that structure. However, both draw on the fantasmatic representation of an *other* as an antagonistic power who is perceived as stealing *our* enjoyment.

This article’s focus on two highly contrasting articulations of the populist logic is also intended to highlight a tendency in the literature to generate pejorative typologies of populism, which consistently associate it with inherent characteristics such as irrationality, emotionality and lowbrow culture. According to Laclau (2005a), such typologies continue a dichotomy that has separated the popular from rational institutional politics since the 19th century, and continues into the 21st with the technocratic dismissal of popular demands as emotional and unrealistic (Stavrakakis 2014).

At the ontic level this derogatory register of the popular as a signifier has historically acted as a barrier to its overt usage as a form of articulation for progressive ideologies. Moreover, at the ontological level, the articulatory logic’s constitution of an *other* that exists in *outsided* antagonistic opposition to ‘the people’ also raises concerns of tendencies towards totalitarian utopianism (Stavrakakis 2003; Žižek 2006, 2008). However, in the conclusions I argue for the possibility of normatively evaluating populist articulations through assessing who is allocated the role of the villain, and therefore whether the articulation potentially disrupts the post-political horizon, or acts to consolidate it.

### **Populism as irrational and dangerous: a continuation of two key themes**

Today it would seem that movements, politicians and celebrities defined as populist are emerging everywhere, from powerful politicians such as Barak Obama to influential YouTube activists such as Russell Brand. Efforts in the academy to delineate its boundaries and define the conditions of its emergence through typologies or cause-effect models would appear to be consistently undone by rapidly shifting mediated articulations that constitute new political trajectories, and even force us to reconsider what we term as political. Despite this, contemporary theorists of populism continue to demarcate rational institutional politics as distinct from the popular, associating the latter with irrationality, emotionality and lowbrow culture, therefore constituting a danger to the deliberative political project of the enlightenment.

As outlined by Laclau (2005a) in the first three chapters of *On Populist Reason*, this perspective can be seen to mirror two key suppositions of 19th century crowd psychology:

that there is a clear divide between deliberative institutional organisation and the pathological frenzy of the crowd, and that the individual is inherently rational against the irrationality of the group (2005a, p. 29). These twin assumptions rest on a conception of the subject as coherent and pragmatic (Konings 2012), almost a century after Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Freud 1922/1975) which moved beyond the simplistic dualism between the 'normal' and the pathological. Freud argued that the normal/rational subject or ego is in fact a balancing act between the unconscious id, dominated by basic impulses and drives, and the equally irrational super-ego, which imposes society's inhibitions and moral sanctions. Most importantly, Freud's focus on the unconscious revealed 'the places where ordinary conscious meaning is distorted or disrupted' (Stavrakakis 2007, p. 11). In other words, there is no purely rational subject; we are all guided by our unconscious drives and desires, which can lead us towards highly irrational identifications.

The connection of populism with irrational identifications, in particular to charismatic leaders who are perceived to take advantage of the frenzy of the crowd, can still be perceived in much of the contemporary literature. Canovan (1999, p. 3) in one way can be viewed as influential in the move away from this position; she insists that populism is not a backwards conservatism that might be outgrown by a progressive liberal politics, but 'a shadow cast by democracy itself'. Adapting Oakeshott's politics of faith and scepticism to her own dichotomy of the pragmatic and the redemptive, Canovan (1999, p. 10) describes populism as one of democracy's two faces, which are 'squabbling Siamese twins'. While Canovan must be credited for allowing populism to begin to be perceived as something inherent to the political, rather than as a temporary, irrational spectre (Mouffe 2005; Konings 2012), there are also inconsistencies in her approach. In creating a typology of populism, Canovan (1999) assigns intrinsic characteristics such as 'resistance to internationalism, multiculturalism and progress' (1999, p. 3), and 'a focus on a charismatic leader' (1999, p. 6), which contradicts her explicit aim of moving populism away from associations with backwards conservatism. Moreover, her metaphor of *the shadow*, while useful in emphasising populism's close ties to institutional politics, at the same time locates it outside of that realm. Even if they are linked together as Siamese twins, populism's connection to democracy is posited as a dark, mysterious and dangerous one, which re-articulates common themes in 'rational-progressive' liberal democratic representations (Mouffe 2005; Konings 2012).

