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Populism and Dialogue: How Enforced Binaries Make the Populace Harder to Dialogue with and to Understand

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Abstract: This piece begins by outlining a series of anthropological undertakings from the last century that were commonly misconceptualised as being obsessed with the sustained valorisation of binary-oriented thinking (classical structuralism). It is our view that rehabilitating the sensibilities that structuralism endorses might allow us to recognise certain deficiencies with other models of inherited thinking. This piece employs a close examination of extremely popular binaries that are commonly deployed (and frequently cited) in order to better understand 'populism' (in the sense intended by Mudde 2015) and in terms of 'The Clash of Civilisations thesis' (Huntington 1993). These two ideas are perfect illustrations of the perils inherent to any undertaking that intends to advocate for a better understanding of life as it is lived, but that instead propagate hollow generalisations, the normalisation of competing extremist views, and the complete destruction of the possibility of dialogue.

Keywords: Populism, Structuralism, Dialogue, Concepts, Deconstruction

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Introduction

Dialogue is a concept that sounds as though it is binary in nature, but which is not (Heller, 2016).[2] The *di-* stem indicates a kind of oppositional or dichotomous counterpoint, a potentially antagonistic worldview or ethos, but is actually '*dia*' (through). Many challenging conversations were required of the authors of this work in preparation for writing this article. These questions included the proper order of diagnosis of why a term that serves to indicate that words are vehicles through which meaning and consensus can be arrived at might be mistaken for classical binary-type constructions. Put otherwise, this article examines the way in which multiple interpretations become simplified into either/or viewpoints and underscores the 'extremes-centric' trajectory that often results therefrom. The view that we have generated collaboratively, and the argumentative throughline of the present work, is that mistaking multifaceted phenomena for binary-seeming undertakings is precisely what gives rise to the problems with which dialogue, as an undertaking, is plagued at present.

To begin, it is vital to understand how the documentation of concepts has been treated historically, using a selection of examples from anthropology (a field dedicated to better understanding human interaction), to outline the distinction between the representation of an idea and the implications thereof. To achieve this, we will examine how concepts come to have meaning at all through signification. This undertaking is necessary to examine Mudde's hypothesis about the normalisation of extremes and the specific effect that this has on possibilities for dialogue. We argue that every characterisation of an emerging phenomenon runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophetic view and that Mudde's understanding of populism certainly runs this risk.

This risk is not at all new or specific to recent work. In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer (Frazer 2009[1910]) includes an examination of a mad Mongol king who, desiring to know the true word for that which is referred to as bread, decided to lock an infant in a room, providing nourishment through bread, but offering no linguistic interventions so as not to sway the child one way or the other. This was meant to dissuade the carers from giving the child conceptual tools to characterise bread in any way but its own. An uncontaminated concept was somehow expected to emerge from this experiment. From this tale, we are told that the proper name for bread is 'bek.' From that point on, according to the king, the only proper name for bread is 'bek' and any other characterisation in any language whatsoever was a deviation

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from the true name of the thing to which 'bek' substantively refers. The effort resembles a hylomorphic undertaking (in the sense meant by Ingold (cf. Kochan 2024)) and involves a sculptor finding a work of art within the marble and putting it on display. In every operant theoretical postulation, there is a concern with whether or not something previously hidden is being shown or is actually being manufactured. This ought to be borne in mind when examining any theoretical undertaking.

This desire to set aside linguistic difference to approximate something grander or purer can also be observed in the story of the Tower of Babel, but in reverse, where multiplicity is the byproduct of singularity in the former and 'bek' serves to replace the multiplicitous interpretations of bread in the previously given example. At heart, this consideration concerns the relationship between language and that which it aims to approximate. This undertaking has already been outlined in the masterful work by Ferdinand De Saussure called 'Course in General Linguistics' (1959[1916]) and revolves around the arbitrary connection between sign and signified, or that to which we refer and the linguistic conveyance used to refer thereto. The relationship between sign and signified is arbitrary; it is an intersubjective matter of how things are understood, and language both regulates this and allows for incremental change as times change. In what follows we will apply this understanding to social science terminology more generally.

