

Primary Populism and Secondary Populism: Laclau, Symbolic Representation, and Group Psychology

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Abstract In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau takes Freud as his point of departure to argue that populism is not a pathological form of democracy, but its intrinsic rationality and possibility, and already embedded in democratic practices, ideals, and struggles. I delineate three of Laclau's Freudian premises and identify limitations or flaws in his appropriation. In distinguishing between a primary populism and a secondary populism, I argue that both Laclau's conception of symbolic representation and his presentation of the leader's role in group psychology fall prey to a version of sovereign loyalty that undermines independent agency and judgment.

Keywords Populism, symbolic representation, group psychology, Laclau, Freud, Pitkin

Ernesto Laclau begins *On Populist Reason* with the frustration that political theorists have for the most part deployed the word "populism" as a pejorative term without ever providing an analysis that enunciates its logic. Dismissed as both formless and venal, and often conflated with authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or fascism (or accused of leading inexorably to them), populism is treated as a conceptual mish-mash whose concrete instances have at best family resemblances with one another. In relegating it to an irrational and anti-democratic force, critics of populism accuse it of being ideologically vague and ambiguous, less a form of governance or a coherent set of commitments than a force that does not even rise to the level of political form.

Laclau counters that populism is indeed not a specific set of ideological commitments, tenets, or beliefs, let alone a form of governance or a distinctive type of regime, but is instead a mode of symbolic and affective mobilization that is intrinsic to "politics *tout court*"¹ insofar as it pertains to "the nature and logics of the formation of collective identities."² Populism, for Laclau, is a formal structure with internal rules of its own, not a particular set of ideas or values. The appeal to the people (to become a people) that is at its core does not itself imply or determine any particular substantive content.

Laclau aims to reclaim populism by showing that its logic and practice is already embedded in democratic practices, ideals, and struggles, and he turns specifically to Freud for what he takes to be Freud's non-denigration of the masses and grasp of the libidinal nature of the social bond. With Freud as his "point of departure,"³ Laclau sets out the ontological primacy of representation and proposes a model of democratic leadership that both preserves the leader's symbolic role and equalizes him. I argue here that while Laclau's claims for the necessary centrality of populism to democracy succeed, his claims on behalf of populist leadership fail to establish a non-authoritarian conception of democratic leadership.

I begin by delineating three crucial and inter-related insights Laclau borrows from Freud. First, Laclau relies on Freud's purported dissolution of the boundary between normal and abnormal to contend that populism is not a pathology of modern democratic politics, but its intrinsic rationality and possibility. Just as Freud shows that what first appears to be a pathological symptom (e.g., narcissism, melancholia, or perversion) is in fact internal and integral to the structure of the psyche, so too with populism and democracy: Populism and its construction of a people is the internal condition of politics. The apparently marginal or deviant is in fact central and necessary.

Second, Laclau draws a direct parallel between populism and dreams, claiming that "populism is the royal road to understanding . . . the ontological constitution of the political as such."⁴ Laclau's phrasing echoes Freud's claim in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious,⁵ implying not only that populism is revelatory of the inner forces and structures of political life, but that these forces can be identified with Freud's primary processes of condensation and displacement which do the work of dream-construction.⁶ What could be called the "dream logic" of populism would then be found in the work done by symbolic representation in people-construction. Populism shares an ontological status with dreams and this status means that, contra Hanna Pitkin, symbolic representation is not a threat to democratic politics but constitutive of it.

Third, Laclau finds in Freud's ostensible de-pathologization of group psychology resources to re-situate the role of the charismatic leader (whose necessity he affirms) as a kind of equal. While nevertheless maintaining that a group will symbolically unite around an individual, Laclau brings to the fore the purportedly identificatory or horizontal possibilities of what he calls "democratic leadership"⁷ and downplays the vertical relation to the leader.

In this paper I affirm the first two premises, with important qualifications to each, but dispute the accuracy and implications of the third. In qualifying the first premise, I argue for a distinction between what I

call primary populism and secondary populism, and show that within Freudian conceptual space, they must have different logics and itineraries. In qualifying the second premise, I show that Laclau's depiction of the constitutive role of symbolic representation relies on an equivocation in the meaning of symbolic constitution, and that this equivocation both hinders his critical response to Pitkin and derails the parallel with dream logic. I contest the third premise by challenging Laclau's reading of identification with the leader in Freud's *Group Psychology*. Laclau simultaneously obscures what is for Freud the necessary asymmetry of libidinal attachment in group formation, and advances a regressive attachment to the leader's authority.

Laclau's dismissal of Pitkin's reservations about symbolic representation and his infidelity to Freud's group psychology are bound together: In evading the dream logic he himself introduces, he also collapses the distinction between manipulation (or suggestion) and populist leadership and endorses a remnant of personal sovereignty as necessarily operative within any social logic. Despite his avowedly Freudian premises, and celebration of a "Freudian breakthrough," Laclau's group psychology ultimately revives an inverted form of loyalty to authority.

I. Primary populism: The People is not a pathology

Laclau's most fundamental Freudian premise is rooted in what he calls the "Freudian breakthrough": the insight that "psychopathology holds the key to the understanding of normal psychology."⁸ With this methodological principle in hand, Laclau writes that populism has been "denigrated" in pursuit of "a social frontier separating the normal from the pathological"⁹ whereby the "normality" of democracy is protected by the exclusion of populist dangers. Attempts to purify the concept of democracy of affect, conflict, and attachment treat the formation of collective identities as a kind of atavistic regression that is fundamentally anti-democratic. On Laclau's Freudian account, however, populist mobilization is not an abnormality that can be excluded in founding an ideally rational democracy, but part of democracy's normal constitution.

Laclau's argument—that a structural or universal form of populism is intrinsic to democratic politics—finds both substantive and analogical support in Freud's repeated demonstrations that the apparently marginal is in fact constitutive of psychic formation. This can be seen, for instance, in his studies of narcissism, identification, and perversion. In "On Narcissism," Freud shows that the ego requires an originary self-cathexis in order to come into being; there would be no psyche without it. Rather than taking narcissism simply as a sexual

perversion, Freud detects what he calls a primary narcissism that is the "original libidinal cathexis of the ego"¹⁰ and necessary for its birth. What Freud calls secondary narcissism is "superimposed" upon this primary form and entails the withdrawal of libidinal cathexes "from the external world" and onto the self.¹¹ Similarly, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud supplements his earlier account of melancholia, showing that the ongoing development of the ego takes place through continual identification with lost objects. The idea that the ego is the "precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes" makes universal a form of interiorizing identification he had previously considered distinctive to melancholia.¹² Here again, an apparent pathology is shown to have a universal and structurally necessary role in psychic formation, even as melancholic distortions might be superimposed upon it. We can see a similar move in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* with Freud's claim that "a disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct and that normal sexual behaviour is developed out of it."¹³ This universal perversity does not eliminate the distinctiveness of subsequent sexual forms. In each of these cases, Freud abandons the reassuring safety of opposing the normal to the pathological across an unbridgeable divide.

Laclau extends the Freudian breakthrough to political life to argue that what had been taken as "aberrant," "marginal," or "irrational" are in fact processes that "structure *any* kind of socio-political life."¹⁴ The people is an affective and symbolic identity that is integral to democracy, not a pathological symptom of its breakdown or an obstruction of what would otherwise be a "rational community."¹⁵ There is an ineradicable kernel of popular sovereignty (a collective will) that must be understood not as an irrational remainder of identitarianism to be ejected,¹⁶ but as necessarily constituted in and necessary for the constitution of a democratic polity.

