What's Wrong With Populism?
Basic Modules for an Immanent Critique

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Donald Trump, the Alternative for Germany and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: These movements and leaders seriously threaten the positive connotation of populism as a movement which aims at representing the political underdog. At the very same time, the European left pinned their hopes on, for example, Podemos or Syriza, which also are labeled as populistic. This confusion about the normative evaluation of populism is dublicated within political philosophy. Concerning the normative conceptualization of populism, this field is marked by a crucial split: While one tradition of theories connected to Ernesto Laclau conceives of populism as the democratic movement per se, the other, younger school of thought envisages populism as a major threat to democracy. Focusing on this second wave of philosophical engagement with populism, I will argue that these argumentations are restricted in their scope as they use liberal values for a merely external critique. Introducing an immanent mode of criticism, the persuasiveness of the conclusion -that there is something wrong with populism- should be expanded. As an outlook, I will sketch an application of this kind of criticism to the US American case of populism.

Introduction

In huge red letters the self-made sign reads as: "*Make Racism Wrong Again*". It is August and in Bergen, Norway, protesters gathered together in order to counterfight another political march which is happening today. *SIAN* (whose acronym stands for *Stopp Islamiseringen av Norge*) is in town and wants to warn the public of an assumed "islamization of Norway". Also in Norway, right-wing populism is not only a social movement. Forming the coalition in government responsibility, the *Fremskrittspartiet* (Progress Party) together with the conservative party, cuts formerly existing gender-equalizing policies such as "liberalizing" parental leave and pushes forward a more and more restrictive immigration and asylum-policy (Bjerkem 2016). In Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) polarizes the society and runs a revisionist ideology towards the Shoah and devastating views on gender equality. In Eastern Europe as well as in Turkey, ultra-nationalist populist governments cancel the rule of law. And not to be silent about the one whose name nowadays better is launched with a trigger warning, the president of the United States of America holds alliances with the white supremacist *Militia* movement. But also as a rather new research field for normative political philosophy, populism gains attention. Populism, as it is argued here, poses a threat or a boost to democracy: An exclusively defined "people" is

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confronted with an outlandish elite, the political opposition is delegitimized, minority rights disrespected and patterns of democratic ways to communicate violated (Urbinati 2013, Müller 2016, Stanley 2016). By stark contrast, others claim that in bringing the underdog back in the political sphere and debate, in setting a radically other political agenda, in publicly pointing out to recent shortcomings of the governmental parties in charge, populism can indeed revitalize democracies (Laclau 2005a, 2005b). Regardless of the theories' own rhetorical frames, I think one can indeed identify a consensus here: Plurality and equality are key political values which are at stake. As I will argue, taking these liberal values as the normative horizon of an external critique, both strands of argumentations fail in addressing the relevant agents as well as the inner tensions of populism itself. My hypothesis is: Populism does not need to be contrasted with idealized democracy in order to be criticized. A much thicker criticism can be derived when using another strategy, namely an immanent or reconructive critique. In the end, my hope is that these insights can contribute to constructing a both more complex description and convincing critique of populism. Then, these insights can sketch the way out of the populist age: If there is something inherently wrong with populism, promoting a left-wing populism as a counterpart for right-wing populism does not seem attractive. Due to the character of the question I am interested in, also my approach is interdisciplinary: both normatively inspired and empirically informed. In the first part of this paper I want to overview the contemporary landscape of philosophical evaluations of populism in reconstructing Müller and Urbinati as zwo dominant theories. Uniting these theories in one more formalized argumentation, I will show the strengths and weaknesses. In the second part of my paper, I want to tackle one of the weaknesses. As I will argue, this restricted scope of argumentative force is based on an external mode of criticism, which I aim to overcome by presenting a contemporary model of immanent critique. In the third part of this paper I will sketch an application of this mode of critique to the US American case of populism.

Populism and Democracy – Beloved Enemies?

In contemporary normative political theory, I think that one can see two major waves of engagement with the phenomenon of populism. The first is heavily influenced by Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism. Here, populism is able to unite unsatisfied political demands in a stronger chain or set of unsatisfied demands – which thereby become powerfully articulated political battle cries. This conception of populism carries a positive connotation when Laclau writes: that "the end of populism coincides with the end of politics" (Laclau 2005b: 67). Without doubt, his occupation with populism as a real world phenomenon derives from political developments of these days, namely the uprising of various leftwing political governments in Latin America. I think also in his theory one can identify normative values, even though the theory is not openly normative. Plurality of political demands, counterfighting political interests I think can also be articulated as liberal values. However, in what follows I will focus on two other philosophers, who established very potent, if

not to say popular, theories of populism, Nadia Urbinati and Jan-Werner Müller. These two philosophers belong to the second wave of contemporary philosophical investigations of populism, which critically accompanies right-wing populist up springs in the political West since 2010. Here, populism is compared to western liberal democracies.

Normative political theory typically asks questions like: Is populism a desirable political style? Why is it or what makes it superior to other political forms of government, of designing policies – both in a process or output-oriented way? But to finding thesis directing to answering these questions, one needs to know what populism actually is in the first place. I am aware that this poses a major epistemological problem. This is so, because every historically informed attempt to identify populism must be biased in the sense that it already needs distinctive assumptions about what populism is and "where to look at in history" in order to developing a concept of it. Because of this epistemic and methodological difficulty, I will stick to a minimal definition of populism. It is minimal in the sense that it does not conceive of populism as a holistic political agenda or ideology, but rather shows two necessary conditions for a political ideology to be populist. Even if, taken together, they are also sufficient conditions for a political ideology to be populist, "populist" then is no complete description of the political agenda itself. However, the minimal definition I take as a basis for this paper states a fundamental split between the people and the elites. The people, imagined as a homogeneized political subject, is thought of as somehow betrayed by the – possibly outlandish – elites. This ideology, where the people is thought of as a unified, homogeneous social arrangement, is however thin as "there is limited potential in these core concepts for populism alone address 'the famous who gets what, when, how' question that is seen to be central to politics" (Stanley 2008: 106). Now it is time to go one step further and ask the normative question: If this is what populism is, or what is the populist part of a specific political agenda or ideology, what, if anything is wrong with populism? In what follows I will present and reconstruct in more detail Jan-Werner Müllers influential view on populism as well as Nadia Urbinatis illuminating and historically sound account.

