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Racism and Brexit: Notes towards an antiracist populism

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ABSTRACT:

This article takes Brexit and Nigel Farage's right-wing populism as a starting point to consider the populist politics of racism and antiracism. I demonstrate how two key figures of right-wing populist discourse – the “white working class” and the “liberal elite” – have come to describe a political grammar with a widespread influence and explanatory resonance across the political spectrum, and which have as a result formed a racial common sense in Brexit Britain. Rather than accept the terms of a debate that has been set by the populist right, I draw on Ernesto Laclau to describe a rival politics of antiracist populism. Although it is far from straightforward to navigate, engagement on the terrain of the popular is not optional if we are to counter a fatalistic tendency to conceive of antiracism as a minority or elite concern.

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Populist times

Populism is an important political force in the world today. Political elites in liberal-democratic nation-states are being challenged by a diversity of political actors who attest to represent the will of the people. Donald Trump's claim to champion the interests of “ordinary American people” saw him wrongfooting the mighty party machines of both Democrats and Republicans all the way to the White House. In Europe, populist parties of the left have made significant gains in the aftermath of the European Debt Crisis, Alexis Tsipras's *Syriza* promising to “destroy the oligarchy” and Pablo Iglesias's *Podemos* to depose “La Casta”, Spain's political elites (Mason 2015; Tremlett 2015). Right-wing populists, notably Geert Wilders's *Partij voor de Vrijheid* and Marie Le Pen's *Rassemblement national* (the rebooted *Front National*), have moved further into the political mainstream. Britain's vote in June 2016 to leave the European Union is clearly part of this anti-establishment tendency, and Nigel Farage's UKIP played a significant role in cultivating opposition to Britain and Europe's “privileged elite” (Barnes 2016).

This article takes Brexit and Farage's right-wing populism as a starting point to consider the populist politics of racism and antiracism. It takes seriously the idea that the populist moment we are currently experiencing in Britain is not a

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temporary aberration, and that it is therefore necessary to consider the implications of populism for antiracist practice. Not only do antiracists need to oppose a political climate that feeds racism and xenophobia, they also need to get to grips with how populism has shaped the terms of antiracist struggle. My first objective is to demonstrate how two key figures of right-wing populist discourse – the “white working class” and the “liberal elite” – have come to describe a political grammar with a widespread influence and explanatory resonance across the spectrum of British politics. Exploring the “family resemblances” that connect right-wing populists, the Tories, and sections of the left, I suggest that the opposition between these two figures constitutes a racial common sense in Brexit Britain. To make a break with the political grammar of right-wing populism, I then contend that it is conceptually useful to differentiate between populism’s form and its content. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism as a “political logic”, I argue that there are theoretically opportunities for the development of an antiracist populism that harnesses popular democratic desire to alternative political ends. Antiracists cannot ignore the rise of populism, and neither can they oppose it without reinforcing the idea that antiracism is itself the project of political elites. While the spectre of racialized nationalism continues to haunt populisms of the left as well as the right, I suggest that antiracist populism is a necessary heuristic to help us understand and act upon a changed terrain of political practice.

The populist racism of the Brexit vote

The first point to acknowledge is the centrality of racism to the Brexit vote. Certainly, there were other factors involved, but Britain’s vote to leave Europe was in significant part due to the successful mobilization of anti-immigrant racism by the anti-establishment right. Just as Nigel Farage’s infamous “Breaking Point” poster ostensibly named Europe but depicted Syrian refugees in Slovenia, UKIP’s injunction to “break free of the EU and take back control of our borders” had a significant and undeniable racial subtext. Never mind the fact that the EU referendum did not remotely address the question of non-European migration, the anti-immigrant vote was, as has long been the case in Britain and across Europe (see Ford 2011), fostered less by antipathy to migrants per se than towards non-white immigrant groups in particular (see Hix et al. 2017). The visual rhetoric of much of the Brexit campaigning had been preceded by the widespread dissemination of images from the Calais “jungle”, having come to prominence in the summer of 2015 as a metonym for the European “refugee crisis” (see James, this issue), accompanied by tabloid headlines such as the Daily Express’s “Send in army to halt migrant invasion” (Reynolds 2015). The evocation of abject black and brown bodies jeopardising the integrity of Britain’s geographical borders was already a mainstay of tabloid media and right-wing political discourse. A conception of migrants as economic and security threats (Virdee and McGeever 2017) had been bolstered by recent government initiatives predicated on “a ratcheting up of anti-migrant feeling” including the “domestication” of border checks in workplaces, hospitals and banks (Jones *et al.* 2017). Although more “respectable” politicians found it expedient to distance themselves from the UKIP leader – reacting to the “Breaking Point” poster, Tory Brexiteer Boris Johnson responded “That’s not my politics and that’s not my campaign” (Zeffman 2016) – Farage’s influence came to dominate the EU referendum

debate. While there was nothing particularly novel about UKIP's anti-immigrant racism per se, what made Farage's appeal distinctive was the way he set himself up against a political establishment. By drawing together an already well-established racist border politics with a forceful critique of political elites (directed both towards Brussels and an acquiescent Westminster), Farage was able to steer Brexit's political coordinates.