This operation becomes more difficult when applied to the coining of social scientific terms aiming to both deploy and facilitate new understandings of emerging phenomena. We might first, accidentally, presuppose that all people view a phenomenon in much the same fashion and might then apply a technical term thereto without sufficiently justifying what precisely we are pointing to. There has been a tendency to exempt theorists who advance a specific view from having to rationalise and to explain the material advantage that the large-scale adoption of this or that hypothetical view might provide. Likewise, politicians and/or other people can fabricate particular long-standing or predestined courses of action on the basis of recent election results (Variale 2021); subterfuge and dissent within any community, be it academic or political, might give rise to the felt necessity to continue to endorse monistic and oversimplified binaries. This, in turn, assists with the continued demonisation of a 'them' category, an oversimplified binary that was endorsed and espoused by the Nazi party member, and partisan, Carl Schmitt (Bashkina 2020). Tellingly, it might have been Scmitt's obsession with the necessity for an us/them construction to take hold in society that he refused to engage in denazification efforts; this dichotomy appears as both political necessity and as ultimate reality. The apparent concern here is with the abiding and seemingly self-explanatory nature of binary states of affairs here and the problems to which they might potentially give rise.

A Social Scientific Undertaking

When scientific discourse and paradigms are applied to the coining of social scientific terms aimed at facilitating new understandings of emerging phenomena, they can, paradoxically, become significant barriers to dialogue. The primary challenge that arises is the assumption of an existing universal understanding in which a term or concept is coined and adopted without fully accounting for the vast implications of its usage or misusage even. This programmatic approach tends to exculpate theorists from having to justify the material consequences of the frameworks that they put forth. Once a term or theory acquires traction, particularly as it aligns with prevailing political or societal trends, then the obligation to rationalise its conceivable consequences is often neglected. This produces dangerous presumptions that such diagnoses are value-neutral in nature or self-evident when, in reality, these diagnoses shape public perception and have real-world implications that may not always be immediately apparent. Apart from these two qualities, a third can be observed in the fact that they may well be *neither*, consequently leaving too little room for a necessary meta-analytical approach from which the phenomenon might be inductively treated, thereby allowing for new insights to become thinkable.

In such undertakings, dialogue is reduced to opposing voices, dichotomous categories, and dualistic frameworks, and this ambiguity gives rise to false equivalencies and speculative causations. This means that discourse comes to resemble a litany of oversimplified binaries; this further propels the aforementioned normalisation of Schmitt's 'friends versus enemies' and 'us versus them' framing (Schmitt 2007[1932]). The unchecked adoption of paradigms that both fail to engage with and consider the broader implications of their use can perpetuate division, rather than fostering understanding, thereby leading to the consolidation of power and the further entrenchment of oversimplified, harmful narratives. One such defence against this concern can be found in the work of Robinson (2015), in which integrity is fused with dialogue in order to navigate complex social contexts. Moreover, both dialogue and processing through words run contrary to such undertakings and even contain the condition of the possibility of liberation from harsh binaries.

It is our view that the current state of populism not only commits this error, but also propagates the state of affairs that the description of the phenomenon necessitates. The reason is that the term 'populism' presupposes a kind of binary construction, one organised in terms of competing extremes, that reduces our ability to think of any space between the extremes; this is an error commonly thrown at the feet of classical structural thinking. This type of thinking is believed to have been superseded in poststructuralist thought, but it is our view that the term 'populism' has reproduced

structuralism's purported error. The specific questions that we have for Mudde's work in particular are examined below.

Structuralism, broadly misunderstood, might contain the view that there are meaningful and coded binaries that must be conceptualised as being in tension with one another, such as between sign and signified and between culture and nature (Levi-Strauss 1963a; 1963b; 1966; 1973). It was this tension, after all, that compelled the mad Mongol king mentioned previously to deprive a child of liberty until of speaking age so that this tension might be resolved into a singular term. This is a misrepresentation of the undertaking of structuralism, though, at least in the linguistic and anthropological traditions. We have similar misgivings about the phenomenon of populism, with respect to Mudde's interpretation thereof, and these will be outlined below.