Populism as a Threat for Democracy

> "Think of Victor Orbán claiming after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections that 'the nation cannot be in opposition'; or think of Andreś Manue López Obradir, arguing, after his failed bid for the Mexican presidency in 2006, that 'the victory of the right is morally impossible' (…); or think of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan insisting in the face of rather strong empirical evidence that Turkish citizens were protesting against his policies in Gezi Park that the protesters did not belong to the Turkish people. In short, the logic of populism is not: we are the 99%. It is: we are the 100%." (Müller 2014: 487)

Using these quotes as empirical starting points, Müller argues that populism in a nutshell is "a particular moralistic imagination of politics" (Müller 2014: 485). This imagination of politics, articulated in typical populist statements, is

in more detail characterized through the following features: Firstly and most importantly, it dismisses the claim to political power of every other party; when it is assumed that "we", namely populists and their supporters are "the 100%", then it is impossible to have a legitimate opposition. Interestingly, the German party "Alternative für Deutschland" makes the move of describing itself on twitter as the only oppositional party.[1] This anti-pluralistic tendency is not only directed towards possible parties forming a government, but also applied on the actual political subject, which ought to be represented by politicians – the people. This assumption at least holds true for representative democracies. According to Müller, populists refer in a normative, yet contra-factual way to the political constituent, the people (Müller 2016: 19f.): They do not conceive of the people in the legal manner as the amount of people who actually are entitled to vote within a specific territory. Rather, they construct the people as a very specific group of persons, which is already associated with specific political and religious claims – most often related to conservative, nationalist imaginations of authentic inhabitants of the country (Müller 2014: 485f.). One especially illuminating example for this is the controversy about Barack Obama's birth certificate: "in the eyes of the 'birthers', the president is in fact a usurper, a foreigner, someone who has appropriated office under false pretexts" (Müller 2014: 486). What is crucial here is that populists have a certain image of the people, which is insofar moral or normative, as it must be extracted from within the people. At the very same time, this real people is constructed as a victim: of foreign nation's interest or of corrupt elites (Müller 2015: 489). These elitist and/or foreign powers hindered in a populist narrative the real will of the people to come into presence. Along with the – imagined – uniform social identity of the people comes also its political will:

> "(...) Populism crucially relies on the notion that there is a distinct common good, that the people can discern and will it, and that a politician or a party or, for that matter, a movement, can unambiguously implement such a conception of the common good as policy." (Müller 2014: 486)

Müller explains that the common good for populists is so obvious, no democratic participation is needed: Who the people is and what it wants is given as a pre-political factum (Müller 2015: 84). Now, this only needs to be realized through the right representative (see ibid.). Who this person is, again in a populist self-conception (identified by Müller) is independently from democratic elections: Due to Müllers understanding of populists, the right representative is just a matter of fact, as the real will of the real people is given (recall, for example, Donald Trumps announcement before the official outcome of the counts in 2016 was declared, that he would not accept the election if it was not him to win the presidential election).

What was said so far referred to populism on the level of self-conception and ideology. But Müller goes one step further and also provides an account on what populist will do, connected to their rhetoric and self-image, once they have to power to govern. This populist practice can be summed up in three

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[1]See: Alternative für DE, Twitter, https://bit.ly/2ASB72J, [accessed 09.08.2018].

steps: colonize the state and judiciary with their partisans; engage in clientelism in exchange for broad political support, suppress opposition within civil society to maintain the illusion of a unified people (Müller 2016: 44ff.). All these patters of populist policies can be directly linked with the very core of populist ideology on Müller's terms: I and only I represent the people in pursuing its real and authentic will. Therefore, other representatives or other parties need to be dismissed, opposition is theoretically impossible and morally disqualified due to the assumption of the one, real and authentic people.

To sum up Müller's characterization of populists, on an ideological level we can say the following: Populism is a moralistic imagination of politics. Moralistic in that sense, that the people, the will of the people and their representatives are conceived of as a given fact and that there is only one legitimate political subject – the real, uniform people. On the more practical level, Müller predicts populist to "occupy" the state as well as the media and suppress its opponents.

Now, how can we conceive of the relationship between populism and democracy? If these three patterns of policies which are attributed to populists by Müller, were to put into radical praxis, it seems to be clear that the outcome would be undemocratic: An omnipotent government, which rules or suppresses the media and its opponents. As stated above, these forecasted populist policies relate to the main ideological claim of populists, in that they and only they are the legitimate representatives of the people. Given this radicalness, one does not even has to ask to which precise concept of democracy one is sympathetic to: acceptance of other opinions and parties as well as the outcomes of votes are necessary conditions of deliberative, republican or liberal concepts of democracy.