Before demonstrating something of the wider political resonances of this splicing together of racism and anti-elitism, I want to first set out in a little more detail the character of Farage's confrontation between people and elite. While not always named directly, two rather more specific figures, set up in opposition to one another and both inflected by race, served to give shape and tone to his populist rhetoric: the "white working class" and the "liberal elite" (see, for example Farage 2018). The white working class are conceived as resistant to (non-white) immigration, while the liberal elite are deaf to their demands; the white working class are culturally conservative and threatened by cultural difference; the liberal elite celebrate and are enriched by multiculturalism. The white working class live in small towns and identify as English or British; the liberal elite live in the metropolis and identify as European and cosmopolitan. The white working class do not censor themselves and speak the truth about race; the liberal elite are transfixed by and seek to impose an agenda of political correctness. This opposition between the white working class and the liberal elite draws on an eclectic range of elements, combining issues of culture and lifestyle together with politics and ideology. Right-wing populists like Farage paint a vivid picture of two irreconcilable groups and the imbalance of power that exists between them: the liberal elite are small in number but large in influence; the white working class are large in number but powerless and disenfranchised. To remedy this inequity, right-wing populists propose a simple and neat solution: the liberal elite must be deposed and representatives of the people must be installed in power.

It is not hard to unpick the racial politics that is implicit to this framing. When Farage argues that immigration "has left the white working class, effectively, as an underclass" (in Wintour et al. 2014), he uses the language of racial difference to construct a category of identification and victimhood (see Emejulu 2016). In right-wing populist rhetoric, the "white working class" does not only give a name to a group of people, it also implicitly names the cause and agents of their subordination: immigrants and liberal elites. This causality embedded in the "white working class" references a time before its fall, a time apparently before "immigration". It references the long-held but profoundly erroneous fantasy of Britain as a white nation, over which white people have some proprietorial claim (see also Abbas and Jones, both this issue). In addition, the figure of the "white working class" refuses an understanding of class that cuts across racial differences. Britain's multicultural working class is hereby fragmented and repackaged so as to prioritise racial difference as a defining element of social conflict. The "white working class" is not, therefore, an innocent empirical description of an existing social group, but a partisan argument about race, proprietorship, entitlement, victimhood and displacement.

We can advance similar kinds of argument about the figure of the “liberal elite”, who in right-wing populist discourse are conceived as the relentless champions of immigration and proponents of multicultural diversity. It does not take much critical scrutiny to reveal the fictive nature of this “liberal elite”. Even the most laissez-faire of recent UK governments have presided over immigration regimes that have served to both stigmatise economic migrants and exploit their labour. State managers who go out of their way to stress their commitment to oppose racism and discrimination have frequently shown themselves to be apologists for it. Governing elites have certainly learned to speak a “progressive” language of race, but however well intentioned their antiracism is frequently inadequate and self-serving.

By defining political elites by their supposed social liberalism, the discourse of right-wing populism reinforces a false dichotomy in the politics of race. It reproduces a conception of antiracism that is imposed, top down, on a reluctant and prejudiced population. In doing so, it removes from view the hospitable, convivial, “unheralded multiculturalism” (Gilroy 2004, 108) that has long been part of the fabric of British working class life. Such framings sideline quotidian forms of antiracist politics and solidarity, and write out of the story the central role played in the antiracist struggle by minority communities themselves. Indeed, one of the most notable features of right-wing populists’ rhetorical opposition of the figure of the “white working class” to the figure of the “liberal elite” is the virtual absence of anyone who is not racialised as white. While racialised minorities are central to right-wing populist discourse, they exist only to describe the antagonism between both groups. If right-wing populism adapts Orwell’s characterisation of the nation as a “family with the wrong members in control” (Orwell 1941), then we should also note that it conceives of this family as intrinsically white.

Family resemblances

So much might be considered par for the course from right-wing populists like Farage. What is more remarkable is the extent of right-wing populism’s political influence. Consider the rapidity with which the leadership of the Tory Party reframed its stance at their party conference some four months after the Brexit vote. Attempting to put some distance between herself and her predecessor David Cameron – not to mention her own pre-vote association with the Remain campaign – Theresa May spoke of a sense “that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them”, and that “too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with people down the road”. Summarising this populist affiliation to “the people” against the elite, May insisted that “if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere”. May addressed “the public”, who she defined in opposition to politicians and commentators who, she argued, “find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to your job security inconvenient.” (May 2016; see also Stewart and Walker 2017).