The crucial qualification to this first premise is that populism as a structural or primary condition of democracy does not mean there is not also a secondary form that potentially threatens democracy. While Freud shows that incorporative identification, narcissism, and polymorphous perversity are structural conditions for psychic formation, he retains the concepts of melancholia, secondary narcissism, and sexual perversion as distinctive phenomena. The structural centrality of the supposedly aberrant does not annul the category of pathology, which can still intrude into or superimpose itself upon the normal. Hence, although the political analogue of the Freudian premise renders populism integral to democratic logic, it does not preclude a populism that is a distinctive phenomenon bound to democratic unraveling. Echoing the Freudian language of primary narcissism and secondary narcissism, we could call these variants primary

populism and secondary populism. Primary populism is primary in the sense of essential to the structure and origination of political life, as primary narcissism is essential to individuated identity. The concept of primary populism signifies that affect and identification are integral to the formation of collective identities. The concept of secondary populism acknowledges that group formation might contingently proceed through regressive manifestations of mass mania, hyper-cathexis to a leader, passive obedience, and distortion of judgment.

Primary populism is ontologically necessary and normatively neutral; secondary populism is ontologically contingent and normatively suspect. When Laclau claims that populism is "midway between the descriptive and the normative,"¹⁷ he aims not only to eliminate "any necessary attitude of ethical condemnation"¹⁸ toward it, but to obscure the ontological distinction that would be required by the Freudian parallel. We can, however, affirm a core of populism intrinsic to democracy, "a constant dimension of political action"¹⁹ that cannot be superseded by purportedly more mature forms of collective life, without eliding the dangers of secondary populism. The primary, structural, originary form does not exclude pathogenic or regressive variants. In the following sections, I show how Laclau's conceptions of symbolic representation and leader identification give way to inverted loyalty and libidinal captivation by personal sovereignty.

II. Dream logic and symbolic representation

Laclau's second Freudian premise is that Freud's discovery of the unconscious has the "ontological consequence" that representation is "absolutely primary,"²⁰ since neither objective reality, the identity of the self, nor the boundary between self and other is simply given to the nascent psyche, but must be established. Laclau claims that, homologically, the "inner structure" of popular identity is "essentially representative"²¹: since a people cannot be empirically present in actuality, the identity of the people requires symbolic representation. Laclau, moreover, expressly likens this symbolic representation to dream logic. He writes that "like the process of condensation in dreams: an image [of popular identity] does not express its own particularity, but a plurality of quite dissimilar currents of unconscious thought" which converge in a "single image."²² A people is constructed like a dream, which presents in manifest form the latent content of the unconscious. If the construction of group identity works according to dream logic, the logic of what Freud calls the primary processes, this would mean that certain privileged signifiers assume an array of representational content while also attracting affect from dispersed and latent desires. A symbol (whether name, image, or individual) would be resilient if

supported from multiple sides, shored up by affect, contingent residues of experience, and already sedimented pre-representations. Combining signification and affect, this symbolic representation, taken as the work of constructing a people, would be an ineradicable feature of democracy. Laclau takes this primacy of symbolic constitution to be a refutation of Pitkin's critical account of symbolic representation. While partially accepting representation's ontological status, I argue in this section that Laclau does not successfully counter Pitkin.

The primacy of representation means that the symbol is neither expressive nor descriptive but constitutive, bringing into being a popular identity that does not pre-exist the performative act of naming it. Laclau thus takes the basic unit of his analysis to be not a ready-made group but a "social demand."²³ Social demands arise initially in diverse circumstances and in an uncoordinated way. When unsatisfied demands radiating across the social field become excessive (whether in number, intensity, or overflow of affect), they have the potential to activate what Laclau calls a "chain of equivalence" with one another. With the formation of a chain of equivalence, what had been dispersed will coalesce in a binary division: the people vs. powerful elites. The people are represented by a "privileged signifier"²⁴ that performs the affective and imaginative work of conjuring an identity and attracting cathexes to it. Unfulfilled demands are no longer simply a request for this or that appeal to be satisfied, but take on solidarity with one another and transform into a more global dispute with the status quo as such. Laclau calls this unity a "*new collective will*."²⁵

The transformation of isolated demands into a popular will is not the spontaneous effect of sharing a lack, but requires the intervention of a symbol or name that converts demands into agency. With the advent of a symbol, one demand transcends the chain and serves as representative locus for the chain as a whole. In this way, a partial struggle, and ultimately a single name, assumes the status of universality, providing the nodal point for a "symbolic unification"²⁶ that creates and stabilizes a collective identity. As with dreams, the symbol performs the work of condensing a plurality of particulars and concentrating affective potency.

In his account of symbolizing, Laclau describes a double articulatory practice: what he calls the "forms of investment"²⁷ or the "*signifying operations*"²⁸ and what he calls the force of investment or the "*affect*."²⁹ These "signifying and affective dimensions"³⁰ are not to be taken as separate, discrete, or additive, as if affect is added to signification from the outside. Affective intensity is enmeshed within and internal to signifying processes and practices, but it is unevenly distributed and not spread uniformly across signifiers. There are vertical bumps, with specific identities, symbols, names, or demands uniquely invested as representative. Symbolic potency is dependent on cathectic uptake.

Laclau clarifies that the cathected symbol does not represent an inaccessible beyond in the sense of an "external" relation where what is absent (social harmony) is "substituted by a succession of indifferent *ersatz*."³¹ The symbol of popular identity neither stands in for nor merely points to an unavailable yet pre-existing referent. We are not stuck longing for an unattainable ideal. In contrast to external representation, Laclau puts forward an idea of "intimate" representation as embodiment, where the name becomes the nodal point of communal identity and attachment.³² Populist representation is intimate, not external, because it binds representation to the interior of identity.

Laclau's account of representation both borrows and diverges from that presented by Hanna Pitkin in *The Concept of Representation*.³³ On Pitkin's account, representation always denotes making present "in a nonliteral sense" what is absent.³⁴ Despite this "single, basic definition," what representation means varies across contexts, and different circumstances disclose different aspects when considered "from different angles."³⁵ Each distinctive conception on its own is incomplete or inadequate, running up against its own limits and pointing beyond itself if taken to be exhaustive.³⁶ But what representation is (the "thing" as Pitkin puts it) "depends on" understanding how the "word" is used, "what it means to us, what it is for us, in our world."³⁷ Pitkin's analysis has a recursive dimension, where understanding representation requires us to understand how representation is itself represented.