Firstly though, and returning to the work of De Saussure, it might be observed that many elements of language are on a continuum, rather than in opposition to another category. In terms of understanding colours, for instance, De Saussure says that one way in which to operationalise what a colour is might be to relegate from the entirety of the colour spectrum every colour except the one chosen by comparing them to that which they are not (De Saussure 1959[1916]). Red is not black, not blue, not green, not magenta, and so on. This term is referred to as 'meaningful difference' and shows that it is often more complex than culture-is-not-nature-and-vice-versa type claims. Put otherwise, there are more manners of understanding things than simply in opposition to each other and thinking along a continuum is an endeavour that is full of potential.

Claims about populism often return to dichotomies, though, and restate their value, both in the study of the phenomenon and in terms of political reality. The nature of these claims, as we have identified, is undoubtedly and wholly central to this text, but for now it is vital to recognise that it is of a type mentioned previously: it runs the risk of a kind of wrongheaded structuralism that views concepts as dichotomous and as being in abiding, insoluble tension with one another. It is immaterial if the concepts are closely related, as in some structural accounts (matter and matter out of place, such as in Douglas 1966) or if they are proposed as existing at the extreme ends, such as the fundamental incompatibility of the viewpoints of the extreme right and extreme left, for instance. The analysis of extremes has another effect, though, which is that analysing binary antithetical viewpoints renders the middle ground, a possible site upon which dialogue might take place, troubled and possibly impossible.

Structuralism is thought to have had its death knell rung by Jacques Derrida in 1966 (Derrida 1974[1966]), in a work called 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses

of the Human Sciences', in which Derrida critiqued the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, father of Structural anthropology and a close reader of De Saussure and Roman Jakobson. The article takes an interesting position with respect to binaries and asks, 'What happens when the opposition between the binaries can be collapsed by way of an example that applies to both of these concepts?' It is a fascinating undertaking, one that has inspired this work and that involves a close reading of Levi-Strauss's work on the binary of culture and nature specifically. This particular approach has proven incredibly useful to the co-joining of anthropology and feminism (Rosaldo & Lamphere 2002[1974]) where women were likened to nature (uncontaminated potential sites of meaning) and men were likened to culture (an elaborated or sophisticated 'building upon' of nature). Observing the cosmetic composition of the divide has led to genuine dialogical opportunities.

Derrida tries to deconstruct the existence of the binary from within by examining a specific instance of a phenomenon found in both the animal kingdom and among human beings, that of incest. He asks whether the incest prohibition is normal (cultural) or natural (predicated upon a kind of automaticity to avoid such behaviours as though coded within people). If it is the former, a social prohibition, then a certain series of concerns follow: Does the incest prohibition mean that humans have an outsized tendency towards such a behaviour, such that it needs to be prohibited? If it is natural, then does this mean that the prohibitions against it are somehow surplus to requirement, given that it is hard-wired into our natural cognitive and behavioural framework? This example, although upsetting to consider at length, obviously demonstrates the troubled construction of binaries; binaries do not need to be erected in this fashion if there are instances in which neither term fails to fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon under review (cf. Culler 1981). Given this, we are of the view that the term populism gives rise to similar misconceptions, and we aim to deconstruct it below.

It is advisable to offer a defence of structuralism here and to communicate that structuralists are not married to either dichotomous reasoning or to binaries as such and actually commonly examine very many instances in which binary thinking is insufficient to understanding (Levi Strauss 1964a; Douglas 1966); there is also the (ahead of its time in its undertaking, analysing the gender binary as being insufficient to capturing human variation) work of Wikan (1977). At heart, structuralism was an attempt, and a concerted one at that, to draw parallels in and between people groups in order to show their general similarity to one another, where there is crossover in terms of certain universals, and where there are imponderables and particulars.