While May's populist turn was evidently an accommodation to the direction of political travel that had been established by UKIP, it is striking to note the extent to which the same variety of political rhetoric – counterposing local publics with “international elites”, and returning repeatedly to the theme of immigration and national identity – was adopted across a wide political spectrum as an analysis of the Brexit political conjuncture. Take, for example, the premise that animates David Goodhart's *The Road to Somewhere*, which sets up an opposition between “Somewheres”, socially conservative and geographically-bound, and “Anywheres”, that cosmopolitan liberal elite (Goodhart 2017). In the analysis of Eric Kaufmann (2017), popular opposition to immigration is a legitimate expression of “racial self-interest” erroneously policed by the antiracist moralism of liberal elites. It became exceedingly common after the Brexit vote for political analysis to share the diagnosis – if not the beliefs – of right-wing populists.

Of particular interest here is the way that the right-wing populist opposition of “white working class” and “liberal elite” have been echoed by some in the Labour party. Consider the response to the Brexit vote by centre-left Labour politician Andy Burnham. While critical of the explicit racism of the far right, Burnham argues that Labour activists need to “take back control of the immigration debate” by listening to and not dismissing “public concerns” out of a fear of “pandering to UKIP”. Again, right-wing populists are credited with expressing an authentic popular desire, and Labour activists are framed as thwarted by their own political correctness, left “avoiding people's eyes and shuffling away” (Burnham 2016). If Burnham unintentionally takes for granted the political grammar of right-wing populism, there have been indications that the perceived popular purchase of anti-immigrant positions have at times also inflected the actions of the Labour leadership in its triangulations over Brexit. Jeremy Corbyn's advocacy of a “migrant impact fund” (Corbyn 2016) framed an underfunding problem as a migrant problem, while an abrupt U-turn over Labour's opposition to the 2019 Brexit immigration bill (Stewart 2019) demonstrates ongoing equivocation over the question of free movement.

Other Labour politicians have drawn more explicitly on a racialized discourse, defending the “white working class” against a range of straw targets beloved of right-wing populists: Stephen Kinnock has called for “an end to identity politics” and “obsessing about diversity” in order to “stand up for ... the white working class” (Simons 2016), while Angela Raynor has argued that initiatives to tackle gender and race discrimination have “actually had a negative impact on the food chain [for] white working boys” (Nelson 2018). In a recent survey of the racialization of the white working class, Aurélien Mondon and Aaron Winter note how the ‘white working class’ has become ‘a reactionary proxy for the embodiment of the “people”’ (Mondon and Winter 2018, 2), with analyses highlighting the decline, vulnerability and victimization of the “white working class” increasingly common amongst sections of the British left.¹ Similarly, Malcolm James and Sivamohan Valluvan (2018) take to task a “conflation of essentialised, fetishised whiteness with working-class struggle and anti-capitalism” in left-nationalist arguments around Brexit. Notwithstanding the novel features of the Brexit political conjuncture, there are clear continuities here with a far longer history on the left of “racialized identity politics” (Virdee

2019, 19-21). Some of the key operating assumptions of right-wing populist rhetoric – involving a nativist conception of “the people” and a concern about their displacement by immigrants and minorities – have a long history in the Labour movement and came to be institutionalised in social policy and the British welfare state (see Lewis 1996; Paul 1997; Knowles 1992; Virdee 2014).

There are, to summarise, a range of family resemblances that have allowed right-wing populist rhetoric to resonate right across the political spectrum. Farage’s opposition of the “liberal elite” to the “white working class” was part of an exemplary populist manoeuvre that Theresa May’s Tories had little choice but to follow, despite the performative contradictions and self-inflicted wounds this entailed for Britain’s ruling party. But this populist analysis has had a wider explanatory traction, amongst journalists and commentators, and significantly amongst Labour politicians too. On the face of it, Brexit did highlight an exceedingly stark divide: the National Centre for Social Research counterposes the category of “middle class liberals”, who voted 92% remain, with the category of “economically deprived anti-immigration”, who voted 95% leave (Swales 2016, 25). Yet these classifications represent extreme fractions of the British population and detract from the fact that the Brexit vote was “disproportionately delivered by the propertied, pensioned, well-off, white *middle class*” (Bhambra 2017, 215). Like other awkward statistics – for example, that three quarters of generally poorer BME voters elected to remain (Begum 2018) – these facts have been sidelined in political commentary and analysis by the simplifications of an engaging story about the white working class, the question of immigration, and the interests of a liberal elite. A very particular story about race has come to dominate in the Brexit political conjuncture, in which certain categories of subject have been given excessively large roles.