Pitkin distinguishes four senses of how the word is used: formal, substantive, descriptive, and symbolic.³⁸ Formal representation is purely procedural or rule-governed and means that a delegate is authorized to act for another,³⁹ as in an elected representative who is granted authority; or that they can be held to account for such action, as in "someone who will be subject to election."⁴⁰ Substantive representation means that a political representative is responsive to the wishes or responsible for the interests of a constituency.⁴¹ Authorization, accountability, and responsiveness are all ways of "acting for" another. By contrast, descriptive representation indicates "resemblance or reflection, as in a mirror or in art,"⁴² or as in "proportional representation."⁴³ The descriptive representative does not act for the represented but stands for it. Descriptive representation is "*of something*";⁴⁴ it has a seemingly established, pre-existing referent. Symbolic representation is also a kind of "standing for," but "no resemblance or reflection is required."⁴⁵ Pitkin calls this "symbolization"⁴⁶ and distinguishes symbolizing from descriptive representation: "a symbolist painter is one who 'aims to symbolize ideas *rather than* representing the form or aspect of actual objects'"⁴⁷ and so, for instance, the fish is a symbol and not a representation of Christ.⁴⁸ In such cases, there is no likeness or resemblance. Put another way Christ is represented *by* a fish, not represented *as* a fish.⁴⁹ A symbol is neither "proxy" nor "substitute,"

but a "vehicle" to bring an idea to mind.⁵⁰ It does not aim at likeness but at evocativeness.

Pitkin notes that the symbol need not be an "inanimate symbol" but could be a "living symbol," as for instance with a political leader.⁵¹ While a political leader might also be a formal representative (authorized as working head of state), their role as figurehead is a symbolic one,⁵² giving their representative role a dual character. Moreover, a political leader might be not only a symbol but also a "symbol-maker" insofar as they are engaged in "activity to foster belief, loyalty, satisfaction,"⁵³ a pursuit that works through emotional identification.

Symbolic force or value can be contrasted with descriptive accuracy.⁵⁴ A symbol cannot be accurate or inaccurate; the criterion of accuracy does not even pertain to it since "accurate resemblance" to a referent (for instance, "accurate reflection of the popular will"⁵⁵) is not its purpose or mechanism of operation. A symbol is instead "'a matter of existential fact',"⁵⁶ and when symbolic representation is taken to be exhaustive of political representation, the "crucial test . . . will be an existential one: Is the representative believed in?"⁵⁷ i.e., is the political leader accepted as symbolic representative? While in the descriptive sense there can be misrepresentation, there is no such thing as "mis-symbolizing"⁵⁸: loyalty and belief are what make a symbol a symbol, and without this adherence there is simply not a symbol at all. The existential test can provide "no reason for believing,"⁵⁹ only motives or causes. Pitkin distinguishes between manipulation and rational persuasion, and she alleges that symbol-making's focus on affect and habits removes it from the domain of reasons.⁶⁰ Where the psychological or motivational question of "what makes people believe in a symbol or accept a leader" replaces the justificatory question of when people "ought to accept, have good reason for accepting a leader,"⁶¹ there the meaning of representation has been upended.

For Pitkin, the existential, criteria-less, test of potency that characterizes symbolic representation means that "[a]t the extreme, this point of view becomes the fascist theory of representation,"⁶² displacing formalities (like elections) in favor of dramatic leadership.⁶³ In superseding or deposing political representation's other (formal, substantive, descriptive) aspects, symbolic representation at its extreme also compresses or diverts the two-way representative relationship into a one-way one: The state or leader "molds," "creates," or "aligns" followers into a "cohesive body" or "unity of wills"⁶⁴ who adjust to him. Here the living symbol converges with symbol-making. From a non-fascist perspective, Pitkin contends, this can only be viewed as "inverse representation," where the "following represents or reflects the will of the leader."⁶⁵ At the extreme point of symbolic inversion, reasons are subsumed into affective allegiance, and the leader's will

consumes freedom. This "fascist theory of representation" denies that the represented is "somehow logically prior"⁶⁶ and in so doing it divorces representation from judgment.⁶⁷ That people do accept a charismatic leader is not a reason to do so (or to have done so).

The representational logic of populism that Laclau lays out, with no prior author, interest, or referent, is fundamentally symbolic. Laclau claims that representation is constitutive, not expressive, and that constructing a people is "paradigmatic" of what representation is.⁶⁸ The populist symbol constructs the people it represents. On this basis, Laclau treats Pitkin's distinction between reasons and motives as a red herring, writing that "Pitkin has clouded the issue" since, on his view, reasons do not "*precede* representation" but are "*constituted through* representation."⁶⁹ In denying that symbolic representation is irrational, Laclau argues that we are always inside a symbolic space and that identity is not prior to signification, since group identities emerge via the representation of demands. There is not first a discursively unmediated people who then subsequently express their will. Symbolic mediation comes first and retroactively and performatively produces its object (as political subject).⁷⁰ Only "once some basic political identifications have taken place" can reasons emerge, reasons which are then necessarily rooted in an identity that "results from the process of representation."⁷¹ But it is Laclau who seems to cloud the issue since we are not suspended in time awaiting the moment of political identification. We find ourselves already in the midst of them.

Laclau's constitutive claim does not adequately address the complexity of Pitkin's stance. Lisa Disch has argued that "Pitkin clearly recognizes representation as constitutive,"⁷² but denies this constitutive element to symbolic representation. On Disch's reading, Pitkin "resists the idea that there would be an imaginary or symbolic aspect to what the people takes itself to be," while "Laclau champions the imaginary dimension of representation."⁷³ But Pitkin does not deny that self-image is active and constitutive. Pitkin's concern is to keep the two poles (representative and represented) logically distinct so that a two-way relationship is preserved and the space for judgment is not collapsed by fusing them. Admittedly, Pitkin does claim that true representation is substantive representation of actual, objective interests or desires, whether known by the people or not, and that real interests should "serve as a guide or standard."⁷⁴ This seems to be a corollary to the logical priority of the represented. But she also recognizes that the notion of real interest or true desire is not clearly fixed. The people's will is rarely "an express will," and, because the people often "know nothing," the leader need not and cannot represent only "actual, conscious wishes."⁷⁵ Pitkin goes so far as to call the idea of a "'latent' or 'unconscious' or 'unexpressed'" will of the

people misleading, and she instead presents an almost retroactive—rather than anticipatory—logic to political representation, wherein the represented will have wanted what the representative presents as their interests.⁷⁶ The acts of the representative to some extent constitute the desires of the represented.

At the same time, Pitkin attempts to avoid the paternalism of substituting interests for desires. When interests are privileged over desires, then, as with symbolic representation, substantive representation can arrive at a self-dissolving “extreme.” Since at the point where the representative becomes a mere trustee or guardian, “with an expert deciding technical questions and taking care of the ignorant masses as a parent takes care of a child,”⁷⁷ there representation has ceased altogether and a different relation, shorn of the agency of the represented, comes into play.⁷⁸ Pitkin recognizes, moreover, that there can be “profound disagreement among men as to what their interest is” and that “a sharp, deep-seated cleavage on important value commitments”⁷⁹ might well throw us back to descriptive, symbolic, or formal representation, i.e., on ideas that the representative should be similar to us, or command loyalty, or that only institutional arrangements matter.⁸⁰ In light of these impasses, which in themselves point to the limits of advocating for a single concept of representation to the exclusion of others, Pitkin can not be said to proffer an unfettered defense of substantive responsiveness to a pre-existing represented. While Pitkin does not resolve all of the conundrums her analysis presents, her critique of the dangers of symbolic representation rests not on an uncomplicated idea of real interest or true desire, unmediated by images, but on the potential fascist inversion contained in the missing reasons for belief.