By way of examination, it is interesting to consider Claude Levi-Strauss's 'Totemism' (1964b), in which this view is made fully plain. The Totem has been the-

orised in many different fashions (from Freud to Malinowski and in the work of Boas), but when reading their works, Levi-Strauss was struck by how unnecessarily uncharitable they were and, in particular, how unconducive to dialogue they were. To take one example, and it is an example that Levi-Strauss dwells on, we can look to Malinowski's interpretation of the Totem. It is Malinowski's view that totems arrange animals in terms of their deliciousness (Malinowski 1929). This is because Malinowski is of the view that the savage cannot think and is compelled only by desires to satiate the gustatory. Put otherwise, then, the Totem is a concrete representation of the functionalism indicated within the body drawn into space and represented hierarchically (Malinowski 1964). If you have a low view of the objects of your study, then you run the risk of oversimplifying their lives in terms of conceptualisation.

Levi-Strauss was obviously dissatisfied by the vacuousness of this interpretation; it seems to have begun as a type of intuitive sensation, and it seemed to him intuitively incorrect somehow. During his fieldwork, Levi-Strauss witnessed an in-person disagreement between two people who both subscribed to Totemic thinking. The discussion, as Levi-Strauss relayed, concerned two individuals from different Totemic clans who were broadly implying that it is proper that they be enemies, given that bears and eagles commonly display antipathy in the wild, but that both people simply laugh this assertion off. Levi-Strauss was struck by the recognition of the non-necessity of Totem circumscriptions. It was also patently obvious that this conversation did not concern the edibility of the other, although some conversations do take place along these lines (hooks 2014).

To that end, Levi-Strauss went about reinvestigating the Totem and argued that the Totem was a good object through which to think about the differences that exist within the social world of the people that subscribe to the validity thereof. The difference in totemic 'rank' does not stem the tide entirely of dialogue, as indicated by the interpersonal jocularity about the fundamental nature of different people groups. It is not hierarchical as such and, importantly for our discussion, runs the tremendous risk of being misunderstood and having that misunderstanding affect the academic discourse surrounding it. Malinowski's view was the true one until it was dethroned. It is a worrying thing to dwell on what the world might look like had Claude Levi-Strauss not invited alternative interpretations of a social-scientific undertaking which already had a satisfactorily resolved, tension-free interpretation.

For our concerns, we should also keep in mind that certain interpretations are, by their nature, uncharitable and this is both what prompted Levi-Strauss to offer new ones and has inspired us to do likewise. Similarly troubled interpretations do abide, and anthropology is, lamentably, replete with such examples. One need only think of Evans-Pritchard's view that the Nuer of South Sudan suffered from 'Nuerosis,' a

mental condition apparent only to the United Kingdom-trained Evans-Pritchard (1940a; 1940b), Scheper-Hughes' characterisation of people groups residing in the west of Ireland as some variation of 'Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics' (1979), and Napoleon Chagnon's work on the Yanomamo of the Amazon, to whom he refers as 'the ferocious people' (1977).

Part of the reason behind the necessity to provide new interpretations stems from the social sciences' difficulty in determining its relationship to Popperian falsifiability (Popper 2022). As researchers, we are occasionally aghast at the fashion in which viewpoints, when viewed from the perspective of our disciplinary training, are offered that appear entirely anachronistic, oversimplified, and not apposite to the social world. In what follows, we restrict our bafflement to the Clash of Civilisations hypothesis and to Mudde's framing of populism.

Why do civilisations clash?

How do civilisations clash and how might we understand potential rationalisations for their disagreement? Samuel Huntington first proposed his 'Clash of Civilisations thesis' in an article dating back to 1993. He then 'refined' this idea in a full publication that was released in 1996. Hypotheses are postulated, but not yet proven, viewpoints much like ideas in search of content or dispositions in search of evidence. The undertaking seemingly involved breaking the world into simple components and then 'identifying' an inherently antagonistic relationship between certain people groups; the primary antagonistic relationship between civilisational groups, according to Huntington, was between the Islamic world and the West after the Cold War.