The political logic of populism

In the first part of this article I sketched out the political grammar of right-wing populism, acknowledging its influence and explanatory resonance across the spectrum of British politics in the Brexit political conjuncture. In this section, I want to draw on Ernesto Laclau’s definition of populism as a “political logic” (Laclau 2005a, 117) as a resource to develop an alternative set of critical perspectives, and to unsettle and render contingent the widely naturalised rhetoric of right-wing populism. Rather than take right-wing populists at their word and accept a fundamental antagonism between the “white working class” and the “liberal elite” over race and immigration, it becomes possible, I suggest, to envisage rival forms of populist politics. An anti-racist response to the rise of right-wing populism in Britain needs to be sceptical of and resistant to taking on understanding of “the people” moulded in the image of the far right: essentially the idea that significant sections of the British people, and particularly the working classes, are intrinsically racist. I will not dispute this interpretation on empirical grounds – it is easy enough to find examples of racism, and easy enough to show how racist hate crime has risen in the Brexit conjuncture, as numerous national and regional figures attest (Corcoran and Smith 2016). Rather I will argue that to get to grips with right-wing populism, antiracism must involve itself in the contestation of the category of “the

people”. Antiracist populism thus becomes a way of breaking with the political grammar of right-wing populism and its entrenchment in British politics. In making this largely theoretical argument I stop well short of delineating a developed political programme, and I readily acknowledge that the left’s nationalist investments that I have sketched above continue to pose some significant challenges to its development. My interest here in rethinking race and populism from first principles is largely heuristic, intended to show how it is important for antiracists to prevent right-wing populists from setting the terms of the debate around race and immigration. To tackle right-wing populism, I will go on to argue, it is necessary to be alert to how populism has come to shape what we what we mean and understand by antiracist practice.

In Laclau’s reading populism is not by definition nationalist, racist or anti-immigrant: such characteristics are simply particular to the right-wing populism espoused by the likes of UKIP. Indeed, as far as Laclau is concerned populism does not have any necessary characteristics at all – racism is simply an “ontic” content that can be substituted for an infinite variety of other contents, each (theoretically at least) as contingent as the next. What’s significant about populism as a political logic is not its ontic content but its ontological form: an appeal to the popular defines a “frontier of exclusion” between “the people” and their political antagonists (2005a, 81). In Laclau’s reading the political logic of populism is therefore constitutive of politics per se. Populism does not describe just the activities of the far right, but that of all actors who seek to determine the trajectory of popular will. In its simplest formulation, populism describes the way in which political identities get established in relation to a constitutive outside (an excluded element which gives political identities shape and meaning by resembling and standing for what they are not). Populism names the process by which differences give way to common cause: the way an otherwise heterogeneous people cohere in the pursuit of a mutual set of interests and against that constitutive outside. To act politically is to play a part in shaping this process, of working to establish these interests as common.²

While we may want to look elsewhere to interpret the particular “content” of right-wing populism, the political logic of populism can help us to understand the broader context of its emergence in Brexit Britain. As has been widely recognized in left analysis (see, for example, Mouffe 2005a; 2005b; 2018; Yilmaz 2016; Mondon 2013), mainstream political parties in liberal democratic states have increasingly converged around a neoliberal agenda that has proven to be both depoliticizing and antidemocratic. Managerial elites have made decisions according to market-friendly protocols and precepts that have served to distance them from the terrain of political accountability. Though it is axiomatic in liberal democracies that political parties make some kind of claim to uniqueness in representing the will of the people, neoliberal convergence dampens parties’ distinctiveness and places emphasis on their common identity. As elsewhere, the centrist consensus in Britain has precipitated withdrawal from and widespread cynicism towards Westminster politics (“they’re all the same”), and it is into this breach that right-wing populists like Nigel Farage have recently stepped. Right-wing populism is, in Chantal Mouffe’s analysis, “the consequence of the post-political consensus” (Mouffe

2005b, 51). The fact that the anti-establishment energies unleashed by Farage's UKIP were subsequently drawn upon by Theresa May's establishment Tories is not a contradiction in terms: in accordance with Laclau's reading, the political logic of populism is not the sole preserve of political outsiders, but may be drawn on by anyone capable of making a successful appeal to "the people" (see Moffitt 2016, 47-8; Pauwels 2014, 184).

In noting the significant racist dimension of the Brexit vote, antiracist critique needs to be cautious about accepting without question an inevitable association between racism and populism. The causal logic operative in Farage's argument implies that they are closely correlated (a managerial political elite are deaf to the popular demand to reduce immigration and restore the racial sovereignty of white Britons), but it is conceptually useful here to distinguish between populism's form (its evocation of a people against a political establishment) and its content (its anti-immigrant racism).

