



George Orwell: a left populist?

by

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Abstract

This research paper aims at associating George Orwell's democratic socialism with left populism and to see whether or not Orwell's democratic socialism is a form of left populism. This will offer a new lens to understand left populism and will allow me to delve into Orwell's notion of socialism, which often goes unnoticed. Through an interpretive analysis, this paper distinguishes left populism from right populism and proposes a definition of left populism based on the European context. That will allow me to identify similarities between Orwell's democratic socialism and left populism. After emphasizing the lack of common literature between both and their probable disagreements, this paper will define Orwell's democratic socialism and then compare some of its characteristics shared with left populism, such as anti-establishment, the centrality of the people, reinforcement of democracy and patriotism

Keywords: left populism, populism, democratic socialism, George Orwell, people

Résumé

Ce dossier de recherche propose d'associer le socialisme démocratique de George Orwell au populisme de gauche et ainsi de se demander s'il aurait pu être une forme de populisme de gauche. Cela constitue une nouvelle perspective pour étudier le populisme de gauche et permet d'approfondir la notion de socialisme chez Orwell, passant souvent inaperçue. A travers une analyse interprétative, cette contribution distingue d'abord le populisme de gauche d'un populisme de droite et propose une définition du populisme de gauche. Ensuite, ce texte relève l'absence de littérature commune entre Orwell et le populisme et identifie plusieurs désaccords entre les deux. Finalement, ce texte offre une définition du socialisme démocratique d'Orwell, pour ensuite comparer certaines de ses caractéristiques partagées avec le populisme de gauche comme l'anti-establishment, la centralité du peuple, un renforcement de la démocratie et le patriotisme.

Mots-clés : populisme de gauche, populisme, socialisme démocratique, George Orwell, peuple

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Contents

Author declaration	1
Dissemination agreement	2
Availability within the School	2
Availability of print copy outside of the School	2
Availability of digital copy outside of the School	2
Abstract	3
Résumé	3
Acknowledgements	4
Contents	5
Introduction	6
Literature Review	6
Method and theoretical framework	8
1. Supporting the existence of a left populism	10
1.1 What is populism?	10
1.2 Definition of left populism and distinction with right populism	12
1.3 Why Orwell cannot be related to right populism	13
2. Absence of common study between Orwell and populism	15
2.1 The vagueness of the concept	15
2.2 The populist discursive style: empty signifiers	16
2.3 Evolution of the left toward more inclusivity	17
3. Why Orwell would have adhered to left populism	18
3.1 Definition of Orwell's democratic socialism	18
3.2 Common people and democracy	19
3.3 Patriotism and other traditionally right values	21
Conclusion	24
References	26
Primary sources: Orwell's writings	26
Secondary sources	26

Introduction

In 2022, John Rodden explained to *The American Purpose*, how captivating George Orwell's afterlife is. Among scholars or even politicians, there is this obsessive question of what Orwell would say or do today. We find him as a reference in many of our contemporary subjects: surveillance, use of media, or the power of words. Today *Animal Farms* or *1984* are still observed as some kinds of predictions of our contemporary era, as lenses that we could use to understand it. This last comment was the starting point of this thesis: how we could use Orwell's writings and relate them to our current political issues. I was particularly interested in how Orwell embodied a new vision of the left and more precisely of democratic socialism and how it could be related to our era. In his definition of democratic socialism, some concepts stood out: egalitarianism, common people, patriotism. These concepts reminded me of left populism and thus I started to wonder how relevant it would be to think of left populism through Orwell's political thought. It became rapidly challenging because this association is not commonly made. The term "populist" can be evoked in some publications studying Orwell, but it is never at the heart of the topic. That is what interested me: delving deeper into the relation that may exist between left populism and democratic socialism, as George Orwell defines it. Moreover, that could enlighten Orwell's own definitions of concepts such as common man or patriotism. Orwell gave great importance to clearly defining concepts and to make politics accessible to people. The concept of "populism" is a striking example of the current state of the political discourse: a word that we often hear in the media, largely studied by scholars but that no one, in their everyday life, understands. In contemporary democracies, a large part of the people feels unrepresented and distanced from politics. Left populism is seen as an answer to this crisis of representation and addresses various issues that are often overlooked such as gender inequality, ecology, or racism. It proposes at the same time to expand the role of the people within democracy. A point with which Orwell would have agreed. Thus, Orwell and left populism appear to share similarities and it seem relevant to study both at the same time.