Populism: Internal and Parasitical to Democracy

Populism as a tendency, rather than a pathologicalized alter ego of the idealized democracy – this pattern can be found in Nadia Urbinati's research on populism. Nadia Urbinati concludes that populism is both: parasitical on and internal to representative democracy (Urbinati 2013: 137). Her theory of populism therefore situates itself in a rather transverse position towards Müller and Laclau. Albeit they differ in the normative judgment on populism, the other two strands of theories take democracy and populism in their cores as different phenomena. At the same time, one can identify clear similarities between those critiques of populism and Urbinati's conception of it, when she gives the characterization of populism:

> "(…) A populist movement that succeeds in leading the government of a democratic society tend to move toward institutional forms and a political reorganization of the state that change, and even shatter constitutional democracy, like centralization of power, weakening of checks and balances, disregards of political oppositions, and the transformation of election in a plebiscite of the leader". (Urbinati 2013: 137).

So the question of interest is again: How does she conceptualize populism? It is important to keep in mind that this question itself is twofold: The way she derives a concept of populism and the content of this conception. Urbinati conducts an historical perspective (Urbinati 2013: 137). She focuses on US-America and Europe as spheres of her historical investigation. She does not start with rather recent populist phenomena, but undertakes a long travel backwards in history, 2,500 years back: She traces the birth of the phenomenon back to the Roman republic. Here, the idea of the people as populus was born: At the Romean Forum, the people as a crowd could cheer or boo towards politicians who seek support for their power plans in front of them (Urbinati 2013: 151). From this starting point, she then follows historians in the identification of various moments in history, which are classified as populist. Napoleon Bonaparte as the first populist leader who skillfully used media as means of promoting his own ends of imperial ambitions and his politics of reconciliation with catholicism; the spread of Christianity in North America during the "Great Awakenings" as popular movements, challenging interpretations of the bible which has been conceived of as elitist; the rise of the People's Party as in its core critical to the financial sector and holding alliances with the labor movement; the fascism of Bendito Mussolini and his aim of mobilizing the masses; until she arrives at the present. Interpreting these populist phenomena along the lines of history, Urbinati presents populism finally as a political phenomenon with the following set of features:

> "a) the exaltation of the sovereignity of the people as a condition for a politics of sincerity or transparency or purity against the quotidian practice of compromise and bargaining that politicians pursue; b) the appeal to, or affirmation of the correctness and even the right of the majority against any minority, political or otherwise (in Europe, populism feeds strong discriminatory ideologies against cultural, gender, religious and linguistic minorities); c) the idea that politics entails oppositional identity or the construction of a 'we' against a 'them', and d) the sanctification of the unity and homogeneity of the people versus any parts of it." (Urbinati 2013: 147)

Now, two further questions have to be asked to understand her argument: In what sense is populism inherent to, and in what sense parasitical on, representative democracy? I will start to outline the ideological and structural patterns of populism which justify the conclusion: Populism is parasitical on representative democracy.

In order to answer this question, one needs an account of what representative democracy is. Albeit Urbinati is not entirely explicit about that in her own essay, one can extract key patterns of representative democracy when reading that "populism holds the multi-party system in great suspicion; hence, it is a denial of electoral representation, which is the main institution or set of institutions through which procedural democracy is implemented" (Urbinati 2013: 147). Besides political pluralism in the sense of a multi-party system and representation through the means of elections, Urbinati emphasizes the role of minority rights in a representative democracy (Urbinati 2013: 137) as a key characteristic that "democratic procedures intrinsically presume and promote"

(Urbinati 2013: 138). Crucial to the protection and realization of those minority rights, but obviously also for the other core patterns of the form of democracy Urbinati contrasts populism with, are democratic institutions, above all, strong and independent legal institutions (Recall Trumps attack on the judges here.). I understand strong in that they successfully can defend the constitution, even if a majority of the people at a time does not support it, and independent its autonomy towards the executive strand of government. Representative democracy, thus, is only what it is when it pays sufficiently attention to suffrage, independent legal institutions, and the plurality of politics – both in the sense of a heterogeneous people in terms of minority rights and plurality in the spectrum of political parties.

Now, it is easy to see the enemitical feature of the relationship between representative democracy and populism as they are sketched here: Populism's ideology is one of a united people, by means of unification and exclusion of unwanted groups of the people or minorities. This ideology stands in stark contrast the ideology/idea and prerequisite of democracy which emphasizes plurality of the people, minority rights and plurality of political parties. If populism sets the will of the majority on the top of politics to be sincere and authentic, the idea of restricting forces such as legal institutions and a constitution is unnecessary and in fact poses a hindrance to "the real will of the real people". And due to the sharp and unsolvable distinction in identities and interests regarding who belongs to the real people and who should be set apart, populism denies the inclusive forces of political institutions that can mediate conflicts.

Now I will turn to elaborating on the second part of the conclusion Urbinati draws: Even though populism is opposed to core values of representative, constitutional democracy, she calls it inherent to this interpretation of democracy. How can we get a more substantial grasp on this? Her argumentation is twofold: Both in a systematical manner, populism only can develop in such democracies and in a historical manner, we can see that populism was born first of all within a republican democracy – the Romean republic. In a broad sense, one can relate populism and democracy in saying that both are "playing the same game" for the goal of identification of representatives and represented and in that sense populism is a member of the family of democracy (Urbinati 2013: 143). The metaphor of the family also can be used when saying that it only can exist, once its parents offer a fruitful environment to develop:

> "Populism is not a revolutionary force. Because: it does not create people's souvereignity, but intervenes once it exists and its values and rules are written in a constitution. Populism represents an appeal to the people within a political order in which the people is formally already the sovereign. (…) Populism does not create democracy." (Urbinati 2013: 146)

Drawing on Aristotle's theory of the circle of governmental forms of rule, she points out to populism as a permanent possibility of representative, constitutional democracy in that both – democracy and demagoguery in Aristoteles' terms – rely on public speech and opinion, as well as majoritarian-

nism (Urbinati 2013: 145). To conclude: Populism is parasitical in Urbinati's account. This framing of populism as a parasite already hints to two opposed patterns – it is inherent in and opposed to democracy in the sense of its representative and constitutional features. Historically, populism's rise was connected to the first democracy – the Romean Republic. In a systematic manner, it can be understood as a permanent possibility in democracies in their use of majoritarianism and a party system.