I want to do this first to elaborate the possibility that derives, as shown above, from Laclau's theory of populism: there is no necessary relationship between form and content here, and that it would have been possible – if not in these specific political circumstances, then in slightly different ones – to develop a populist appeal to the people against elites grounded in an alternative content (a more progressive iteration might have focused on political elites' capitulation to multinational finance capital, say, or their collusion in the impoverishment of education, healthcare or social security over the last decade of political austerity). I make this theoretical point not in order to claim that alternative populisms would in June 2016 have necessarily been a viable alternative to Brexit's racist nationalism (there is surely little doubt that the racist right had very much the upper hand here). I am merely interested in establishing the possibility of anti-elitist populisms grounded in different content – that it is plausible that a protest might be developed against unresponsive political elites around a different issue, or set of issues. The most cursory reading of political history can furnish any number of examples where this has happened, from the scale of revolutions and anticolonial struggles to that of parish councils: an appeal to the suppressed will of the people is, as Laclau insists, "the political operation *par excellence*" (Laclau 2005a, 153). The democratic inadequacies of Britain's political system mean that the perennial nativist complaint about having "never been asked" about immigration can be easily applied to an infinite range of other topics. At a moment when the political grammar of right-wing populism has such a powerful explanatory grip, Laclau provides an important reminder that popular desire is never given, but always the subject of political contestation.

The idea that populist form might have alternative contents gives us a different way of approaching of the right-wing populism of Brexit. By breaking with the causal association between form and content that right-wing populists set up – that anti-immigrant racism is the suppressed will of the people – it becomes possible to disarticulate one from the other. When anti-immigrant racism is accordingly understood as only one possible content describing this suppressed will, we can begin to think of rival contents to fill out the form of

popular desire. Besides the possibility of giving populist form an alternative content, the disarticulation of form and content enables us to consider that part of populism's attraction might in fact relate to its formal qualities. Given that anti-immigrant racism in British politics long precedes the intervention of Farage and UKIP, it follows that we should consider their status as political outsiders as significant to the Brexit political conjuncture.

To put this another way: why should we go along with the fatalistic notion that it is racism that comes first in Brexit's intoxicating blend of racism and populism? Instead, can we not entertain the possibility that Brexit's populist form (the nascent democratic desire to have one's voice heard and taken into account) might have some appeal beyond the particular content (racism) with which it is expressed? I am not trying to suggest that form trumps content and that we can therefore straightforwardly substitute antiracism for racism as if the racist content of Brexit populism was entirely incidental to its appeal. Rather, my argument is that if we can attribute even one small portion of the appeal of Brexit populism to the populist form rather than the racist content – that if even a tiny scrap of the electoral appeal of Brexit was towards an idea of democratic sovereignty and self-determination, expressed in frustration at the neoliberal political consensus – then it becomes possible to reject racism as a *fait accompli* and pursue a political agenda that seeks to harness the populist form to a rival (“non-racist”, or, better, antiracist) content. This is what Mouffe calls the “democratic nucleus” (2018, 22) at the core of populist protest.

Once we have broken with the claimed causal association between the form and content of right-wing populism, we begin to undermine the notion that right-wing populists like Farage are simply giving voice to some intrinsic and heartfelt conviction amongst the people of Britain, as if “tensions around immigration are natural, prepolitical reflexes” (Yilmaz 2016, 6). Rather than adhere to a model of politics that conceives of “the will of the ‘people’ as something that was constituted *before* representation” (Laclau 2005a, 163-4), Laclau's theory of populism insists that the people and their demand emerge at the same moment. Thus “political practices do not *express* the nature of social agents but, instead, *constitute* the latter” (Laclau 2005b, 33). Political representation is, as Jan-Werner Müller attests, “a dynamic, two-way process, not a matter of reproducing some social and cultural reality that is always already out there” (Müller 2016). In this reading, Brexit racism is not the repressed organic desire of the British people that had just been waiting for a figure like Farage to come along to give it voice. Rather, Brexit racism is in part at least the creation of Farage and his political allies (who are of course not making original arguments but are drawing on long-established reserves of racist nationalism in British political culture). Brexit racism is formed through Farage's appeal to represent the people's will, supported in great part by all those other actors right across the political spectrum and in Britain's news media who take the far right at their word and accept without question the proposition that on some level the British people are intrinsically racist.³ Such an observation does not mitigate the force of Brexit racism – it is no less racist on account of it being politically confected; its effects are not less real. But it does undermine the causal logic according to which Farage is simply the

spokesperson for an already-existing popular desire. The political logic of populism encourages us to recognize the contingency of the relationship between “the people”, their political representatives, and the demands that appear to seamlessly join them together in common cause.