Literature Review

This paper includes a large corpus of texts, allowing for a proper understanding of the debates around populism, Orwell's thought, and the way it has been studied. This has involved the study of both scholarly sources and Orwell's own writings, from his novels to his essays.

On populism, getting to a clear definition is demanding because of the numerous disagreements between scholars and aspects that constitute it. Populism is used to describe, at the same time, political movements, parties, ideologies, leaders from different geographical, historical, and ideological contexts (Kaltwasser 2013). Indeed, the term populism has been applied to both radical left movements such as *La France Insoumise*, *Podemos* or Bernie Sanders or extreme right movements such as *Le Front National* or *Fidesz*. Some authors (Rosanvallon 2018, Müller 2016, Kaltwasser and Mudde 2013) do not make a distinction between the populist nature of these movements and consider populism as a threat for democracy because of its anti-establishment combined with anti-pluralism: populists present

themselves as the only ones able to represent the true people (Müller 2016). In other words, they claim a monopoly of representation and essentialize the people (Rosanvallon 2018). On the opposite, authors such as Tarragoni (2019), Mouffe (2018) or Cervera (2021) build a specific definition to left populism, distinct from a right populism. Cervera (2021) even rejects the concept of populism, because it confuses minds and he perceives right populism as a lenient way to call extreme-right movements. Scholars working on left populism are less hostile to populism and believe that it can result in a reinforcement of democracy (Mouffe 2018) or in a fairer democracy (Tarragoni 2019). Thus, left populism may bring a questioning of our democracies and of its methods of representation and participation. Thus, it doesn't intend to destroy democracy but Tarragoni (2019) underlines that if these movements are not sufficiently monitored, these movements can lead to fascism. They tend to precisely portray what left populism is in terms of values, relation with democracy, their political orientation, discursive style etc. However, I have noted through my readings that the distinction between right and left populism is often a bit overlooked. Tarragoni (2019), Mouffe (2018) or Cervera (2021) agree on the distinction but never precisely study it: right populism consists of nationalist and racist values and limits democracy to the nationals while left populism consists of inclusive values and extends democracy to better radicalize it (Mouffe 2018). This distinction would deserve a more detailed analysis on the existence or not of right populism and on its own characteristics.

On Orwell, I focused on both scientific publications and Orwell's essays after having read *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Among his essays, I have studied *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Why I Write*, *Notes on Nationalism*, *Politics and the English Language*, *Fascism and Democracy*. The idea was to immerse myself in Orwell's political thought through his own writings and then to study the way his thought had been analysed. As I said above, Orwell is little associated with populism: he has never written the word populism in his essays and in scientific publications the term populist has been only invoked by two scholars: Rodden (1990, 141) that calls Orwell a "romantic radical and patriot who loved England of his childhood, nostalgic populist who hated class oppression and the modern industrial world" and Rosat (2012, 21) that describes his attitude as "a solicitude, devoid of any populist naivety, for the "common man" and "the sane opinions of the people". In the first case, he is associated with populism, in the other case he is distanced from it. Outside these two comments, I have found no bridges between Orwell and left populism in the corpus that I have analysed. However, his democratic socialism is the object of great interests and of numerous studies. The publication on Orwell flourished in the 1980s with the arrival of the special year 1984. The first biography on Orwell, *George Orwell: a life*, written by Bernard Crick in 1980 paved the way for the publications to come. Scholars went back to Orwell's own experiences to understand the origins of his democratic socialism. They (Leys 1984, Fyvel 1983, Newsinger 2006, Trilling 2007, Makovi 2015, White 2008) identify three founding events: his childhood at Eton, his experience as a colonial administrator in Burma during the 1920s and his enrollment in the Spanish War in 1936. Thus, scholars define Orwell's democratic socialism through his personal experience but also by highlighting the main values that stand out in his work and push his socialism: his feeling of injustice (Rosat 2006), his will of egalitarianism (Rodden 1990, Crothers 2015) and improving the lot of common people (Rosat 2006) as his ultimate value and by common decency (Rosat 2013). Other values have been attributed to Orwell's socialism: liberty, fraternity, humanism, (White 2008), anti-imperialism (Crother 2015), patriotism (White 2008, Rodden 1990, Newsinger 2006) or objective truth (Conant 2000). These values that characterize his socialism are mainly political, Crothers (2015) points out that Orwell's definition of socialism is mainly a political one rather than an economic one. I