Expanding Canovan's argument, Arditi (2005, p. 77) outlines three 'possibilities of populism': as a mode of representation; as the border or symptom of democracy; and as its dark underside or shadow. Through his re-articulation of Canovan's shadow metaphor, Arditi again accentuates its potential danger to democracy through the rise of demagogues and tyrants. Populism is cast as a symptom of a new stage of political representation, one where traditional mass-party politics is in decline, to be replaced by mass-mediated, personalised politics which aims to manipulate and divide 'the electorate in order to differentiate the candidate from its adversaries' (Arditi 2005, p. 84). While useful in conceptualising the increasingly populist alignment of institutional politics in the West, Arditi's three possibilities provide us with little to theorise the multiplicities of populist articulations outside that sphere. And, like Canovan, Arditi registers the signifier of populism as a danger to, or at least a distraction from, progressive liberal politics.

In a similar vein Comaroff (2011) links the contemporary ubiquity of populism to the symptoms of late liberalism; the growth of identity movements, and increasing disaffection with traditional politics, or as Pratt & Clark (2005, p. 303) put it, a ‘growing disenchantment with the existing democratic process’. Although again she admits that populism of some shape is necessary for politics, Comaroff characterises it as linked to emotive, irrational, low-brow culture, which in turn is connected to the increasing mediatisation of political debate.

Konings (2012) links this logic, which outsiders the popular from politics, with the Enlightenment conception of the coherent, pragmatic and rational political subject, who perceives emotion as outside of, and thus a danger to, the democratic imaginary. Democracy is thus conceived as a grand project with a clear linear timeline; increasing in rationality from the 18th century to the present. While not explicitly aligned with the psychoanalytic tradition, Konings’ perspective resonates with the insights of Freud in highlighting that the conception of the rational and pragmatic subject fails to see that immanent and locally produced affect and emotion are integral to politics, rather than outside of it (Mouffe 2005). As Crociani-Windland & Hoggett (2012) draw attention to, strong affective feelings such as resentment, anger and injustice are central in providing energy and intensity behind any political discourse, populist or otherwise.

The rigid division between politics and the affective has led to attempts in political science to model a ‘populist attitude’, in order to section off and account for how the emotional rises to the surface in voter behaviour, when the coherent pragmatic subject should be acting in their own rational interests (Denemark & Bowler 2002; Rooduijn 2014). Denemark & Bowler (2002), in comparing the rise of One Nation Party in Australia and New Zealand First, categorise those parties as associated with ‘extremist’ issues such as immigration and aid for indigenous minorities. Thus, a voter attitude that supports these parties is related to a new form of politics; one that is distinct from the rational materialism of the ‘major’ parties of left and right, and which is guided by the negative emotions of fear and aggression. Such emotions allow political opportunists or ‘entrepreneurs’ to emerge, such as Winston Peters (Gustafson 2006), or Silvio Berlusconi (Fieschi & Heywood 2004), that tap into media-generated issues such as immigration and minorities.

Such approaches to populism therefore, in consistently attempting to apply typologies and inherent characteristics such as conservativeness, anti-progress, emotionality, and a dangerous disinclination towards following the established rules of democracy, are not only constantly ‘overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions’ (Laclau 2012, p. 44), but clearly parallel the two suppositions of 19th century crowd psychology outlined earlier. These were, firstly, that a distinction can be drawn between rational/non-emotive and irrational/emotive politics and, secondly, that once in a crowd situation, or its modern equivalent the mass-media, our inherent rationality is at risk from the rhetorical prowess of the charismatic leader.

### **Laclau’s theory of populism and the challenge to neoliberal post-politics**

Laclau (2005a, 2005b, 2012) theorises populism as an articulatory practice, or ‘a way of constructing the political’ (2005a, p. xi), not tied to or defining any particular group (such as minor political parties), persons (such as charismatic leaders) or institutions, but only ‘a way of articulating their themes’ (2005b, p. 44). Populism for Laclau is therefore

an ontological category; a mode of articulation that has no intrinsic characteristics that can be listed in ontic symptomatic typologies—it is simply the form of message for ‘whatever social, political or ideological contents’ that are articulated through its logic (Laclau 2005b, p. 34). By this rationale, content and representation are one, as Laclau believes that ‘relations of representation are ontologically constitutive’ (Laclau 2012, p. 396). In other words, if a movement articulates itself as populist it constitutes itself as a populist movement, but only then, not because of any intrinsic tendencies of the movement.