By understanding the association between racism and the people as a hegemonic manoeuvre – the establishment of a “common sense” in British politics – it is possible to begin to grasp how disabling this might be to the development of an effective antiracist alternative. The accepted racial common sense of our time suggests that liberal elites have betrayed the will of ordinary socially conservative people, and that the answer to right-wing populism is to give credence to their concerns about immigration as if these emerge, *sui generis*, without the concerted symbiotic collusion of diverse political actors. This racial common sense gestures towards only two political options: either politicians must listen to and incorporate the people’s concerns (the populist option; historically pursued most often by Tory administrations), or they must prevent the expression of popular racism by its containment and distraction (the elitist option; historically pursued most often by Labour administrations). Both of these options have been a mainstay of racial governance since the great populist intervention of Powellism in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Hall, 2017), and while from one perspective they seem to indicate very different kinds of race politics (the appeasement of racism versus the protection of racialized minorities), their shared racial common sense – that the people are racist – describes an underlying conceptual unity. According to the racial common sense that preceded, dominated and succeeded the Brexit vote, antiracist populism is a contradiction in terms: political actors have the option of either listening to, or of suppressing, the racist will of the people.

To question the authenticity of this political diagnosis does not require us to downplay racism’s hold in Brexit Britain. Insofar as the abiding racial common sense cultivates and encourages it, racism remains an indisputable fact of national life. And yet it is surely possible to hold at one and the same time to two descriptions of the British people: The first, largely empirical assessment, presents us with a descriptive and critical account of actually-existing racisms, their popular currency, and their embeddedness in the social. The second, largely theoretical assessment, is aimed at the contestation of the terrain of “the people” and does not and cannot for strategic political reasons accept the damning finality that almost invariably accompanies the first. To suggest that there might be a populism that could work to antiracist ends is to delineate an alternative to the racist double-bind of Britain’s racial common sense. To be effective, such a populism must reject the self-fulfilling proposition that the people are racist, and begin to construct a popular identity using a different set of assumptions. As I have already indicated, to invest in a notion of “the people” as intrinsically racist is to reinforce a profoundly contestable picture of British society: it is based on a fantasy of white proprietorship, it homogenises Britain’s multicultural working class, it exaggerates the antiracism of elites, downplays quotidian forms of antiracist struggle, and renders invisible and voiceless minority communities themselves. By highlighting the contingency of right-wing populism’s confident claim to represent the will of “the people” I

want to suggest that there are other ways in which “the people” could be imagined and politically mobilized which do not build on a racist kernel. The starting point of antiracist populism would be to seek to fill the populist form with a different kind of content, approaching “the people” as plural, egalitarian, and ethnically diverse.

Criticizing antiracist populism – the problem of nationalism

Critics of this outline of antiracist populism would be absolutely right to point out its largely theoretical and speculative character. Although I have borrowed from the advocates of left populism the idea that neoliberal post-politics is the catalyst of popular desire, I have stopped short of making a direct link between antiracist populism and left populism. I have not set out a political programme for antiracist populism or mapped out the social, political and cultural resources on which it might draw, and nor have I explored the potential for antiracist populism in Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party. Indeed, my account of the political grammar of right-wing populism has suggested that the explanatory resonances of “liberal elite” versus “white working class” are an ongoing problem in the racial politics of the British left.

My account is and will continue to be in large part a negative one, aimed at demonstrating what antiracism stands to lose by accepting the abiding racial common sense that “the people” are racist. Before I go on to give some specific examples that illustrate why I think antiracists need to contest the terrain of the popular, I want to first deal with the problem of nationalism. However useful Laclau’s theory is both to our understanding of the rise of right-wing populism and in illuminating a need to develop antiracism from a different starting point, it has long been subject to criticism from a race perspective. While there is much to learn from Laclau’s take on the abstract, formal political logic of populism, there is at times a temptation in its application to selectively foreground or background certain contextual conditions to suit the particular argument that is being made. In Stuart Hall’s reading, this is encouraged by a tendency in Laclau (and Mouffe) to “slip from the requirement to recognize the constraints of existing historical formations” (Hall in Grossberg 1996, 148). I note this as a self-criticism of the argument I have been making here: I have readily referenced the concrete conditions and circumstances of a dominant neoliberal political consensus as productive of populist energies, while so far sidestepping full acknowledgement of the unit or units of collective identification that describes “the people” of populist interpellation. We know that far right populists have the fantasy of a white nation to cohere an idea of the people against non-white immigrants, but what equivalent entity might serve an anti-racist populism? It is all very well to gesture towards a diverse and cosmopolitan populism-to-come, but what are the building blocks of such a political community? Without an answer to this question Laclau’s contribution is not a theory of politics as such so much as a theory of right-wing populism in particular. Does nationalism denature the very possibility of an antiracist populism?