United against Populism: Urbinati and Müller in one Key Argument

Taken together, I think one can rationally reconstruct those two dominant theories of populism – Jan-Werner Müller and Nadia Urbinati – in one line. This is not to say, that this argument as such can be found in one of the respective texts in the form I present it here. But this is to say, that, taken together, such an argumentation is can grasp the essence – both in the content of the premises as well as their argumentative procedure – of contemporary normative philosophies on populism. What the argumentation borrows from Urbinati is its focus on minority rights (see first and second premise), what it includes of Müller the emphasis of legitimate opposition (see premise 1. and 2.). Heterogeneity and plurality as normative frames is present in both theories.

1. Populist ideology is anti-pluralistic respectively the composition of the "people" and its political interests and pursues the rule of the (manipulated) public opinion over suffrage and the authoritative will as well as denying the possibility of legitimate opposition.
2. In order for a political unity to be a representative democracy, it has to emphasize minority rights, a diarchic structure and an electoral system as well as embrace opposition.
3. If populists occupy representative institutions and become governmental parties, they will implement their ideology in concrete policies.
4. These policies (see premise 1.) undermine the main characteristics of representative democracies (see premise 2.)
5. Conclusion: (Governmental) Populism undermines representative democracy.

This argument, even if it cuts off interesting insights and details, aims to be stronger than every single argumentation within one of the theories – directed towards the same conclusion – for it tries to counteract shortcomings of one theory with strengths of the others. I want to elaborate on the conclusion of the forwarded argumentation. This is no objection in a strict sense, as it does not challenge one or more premises. But even though the argument shown above is formally valid, an uneasy questions remains open: Is this conclusion really innovative? How is it informative and in which manner? And: To whom is this argumentation directed to? My answer to these questions can be sketched like this: The argument reconstructed above is clearly located I a liberal political tradition. This is limits to scope of its force to convince people – both theorists and actual populists or populist supporters – drastically: If you are a (leftist)

liberal, you accept the argument and hold the conclusion as true. At the same time, this conclusion might leave you somewhat unsatisfied because it is not in itself action-guiding – and this is what I conceive of the aim of practical respectively political philosophy. Now, if you are a socialist or communist, this argumentation would hold true for you but you probably would pose another set of norms that constitute another political system as a milestone for contrasting populism, and in the argumentation as a second premise; therefore, this argumentation might simply not be of great value for you. Now, what if you are a populist? My guess here is that you would accept every single premise (despite the pejorative wording when it comes to populism, populists and their supporters) and therefore the conclusion, too. But would you be convinced that populism is something which needs to be thought of critically, which needs to be fought against by parliamentary and non-parliamentary means of politics, whose ideology is highly problematic, to put it frankly, or neo-fascist? Probably not: Populists do not want to support the rights of refugees, of migrants, of women, of transgender people. Populists do not claim to support the established institutions of representative democracy. Populism, taken as a social movement, is not about celebrating suffrage. Populists can happily embrace the conclusion shown above. This is why we need another philosophically sound and politically convincing strategy to say what is wrong with populism.

Another Mode of Criticism

> "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
> (The English Standard Version Bible 2009, Luke 23:34)

The approach of this paper is to develop a criticism of populism which not only speaks to liberal democrats: Even if only as a possibility, the developed approach shall be sound to persons holding sympathies with voting for populist parties or joining populist marches. Also on more strategic grounds, such an approach is needed: In the US-American case, an array of CEOs and billionaires like Apple's Tim Cook have spoken out against Donald Trump and emerged as surprisingly strong champions of an inclusive US society: at least when it comes to immigration, race and gender (see Callahan 2017). The problem in terms of the scope of liberal criticisms expands also through this performative act: If exactly parts of the "elites" who are typically accused for being corrupt and simply elitist then blame populists for exactly the same reasons liberal philosophers blame them, the criticism might also be rejected on this ground.

The path of the immanent critique, so I will argue, is superior to other ways of criticizing populism. Due to this overall ambition, this section of my paper has to provide answers to the following three questions: What is immanent criticism or which kind of immanent criticism is it that I want to use? How and why is this, as I stated before, superior to other ways of criticizing populism? And finally, how does it work in a more practical manner, how can it be applied to the field of interest here?

Historical and Systematic Overview

To understand the critical drive of the school of theories which use "immanent criticisms", a systematic and historical overview is helpful. After that, I will present one version of the by no means homogeneous stream of immanent criticisms. In the broader picture of this thesis, this theory of immanent critique will then be used in practice when identifying the socio-political context in which populisms arise with the US American case. In what follows, I draw heavily on Robin Celikates' classifications of the two opponent methods of political or social theory formation (Celikates 2009: ch. 1 and 2).

When it comes to criticism directed towards social or political phenomena, until the 1980ies one could speak of two major camps within philosophy. What unites theories committed to immanent criticisms, in my view, is their identification of shortcomings of these formerly dominant streams of theories. In other words, immanent criticisms can be conceived of as an attempt of overcoming the failures of this dichotomous split in either external or internal criticism.

One very influential stream of theories can be labeled as "orthodox criticisms of ideology". This approach seeks to answer the questions of what is and what is wrong with and within a society broadly speaking in such a manner: How the people act is due to them being in grip by a false ideology. They cannot know about this mechanism, because they are trapped within the practical. In this picture, the members of the group or society which is to be criticized are constructed as "judgmental dopes", as Celikates puts it. Their actions, which then can imply: establishing policies and institutions, vote for political parties, joining marches, to name some possible actions on the macro-level, but also the way they behave within smaller units such as the family or peer-groups, can be explained entirely through a description of their ideologies. The role of the external scientific sociologist, political theorist or philosopher, in this picture, is then to make visible what must remain unseen from the involved actors' point of view.