In displacing the identification of populism from ‘contents to form’ (2005b, p. 44), Laclau neatly accounts for the contemporary ubiquity of populist articulations; from global movements such as Occupy, to internet celebrities, to US presidents, which persistently force the typologies described in the previous section to be redefined. Populism under Laclau’s conceptualisation is therefore emancipated to potentially emanate from any place at any time. This centrality of extrinsic representative form over intrinsic content stems from Laclau’s relational conception of society (Howarth 2000) and his fundamental concept of radical contingency; whereby any entity, such as a political movement, derives its identity and form from ‘conditions of existence’ which are ‘... exterior to it’ (Laclau 1990, p. 19).

Identity formation is therefore a highly open and political process, with Laclau rejecting the Marxist theory that individual and collective identities are determined by their material base (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Identities instead are constituted through acts of power, with Laclau defining *the political* as a separate ontological category from *the social*, with the former acting to institute the latter (Laclau 1990). The *moment of the political* is defined as the point at which the political acts to either conceal or re-activate the radically contingent nature of the social (Marchart 2007).

This moment is the point where the twin logics of difference and equivalence are constantly pulling at each other in an ‘unsolvable tension’ (Laclau 2014, p. 53); as there can never be one without the other. It is that point of tension that the political either acts to institute (difference/concealment) or rupture (equivalence/re-activation) the contingent social (Laclau 2005a; Marchart 2007).

Broadly speaking, the logic of difference works to institutionalise, or sediment, social relations, therefore strengthening an established hegemonic normative structure by stressing the fixity of individual elements within it, which are ‘considered equally valid within a wider totality’ (Laclau 2005a, p. 82). In effect, the appearance of social objectivity is achieved through the ideological forgetting of previous political antagonisms and possible alternatives, which works to sediment the dominant hegemony ‘by repressing that which threatens it’ (Laclau 1990, p. 31). Phelan (2014) cites a useful example of a period when difference was dominant—the third-way neoliberalism of the 1990s. During this period the ideological antagonisms of the 1970s and 1980s were downplayed and difference was emphasised through the articulation of discourses such as multiculturalism. While multiculturalism undoubtedly had its merits, the possibility of political change that may challenge the dominant hegemony became increasingly distant, as the practices of neoliberalism became normative and institutionalised (Hay 2004).

Equivalence, by contrast, emphasises the possibility of political agency and change by referring to a common antagonistic element; a point of disidentification with an ‘other’ that acts as a cohesive point of shared resentment (Phelan 2014), or ‘constitutive outside’ (Torfing 1999). While discourses of difference, such as multiculturalism, conceive

of society as a harmonious closed system, discourses of equivalence, for instance those commonly articulated during neoliberalism's initial period of expansion in the 1970s–1980s, identify a point outside of that system, such as socialism or Keynesianism, in order to make equivalent previously dispersed political demands, which find a point of unity through their common animosity towards the point of antagonism (Carusi 2011; Phelan 2014).

The logic of equivalence has many points of similarity to Laclau's populist logic, and they regularly become difficult to separate in his later work (Arditi 2010). Equivalence's emphasis on a dichotomised 'them v us' antagonistic frontier is Laclau's first 'precondition of populism'; which allows the equivalential linking of a chain of unsatisfied social demands that were previously heterogeneous (Laclau 2005a, p. 74). Although individual requests, claims or even demands can be dealt with on a one-by-one basis institutionally, and therefore differentiated, if left unsatisfied they can become associated with a corrupt and unresponsive power. This is what Laclau terms a populist equivalential chain—where the differences and antagonisms between diverse movements or demands may be temporarily forgotten, uniting against a common enemy: the status quo or the powerful elite. Such grouped demands can become popular demands and work to constitute a popular subjectivity through their unification (Laclau 2005a, pp. 74–75). This is a process that works simultaneously with the struggle to colonise key signifiers such as justice, sovereignty, the nation, etc. (Laclau 2005a, pp. 129–138).