found indeed very few ideas on Orwell's economic thought. Consequently, the association that I will make between Orwell and populism is mainly political and I will not focus on the economic propositions of populists, even though key to their programs. Outside his proposition of nationalization in *The Lion and The Unicorn*, Orwell does not seek for a way to overcome capitalism. His focus is rather on politics and social relations and that will be at the heart of the association that I will make between the two.

Thus, because Orwell democratic socialism and left populism appear to share similarities, I will wonder: to what extent could George Orwell have adhered to left populism? I suggest that there is a left populism, very distinct from a right populism and that this distinction is necessary while making an association between Orwell and populism. My hypothesis is that Orwell's democratic socialism could be considered as a form of left populism but that it must be nuanced on certain points that distance Orwell's thinking from that of populism.

After defining my method, I will start by supporting the existence of left populism by defining populism and by making a distinction between right and left populism. This distinction is necessary since Orwell's thinking cannot be related to right populism especially in terms of values. Then, I will make some propositions on why Orwell is so little associated with populism, a point that intrigued me during the process of my research. I aim at nuancing the bridges that I will later build between Orwell and left populism, by emphasizing that Orwell may have not wanted to be related to populism because of the populist discursive style. That underlined, I will finish this thesis by justifying why Orwell would have adhered to left populism by relating some specific points of his own definition of democratic socialism such as the idea to renew the left wing, the figure of the common man, the deepening of democracy or traditional right values common to Orwell and left populism.

Method and theoretical framework

To answer my question, I will use interpretive political theory. In other words, I will propose an interpretation (Bardon, 2014) of Orwell's democratic socialism in the light of left populism. I aim at describing their core values and ideas by analysing judgment values made by Orwell, scholars that studied him and interpreted his political thought and those of scholars standing for a left populism. I do not intend to develop a normative argument but to discuss the normative dimensions present in the literature presented above. My interpretation does not aim to bring an additional normative argument but to make my sources dialogue and to how their norms and values converge or diverge. I will apply political theory while thinking about its critical function (Boudou 2016) and believing that a better understanding of Orwell's political thought is possible. Moreover, Orwell's insight could provide a new lens to study left populism and the concept it develops. That is also a reason why I do not wish to bring my judgment value on the topic, it would not serve the aim of my research.

The literature studied is concentrated on the political aspect of populism analysed in rather recent publications: *Le Siècle du Populisme* (Rosanvallon 2018), *What is Populism?* (Müller 2016) or *L'Esprit Démocratique du Populisme* (Tarragoni 2019), *Le Populisme de*

Gauche. Sociologie de La France Insoumise (Cervera 2021), among others. While I define populism in the first part of this thesis, I do not make any association between right populism and Orwell's political thought. Any bridges built between Orwell and populism concern left populism specifically. Regarding left populism, I restrict it to the one present in Europe mostly in the twenty-first century because of the scope of study of the literature I work on. I will critically analyse these documents by highlighting key values common to Orwell and left populism and compare their definition. I will analyse concepts such patriotism, common people and the people or democracy. Concerning Orwell, the literature, outside his own writings, is from the 1980s until today.

1. Supporting the existence of a left populism

In this first part, I intend to bring light on the concept of populism: I will point out the debates that surround its definition, the context that favours its emergence, its main characteristics by referring to contemporary European movements and its link with democracy. It will point out the different perceptions that authors have on populism and open a discussion around the distinction between a left and a right populism. Thus, I aim at justifying this distinction and at building a specific definition of left populism. I will finally claim this distinction necessary when it comes to relating Orwell with populism. The values he stood for, or his political project have indeed no relation with right populist values and in this way, the links between Orwell and populism, developed later in this thesis, will not include right populism.