They, particularly because they are not involved in the social and political happenings, are not distracted or blinded by the flashing lights of false ideologies. What the judgmental dopes themselves offer as their interpretation of what, if anything, is wrong at a given situation does not contribute to developing a criticism of the respective social arrangement, because it is necessarily wrong, misguided through false ideology.

Now, directed to this strong version of external critique, one can at least articulate four concerns (again, here I follow Celikates 2009: 76): a normative concern, a strategic objection, an empirical question and a major methodological shortcoming. Here, I will only sketch the normative and methodological objections. If we accept to respect each other as equals, as autonomous and politically mature counterparts, downgrading the objects of political studies or philosophical analyses in such a way that the object of the respective study, which happens to be humans in these disciplines, is not permitted. This is the normative concern. Now, one could argue that this is true but for reasons of scientific reasoning it is necessary and in this sense unavoidable, if we want to

continue with the project of scientific research in the social sciences and humanities.

But here comes the methodological objection: Societies and groups of people are a different kind of object than stones or those kinds of objects natural sciences are interested in: There is no social or political reality without prior interpretation of what is the case by the people actually involved, and that is to be done by the judgmental tropes themselves. That is to say that there cannot be such a thing as a political theory without including in one way or another, the self-description and self-conception of the people and groups one investigates and their interpretation of the phenomenon in question. The role of the theorist then, is a second-order hermeneutics: Interpreting the already interpreted social and political reality (Celikates 2009: 82).

For all that has been said about an orthodox way to criticize ideologies and societies, it may not come as a surprise that methodology in political theory and sociology underwent a major shift in the 1980's: the pragmatic or interpretative turn. While the orthodox criticism of ideology can be imagined as an uninvolved bystander of society, the theorist of the pragmatic turn can be imagined more like a journalist, interviewing the social actors for their interpretations and normative evaluations of the social situation, institution or dynamic which is in question. Obviously, the assumptions about these actors differ radically: The judgmental dope is substituted by a politically mature person, whose self-conception and (normative) interpretation about what is questioned is taken for granted.

We can also try to direct the objections raised against the orthodox view to evaluate this approach: The normative concern of not regarding the social actors as equals does not hold; but what about the methodological shortcoming? This was raised against the orthodox approach in pointing to the assumption that any theory-building concerned with societies or groups of human subjects necessarily needs to take into account – in some form – their self-conception and normative evaluation of the social complex in question. Again, this can be a social dynamic between different actors, the performance of some institutions of the mere description of them as a group.

So this is the first level of the second-order hermeneutics a social or political theory has to rely on. In this picture of pure adaptation of the interpretations of the social actors themselves, it seems that the second order misses. Of course, this is only a valid objection to this method if one shares the assumption that social and political theory indeed needs to proceed in this form of second-order hermeneutics, which theorists of the pragmatic camp might deny. Before making the case for the relevance of further theorizes the interpretations of the actors themselves in constructing a variation of immanent criticism suited for my approach here, I want to briefly recapture the two positions.

In a nutshell, the orthodox critic of ideology claims: "What is wrong with this or that situation can be seen, from an exclusively external standpoint. As soon as one gets involved, one gets blinded by ideologies and neither can conceive of the situation, nor put forward a valid criticism of it." The pragmatic critic, would reply, then: "Just go and ask them what is wrong with the social

situation or system you are interested in, then they will tell you!". These slogans are mutually exclusive. The actual objects of research differ: Orthodox critics of ideology are accused of holding them as "judgmental dopes". They, the persons or groups, who are at stake here, act in a manner that contradicts their actual, their real interests. By stark contrast, the pragmatic theorist only needs to have a close look at the actual statements, self-understandings or interpretations of the situations of the involved actors in order to get to know what, if anything is wrong. Closely connected to these characterizations of the actors involved, also the standpoint of the one who is asking: What is wrong with this social or that political situation, shifts: While we can imagine the orthodox as an interested bystander of the – possibly problematic – social context, the interpretative theorist gets involved in the event and enthusiastically reports and rephrases the criticisms and problematizations of the affected actors. Also in terms of the status of the normative judgments, values and evaluations of the situation both camps hold divergent views. The orthodox critic normatively measures the situation independently, and possibly contradictionary to self-descriptions of the involved actors or participants. To stick to the image of the interested bystander, they seemingly can pull the norms to evaluate the situation, which can also have systemic patterns, out of their pockets; whereas the pragmatic pretends to be a *tabula rasa* when it comes to normative biases and own moral judgments, only reporting what the participants said to be the case or the problem at stake. Here, only the norms which are already present in the social game can serve as normative guidelines.

Why Internal Critique is Not Exhausting

A second alternative – given that one was to formulate a critique in the first place – is to judge populists by their own statements and in that sense pursue a strategy of internal critique. If external critique would be the only other possibility to say something critical about populism, an internal approach seemed to be promising: Internal critique is interested in identifying open self-contradictions between articulated normative values and their realization. And not only individuals, but also institutions, corporations and whole political systems can be evaluated through this internal perspective: Institutions might embrace the value of gender equality and then only hire men, corporations might formally admit safe working conditions in their codes of conduct and then trade with firms violating those workers rights throughout their supply chain, nation-states can include the freedom of press in their constitution and censor journalists. Applied to my field of interest, one would then take populists and their supporters up on their own words, assumptions and goals. This clearly bears the advantage of affiliate directly to the already given convictions. In other words, the danger of talking past each other is not given.