Firstly, however, a *tendentially empty signifier* must emerge, which in Laclauian terminology is a particularity which signifies the universal (Laclau 2000). Laclau illustrates this with the example of where trade unions may become involved in a social justice issue outside of the immediate interests of their constituency, and so 'they cease to be the pure expression of sectorial interests at a given moment' and begin to signify the wider collective struggle (Laclau 2005a, pp. 109–110). However, because in Laclau's ontology actual universality is impossible, the empty signifier as a rallying point must be maintained through constant affective investment (Laclau 2005a, pp. 110–111), a process that I will outline in more detail in the next section.

This act of a particularity coming to signify the universal is also Laclau's hegemonic logic, as 'there is no universality which is not a hegemonic universality' (Laclau 2000, p. 193). In other words, the metonymic act that substitutes a particularity for universality is also how a group becomes representative of broader society, and therefore achieves hegemonic status. Populism follows the same logic, and similarly to the logic of equivalence the conceptual boundaries between them become blurred; however, the former can be best conceived as a 'species' of hegemony that constitutes 'the people' as the empty signifier (Arditi 2010). A second important difference between populism and hegemony is that while hegemony can be articulated through both the logics of equivalence and difference, populism is congruent with the logic of equivalence only. This means that in Laclau's theory populism could be perhaps better conceived as the *counter-hegemonic* species of the genus hegemony, 'the species that calls into question the existing order with the purpose of constructing another' (Arditi 2010, p. 492).

Arditi therefore moves us towards the twin parallel functions of populism in Laclau's theory: the rhetorical act of naming 'the people' has effects on both the ontological and ontic levels. Since removing the King as sovereign, liberal democratic societies have subsequently filled the bodily void at the place of power with 'the name of the people'



(Marchart 2005, p. 14). The name of ‘the people’ thus acts as the very ontological ‘subject of the political’ (Marchart 2005, p. 7), separate from its function as an ontic signifier in discourse. A counter-hegemonic movement that assumes the name of ‘the people’ takes on a distinctive ontological weight that cannot be permanently ignored by elites, should it extend its equivalential chain far enough to constitute a popular subjectivity.

But because ‘the people’ is also a signifier in discourse on the ontic level—a *floating signifier* (Laclau 2005a, p. 132)—it can become pejoratively linked to derogatory signifiers: extremism, irrationality, conservatism etc., which affects the balance between the populist (equivalence) and the institutionalist (difference) structuration of society (Stavrakakis 2014). A technocratic hegemonic formation within the contemporary post-political horizon is able to tip the balance in the favour of institutionalism the more populism becomes colonised by pejorative signifiers, allowing the denunciation as populist any popular protest against neoliberal austerity. It therefore becomes an important component in the struggle against neoliberal post-politics for this process to be resisted.

In de-coupling populism from any intrinsic contents to a representative form only, together with its conception as the historically irresistible force of political rupture of the hegemonically sedimented social, Laclau makes the task of imagining a progressive populism that articulates ideologies of the left more pressing (Stavrakakis 2014). The events of the ‘Arab Spring’ (Gaonkar 2012), Occupy (Decreus et al. 2014), and the rise to power of SYRIZA in Greece (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014) would appear to indicate that Laclau’s conception of populism as a logic capable of breaking open points of fracture in late capitalism, thereby creating new possibilities for emancipatory politics, is proving pertinent.

However, that is not to say there are no blind-spots in Laclau’s approach—while he engages with affect as the force behind the form of the empty signifier, he curiously fails to provide sufficient detail in the affective construction of the ‘them’ (Žižek 2008), the outsided point which is so crucial for the logic of equivalence to attain dominance (Phelan 2014). This gap will be explored in the following section, as I highlight the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of fantasy as a possible supplement to Laclau’s populist logic.

## Populism and fantasy

In contrast to common sense conceptions of fantasy as an illusory escape-mechanism opposed to reality, the approach in this section follows Glynos and Stavrakakis in treating fantasy, or ‘the fantasmatic’ (Glynos 2001; Glynos & Howarth 2007; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008; Glynos et al. 2012), as a constitutive aspect of social reality. The fantasmatic is understood as a screen or framing device that domesticates the fundamentally antagonistic and contestable nature of the social order, by offering a coherent narrative of social objectivity (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Žižek 2003). Fantasy is therefore crucial for social agency and political action to occur, but importantly it can also encourage passivity and political cynicism (Glynos 2014; Glynos et al. 2012).