1.1 What is populism?

Studying the concept of populism implies looking at its definition and the history of the concept. Emphasizing the central role of populist politics in contemporary democracies, an increasing discussion has been taking place for the past decades and defining it represents quite a challenge for the scientists. There is a consensus, among scholars, on the fact that “populism worships the people” (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969). Outside this point, consensus is with difficulty attained. This is partly due to the fact that populism is used to describe, at the same time, political movements, parties, ideologies, leaders from different geographical, historical, and ideological contexts. Indeed, populism has been present across all continents and expresses itself in different ways and different periods of time. However, populism does not only cross borders and historical eras, but also ideological cleavages (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2013). When in Latin America, populism has been related to a progressive and inclusionary dynamic, related with left-wing values (Madrid 2008, Rosanvallon 2018), in Europe, populism was at first mostly from the extreme right. It was characterized by policies against migration and nationalist values. Left-populist movements have also been multiplying in Europe for the past decade, such as the movement of *La France Insoumise* in France or *Podemos* in Spain (Cervera, 2021). Thus, the term populism has been used to define extreme-right wing movements as well as radical left ones, which challenges the establishment of a scientific definition and of a common ground between these movements. Moreover, the term is widely heard in the media (Cervera, 2021) or used as an insult to delegitimize a political opponent (Müller 2016), which blurs our understanding of the concept. Scholars’ definition of populism, I believe, are very much linked to their political opinion about it. Cervera even affirms that any scientific neutrality on the topic is unreachable because of the political purpose or bias behind it, which Mouffe admits at some level. That point highlighted, studies on populism remain worth studying to understand the organization of these movements, their common points and what they say about our democracies.

However, to start, scholars often go back to the context required for the emergence of populism: it takes the form of a disenchantment of democracy for Rosanvallon (2018), a

resistance against neoliberalism for Mouffe (2018) and Cervera (2021) or comes from the entrance into a post-democratic era for Mouffe (2018) characterized by the end of the left/right cleavage or from a multiplication of social movement in response to liberal economic policies for Tarragoni (2019). What stands out from this specific context is an opposition to the dominant order, politically and economically. That implies that populism, at its roots, brings a questioning of democracy and of the economic system.

Then focusing on its form, scholars approach it in different ways. Müller (2016) perceives it as a political tradition with a definitive answer to the people's representation, Rosanvallon (2018) as a political proposition with a protesting dimension and a discursive style, Mouffe and Laclau (2018) as a political (but not ideological) strategy of "building the political frontier between Us and Them" and Tarragoni (2019) as a plebeian and radically democratic critic against the dominant order. Thus, the form of populism varies from one scholar to another, but they point out central themes within populism: the people, anti-establishment and again a questioning of democracy. Indeed, populism has a specific relationship with democracy: one common point between scholars is the border (Mouffe 2018) that populists create between us (the people) and them (the political elite). Populists are hostile towards elites and describe them as corrupted and immoral. This opposition constitutes the central mobilizing force of populism according to Tarragoni (2019). Nevertheless, this hostility is not enough to define a populist (Müller 2016). Populists also stand that the wrong elites are in power and that they are the only ones (we and only we, Müller 2016) that can represent the true people. Two aspects must be underlined from this last comment: firstly, not only are populists against the establishment but they are also anti-plural and secondly, they build a homogenous definition of the people that they qualify as morally pure (Müller 2016, Rosanvallon 2018). That is one way to interpret populism, a way that portrays populism as a threat for democracy. On the contrary, other authors disagree with this interpretation and defend that populists do not essentialize the people but perceive them as heterogeneous and have an inclusive approach towards them (Mouffe 2018, Tarragoni 2019). This border set up between the elites and the people aims at bringing back antagonism into democracy and at deepening the democratic exercise, in other words to radicalize it. Thus, scholars have different ways to describe the relationship between populism and democracy: in one case, populism threatens our democracies, in the other case, it reinforces them.