It took a seismic shift on the world stage for Huntington's ideas to gain the traction required to prove what had previously been held as a hypothesis, held without evidence and independently of consulting members of the civilisational boxes that Huntington drew arbitrarily around diverse regions in the world. Huntington was ostensibly proven correct after 9/11; however, the question immediately arises as to whether there is any real difference at all between a postulation without evidence and a prejudice. Huntington wrote a great deal in which he presupposes that people in a world with which he was nearly totally unfamiliar might be speaking directly about his nation as its enemy. Huntington's work (1993) has also been cited almost 50,000 times, the lesson being that polemical work gains traction in academic circles, a pattern that we see happening again within the field of populism. A clear example of how this might come to pass is by advancing a view without including a methodological outline of how that view might be approximated or replicated. However, one counterexample can be found in Said's work which specifically discloses its method and which Mudde's work and Huntington's work vitally omit:

> My intellectual approach has been to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange.' (Said 2001, 874)

It is our view that continuing to support the term 'populism' commits a similar error to Huntington's because it will only serve to galvanise and to recirculate defensive self-pride from one side or the other. In fact, there are elements of Huntington's prognosis that are more adequate to understandings of populism than global conflict, such as here:

> It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.' (Huntington 1993, 22)

For our purposes, we are of the view that Mudde builds the concept of populism in a near identical fashion to Huntington's hypothesis, erecting binaries along extremes and destroying the middle ground and the possibility for dialogue in the process. His view on populism, we argue, is like the Clash of Civilisations but domestic, inter- and intrastate. Additionally, we claim that the release dates of both Mudde's and Huntington's publications were serendipitous.

Published in 2015, Mudde's work gained a sudden spike of attention and relevance, as can be seen in the drastic increase in his academic citations in 2017, culminating in over 40,000 citations today. To understand the context of this period, the election of Donald Trump and the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union occurred just one year after the publication of this piece and ushered in a new period, one coloured by the rise in expressions of populism. This populism-fraught reality was further reflected in academia as the Cambridge Dictionary held 'populism' to be the word of the year in 2017, and the usage of the word in the New York Times quadrupled from 2015 to 2017 (Hunger & Paxton 2022) Thus, we share the view that Mudde's coining of the term coincides with significant, observable shifts within the political landscape that gave rise to a renewed interest in a topic about which he was an expert. What is less commonly examined about this rise in the aca-

demic attention paid to the populace is whether or not this coincidence is substantive or not. This is a topic to which the following paragraph is dedicated.

Points of Contention

In relation to the points of contention with which we will engage below, we find it important to discuss Mudde's *moral* interest in the predicted shape of things to come, rather than the *ideological* or academic approach that he took upon himself — or rather failed to, as we hold and will explain shortly — when writing about populism. Mudde's engagement with the conceptualisation of populism means that it is incumbent on any academic or expert, self-acclaimed, widely recognised, or otherwise, who contributes to the conversation on populism in even a slightly influential fashion to diagnose the phenomenon in a fashion that is responsible. While understanding that academic distance and objectivity must be maintained when engaging with emerging phenomena, we find that Mudde's descriptive manner of interacting with populism is something of a disservice to both academia and to the possibility for the creation through dialogue of a middle ground in an increasingly polarised world. He automatically created a space for the normalisation of the idea of populism to both breathe and to flourish, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by maintaining an equivocational approach through description and prediction: there are only two sides to the populace and this seems to be an either/or fallacy. In light of this, we would like to dedicate the sections that follow to the identification and explanation of four specific points of contention that we have found within Mudde's work.

The role of elites and their relation to the general population

Mudde claims that

> [P]opulism is best defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde 2015, 2).

The reflexive omission of the subject position of authors writing about the phenomenon of populism is quite telling here. The question, when encountering a claim like this one, must be: Do populists oppose academics? If so, then why do academics continue to deploy the term and in what way does this insulate the academic communities from becoming despised by populists? Where do intellectuals come from, if not the populace at large?

We would like to leave these questions open.