This is the criticism that was levelled at Laclau by Paul Gilroy back in the early 1980s in his suggestion that, insofar as the nation is implicit to the formation of political identities in Britain, Laclau’s conception of the “the people” remains

a “racially specific” one (Gilroy 1982, 278). It is a criticism repeated more recently by Benjamin McKean (2016) who similarly argues that hierarchies of race within the nation prevent racialized minorities’ identification with a collective political entity, reminding us of the tendency of existing right-wing populisms to be constructed not against powerful elites but less powerful and less wealthy minority and migrant communities. Eric Fassin’s critique of left populism in contemporary France is similarly pessimistic about escaping a national and therefore racial subtext in appeals to “the people”. Rather than trying to convert voters who identify with right-wing populism it is, Fassin suggests, a better strategy to make a specific political appeal to the left that can potentially resonate with both racialized majorities and minorities (see Fassin et al. 2018). Jean-Luc Mélançon’s left populism has demonstrated that it is in practice very hard to throw out the bathwater of neoliberalism without jeopardising the baby of cultural diversity.⁴

Such criticisms are entirely valid insofar as we conceive of the Western nation-state as the normative political framework within which “the people” are conceived. If we follow Sadri Khiari in observing that “the notion of people, in its modern sense, was constructed in close connection with the social production of races by colonization” (Khiari 2016, 90), then it is surely the case that Britain’s imperial and post-imperial history of racial formation mitigates the possibility of the development of a populism that is not itself striated by racism. Even culturally plural definitions of British national identity depend on the exclusion of racialized outsiders and on racialized hierarchies of belonging (Pitcher 2009). In their reading of Latin American populisms, Cas Muddle and Cristóbal Robira Kaltwasser suggest that in relatively poor societies like Mexico, Peru and Venezuela populisms “promote the inclusion of vast groups which are objectively and subjectively excluded from society”, but that in relatively affluent societies “the people” tend to be defined in “ethnic” terms (2012, 207). The issue might therefore not be with the theory of populism per se but its application to Western or British politics in particular.

The problem of nationalism certainly isn’t going to go away for the politics of populism. While Mouffe raises the possibility of escaping nationalist determination in her assertion that what’s problematic about populism is not the reference to “the people” but “the way in which this ‘people’ is constructed” (Mouffe 2005b, 69), her recent work on left populism is somewhat equivocal, advocating as it does strategic engagement with the “strong libidinal investment” in nationalism and patriotism (Mouffe 2018, 71).⁵ It is true that one of the great advantages of Laclau’s theory is that he understands the social as radically heterogeneous: the constitution of ‘the people’ does not depend on an underlying or pre-existing category of identification like race, nation or class. Yet while we can accept in theory that “communities consist of discursive spaces, rather than geographical locations” (Laclau 1990, 245) there remain practical questions about the current political valency of rival deterritorialized conceptions of political community, or of sub-, supra-, or trans-national alternatives to the naturalized territory of race and nation.

A defence of antiracist populism

Although the problem of the racialized nation state is not going to go away for the politics of populism, I want to end this article with a modest defence of antiracist populism. My contention is that the populist moment we are currently experiencing in Britain and beyond is not going to go away any time soon, and that appeals to “the people” against an elite will continue to have a political resonance for some time to come. It is accordingly imperative that we recognize how antiracism fits into all of this. Antiracist populism does not provide an answer or response to the racisms of right-wing populism so much as act as a heuristic to help us understand how the field of antiracist struggle is shaped by our populist moment. It is, in part, out of a need to account for the influence of right-wing populism on antiracism that antiracist populism continues to be an important problem to think through, and with.

The key issue that antiracist populism brings to light is this: antiracism comes down far too often on the wrong side of the distinction between “people” and “elite”. In this article’s account of the pervasive racial common sense that right-wing populism has consolidated around Brexit, antiracism is constructed as an elite agenda, imposed unwanted on a racist people. When self-identifying “remainers” criticize populist voters as “unreasonable”, ‘utopian’, ‘irrational’, ‘uneducated’, not to say ‘stupid’” (De Cleen et al. 2018), it is not hard to see how antiracist voices might help to reinforce this formal distinction between people and elite. It is a cleavage that can be deepened, too, by some of the antiracism that takes place on social media – an often righteous policing of words and behaviours by those who know better. This patrician framing has of course long dogged the Labour Party: in 2014, Emily Thornberry tended her resignation from Labour’s shadow cabinet after tweeting an image widely interpreted as an insinuation of working-class racism (see Walsh 2014); in the run-up to the 2010 general election, Gordon Brown was castigated for his famous off-camera but inadvertently on-mike assessment of a pensioner complaining about immigration as “just a sort of bigoted woman” (Sky News 2010). Whether such comments are reasonable or justified is besides the point. What matters is their performative affirmation of the distinction between people and elite. Antiracism is hereby framed as a minority concern, characterised by its political correctness, and elaborated as the coalition of threatened minorities and a protective, educated elite.