Contrary to Laclau’s reading, Pitkin does not reduce leadership to manipulation; she is explicit in viewing freedom as the (tenuous) dividing line between them, claiming that manipulation is imposed, but the led must be “willing to follow.”⁸¹ Although appeal to freedom is perhaps inadequate to the problem of inversion, this “willingness” anchors agency and judgment in a relation of independence to the leader. Given conflicted, unexpressed, or non-existent interests and desires, the logical priority of the represented is best understood as pointing to this independence rather than as asserting a chronologically prior referent. The representative relation for Pitkin is thus neither fully external (as a pre-existing referent would be) nor fully intimate (as identification with and incarnation by a living symbol would be). It is instead exactly the symbolic mediation that Disch affirms, but recognizes that “an activity that acts on the imaginations and identities of the represented”⁸² must preserve independent (non-fused) agency in order to be non-manipulative; that is, it must preserve a boundary

with some degree of mutual externality. The problem with inverse representation lies not in imaginative activity, but in the collapse of representation into identification as an "alignment of wills."⁸³

Laclau's notion of representation as constitution deflects rather than resolves Pitkin's appraisal of symbolic potency. Laclau pairs the structural concept of constitution with the psychological concept of identification or "ontological investment," which direction, he notes, goes "from representative to represented."⁸⁴ The other direction from represented to representative is defined by Laclau not in terms of movement, but in terms of *actuality*: the signifier "must actually represent" the links in the equivalential chain.⁸⁵ Since there is no pre-symbolic actuality, as the people do not pre-exist their symbolic constitution, this actual can only refer to what is constituted by representation, a circularity that takes identification as responsive to its own investment.⁸⁶

Laclau's dismissal of Pitkin's criticism of symbolic representation obscures their fundamental agreement that the thing depends on the word⁸⁷ or that the name is the "ground of the thing."⁸⁸ It is simply not the case that for Pitkin "reasons operate entirely outside representation."⁸⁹ Although they approach the topic of representation from different traditions, assumptions, and questions, we can hear the background hum of Wittgenstein in their shared adherence to the inescapability of symbolic mediation.⁹⁰ What Laclau writes of Margaret Canovan's theory of populism could also be said of Pitkin's understanding of representation: She provides a "map of the linguistic dispersion that has governed the use of the term."⁹¹ As linguistic beings, we cannot wrest ourselves outside of our shared signifying frame. As Pitkin puts it, "we perceive political reality through the people with whom we are in contact . . . by way of other people's perceptions."⁹² Desires, beliefs, and interests are symbolically mediated through and through. We could call this shared view the "general" view of symbolic representation, indicating that meaning is embedded in its signifying context. With regard to this general sense, reasons are, as Laclau claims, inside of (emerging out of, not prior to) representation.

Lasse Thomassen's illuminating reading of Laclau can help make sense of how this general view of symbolic representation works. On Thomassen's account, the "performative dimension" of representation raises three issues: the beyond (the status of a referent), plasticity, and sovereignty.⁹³ Thomassen argues that there is no "beyond" or outside of representation,⁹⁴ but there is a terrain "of already existing representations," including "meanings, practices, and structures" that are continually "being re-represented."⁹⁵ Extending Thomassen's language of "re-representation," we could also speak of "pre-representations" which are not primordial origins or givens, but sedimentations

of prior representations. This terrain of pre-representation, weighted with values and attachments, means that there are limits to both the plasticity and sovereignty of representation.⁹⁶ Plasticity is constrained by having to play homage to contiguous pre-sedimented meanings in order to attract identification. And while it might appear that naming presumes “the namer” as “sovereign subject,” here too the “re” comes into play, both because naming requires “recognition” and resonance, and because it “draws on existing names.”⁹⁷ There is thus no “pure naming,” only a “re-naming.”⁹⁸ Taking the “re” seriously implies that acts of representation must, to be successful, be met by acts of self-recognition, an active or agential receptivity that is galvanized by pre-attachment to ways of life. This bi-directionality ensures that the constitutive role of representation in the construction of a people does not amount to the one-way imposition of a sovereign will on a merely pliable or suggestible populace, treated as passive material to be worked on.

Certainly, this non-sovereignty can be seen in Laclau’s text. He writes, for instance, that the political institution of the social is “not an arbitrary *fiat* but proceeds out of social demands,”⁹⁹ that “belief is anchored in a way of living,”¹⁰⁰ and that the invested object “cannot be changed at will.”¹⁰¹ But Laclau also tasks the name (if not quite the leader) with the sovereign function of bringing order out of disorder, and claims the possibility of a “*creatio ex nihilo*” transfiguration where a symbol “does not derive its central role from any logic already operating within the preceding situation.”¹⁰² For Laclau, the political act is not only irreducible to its context but implies a “radical break” from it. Thus, while representation in the general sense does not arise *ex nihilo*, Laclau insists that some specific acts of representation do.

To return to Laclau’s dispute with Pitkin, Laclau embraces the idea that a particular nodal point within a signifying frame (this name, this symbol) would be determinative of any reasons I might have. It is not only that there are no reasons apart from representations and identifications in a general sense, but that reasons are submerged into a unique moment of identification, described as a “moment of fusion.”¹⁰³ In this intimate view, contra Thomassen, Laclau indeed hands agency off to “the name” or “naming.” We could call these intersecting claims for an *ex nihilo* act that breaks free of its context and determines reasons the “specific” view of symbolic representation. In the specific view, belief is referred to identity and reasons are incommensurable across identifications. Why someone believes becomes incoherent from the outside, since, as Disch puts it, “investment affects what counts as a good reason.”¹⁰⁴ Pitkin’s concern is not with the constitutive nature of symbolic representation in the general sense, but with the intimate nature of symbolic representation in this specific sense.

Laclau's quarrel with Pitkin relies on an equivocation between the general and specific senses of symbolic representation. That our experience of reality is produced within a symbolic order does not mean that any particular symbol, however potent or dramatic, dispenses with the configuration of possible reasons within which it operates. New symbols intervene in a pre-represented and pre-sedimented world, a shared symbolic space, not a raw un-constituted one. Laclau's account of populism not only grants the priority of symbolic constitution, but shifts almost imperceptibly from performance to fabrication ("symbol-making" in Pitkin's words), bestowing on specific symbols a quasi-sovereign role. In so doing, it forecloses the diverse array of meanings of political representation and representative practices, implicitly excluding accountability and responsiveness.

Indeed, when Laclau asserts that signifiers do not express but constitute identity, he acknowledges that symbolic "inversion" is the "distinctive feature of the quilting function"¹⁰⁵ and he thereby seems to confirm Pitkin's point about inverse representation but with an affirmative spin.¹⁰⁶ Laclau's replacement of "manipulation" with "constitution" aims to sideline Pitkin's allegation that symbolic loyalty is immune to reasons—but in the specific sense, this constitution, and the intimacy of identification, is inversion: The living symbol merges with symbol-making and a one-way relationship is licensed.