But still, I think there are general disadvantages of this sort of criticism, which I will elaborate on now.

The deficits of an merely internal mode of criticism can be captured in saying that this is unable to transcend the already given social situation. So, to take a more extreme case one can ask: Why don't we criticize fascism from within, from an internal standpoint? Because then one could only argue from

within a fascist framework of ideology. The existence of human *races*, the primacy of the *white* race above others, the antiliberal and anticonservative impetus, the creation of a new mankind and the role of woman as mere reproductive forces: these are starlights of fascist ideology. Comparing fascist realities or tendencies with those ideals internal to fascist ideology, one ends up with conclusions like the following, if one was to criticize fascism from within: Frauke Petry as one of the former leading figures of the German populist party "AfD" was spending too much time in doing politics, she should have stayed at home for taking care of her family. Yet another one: it was a mistake by Italian fascism to downplay its antisemitic tendencies. I take it for granted that this is not a politically and morally sound option.

Immanent Critique: Suspicious and Understanding

Introducing a contemporary version of immanent critique, two questions can serve as guidelines in presenting the theory: What is immanent in the respective theory and how is it a critique? The goal of this theory is to provide a version of critical theory which sets itself free from the dogma of epistemic asymmetry and the epistemic divide between social actor and social/political theorist in centering around the reflective social actors, without getting rid of its critical demand. In one respect it can be said that Robin Celikates shares a crucial thesis about the social actors with the school of orthodox criticism of ideology: That these actors, who are the objects also of his proposed methodology, are wrong in their interpretations of the social reality. But, at the same time he claims as to stick to a "methodological egalitarianism" (Celikates 2009: 165). So how is this possible, then?

Starting off with contrasting orthodox theories of criticism of ideology and purely interpretative social theory methods, Celikates develops his theory which can be thought of as "postpragmatic" (Celikates 2009: 35ff.). In a nutshell, this version of immanent critique holds that the social actors are not to be constructed and produced as judgmental dopes and "dumb" simply because they are involved in the social happening and, therefore, necessarily in the grip of a flawed ideology. Rather, the social or political theorist has in general the very same set of possible tools for interpretating and potentially criticizing the social or political reality.

What Celikates borrows from the previously portrayed orthodox theories is the emphasis on the influence of ideologies on the way people act and think. At the very same time, he stresses the importance of the self-conceptions of the people involved. The key to understanding this possible tension is this: There can be structural patterns which more or less systematically hinder the evolution or actualization and use of the capability of subjects to critically examine their social context and politically produced circumstances. So in this picture it is still possible, that the actors are wrong when it comes to an interpretation of a social dynamic. But this does not derive from their fundamental inability to make sense of social or political nexus, but is due to external obstacles.

Celikates wants to provide a model of critical theory which proceeds in continuity with the social practices of self-understanding. So, in what ways is it that the self-conceptions of the actors come into play? This question can also be approached in a different manner: One key assumption of Celikates is that social actors are not merely judgmental dopes, neither fully rational, emancipated and enlightened individuals, who just have to be asked for their evaluation of the social problem in question. The qualified middle position holds that specific social and political conditions can enhance or hinder, sometimes even almost bloc the capability to critically investigate and fully grasp the social or political complication. At this point the question arises: How do we know which abilities or capabilities are needed to identify "the real social situation"? One could also frame this as a major objection to Celikates approach in saying that in the end it relies on a substantial list of capabilities the social actor would need to have in order to get their social situations right (Celikates himself is open on that, Celikates 2009: 170). The way out lies again in connecting the set of capabilities necessary to capture one social or political understanding of a situation to the demands of the affected people and their needs of capabilities to criticize their socio-political surroundings. One key lies in the identification of the needed capabilities on a formal, rather than substantial level (Celikates 2009: 170).

Because this is a crucial point and there might be disputes when it comes to the right translation, I will cite this passage directly and then paraphrase it afterwards:

> "Natürlich muss das Kriterium für die Zuschreibung von Vermögen beziehungs-weise Fähigkeiten, sollen diese nicht auf metaphysische Weise hypostasiert werden, auch hier letzlich das tatsächliche Verhalten der Akteure sein: Wir sind zu einer solchen Zuschreibung nur (aber auch: schon) dann berechtigt, wenn ihr Verhalten nur so (oder: so am besten) verstanden und erklärt werden kann."

So in this paragraph Celikates clarifies under which circumstances which deliberative capabilities should be assumed to be necessary to criticize a social problem. The criteria he proposes can be captured like this: Whatever capability necessarily needs to be assumed in order to make the best sense out of the actual behavior of the respective actors and give the best understanding as well as explication of it, is to be assumed.

To recapture this brand of immanent critique, I briefly want to answer the two questions: What is immanent in this approach and in what sense is it critical? The sense in which it is critical is twofold in my understanding: It is as well askant towards the interpretations of the actors as well as it is leery towards the socio-political context in which these utterances take place. So each of both variables, the self-interpretations and the social and political context, are in this sense open for social criticism.

Applying an Immanent Approach

Methodological egalitarianism, contradictions and tensions: How can we apply these buzzwords to an empirical phenomenon of (right-wing) populism? In this last part of my thesis I want to show the direction in which I think an immanent critique of populism has to go. Regardless if we focus more on the inner tensions of underdeveloped or misfigured normative standards within a specific ideology, or if we want to understand which social, economic, political or cultural patterns and material conditions enhance or hinder, enable or flaw the interpretations of the social or political reality – ideology –: the very first step needs to be the identification of the self-understandings and interpretations of the social actors, the political situation at stake. So what is the political situation at stake here? There are many possible layers and levels of possible investigation on such a broad political and sociological term as *populism*: Governments, parties not part of governments, single politicians, their voters, non voters, people on marches connected to populist governments – all these actors are possible choices of interviewees. In my thesis, I want to conduct the helplessly naive approach to develop a criticism of populism which is, in theory, suited to convince persons actually voting for populist parties or holding sympathies with them. This is why I take this level as an anker of investigating populism.