The similarity between extreme left and extreme right parties

The second point of contention with Mudde (2015) that we have identified concerns the definition given of populism because it does not contain a defining feature; populism's lack of a core concept causes the nuance of any given situation to become lost to vagueness and this nuance-free characterisation results in our falling into the aforementioned structural trap of unbending binaries. It is also necessary here to accurately reflect upon the reality of the current state of public political and social opinion and to represent it. The missing feature to which we are referring is right-wing populism's characteristic strategy of relying upon exaggeration, false information, and general untruths (Zehndorfer 2019) – this is a vital omission.

Ensuring the inclusion of the factor of infidelity to truth, when making a clear definition for specifically right-wing populists, allows us to more accurately understand the current rise of populism internationally and why it is so attractive; it is necessary to reflect on the very meaning of truth, its employment in political rhetoric, and how untruths are received by the public. However, to understand this, we must first identify the combination of rhetorical strategies that make right-wing populists unique, given that we cannot understand the effect of employing misinformation without also understanding charisma. Referring to Mudde's claim, and by pointing out that many successful non-populists are charismatic, this does not take into account the specific form of populists' charisma, which is centred on either incorrect information or on information taken out of context to benefit the politician.

In view of this, the omission of truth and the central role played by misinformation necessitate the view that populist leaders take on a different level of importance because what they are describing is sensational or dangerous or less commonplace. The not-so-secret formula pertinent to right-wing populism that Mudde fails to mention often consists of lies spoken confidently. This also replicates the binary found previously where the matter of whether or not something is thin-centred is something that depends on the subject position occupied on the phenomenon. Examining the role of this formula and its effects on voters and the public allows us to observe that this generates not just the support that a voter has for a candidate, but something much more personal: belief (Good 1993) While it exceeds the parameters of the present work, it remains no less important: Belief is not comprised of the same material as science.

This gives rise to problems when the majority of voters, not just populist ones, confuse the two concepts because it is exponentially more difficult to argue against the

former than it is the latter. However, and as examined below, there are still some efforts to re-litigate the scientificity of science (Mathers 2020). In this observation lies the deepest problem that populism creates in a polarised society; we will adopt the assumption here that polarisation is at once a circumstance, merely circumscribing an environment, and also a factor actively affecting populism as a phenomenon. Following this line of logic, the reason to refer to more than just populist supporters is specifically to emphasise that populism is not a contained phenomenon and it can, in fact, be observed, criticised, and opposed by a great many people, even if it is not the 51% necessary to win. In terms of differentiating between a belief and an empirically supported statement, we can observe the quality that a sentiment propagated by a political figure in a campaign can suddenly take on: it is different from the quality a simple policy point would normally have and is enveloped by personal conviction and is adopted by voters as inherently good for them, thereby allowing for this sentiment (belief) to grow deep roots in an individual. From this point, we can digress into a constellated conversation that is rich with potential on the topic of how to assuage devoted voters with convictions (beliefs) based on misinformation delivered with charisma, but it is not a discussion that can be detailed in the present work.

What is central to this discussion is the importance of recognising the difference between left- and right-wing populism, specifically concerning the factor of truth and the right-wing's infidelity to what should be a cornerstone to any active political group gaining traction in our democracy-oriented liberal international order. This begins by taking issue with the preconceived tenets of the ideas that critics and commentators inherit. The following point aims to tackle this concern.

The *volonté générale* or 'will of the people'

Mudde claims that the *volonté générale* (the will of the people) is a real thing, not a pretext of a type used to rationalise undertakings such as the January 6th Insurrection in the United States or the resistance to COVID-19 vaccinations and the requirement to wear masks (cf. Mathers 2020).

The main problem that we raise with respect to this observation perfectly reflects the broader theme that we flagged previously – the oversimplification of the inherently and necessarily complex can only lead to ruin; in this case, this involves the erosion of the middle ground between two supposedly extreme opposite groups, groups only supposed due to the language that is used to describe them. This oversimplification is aided by the use of the concept of the *volonté généra*le as it is the equivalent of a blanket – not only does it cover a large number of people, but it does so with a pejorative connotation. We can take the context of COVID-19 to create a parallel between Mudde claiming the existence of a *volonté générale* and right-wing claims

that left-wing supporters were 'sheep' for wearing masks or accepting to get vaccinated against COVID-19. This use of a label can be considered a code that only serves to reinforce the creation of the extreme nature of the binary enforced by Mudde.