Were Laclau to embrace more fully the implications of the idea that a people is constructed like a dream, he would be better positioned to abjure sovereign symbol-making and to retain the "double movement"¹⁰⁷ of symbolic representation, its "two-way" directionality.¹⁰⁸ A dream is neither consciously invented nor purposefully directed. There is no maker. In dream logic, the dreamer is not master or author of the dream, as they do not choose the elements that compose it, but is also not a passive recipient as if the dream were an oracular pronouncement. A dream is unpredictable and unruly. In responding to pressures from infantile wishes, the day's residues, and somatic excitations, the dream-work selects images that address and articulate multiple ideas. Like a dream image, a political symbol responds to competing pressures, and succeeds when it makes use of pre-constituted values, habits, interests, and desires to draw cathexis to it, thereby consolidating a nodal point for popular identity. And as with the work of the dream, the symbolic work of populism has a reason of its own and cannot be consigned to irrationality or pathology. But, while the people is not a simple given that is either determinative or self-transparent, the constitutive work of people-construction cannot be understood as giving singular symbols (or symbol-makers) sovereign agency.¹⁰⁹

Despite his criticism of Pitkin, Laclau concedes that reasons are more operative in groups with less-exalted leaders,¹¹⁰ and he seeks resources in Freud to think a de-idealized leader, a leader who both belongs to and transcends the chain of equivalence. By promoting the role of identification with the (name of the) leader and demoting the role of idealization, Laclau aims to render the construction of a people and the formation of a collective will as semi-horizontal phenomena. But just as his defense of symbolic representation fails to meet Pitkin's criticism of inversion, so too his defense of leader-identification fails to meet Freud's misgivings about cathexis to an externalized ego ideal. In both cases, identificatory attachment undermines independent agency and judgment.

III. Leadership, identification, and group psychology

The third premise that Laclau borrows from Freud is that "the symbolic unity of the group around an individuality . . . is inherent to the formation of a "people.""¹¹¹ For Freud, this means that a group is held together by a kind of collective "fascination"¹¹² with the group leader: Identification takes place only among those led and is always premised on shared idealization. Laclau departs from Freud by taking symbolic unification to be fundamentally identificatory, rather than idealizing, and emphasizing that a key mechanism of fascination is the sharing of a common trait with the leader. If identification is the "key notion" then, according to Laclau, "the *degree* of distance between ego and ego-ideal"¹¹³ becomes the central issue in populist group formation, and it is here that Laclau attempts to square the circle of horizontal leadership. In this section I turn to Freud to show that Laclau's claims for leader-identification cannot be made consonant with his conception of symbolic primacy, and that he fails to excavate a non-authoritarian conception of democratic leadership from Freud's text.

Freud presents his model of identification in chapter VII of *Group Psychology*, where he distinguishes three forms. "First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object."¹¹⁴ Freud explicitly states at the start of this chapter that this is the primacy of the father as "ideal."¹¹⁵ The ego-ideal established through this first identification with the father is prior to the ego itself, more primary than both object-choice and narcissism, and provides the support for identification proper. Put another way, primary identification is the primacy of idealization, internalizing or taking in the father as ideal.

Following this pre-objectal identification, there is a second form that "in a regressive way . . . becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of introjection of the object into the ego."¹¹⁶ This second form is normal incorporative identification, with the ego as the

precipitate of lost objects. Finally, a third form of identification "may arise with any new perception of a common quality which is shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct."¹¹⁷ This third form includes the "mutual tie between members of a group" cemented around their "tie with the leader," insofar as this tie functions as the group's "emotional common quality."¹¹⁸ This bond with the leader indicates that identification and fellow-feeling among group members are not spontaneous but rooted in collective attachment to an externalized ego ideal. This externalization can be contrasted with the internalization of primary identification: Collective idealization is a supplement to rather than an ally of primary idealization. The sharing of an ego-ideal anchors group formation, making possible the transformation of envy and rivalry into mutual identification. Freud's "formula for the libidinal constitution of groups" is thus identification premised on shared idealization.¹¹⁹

While Freud's model situates group psychology within the third form of identification, he does not consider individual and social psychology to be clearly demarcated, since others are always involved in the formation of self and since there is no distinct group instinct. From one direction, organized groups have their roots in familial identifications and attachments. From the other direction, the "psychology of groups is the oldest human psychology"¹²⁰ and the individual is a subsequent achievement. While Freud sometimes suggests that the development from group to individual is linear, and therefore that the group's revival is regressive, the fundamental entanglement of individual and group psychology is more like a Möbius strip with each one premised on and turning into the other: The individual emerges from the group and the group (re-)emerges from the individual.

The distribution of horizontal and vertical relations for Freud is clear: The "demand for equality" applies only to group members, and only so long as they agree upon "a single person superior to them all."¹²¹ Without this structure, which is required to reverse a more original mutual hostility, group bonds could not coalesce. As Laclau notes, this marks for Freud a clear division between idealization and identification, a distinction whose "essence" Freud secures on the respective psychical agency to which the object is assimilated: In identification the object is assimilated to the ego, and in idealization the object takes the place of the ego-ideal.¹²²

Laclau views Freud's formula as a deadlock¹²³ rather than a breakthrough because the priority given to idealization seems to close off identification with the leader as a first among equals¹²⁴ and thus to be too "vertical." He claims, moreover, that a group ordered around idealization, with an externalized ego-ideal as the only shared bond, is more fragile and volatile than a group premised on identification. On

his view, a “partially internalized”¹²⁵ ego ideal promises greater group stability. And yet, despite his appeal to identificatory stability, Laclau insists that the equivalential logic of group formation “already pre-announces key aspects of the leader’s function,”¹²⁶ his role in condensing and unifying and naming (in short, symbolizing) what would otherwise be heterogeneously dispersed. The group’s identity is dependent on this “transcendent, singular moment,” which Laclau compares to “Hobbes’s sovereign.”¹²⁷ As noted in the discussion of symbolic representation above, the leader so conceived, acting as what Pitkin calls a living symbol, is actively constitutive and not passively expressive of the group and its collective identity. Pairing the leader-function with identification, perpetually in a see-saw relation, is supposed to secure the leader’s accountability, but Laclau instead arrives at his own deadlock, caught between identificatory internalization and the leader as symbolically constitutive. Laclau’s defense of identificatory internalization as moderating the influence of an externalized ego-ideal, and thereby countering the deadlock of Freud’s idealization model, is dependent on the psychical locus of internalization (ego or ego ideal), to which I now turn.

Laclau insists that we can find in Freud’s text itself resources for a non-authoritarian politics by detecting traces of a de-idealized leader.¹²⁸ To break Freud’s alleged deadlock, Laclau appeals specifically to the final two chapters of *Group Psychology*: chapter XI on “A Differentiating Grade in the Ego,” and chapter XII, the “Postscript,” where he claims Freud himself provides the opportunity to narrow the gap between identification and idealization by presenting possibilities for decreased distance between the ego and the ego-ideal, and therefore an “immanentization” of the “grounding principle of communal order.”¹²⁹ We could see this as a strategy to protect the idea of the leader as living symbol from Pitkin’s worry that such symbolization tends toward fascism. In proposing that the leader can be something like an “equal leader,” identified with rather than idealized, Laclau aims to preserve the symbolic potency of leadership while dispelling the idea that populism is intrinsically authoritarian.¹³⁰ But these two chapters are more complicated than his interpretation suggests and do not support his claims.