A First Level Interpretation

What is too huge of a task for this thesis was done in an illuminating way by Arlie Russel Hochschild – for te US-American case of (right-wing populism). Driven by the aim of bridging once the growing split between liberals and republicans and their supporters in US-America, she wanted to understand the political other – for her as a democrat, that is supporters of the Trump-administration (Hochschild 2016: ix). For her book "Strangers in Their Own Land", the American sociologist targeted sixty persons in total, 50% men and 50% women, all *white* from Lake Charles in Lousiana, a Tea Party stronghold. These people, who at the time were between 40 and 85 years old and have a middle class, lower middle class or working class background, all hold strong sympathies with the rather new US-American government.[2] "Targeting persons" in her approach means: Spending five years with them, as individuals or in groups, joining their meetings in churches, social come together or also marches. *Exploratory, hypothesis generating participant observation* are the academic terms to capture this approach (Hochschild 2016: 247f.). From all the interviews and experiences Hochschild made, she constructed a narrative, the "Deep Story" (Hochschild 2016: 135). As she writes, "the *Deep Story* itself removes judgment, insofar as it is a description of

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[2]Sticking to the idea of populism as a thin ideology, I take the US-American Tea Party as a social movement and a party to be populist, as it shows all necessariy conditions: Assuming a fundamental split in the real people and elites, while politics should be an expression of the will of the real people. What is more, the modern Tea Party shows a clear anti-establishment rethoric. See for a discussion of the Tea Parties´ populism in more general: Walter Russell Mead 2011: The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy: What Populism Means for Globalism.

how things feel, the subjective prism through which people see the world" (Hochschild 2016: 135). And the reality feels like this:

> "You are situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not. Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line. Many in the back of the line are people of color—poor, young and old, mainly without college degrees. It's scary to look back; there are so many behind you, and in principle you wish them well. Still, you've waited a long time, worked hard, and the line is barely moving. You deserve to move forward a little faster. (…) The source of the American Dream is on the other side of the hill, hidden. Has the economy come to a strange standstill? Is my company doing okay? Will I get a raise this year? Are there good jobs for us all? Or just a few? Will we be waiting in line forever? It's so hard to see over the brow of the hill. (…) Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you! You're following the rules. They aren't. As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches, and they hold a certain secret place in people's minds, as we see below. Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers - where will it end? Your money is running through a liberal sympathy sieve you don't control or agree with. (…) 'Crazy redneck.' 'White trash.' 'Ignorant Southern Bible-thumper.' You realize that's you they're talking about. You hear these terms on the radio, on television, read them on blogs. The gall. You're offended. You're angry. And you really hate the endless parade of complainers encouraged by a 1960s culture that seems to have settled over the land. (…) You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel—and feel seen as—moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward."
>
> (Hochschild 2016: 137ff.)

A Second Order Interpretation

Now, in a second step I want to try to adapt a broader perspective, inspired by an immanent criticism of Celikates, and ask which barriors to critical engagement and catalysis for flawed ideologies could be at work here. Even though this story here does not state that it is really the case that there is this waiting in line and this line cutters, this emotionally felt-as-if-story sets the grounds for pushing forward certain policies: which are, in this case, anti-migrant, anti-tax and anti-establishment driven. So, albeit not in every case, the feels-as-if-story is directly translated into statements – which in turn can be right or wrong and do not remove judgment. This is to say that these subjective descriptions of how things feel can be put in a political perspective. In this case, luckily, some statements themselves indicate such hindrances.

"It is hard to see over the brow of the hill." I think there are epistemic hurdles which fancy the picture of women, migrants and refugees being in the problem and the actual crisis in the social situation of the waiting line, because nobody actually can see what is behind the hill. This symbolism in the deep story can be translated into: Nobody can see how the economy is working. So

the magical American Dream is hidden, maybe it does not work anymore, maybe it is absent. Another epistemic problem seems to arise when it is said that People of Color are skipping the line: This symbol can be a reference to affirmative action programs and welfare spendings. Besides these epistemic misconceptions, a less easy to determine pattern seems to be at work here: Throughout the lines the feeling of insecurity, of instability, of precarization is present. I think it is due to these emotionally shaky grounds of one own standing in the standing in line, that the attention is directed towards people who are to blame. Interestingly, when standing in this line and at the spot we are located through the lenses of these white middle or working class people, we cannot see who is at the very top of the line: So the lucky ones who happen to be the first ones, the wealthy white people, are unseen by the ones surrounding us. This holds interesting similarities with the actual invisibility of the top percentages of wealthy people.