The incorporation of fantasy allows for the integration of affect and the body into Laclau’s work, a lack of which he has been critiqued for (Gilbert 2004; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis 2007). Laclau has responded to these critiques with an argument that affect has always been central to his theories of hegemony and populism (Laclau 2004, 2005a), because affective investment in the empty signifier is crucial to provide the *force* that binds together the chain of equivalential demands and popular subjectivities around



their common focal point. The link between particular demand and universalising empty signifier is the affective one, following an identical logic to that of the *objet petit a* (Laclau 2005a, p. 116).

The logic of the *objet petit a* is from Lacan's (2006) psychoanalytic theory, which posits that once we enter the realm of symbolic discourse as infants, we lose our blissful sense of *wholeness* in our attachments to our mother. At this point of separation our subjectivities are formed with a fundamental 'void of Being' (Laclau 2005a, p. 113), a constitutive lack that we attempt to fill through affective investment in partial objects (the *objet petit a*). Such objects, however, can only provide fleeting tastes of the bodily enjoyment, or *jouissance*, experienced during the pre-symbolic (Lacan 1992), because the absolute wholeness which we crave is always unattainable, as once the subject is split through its encounter with the symbolic there is no turning back (Žižek 2003). In Laclau's application of Lacanian concepts the constitutive lack of something unattainable that the subject experiences leads us to constantly strive for an impossible 'absent fullness' within discourses or empty signifiers (Laclau, 2004, p. 280), which represent themselves to the subject as the *objet petit a*, the mythical 'embodiment of fullness' (Laclau 1990, p. 66).

However *jouissance* is defined by Lacanian theorists as both a partial enjoyment experienced 'as always-already lost' (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008, p. 261), and as an affective energy that has substance outside of signification and which emanates from the body (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004; Stavrakakis 2007). The wider importance to the overall argument is that while Laclau fully incorporates the negativity of the Lacanian subject-as-lack thesis, being the centrifugal force which drives subjects to invest in empty signifiers, he fails to include the positive dimension—fantasy as a mechanism which fills the absent fullness with a narrative frame (Stavrakakis 2007).

Through the perspective of Glynos and Stavrakakis, the constitutive lack in Laclau's theory of populism which drives the subject towards empty signifiers such as 'the people', can therefore be more easily understood 'as a lack of *jouissance*' (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008, p. 261), which can only be substituted for through the promise of fantasy which temporarily fills out the 'void of Being' through a narrative which domesticates the lack (Stavrakakis 2007). Fantasy narratives, and the *jouissance* experienced through them, can therefore account for whether a discourse is capable of performing the role of filling the absent fullness, which makes it curious as to why Laclau failed to incorporate the terms into his theories of hegemony and populism, as he had other Lacanian terms (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004). One possible explanation is that Laclau did not conceive of affect as pre-symbolic and bodily, and would accuse those that did of essentialism (Stavrakakis 2007). For Laclau, affect exists only when it comes to be represented within the symbolic, as 'the differential (uneven) investment of a signifying chain' (Laclau 2012, p. 402). However, this reduction of affect to its representation within signifiatory practices, removing the role of the body, also removes its potential as an explanatory concept for the persistent fixity of certain representations of groups or individuals (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2004)—hate-figures which become accepted as archetypal, unable to be unfixed by discourse, and often providing a shared intense enjoyment that is 'disturbingly excessive' (Glynos 2014, p. 181).

*Fantasmatic representations* (Phelan 2008) act as an imaginary locus of affective energy, or 'existential electricity' (Daly 1999) for the subject and society to positivise and project internal antagonisms created by our constitutive lack onto. Similarly, to the tendentially

empty signifier, they can universalise dispersed images and come to represent something broader; however, they do not derive from a discursive demand that is external to the subject, but from an internal desire to positivise constitutive lack, in order for us to identify with and make sense of a world that is radically contingent (Daly 1999; Stavrakakis 2007). The fantasmatic therefore functions as a narrative to domesticate lack by simultaneously offering two key roles—the *beatific* that promises fullness-to-come and the *horrific* that represents an obstacle to fullness that is potentially disastrous if not overcome (Glynos & Howarth 2007, p. 147). There are therefore clear parallels with Laclau's populist subjectivity, which promises to unite the people in a utopian narrative of self-fulfilment (beatific role), only to be blocked in that quest by the unresponsive status quo (horrific role).