The important point is not what we would find if we looked past the hostile connotation of the term *volonté générale*, though it is critical to advertise that in this piece, we do not argue in favour of right-wing policies, beliefs, or rhetoric. What we are making clear here is the contribution made by the alleged existence of the *volonté générale* to the furthering of an extreme binary and the impossibility of creating space for middle ground as the term is simply a label that holds a great deal of power in cementing the binaries by which it is employed.

In fact, by employing the concept of *volonté générale*, which by definition could refer to undertakings such as the American January 6th Insurrection, it prevents making any form of more nuanced, analytical efforts to productively diagnose, and to potentially remedy, what could be a symptom of a deeper societal or political issue: sticking with the example of the January 6th Incident, dismissively attributing it to the wrongful *volonté générale* effectively destroys the possibility of the dissection and understanding of the details of what was a critical point in American democracy. This destruction of the possibility of understanding (in the sense meant by Max Weber), of course, simultaneously negates its being used to ameliorate the circumstances that led to the insurrection happening in the first place (Tucker 1965).

Populism is a 'thin-centred ideology'

Another minor point of contention might be raised by the question of what exactly a 'thin-centred' ideology is, given that many things can either appear thin or thick depending on one's connection with the specific coding of the undertaking being examined; this is a phenomenon that was first outlined over fifty years ago in the work of Clifford Geertz (1973). Taking inspiration from English philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle, Geertz takes the phenomenon of winking and distinguishes it from blinking; the former undertaking is intentional and rich with a type of coding and the latter is bereft of it. The impossibility of discerning from the outside whether what is being examined contains meaning or not, in the case of understanding populism itself, leaves open the concern that a type of populist undertaking *may or may not mean something*. This is a disheartening position from which to launch an investigation into, and to parenthetically revive, the practice of dialogue.

The view that populism is a 'thin-centred ideology' is rather an incorrect category-related and self-serving claim. Framing populism as an ideology presents it as a theoretical framework that informs both decisions and realities, rather than a strategy that can and has been employed for those who are or wish to be in power. Edward

Said, in his op-ed 'The Clash of Ignorance' (2001), proposes that, for ideas such as this (his example concerns the War of the Worlds), it is

> '[B]etter to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis.' (Said 2001).

Said criticises Huntington in a fashion similar to our view of Mudde's work. Hypothesising abstractions to account for foundational antagonism within societies renders them as either normal or the 'new normal.' This is itself an oversimplified binary that does not generate informed analysis and that runs the risk of both propagating and galvanising ignorance. Said argues that such ideas are better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critically engaging with the ways of the world today: it leaves too little room for further dialogue. Nevertheless, Said is mistaken here in his suggestion that the likes of Huntington and Mudde are attempting to better understand the world with their 'Clash of Civilisations' rhetoric. As touched upon previously, it is not a hypothesis that seeks to diagnose the way in which the world operates, it is rather a prescription and justification for how they perceive the world should be – a roadmap of a type. That is exactly the context in which these conceptions are being seen and applied in our world today. The problem is less with the idea itself and more with the fashion in which it is interpreted and the effects that this might have on the possibilities for dialogue.

To reiterate, it seems to us that Huntington's supposition was a self-fulfilling prophecy; he was right about the outcome because his philosophy was a roadmap for domination and exploitation. In a sense, the more people adhere to and subscribe to the 'Clash of Civilisations', the more likely such a clash is to come about. Said's critiques of Huntington's reductionist, monolithic view of civilisations also apply to Mudde's ideas, given that Mudde's dichotomy also oversimplifies the complex realities by making bellicose statements for the purpose of mobilising collective passions, as it has done. What is critically important to note about Mudde's argument is that it both describes the rise of populism and simultaneously implicitly prescribes it as the acceptable norm, as something that needs to be understood so as not to ignore the *volonté générale*. Such extremes are vast abstractions that omit an informed analysis of the praxis at hand within Said's framework.