To precisely define populism, two other characteristics must be added: the charismatic leader and the use of emotion in populist discourses. These two points are quite common to all scholars. Firstly, populist movements require a leader as in any political movement (Mouffe 2018). Scholars agree that a populist leader has to embody (Cervera 2021) or articulate the heterogeneous demands from the people (Tarragoni 2019, Mouffe 2018). However, their opinion differs on charisma: most scholars agree that s/he needs to be charismatic (Taggart 1995, Rosanvallon 2018, Tarragoni 2019, Cervera 2021) and others believe that charisma is not a necessity (Mouffe 2018, Müller 2016). Rosanvallon emphasizes the leader as a people-man who claims a monopoly of representation which illustrates the anti-pluralistic nature of populism, emphasized above. Thus, even if authors analyse a common characteristic, they do not give the same meaning to it. Secondly all scholars highlight a specific populist discursive style that on one hand brings more emotions and affects in politics (Cervera 2021, Müller 2016, Rosanvallon 2018) and on the other hand relies on empty signifiers (Rosanvallon 2018, Mouffe 2018, Laclau 2005, Cervera 2021) to mobilize the people. Those empty signifiers are figurative terms that cannot be replaced by literal terms (Laclau, 2005) such as "the 1%" or "Brussels technocrats" which aim at homogenizing heterogeneous demands coming from the people, to form a populist unity.

Thus, those elements - the context, anti-establishment, the relationship with democracy, the definition of the people, charismatic leader, use of emotion - build the numerous definitions of populism. We can distinguish two main groups of authors: those who perceive populism as a threat for democracy (Müller 2016, Rosanvallon 2018) and on the contrary those who believe that populism brings a questioning of democracy and of the dominant order and thus that it may reinforce the democratic apparatus (Cervera 2021, Tarragoni 2019, Mouffe 2018). I will now show how these two groups differentiate whether or not a left populism from a right populism.

1.2 Definition of left populism and distinction with right populism

There are two main branches regarding the distinction between right and left populism. On one hand, scholars that perceive populism as a threat for democracy (Müller 2016, Rosanvallon 2018, Kalwasser and Mudde 2013) and that build a common definition of left and right populism, since the two are more and more alike. While they perceive left-wing and right-wing movements within populism, they claim that their few differences do not require a separate definition for their populist nature. Among left populist, many traditionally right-wing values - such as sovereignty, patriotism, or security - are reused and confuse the distinction that may exist between a right and a left populist program. The line between good patriotism and bad nationalism can be indeed quite fragile. On the other hand, other scholars reject the concept of populism and claim that any attempt to generate a general theory of populism will fail (Cervera, 2021). Those are often the ones that believe that populism can produce positive outcomes for democracy. According to Cervera, creating a definition of left populism specifically is more relevant and he perceives right populism to be a lenient way to call extreme-right movements. Tarragoni (2019) also recognises the difference between right and left populism and supports that racist and fascist values of extreme right parties, such as *Le Front National* in France, cannot be related to left populism. Mouffe (2018) justifies this distinction in the same way: right populism is characterized by xenophobic and nationalist values and by the will to restrict democracy only to the nationals while left populism seeks to expand democracy. One may open the path to authoritarianism and the other to the radicalisation of democracy. Thus, this distinction is much debated but I believe that it lacks precision among scholars focusing on left populism. This distinction would deserve deeper analysis than summarizing right populism to a lenient name for fascism and racism. That point noted, I still consider the exclusive nature of right populism sufficient to distinguish it from left populism which I shall now endeavour to define.