On Laclau’s reading of chapter XI, where there is a narrower distance between ego and ideal, the leader would be “part of the group, participating in the general process of mutual identification.”¹³¹ Without abandoning the leader’s transcendent place of power, this would be a group with a “more democratic leadership,”¹³² the leader a first among equals, the privileged object of identification who is nonetheless also imbued with uneven cathexis. Where there is greater distance, the leader would occupy the “role of ego ideal.”¹³³ Laclau

sees leader-cathexis and group-organization not as dualistic alternatives, but as two social logics that are always intertwined and whose interplay is at work in all groups. The place of the leader cannot be totally full or totally empty, and the distance between group member and leader cannot be “*entirely bridged*,”¹³⁴ but there is a “gradation” or “spectrum”¹³⁵ of partial embodiments between them. The spectrum concept of degree means that the limit-cases of total organization as “the absence of leadership”¹³⁶ and hyper-cathexis as despotic leadership are always in retreat.

Laclau’s attempt to retain the function of leader as transcendent locus of representation, but resolve the verticality of idealization of the leader into horizontal identification runs into three counter-weights in chapters XI and XII. First, in chapter XI, the decreased distance between ego and ego-ideal is explicitly ascribed to “noisy ephemeral groups,” which is to say relatively disorganized ones that are “superimposed upon the others.”¹³⁷ The distinction Freud makes between, on the one hand, an individual who “gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader”¹³⁸ and, on the other hand, an individual who has a less distinct ego-ideal to begin with, is a distinction entirely within the sphere of ephemeral groups. In both cases there is a leader, but in the former the ego ideal is displaced onto him, and in the latter the ego ideal is diminished and idealization of the leader is aided by some “typical” quality shared by the leader that facilitates the group bond. The tendency toward identification is not, contra Laclau, asymptotically linked with a higher degree of organization, but pulls in the other direction.

In these ephemeral groups, Freud attributes the relative coincidence of ego and ego-ideal in group members to individual “narcissistic self-complacency.”¹³⁹ To be clear this is the narcissism of group members, not of the leader. What facilitates identification with a leader who might “possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned,”¹⁴⁰ while giving “the impression of greater force and more freedom of libido”¹⁴¹ is the lack of a strong inner ideal among individual group members. As Laclau notes, in these cases the individual’s need for a leader travels “only halfway,”¹⁴² and requires similarity of features as a supplement.¹⁴³ Laclau makes much of this idea that the leader will be accepted only if he shares a “positive feature” with group members and thus participates in the “substance of community,”¹⁴⁴ and he takes from this apparent reliance on a common trait evidence for a re-balancing of idealization and identification. The leader is loved because he is similar to me, not because he possesses an attribute I wish I had or feel I ought to have.

In this so-called “democratic leadership,”¹⁴⁵ Laclau claims, the leader need not be the “despotic, narcissistic ruler” and “his identity

is split: he is the father, but also one of the brothers"¹⁴⁶ and therefore "accountable to the community."¹⁴⁷ But in Freud's scenario (of ephemeral groups), the individual group members, the so-called brothers, *are* narcissists, and what sets the leader apart is precisely the force and freedom (the disinhibition) of his libido. The logic of Freud's text points to a leader who is *narcissistic like the brothers* but also *unbound like the father*. As with Pitkin's gloss on charismatic leadership, it is this "force and freedom" that lands the affective punch. The pursuit of a horizontal answer to verticality reaches a dead-end here, since the individual narcissism of group members referred to by Freud indicates a kind of developmental impasse. Earlier in the text Freud compares those with little distance between ego and ego-ideal to "children"¹⁴⁸ and here he strongly suggests that ephemeral groups are more likely than organized groups to be composed of individuals with a weak inner ideal (or conscience). The minimal separation of ego and ego-ideal is not for Freud correlated with any democratic promise, but with the group members' self-abdication, which similarity with the leader does nothing to democratize. Within such ephemeral groups, where the individual ego-ideal is least differentiated, and appears externally "embodied in the leader,"¹⁴⁹ group members are just as liable to be "carried away"¹⁵⁰ and to exhibit the "passion for authority,"¹⁵¹ and the "lack of independence and initiative"¹⁵² that characterize the hypnotic relation to the leader. The recession of individual agency and judgment attests, as with Pitkin's missing reasons for symbolic potency, to the submerging of identity into a captivating image.

There are two additional points of textual resistance in Freud, one alluded to by Laclau and one unmentioned by him. Laclau points to the Christian identification with Christ that Freud discusses in the "Postscript" as another hint of leader-identification, but a closer reading presents a second counter-weight to Laclau's claims. As Laclau notes, Freud makes a distinction between the kinds of relationship to the leader available or encouraged in the two organized (artificial, stable) groups that have served as exemplars earlier in the text. Comparing the Army to the Church, Freud writes that whereas the soldier idealizes, but does not identify with, the leader, the Christian "has also to identify himself with Christ."¹⁵³ This "supplement" of identification (identifying with the esteemed object), even if not unique to Christianity, seems to entail that such a group operates at what Freud calls a "higher ethical level"¹⁵⁴ precisely because of the demands of conscience which are not political demands but moral demands. The analogy to political groups works only if the leader of an organized political community takes on a Christ-like role as moral exemplar. But such an identificatory moral demand within an organized group is exactly opposed to the collapse of the ego-ideal in noisy disorganized groups as discussed

above. If the distance between ego and ego-ideal is narrowed in the theological instance, it is because the ego strives to be closer to the ego-ideal not because the ego-ideal is under-developed. In one case the demands of conscience are strong; in the other, weak. These cannot both be operative at once. Laclau's claim for narrowed distance as the anchor of leader equality thus falters on the conflicting pulls of his two textual appeals.

Third and finally, Laclau does not cite the section of the text at the end of chapter XI where Freud discusses the relation between ego and ego-ideal in the oscillation between mania and melancholia.¹⁵⁵ There, in considering the feeling of coincidence of ego and ego-ideal, Freud suggests it comes about from the withdrawal of the ego-ideal, equating this withdrawal with mania, or with festivals or carnivals where the ego-ideal is in (temporary) retreat. As Freud says, "the abrogation of the ideal would necessarily be a magnificent festival of the ego."¹⁵⁶ This is not the un- or under-developed ego-ideal mentioned at the opening of the chapter (the self-complacent narcissism of narrowed differentiation), but the relief or "triumph" felt when guilt recedes and the ego is allowed to "feel satisfied with itself."¹⁵⁷ In jumping from the beginning of chapter XI to the Postscript, Laclau skips over Freud's description of the vacillation between the ego-ideal's condemnation of, and retreat from, the ego. But if we put the end of chapter XI together with the Postscript, we see that Freud articulates two distinct ways of crossing the distance between ego and ego-ideal (in cases where narcissistic self-complacency has not averted the distance from the outset): the festival (with the ego ideal in retreat) and religious union (where the ego exalts itself to ego-ideal).¹⁵⁸ Although Laclau is right that the relative distance between ego and ego-ideal is crucial to the possibilities of group formation, he fails to note that mania, religious cathexis, or under-developed ideals (narcissism) are the routes by which they grow closer. These Freudian counter-weights cast doubt on the idea that minimizing the distance between ego and ego ideal is a democratically promising form of identification.

Laclau aims to secure the concept of an equal leader by appealing to identificatory cathexes. His conception of democratic leadership is buoyed by an elision of the primacy of idealization and by an attempt to make a virtue of non-differentiation between ego and ego-ideal. We saw earlier that Laclau's restricted focus on symbolic representation tends toward inversion and the exclusion of other forms of representation. By privileging a singular symbol as determinative of the space of reasons, Laclau erodes representation's two-way relationship. Here we can see that his over-estimation of the democratic potential of identification obscures the trade-off between inner ego-ideal (or conscience) and leader-identification, defers judgment to collective

fascination, and risks submerging independent agency into the mania of the carnival. Both Laclau's mis-conception of symbolic constitution and his appeal to identification with an embodied leader wrest agency from the represented.