An interesting parallel can be drawn to Germany: Every few years (depending on the delayed submission by the government) the Federal German government should publish a report on poverty and wealth. Periodically, there are huge criticisms and rumors concerning the displayed content: the objections, which are pushed forward by media and different Parties typically imply, that this is more a report on poverty – and the poor ones – than on wealth – and the wealthiest persons. Partly, this is connected to the problem of gaining knowledge about wealth: Since 1997, the property tax, albeit not legally abolished, is not longer raised. With that, an important tool to gain knowledge about actual wealth despite income, is not longer in power. At the very same time, the persons in Germany who are receiving state-funded financial support have to report their savings, properties and heritages meticulously. Therefore, there is a lot knowledge about the lower middle and working (or, more contemporary: not working) class, and huge blind spots in statistics on prosperous persons. This can also be translated to: Also in Germany, it is unclear, who is standing at the very top of the waiting line.[3]

The application of Celikates' version of immanent criticism on populist phenomena, supporters of the Tea-Party in the US, hints to a lack of knowledge about the functioning of economy. Another pattern seems to be the hackneyed sounding fact, that only the ones "standing next to oneself in the waiting line", less symbolically spoken, the ones having a more similar socio-economic status within a society are visible for oneself, their upgrades when it comes to their location in the waiting line, or well-being or political chances, you name it, then, seem to have an absolute character, while the whole societal context remains invisible. The mere lack of knowledge about the current state of the US-American economy, the mechanisms that create to the need of standing in line, then, can turn into ignorance. But economic precarization alone leaves open the crucial question of why people, then turn right, politically speaking, and not left.[4]

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[3]See for the report itself: https://bit.ly/2W5vaIJ, [accessed 10 January 2019]. See for criticisms: https://bit.ly/2SZKioP.
[4]See for an autobibliographically inspired answer of this question in the French case: Didier Eribon 2013: Returning to Reims.

Restrictions of this Critique

Another pattern which cannot be grasped through the lenses a Celikatesean approach of immanent criticism, is the felt loss of privilege. Even if it remains a blind spot from this angle, I want to shortly elaborate on this crucial dimension. From the Deep Story of the Waiting in Line, it can be concluded that it is not a mere economic precarization that creates a populist ideology: "And you really hate the endless parade of complainers encouraged by a 1960s culture that seems to have settled over the land." Or, in another passage Hochschild herself writes:

> "Meanwhile, if men like Bill were being squeezed by automation, outsourcing, and the rising power of multinationals, they were also being squeezed by greater competition from other groups for an ever-scarcer supply of cultural honor."
>
> (Hochschild 2016: 143)

In this passage, Hochschild implicitly claims that cultural honor and I would add: social recognition is something which gets less the more it is distributed or the more people are being part of the distribution process. I think it is worthwhile to overthink this view on social recognition, which is marked by the economistic view of competition. That discriminatory social behavior and policies is not only harmful to those subjected to discrimination but also the ones discriminating is argued in an empirically rich plea for gender equality and feminism by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014).

Furthermore, such an argumentation seems to entail that we already live in a world, or, to be more precise: that the US is a feminist, gender inclusive and anti-discriminatory state. Obviously, this is not the case, also it has not been the case before Trump. So, the question arises how the subjective impression of being overtaken evolves. A, however sketchy, answer is given by Laurie Penny in her *Unspeakable Things* (2014). Here, she offers the picture of the unquestioned promise given to white, Christian, heterosexual persons that they will deserve better, have a better life as well as their parents (link generational issue also in Pippa Norris 2016) as so called minorities, is not longer uncontested. And this contestation, started in the "1960's culture", now becomes visible and sensible.

Conclusion

The starting and ending point of this paper is driven by the political Zeitgeist. On a personal level, I was puzzled by the question of how I, both as a philosopher with academic interests and political activist with the need for action guiding statements want to relate to that. The course of this paper took the same choreography as these two driving forces: The first part recaptured normative evaluations. Opposed to liberalism, to democracy in rather idealistic forms, populism was criticized for its lack of representation of the opposition, of its denial of plurality respectively the identities and interests of a political

people. Already beginning with Urbinatis approach to populism as a permanent tendency and gradual understanding of what is populist, the mode of criticism shifted from external criticisms to immanent critiques. After a methodological intermezzo in the second part, the third part indicated a direction to go for an immanent critic of populism: Which conditions favor, if not produce in once, populist ideologies? Sticking to the image of waiting in line, a major producer or at least boost for right-wing populist ideologies seems to be the myth of an American Dream: People cannot see above the hill into the neoliberal capitalism at work, the US-American economy and the process which leads to the need of people standing in line in the first place stays a mystery. These epistemic conditions are in this image at the same time material conditions: The place where people are located in the waiting line is a metaphor for their socio-economic status. All this is not to say that if, again sticking to the image of the Deep Story, there was no waiting line, no hill, no need for affirmative actions making it seem for people to skip the line, wide spread knowledge about the persons standing on top of the line, that there would be no racism or sexism. Against the assumption of persons involved in the social world to be judged as judgmental dopes, as Celikates put it, maybe taking them seriously also means to take their racism seriously and not as a mere output of their deprived socio economic status.

Now, how should left wing politicians, citizens and activists respond to right-wing populism? Many on the left spectrum, be it during the election campaign in Germany with the SPD-politician Martin Schulz (left wing in the broadest sense possible), Bernie Sanders campaign in the USA, have been showing sympathies with the idea of left-wing populism. The reminder of the paper is not the right place to discuss the possibility and desire ability of left-wing populism in detail. But what can be added to the discussion from this paper can be summarized in three points: If it is crucial for populism to state and therefore, discursively create, a fundamental social divide and split into the elites and the people, as well as the real and the *fake* people, the question arises how the leftist political value of solidarity, understood as: Standing together, even though you cannot stand each other, could be realized. Based on the premise that left-wing politics has to focus on systemic and structural analysis of society and economy, the question arises how it at the same time could stick to the personalized split of society in we down here and them up there. Taking heterogeneity and multidimensionality both on an identity based and macro level seriously, the split of the elite vs. the people cannot be preserved. Still, it remains populism's success to overcome the normal mode of existence of the individualized, modern subject which is so much used to neoliberal competition.[5] Uniting different identities and social groups in one strong political movement is a task yet to be fulfilled, also for the political left.

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[5]See for the ability of fascism to create social ties between otherwise isolated and unconnected subjects in capitalism: T W Adorno 1952, Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda.

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