The horrific role is commonly represented within narratives of moral corruption as the *other* who are accused of stealing *our* enjoyment (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008). Chang & Glynos (2011) cite the example of the 2009 MPs expenses scandal in the British tabloid press. Egregious details of MPs' expense claims were outlined in order to paint a picture of endemic moral decline which disturbed *our* ability to enjoy the nation. The closing down of the debates to the individual transgressions assigned to the horrific role narrowed the range of potential political solutions to that of smaller government, greater regulation, etc., and contributed to a broader culture of anti-politics that promotes a cynical passivity rather than politicised social agency. The scandal therefore reflected the role that the horrific fantasmatic representation can play—as a condenser of social antagonisms (Žižek 2003) affective energy can be drawn away from any potential counter-hegemonic empty signifier, thus potentially reducing the force of a populist movement which articulates a progressive ideology.

Via their offering of a shared affective enjoyment, fantasmatic representations can offer further avenues towards hegemonic strengthening through the process of 'self-transgression' (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008). The figure of the *academic/intellectual* is commonly outsided within media representations as a threat to the fullness of the national identity (Glynos & Howarth 2007; Phelan 2008; Glasson 2012). The figure represents a horrific cosy ivory tower status quo, set in opposition to the beatific common people who are signified as 'common-sense', 'objective', 'rational' and 'living in the real-world' (Phelan 2008). These examples of fantasmatic representations are self-transgressive because the subject's often intense enjoyment of them can function simultaneously with a public-facing rational conscious affirmation of the importance of academia. Self-transgressions can therefore work against the subject's rational self-interest, often working to maintain, rather than challenge, a hegemonic order (Glynos et al. 2012; Glynos 2014).

The integration of fantasy into the populist logic therefore addresses a gap in Laclau's theory—the lack of integration of the positivising role of the fantasmatic narrative, which acts to fill out the void in our subjectivities by providing temporary *jouissance*. In the next section, I aim to illustrate this further with analyses of John Key's articulations in the run-up to the 2014 general election in New Zealand, and photographs from March 2015 Trans-Pacific Partnership protests.

### John Key's everyman populism

In the approach to the 2014 general election in New Zealand John Key articulated an *everyman* populism that was successful in rhetorically constructing 'the people' against

a fantasmatic representation which combined elements from previously dispersed points of antagonism; including left-wing intellectuals, overweight people and foreigners. The lead-up to the election included two potentially damaging revelations; the release of Nicky Hager's *Dirty Politics* (Hager 2014), which contained details of the National Party's links to controversial right-wing bloggers, and Kim Dotcom's *Moment of Truth*, where the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) was accused of conducting mass surveillance on the New Zealand population. However, the National Party then won the election by a far more comfortable margin than 2011, and this victory hinged on the ability of Key to rearticulate the revelations within a populist logic.

In an interview given on the day after the release of *Dirty Politics*, Key repeatedly refers to Hager as 'the Left'—a historically condensed point of social antagonisms (Žižek 2003), rather than as journalist or author, neatly positioning himself and the New Zealand people as the authentic *us*, in opposition to a morally corrupt *them*:

'If there's dirty politics, it's actually coming from the Left,' Mr Key said in Dunedin this afternoon.

If you look at the Left, they don't want to talk about the issues that matter to New Zealanders. (Wong 2014)

Similarly, immediately before the *Moment of Truth* event, Dotcom is represented by Key as being a left-wing conspiracist, associating him with Hager's earlier representation with the repetition of 'another guy':

Mr Key told TV3's Firstline today he had not lost 'a moment's sleep' over the upcoming announcement.

He's just another guy that wants to throw a bit of mud, he's just another guy who wants to create a conspiracy theory. (Davison & Cheng 2014)

A later articulation then emphasises Dotcom's physical size (a point already drawn on repeatedly by New Zealand's media when Dotcom was arrested in 2012):

'Dotcom is trying to save Dotcom's butt, and it's a reasonably large one so he's bought in all of these people, three little butts to save his butt, and it won't work but they'll say and do anything and bamoozle people,' he told Newstalk ZB. (One News 2014)

Then, finally, and most importantly, Key emphasises Dotcom's status as a powerful and corrupt foreigner, attempting to bring in others in an attempt to steal *our* enjoyment of New Zealand as a corruption-free democracy:

'Dotcom's little henchman is wrong,' says Mr Key.