There are of course significant historical reasons why antiracism has become associated with the political establishment. Civil rights struggles, in the UK and elsewhere, sought legal change to establish anti-discrimination legislation. Racism is recognized in the criminal justice system as a hate crime. While antiracism’s institutional struggles are far from complete, there is some latitude to recognise racism in the legal system, and by businesses and schools, and other institutions like the media. These institutional struggles have been very important, but they have helped to reinforce the idea that antiracism is an establishment cause. They help to underpin the notion that antiracism, deriving from a legal injunction or some symbolic figure of top-down authority, watches over the people and passes judgment over their errors.

There are times when right-wing populists have skilfully played on antiracism's legal and institutionalised status in order to reproduce and reinforce the political grammar of right-wing populism. In the summer of 2018 the far right activist known as Tommy Robinson broke court restrictions in the reporting of a sexual abuse trial of a number of predominantly South Asian heritage men accused of grooming underage girls in the English town of Huddersfield (Halliday 2018). Found guilty of contempt of court and jailed for a short period of time, Robinson was able to create a story that not only confirmed his Islamophobic worldview, but which positioned him as the victim of establishment censure. Acting as agent provocateur, Robinson shaped a populist narrative in which a liberal, politically correct elite are shielding the actions of depraved Muslim men from "the people". By censoring Robinson's ability to tell his truth about Islamic culture, the elite's political correctness is revealed to be a betrayal of that people. People and power are again represented as on opposing sides over the subject of race. For antiracists to refuse to condemn Robinson as a racist would be morally inadmissible, but to go ahead and condemn him also plays into his hands, amplifying the magnitude of his argument and confirming his status as a silenced agent of the truth.

It is perhaps around the question of neoliberal labour policies that the unintended consequences of antiracist critique have been most sustained. Under Labour, Tory and coalition administrations pre-Brexit, the neoliberal deregulation of the labour market was combined with much public worrying about the impact of immigration on 'public services' and 'social cohesion' (for example, Cabinet Office 2010, 21). In such an atmosphere antiracist voices rightly defended migrants from anti-immigrant racism, but in doing so did not always criticise the policies that created the conditions for which migrants were being blamed. If it is not simultaneously accompanied by the critique of restricted labour rights, the legitimate defence of free movement can look a lot like the defence of neoliberalism. Antiracism can play an accidental role in policing the racist side-effects of unchecked neoliberal governance, and as such can again become marked as an elite discourse.

Antiracist populism, as I have sketched it here, describes a very real need to understand and engage on a changed terrain of political practice. These brief examples of the way antiracism has been framed as the project of political elites indicate some of the challenges antiracism is up against in Brexit's populist political conjuncture. Perhaps above all, they demonstrate that how antiracism works and is understood is not fully under the control of self-identifying antiracists, but rather is shaped by a range of social actors, including antiracism's antagonists on the populist right. I have tried to show how a focus on populist form rather than content can prevent antiracists from taking for granted the naturalised political grammar of right-wing populism, and begin thinking about alternative appeals to the popular will. While it is far from straightforward to navigate, engagement on the terrain of the popular is not optional if we are to counter the fatalistic tendency to render antiracism as a minority or elite concern.

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¹ It is misplaced to read such concerns as a result of the influence of the far right: it is possible to trace the figure of the "white working class" in its present incarnation to the unfolding of communitarian social policy under New Labour (Pitcher, 2009: chapter 3)

² This article will try to avoid excursus into the detail of Laclau's conceptual universe. My objective here is to draw on the political logic of populism to provide a perspective on racism and antiracism in the Brexit conjuncture

rather than serve as a full elaboration of Laclau's theory. Those interested in a bit more detail could take a look at Laclau (2005a and b), Laclau (1990), Laclau (1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001). For a recent consideration of how to approach populism as a political logic see De Cleen, Glynos and Mondon (2018).

³ The role played by the press in a media democracy (see Wodak 2015 § 14.57) is of course significant in itself. The British media, and particularly the BBC, have consistently given Farage coverage and airtime disproportionate to UKIP's electoral successes. One obvious explanation of this exposure is that the media have indeed taken on trust Farage's self-characterization as a "man of the people", and that this is partly to be understood as the critical failure of a media class who have accepted their own negative characterization as an out-of-touch metropolitan elite. Thanks to Gavan Titley for inspiring this last point. See also Mills (2016).

⁴ The pressing need for a populist alternative to neoliberalism in France will not go away. While in 2017 the electorate eventually rallied to neoliberal Macron against Le Pen, the popular democratic tide on which her party rose remains unaddressed, and is only likely to amplify further in the years to 2022 however many concessions Macron makes towards the far right.

⁵ Whether Spanish left populist party Podemos's "patriotic" construction of a territorially sovereign people manages to oppose "corporations and banks, not foreigners and refugees" (Gerbaudo 2017, 56) without racist consequences remains to be seen.