CONCLUSION

Primary populism can be characterized by the constructive appeal to the people to become a people inscribed within democratic politics, and by the affective and symbolic dimensions of such appeals. Laclau is right to de-pathologize popular identity and to recognize the imbrication of signification and affect in the name or symbol. There is no purely rational politics purged of the potency of unifying identity. Whether the "we the people" of constitutional order or the "we underdogs" struggling against an entrenched elite, we unite as a people via invocation of a cathected name or image. Laclau wants a populism that is constitutive but not manipulative, a symbol that is intimately representative, and a leader who is identified with but still transcendent. But he equivocates in delineating the role of symbolic mediation, bypasses the logic of dreams, and deflects the perils of leader-identification. In relying on charismatic leadership to galvanize the populist core (collective identity) of democracy, Laclau annexes popular identity to symbolic inversion and hyper-cathexis to a leader.

That democracy is constitutively populist does not entail we should normatively strive to become more populist, any more than Freud's account of constitutive primary narcissism provides an argument for the cultivation of secondary narcissism. Despite Laclau's praise for his "breakthrough," Freud is clearly more dubious than Laclau about group psychology and collective identity, even as he (partly) de-pathologizes the affective organization of groups. Laclau goes much farther than Freud in hailing affect, writing that "there is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status-quo feelings which crystallize in some symbols *quite independently of the forms of their political articulation*."¹⁵⁹ This floating affect is, Laclau claims, what "we intuitively perceive" as populist.¹⁶⁰ Laclau does not say so, but in Freudian terms we know that affect divorced from its ideational representative is Freud's definition of repression.¹⁶¹ Strictly speaking only ideas and not affect can be repressed. Affect itself is not repressed but either displaced onto a different idea or transformed into anxiety where it exerts its force.¹⁶² Precisely because the effect of repression is that affect floats, metonymically attaching itself to whatever contiguous elements come on the scene, the signifiers to which it attaches are unpredictably bound to it. Floating affect and floating signifiers thus go together. Laclau views anti-establishment affect as an unclaimed excess, a free

or open resource available for symbolic capture by a popular identity. Populism offers an invitation to unmoored affect: Link up with us against them.

No doubt Laclau is right that there is a reservoir of floating affect (grievance, outrage, anxiety) in search of an identity and an enemy. Political actors of various kinds (politicians, parties, social movements) can, will, and probably should compete to name this affect, attach it to ideational content, and elicit identification. And Laclau is also certainly right that condemning or pathologizing this affective counter-force is both a strategic and an ontological error. Strategically, political actors cannot abandon affect, symbols, and identity without ceding these to their opponents. The contest to articulate, hegemonize, distill, and direct affect by giving force and form to inchoate desires, energies, demands, and perceptions will proceed with or without us. To turn away from this combat in pursuit of rational deliberation is to unilaterally disarm. Ontologically, the moral fantasy of a triumph of reason amounts to a category mistake, unmooring the performative dream logic of people-making from its symbolic foundations. There is no evading the interminable contest over who the people are. I take these struggles to be the sometimes politically ambitious but ontologically modest truth of primary populism.

Of course, symbols are themselves contingent and volatile, and Laclau acknowledges that even powerful symbols (or leaders or symbol-creators) cannot fully exert "control" over "which demands they embody and represent,"¹⁶³ and therefore over what collective being (with what passions and values) they will bring into existence. Which symbols will come to the fore, which demands will coalesce around them, and how their meaning will be configured cannot be mastered. Yet, the contingency, unpredictability, and ungovernability of symbols does not ensure their plasticity. Symbolic work must resonate with its context. Cathexis, meanwhile, is stubborn and resilient, not easily re-representable, and even "disaffected" affect is not wholly unmoored; it has history, stakes, values to which it is (perhaps unknowingly) attached.

Laclau valorizes raw affect because he fundamentally valorizes disruption to the status quo. He pins his populist hopes to the promise that attachment of affect to an idea will summon a revolutionary us against an oppressive them and catalyze a "drastic rearticulation of the political imaginary."¹⁶⁴ But even if we agree with Laclau that politics cannot evade affect and identification, when political identity cedes its agency to living symbols and succumbs to captive fascination, we are no longer on democratic terrain.

Where Laclau sees in the potent symbol the promise of collective identity, Pitkin and Freud sound notes of caution. Pitkin's analysis of

symbolic representation reveals its potential for inversion and collapse into a one-way relationship. Freud's analysis of the collapsing distance between ego and ego ideal warns of the alternating authoritarian and manic tendencies in group formation, the intoxication of communion that (as Pitkin also sees) disarms judgment. Together Pitkin and Freud allow us to grasp the anti-democratic tendencies of forms of identification that intensify affective force and displace rather than ground agency and judgment.

Notes

1. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso Books, 2005), 18.
2. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, ix.
3. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 63.
4. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 67.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. V, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 608.
6. Freud calls unconscious mental work the "primary processes" (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter VII) and it is these that perform the dream work. These processes are primary because they are prior to the advent of a secondary system (consciousness). While condensation and displacement are the two most important ones, the primary processes also include considerations of representability and secondary revision, which I will not discuss here, although they might also play an interesting role in political representation, and in the turning of abstract ideas into visual images.
7. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 60.
8. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 40.
9. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 19.
10. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 75.
11. Freud "On Narcissism," 75.
12. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XIX, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 29. Compare this account of normal identification to Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV.
13. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 231.
14. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 40.
15. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, x.
16. Andrew Arato has argued, for instance, that there is something intrinsically theological about popular sovereignty, and that we should "replace the idea

of popular sovereignty with that of democracy that can be defined only in procedural terms." Andrew Arato, "Political Theology and Populism," *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 156.

17. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 3.
18. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 16.
19. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 18.
20. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 115.
21. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 163.
22. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 97.
23. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 73.
24. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 87.
25. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 108. Italics in the original.
26. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 74, 100. Laclau refers to symbolic unification in contexts where fragmented demands are unified, i.e., where the parallel seems to be with Lacan's conception of imaginary identification, as in the mirror stage moment when a fragmented body in bits and pieces (mis-) recognizes itself as a unity. Given that Laclau tends to conflate symbol and image, I will use these words interchangeably.
27. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 110.
28. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 101. Italics in the original.
29. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 110. Italics in the original.
30. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 111.
31. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 119. Italics in the original.
32. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 119.
33. Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (University of California Press, 1967). For Laclau's discussion, see Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 159–63.
34. Pitkin, *Concept*, 9.
35. Pitkin, *Concept*, 10.
36. Pitkin, *Concept*, 58, 226, 227.
37. Pitkin, *Concept*, 225.
38. Pitkin, *Concept*, 11–12.
39. Pitkin, *Concept*, 59.
40. Pitkin, *Concept*, 58. While the representative is understood to be free to act in the authorization model, and bound by obligation in the accountability model, both are formal in the sense of lacking any substantive content (Pitkin, *Concept*, 55).
41. Pitkin, *Concept*, 209.
42. Pitkin, *Concept*, 11.
43. Pitkin, *Concept*, 61.
44. Pitkin, *Concept*, 67.
45. Pitkin, *Concept*, 11.