'Kim Dotcom is a man who is trying to gerrymander the election,' says Mr Key. 'He's paying a guy who's coming to New Zealand to make claims'. (Gower 2014)

The above examples articulate three images of Dotcom, which taken as a whole function to condense three key points of antagonism—left-wing intellectual/conspiracist, overweight man and foreign interventionist. The three images provide a shared *jouissance* to the reader in their provision of latent self-transgressions from established social norms (Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008; Glynos et al. 2012; Glynos 2014). While few people would publicly admit to being anti-intellectual, fattist or xenophobic, Key's articulations provide an opportunity to represent Dotcom as 'a signifier of everything that should be excluded from the desired social imaginary' (Phelan 2014, p. 40). In other words, Hager

and Dotcom's representations provide the subject with an enjoyable fantasmatic narrative to account for, and lay blame for, our (always already) lost *jouissance* (Žižek 2003; Laclau 2005b; Stavrakakis 2007). In fantasmatic narratives such as the myth of the nation, our lost *jouissance* must be attributed to a horrific outsider who is represented as having stolen it, and who can be revealed as typifying moral decline (Glynos 2001; Stavrakakis 2007; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008; Chang & Glynos 2011).

Importantly, the above articulations also allow Key to reposition himself as on the *us* side of the populist antagonistic frontier by providing an opportunity to define who we as the nation are fighting against; a position which may have been in danger from revelations that associated him with political corruption. Key's brand has consistently been centred on 'that sense he is quite ordinary, one of us' (Devadas & Nicholls 2012, p. 22), enabling him to present an *everyman* populism that is perhaps more subtle and nuanced than other New Zealand politicians more widely represented as populist, such as Winston Peters (Gustafson 2006). Also significant to our argument is that Key utilises the populist or equivalential logic to strengthen, rather than disrupt, the dominant hegemony.

### Trans-Pacific Partnership protest photos

The Trans-Pacific Partnership, commonly known as the TPP, is potentially the world's largest ever trade agreement, involving 11 Asian and Pacific-rim countries, including

**Table 1.** Emergent themes from photographs of protests signs at the TPP agreement nationwide day of action 7 March 2015. The parent-codes are in bold. The references column indicates the total number of occurrences of an emergent theme, whereas the sources column the number of different photographs it was found within.

	Sources	References
<b>Class</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Environment</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
Food	3	3
Fracking	4	5
Pollution	1	1
<b>Foreign/elite interests</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>
1%	2	2
Corporations	12	12
US	4	5
<b>Concern for future</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Health or medicine</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Money or greed</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>New Zealand or Aotearoa</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>
Fighting or defending	5	5
Kiwi	4	4
Land	1	1
Selling out	7	7
Sovereignty	3	4
<b>New Zealand political actors</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>
Government	2	2
John Key	7	7
National Party	1	1
<b>Rights, democracy and accountability</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>
People power	6	6
Threat to democracy or rights	7	7
Transparency	11	12

New Zealand. Negotiated in top secret, due to be ratified by cabinet only, with parliament having a mere ‘rubber-stamping function’ (Kelsey 2013), and with several pertinent chapters having been published by Wikileaks (2015), a national movement that questions the benefits to New Zealand of entering the agreement has gathered momentum over the past three years, with a series of protests and related actions, lately forcing the debate into the mainstream media.

Table 1 displays results from an NVivo coding analysis of personalised (personally manufactured or printed) protest signs from 41 photos taken at the TPP agreement nationwide day of action on 7 March 2015 at five locations around New Zealand (Wellington, Auckland, Hamilton, Queenstown and Christchurch). Each sign that was legible and not institutionally affiliated was thematically coded with up to three different codes from the table that emerged during the analysis. Nine top-level or parent-codes emerged from the analysis, with a further 17 linked lower-level or child-codes.