Both Mudde and Huntington reduce political landscapes into binary strife. Huntington sees a world of civilisational clashes, while Mudde reinforces the view that there is a political struggle between the 'elite' and the 'people' within societies. In a classic orientalist fashion, Huntington pushes the notion that civilisations are mono-

lithic and homogeneous, self-contained and non-contradictory. Much like Huntington's cultural essentialism, Mudde's approach arguably further polarizes extremes. Mudde presents populism as a normalised response to elites, mirroring Huntington's assertion of the inevitable civilisational conflict as a knee-jerk disposition.

By equating extremes, we risk normalising polar positions and oversimplifying the complexities of political identity. Mudde's harmful equivocation that extremes of any sort are, ultimately, regrettable in terms of political belonging serves to normalise them, ignores the scale of atrocity, and reductively and disparagingly makes the occupation of one of two extreme positions seem like the only option. The effect is that life and political belonging are a simple matter of lot-throwing, rather than the intentional and characteristically *human* by-product of dialogue (Levinas 1969).

Conclusion

In all, this work has aimed to redistribute the general interest in categorising broad and emergent social enterprises in the fashion of antagonistic binaries carried out through an analysis of populism's effect. This has been executed by first bringing to bear older insights from classical anthropological structuralism. It is our view that structuralism is a significantly less binaristic undertaking than is commonly recognised and that it is an enterprise that has tackled oversimplified representations of human expressions of genius (such as in the example of the Totem). Analysts who aim to simplify expressions and understandings of the social world into one of two types reduce and render antagonistic that which must necessarily not be understood in this way in order to give humanity a chance to escape the deadening social paralysis caused by blindly adhering to restrictive binaries.

Populism and the clash of civilisations run similar risks. Each term sets the analyst apart, allowing them to accrue social relevance in the domain of international relations through citations and reputation. Populism is a troubled term, though, and its view that antagonism is normal, not just between people groups (as Huntington had claimed), but *within them*, needs to be rejected in a fashion similar to Said's rejection of Huntington's view. Populism has become a code, one deployed by academics such as Mudde to characterise one of two types of extremisms (one with which we might share sympathies and one that we might not and that this difference depends only on one's perspective). However, we firmly claim that this is a harmful misrepresentation of the foregoneness of the conclusion of the divisions in and between people.

Dialogue requires meta-conceptual interrogations, as we have seen throughout this work, where one concept is disembedded and reinterpreted anew in order for dialogue to thrive. It is vital not only to interrogate the fashion and fora in which we engage with others, but also the scientific lexicon used to understand different types

of actors. The scientificity of terms that place people at odds with one another and that make antagonism seem normal in specific needs to be critiqued. The demonstrability of these terms cannot be contingent on historical events that unfold in a time after their publication either, retroactively proving them true, without recognising that these are potential forecasts of behaviour and are as likely to prove true as untrue. This recognition might prove a useful tool to fuel genuine dialogue, something lodged or concealed within the recognition that theorists and external commentators do not get to determine or prefigure our political belonging or condemn us to binaries if we can find another way to see each other.

The term 'populism' remains ambiguous and uncertain, despite nearly a decade of popular use and widespread application. We take issue with its occasionally uncritical application and, through our discussion of structuralism and caution toward Mudde's characterisation of populism, aim to highlight the risks of oversimplification and of overly descriptive language. Specifically, we argue that Mudde's self-reinforcing definitions leave little room for a middle ground or for meaningful dialogue. As a result, we are left uncertain about whether populism is a valid and empirically demonstrable ideology, one that may be sincerely felt and deeply rooted when viewed from perspectives other than our own. After all, dialogue does not thrive in oppositionally-minded environments.

The concept of populism itself is precisely as guilty of the kind of empty categorisations in an age of extremes that it aims to better understand through these self-same abstractions. What is beyond dispute is that it is not conducive to finding a way through words among diverse peoples.

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