46. Pitkin, *Concept*, 92.
47. Pitkin, *Concept*, 93–4.
48. Pitkin, *Concept*, 94.
49. Pitkin, *Concept*, 101.
50. Pitkin, *Concept*, 97.
51. Pitkin, *Concept*, 93.
52. Pitkin, *Concept*, 102.
53. Pitkin, *Concept*, 107.
54. In keeping with the array of contexts, Pitkin does not always tie descriptive representation to accuracy, “A painting is not more representational or less representational depending on how accurate it is” (Pitkin, *Concept*, 67). What makes it descriptive is having a referent, being “of something” (Pitkin, *Concept*, 67).
55. Pitkin, *Concept*, 106.
56. Pitkin, *Concept*, 92.
57. Pitkin, *Concept*, 102.
58. Pitkin, *Concept*, 99, 110.
59. Pitkin, *Concept*, 100.
60. Pitkin, *Concept*, 101.
61. Pitkin, *Concept*, 111.
62. Pitkin, *Concept*, 107.
63. Pitkin, *Concept*, 106.
64. Pitkin, *Concept*, 108.
65. Pitkin, *Concept*, 109.
66. Pitkin, *Concept*, 140.
67. Pitkin, *Concept*, 141.
68. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 163.
69. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 160. Italics in the original.
70. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 103.
71. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161.
72. Lisa Disch, “The Impurity of Representation and the Vitality of Democracy” in *Cultural Studies* 26, nos. 2 and 3 (2012), 210.
73. Disch, “Impurity of Representation,” 214.
74. Pitkin, *Concept*, 113.
75. Pitkin, *Concept*, 163.
76. Pitkin, *Concept*, 163.
77. Pitkin, *Concept*, 210.
78. Here Pitkin seeks to avoid the paternalism of an appeal to real interests that bypasses agency, both because “real interests” are not fully formed pre-existents and are often unknown or unknowable, and because acting on

behalf of interests can conceal the divergence between interest and desire. Nonetheless, in perhaps her most un-Freudian moment, she also takes it as a working assumption that “normally a man’s wishes and what is good for him will coincide,” an assumption she deems necessary in order for representation not to run aground as mere illusion (Pitkin, *Concept*, 156).

79. Pitkin, *Concept*, 213.
80. Pitkin, *Concept*, 213.
81. Pitkin, *Concept*, 233.
82. Disch, “Impurity of Representation,” 214.
83. Pitkin, *Concept*, 108.
84. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161.
85. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 162.
86. Jan Bība poses this as the “paradox of representative performativity,” namely “How can a representative be said to be responsive to the interests of his/her constituency, when he/she actually moulds their will and interests?” Jan Bība, “Symbolic Representation and the Paradox of Responsive Performativity” in *Human Affairs* 25 (2015), 155.
87. Pitkin, *Concept*, 225.
88. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 100, 101, 105.
89. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161.
90. Laclau himself has previously recognized this overlap with Pitkin, citing approvingly Pitkin’s formulation of the way meaning arises from pragmatics. Pitkin, he writes (with Chantal Mouffe) challenges a “rigid separation . . . between semantics and pragmatics – that is, between meaning and use.” Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (Verso Books, 1990), 101.
91. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 7. Indeed, the word “representation” is often saddled with the same accusations as the word “populism”, that it is “vague or “ambiguous”” and that its meaning shifts (Pitkin, *Concept*, 5).
92. Pitkin, *Concept*, 223.
93. Lasse Thomassen, “Representing the People, Laclau as a Theorist of Representation,” *New Political Science* 41, No. 2 (2019), 331.
94. Thomassen, “Representing,” 335.
95. Thomassen, “Representing,” 336.
96. Thomassen, “Representing,” 335.
97. Thomassen, “Representing,” 337.
98. Thomassen, “Representing,” 337.
99. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 117.
100. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 168.
101. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 115.
102. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 228.

103. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 226.
104. Disch, "Impurity of Representation," 216.
105. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 104; 93.
106. As Disch acknowledges, it seems as though Laclau remakes Pitkin's fascism as "the heart of democratic practice," but she defends Laclau by distinguishing between "mythic unity" and "hegemonic alliance" (Disch, "Impurity of Representation," 217), claiming that the latter is not "an alignment of wills incarnated by a leader" (Disch, "Impurity of Representation," 218). On Arato's view, by contrast, since the represented's "identity and unity is said to be constituted by representation, the idea of a two-way movement is a subterfuge" (Arato, "Political Theology," 161). The only agency of the represented is "emotional attachment" (Arato, "Political Theology," 161).
107. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 162.
108. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 158.
109. I have the Arendtian distinction between acting and fabricating in mind here. We are not stuck with an either/or between natural spontaneity or artificial making. There can be agency without sovereignty.
110. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 161.
111. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 100.
112. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 113.
113. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 62. Italics in the original.
114. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 107.
115. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 105.
116. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 107–8.
117. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 108.
118. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 108.
119. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 116.
120. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 112.
121. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 121.
122. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 114.
123. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 52.
124. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 56.
125. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 217.
126. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 99.
127. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 100.
128. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 57.
129. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 62.
130. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 57, 60, 168.
131. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 62.

132. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 60.
133. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 62.
134. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 63.
135. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 66.
136. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 63.
137. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129.
138. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129.
139. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129, cited in Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 58.
140. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129, cited in Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 58.
141. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129, cited in Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 59.
142. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 59, citing Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129.
143. That Laclau finds galvanizing the spontaneity of similarity in some found feature is surprising since it seems to lend a causal role to a pre-sedimented or pre-constructed condition, and pulls against the articulatory intervention of a symbol. Despite his rejection of external representation, this emphasis on a common feature implies that symbolic representation requires a descriptive supplement.
144. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 59.
145. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 60.
146. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 59. Laclau's reference to the "narcissistic despot" (Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 60) is a kind of evasion. The leader's narcissism or the leader's "subjective intention" is not the issue in considering the "leader's function" (Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 99). What matters instead (and this is Pitkin's point as well as Freud's (Freud, *Group Psychology*, 123)) is the group members' psychology, belief, and acceptance, i.e., their libidinal investment. The leader's narcissism is tangential to this central concern, except insofar as it invites or repels the group's love, idealization, and/or identification.
147. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 60. The language of accountability implies that Laclau recognizes the need for formal (and perhaps even substantive) representation, even as he elsewhere undercuts it. As with the descriptive supplement noted in footnote 143, this seems to be an unacknowledged concession regarding the limits of symbolic constitution.
148. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 110.
149. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 129.
150. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 130.
151. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 127.
152. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 117.
153. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 134.
154. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 135.
155. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 132.
156. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 131.
157. Freud, *Group Psychology*, 131.

158. Both festivals and exaltation reveal in different ways that social bonds are not only libidinal but aggressive, and that hatred or rivalry among group members underlies them. Freud neither condemns nor celebrates mystical bonds of community but considers them to be “crooked cures” for, or protections against, individual neurosis (Freud, *Group Psychology*, 142).
159. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 123. Italics in the original.
160. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 123.
161. Sigmund Freud, “Repression” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XIV, James Strachey, trans. (Hogarth Press, 1968), 152–53.
162. Freud, “Repression,” 153.
163. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 108.
164. Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 138.