**Figure 1.** Taking Peoples’ Power Away—No Way! Reproduced with permission from Lance McCaughan.



Table 1 would appear to provide preliminary evidence for the equivalential articulation of previously heterogeneous demands around the tendentially empty signifier of ‘the people’. Demands that would have commonly been articulated separately, such as the environment, health, government transparency and the selling of land to foreign investors, would appear to be united under the empty signifier ‘the people’, or its referents ‘people power’ (appearing on six occasions), the nation (appearing on 28 occasions), or sovereignty (appearing on four occasions); indicating at least the potential emergence of popular demands and a popular subjectivity (Laclau 2005a, 2005b).

To note is the equivalential chaining of diverse demands despite the absence of a clear charismatic leader who is somehow manipulating the ‘irrational’ crowd. However, ‘people power’ or the nation signifiers, which derive from democratic conceptions of popular sovereignty as the place of power, can be perceived as under threat, in danger of being ‘taken away’ by the indeterminate unresponsive power (Figure 1)—foreign/elite interests (appearing on 19 occasions) and the corrupt New Zealand government (appearing on 10 occasions).

Government and other elites therefore take up the horrific role that represents an obstacle to the potential fullness (beatific role) of the popular subjectivity, which is potentially disastrous if not overcome. The person dressed as Death in Figure 2



**Figure 2.** Death of democracy. Reproduced with permission from Sherie Stott.





**Figure 3.** 1 Million clauses for corporations. Reproduced with permission from Donna Leckie.

reminds us of the looming disaster on the horizon if the corporations, supported by a complicit New Zealand government, are permitted to steal ‘our’ popular sovereignty, which must result in the death of democracy. The potential of the of the TPP protests to become an ethical or subversive break from, and offer a challenge to, neoliberal post-politics, thus becomes at least partly a question of whether the movement can offer enjoyable figures that can be perceived as threats to the nation, and which harness sufficient affective intensity (Crociani-Windland & Hoggett 2012)—an example of which can be seen in the digitally altered representation of John Key in Figure 3 (taken at the 15 August rallies).

## Conclusions

I have argued that Laclau’s conceptualisation of populism as an articulatory logic is an important point of challenge to the contemporary ‘post-democratic horizon’ (Stavrakakis 2014, p. 506). In constituting a popular subjectivity through the convergence of popular demands, previously disenfranchised and fractured populations begin to attain a sense of themselves as ‘the people’; a historically determined political actor with considerable ontological agency within liberal democracies (Marchart 2005), and the movement becomes a potential point of re-politicising rupture or rearticulation (Laclau 1990; Marchart 2007).

However, as was demonstrated by the example of John Key’s articulations, the populist logic can also work to strengthen the post-political order by drawing on latent fantasmatic representations that provide self-transgressive enjoyment. Therefore a robust theory of

populism should not only include an account of the affective investment in the tendentially empty signifier of ‘the people’, but also its disidentificatory constitutive outside (Torfing 1999; Phelan 2014)—those positioned as on the *them* side of the antagonistic frontier.

The fantasmatic narrative therefore provides a potential avenue to a richer account of the dynamics behind the populist logic, but one which also raises potential issues of the inherent dangers of populism as critiqued earlier, as well as ethical concerns. In other words, does the populist logic’s reliance on the fantasmatic representation of an antagonistic other, as I have hopefully demonstrated, preclude it from the possibility of articulating a more inclusive and ethical alternative to neoliberalism, or even weigh it with a tendency towards totalitarianism (Žižek 2006)? It is at this point that we must put the TPP movement into the global context of an increasingly technocratic form of government which posits neoliberal austerity economics as the only viable path in times of economic hardship (Fairclough & Fairclough 2011; Stavrakakis 2014). Populism’s ethical potential then, lies in its capacity to repoliticise the social order by mobilising the disempowered and channeling their affective energy towards powerful elites (Decreus et al. 2014), rather than perpetuate cynicism by channelling that energy towards relatively powerless points of antagonism such as Kim Dotcom. As an articulatory logic, populism contains the capacity to shift the discursive horizon to the left, as has been witnessed in South America (Collins 2014) and Europe (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014).

And as a rupturing force, it also has the capacity for unpredictable consequences, which lie on the heterogeneous borders of the homogenised demands (Laclau 2005a, pp. 141–152)—the TPP protests are now showing signs of forging new subjective positions, such as an increased awareness of global geopolitics, outside of the immediate aims of stopping the proposed trade deal. The possibility of Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) vision for radical democracy thus emerges through the increased politicisation of the social field and social identities, and a new political horizon made imaginable.

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