Our contemporary understanding of the term “left populism” comes from the writing of Laclau and Mouffe and the concept has been recently studied by Tarragoni that emphasizes the democratic nature of left populism and Cervera (2021), that constitutes a gradual definition of it, works on the internal mechanisms of left populist movements and their key values. The populist landscape is currently changing in Europe with the appearance of numerous radical left movements supporting progressist and emancipatory values (Tarragoni 2019). They appear as a reaction or resistance against the neoliberal order, productivism, founded on social movements from the working class and precarious middle class. These classes are

discriminated against by the economic system and often do not recognise themselves in the political elite or in the left wing. That could be interpreted as a certain betrayal of the left: traditional left-wing parties have accepted neoliberalism and so no longer represent the interests of the lower classes of society. Left populist movements address the precarity created by the dominant order and if they do not always propose to overcome it, they tend to moderate it (Cervera 2021). Another key aspect of left populism is the opposition between the people and the elite with a specific perception of the people which differs from the one of right populism. Tarragoni, Cervera, Mouffe or Laclau stands for an open definition of the people, they underline its multiplicity. They should not be essentialized, the people are not homogenous and there is not a precise class destined for revolution. The people comprehend employees, unemployed, students, pensioners, housewives, people with disabilities. Consequently, heterogeneous demands emerge from them, and the role of the leader is to articulate these demands, which is challenging within the left-wing in general. Thus, these scholars do not recognise a general will from the people, that would express itself spontaneously (Rosanvallon 2018), they do not see the people as a homogeneous entity. I believe that it is in this definition that lies the main difference between right and left populism: right populism stigmatizes a part of the people and essentializes what it considers as “the true people”, whereas left populism tends more to understand the system of domination and emphasize the demands from heterogeneous parts of the population. It is obviously not Manichean, and it is not a question of saying that right populism is wrong, and that left populism represents perfect empathy and the right way to go. However, this essentialization is particularly present within right populism which can result in a lack of pluralism and in an increase of discrimination, which is contrary to the values of left populism. That point highlighted, the definition of left populism would not be complete without dealing with its project for democracy. Tarragoni analyses the radical or revolutionary dimension of any left populist movement: it aims at making democracy more democratic, founding it on more egalitarian bases and making it more inclusive. Mouffe relates left populism with radical democracy: she is not against liberal democracy, but she intends to emancipate it (Quétier 2017, Cervera 2019).

Finally, a last characteristic is that left populism reinvests signifiers currently monopolized by the right (order, nation, sovereignty). It tends to use them in a civic and inclusive way, if not, it is not populism (Tarragoni 2019) or at least left populism. Thus, after emphasizing the distinction between right and left populism, I have provided a definition of left populism which is an anti-establishment movement that wishes to reinforce the democratic apparatus and that sees the people in their multiplicity. I will now briefly prove why this distinction is necessary when associating Orwell with populism and why he cannot be related to right populism.

1.3 Why Orwell cannot be related to right populism

Indeed, this distinction is key to the development of this thesis. Orwell could hardly be associated with right populism for different reasons. Making the distinction between left and right populism emphasizes that populism is constituted of movements from both extreme-right and radical left and highlights that they do not promote the same values. George Orwell is a left-wing thinker, stands for values such as social justice and egalitarianism, supports

nationalization and the working class and is against capitalism and class division. His thinking is in the tradition of the radical left and his values are not the one traditionally associated with the right-wing. Then, we have seen that scholars who theorize left populism, distinguishes it from right populism by the nationalist nature of the latter. Thus, it is relevant to study Orwell's perception on nationalism and its opposition towards it.

The following comments will be based on Orwell's essay *Notes on Nationalism*, written in 1945. The aim is to show that nationalism is contrary to several Orwell's values, which distances him from any form of right populism. Orwell starts his essay by defining nationalism as a desire to expand the power of one nation. A nationalist thinks in terms of competitive prestige and believes that his/ her nation is the strongest. It can easily turn into obsession and into an exercise of domination. A nationalist tends to impose its language and culture on others. They may attribute themselves privileges such as the right of self-determination for their own nation, but do not apply the same treatment when it concerns colonies. Here Orwell refers to the case of England and India, which was a British colony until 1947. Thus, nationalism implements forms of domination to which Orwell was opposed. He tells the difference between nationalism and patriotism, but I will come back on that later in my development. This blind love or obsession of nationalists for their nation often results in dishonesty, a lack of critical thought and an indifference to objective truth, which are three elements that Orwell deeply values (Conant 2012). Nationalists often live in a fantasy and with nostalgia. They rewrite the history of their nation, modifying past events and thus distance themselves from the common world and reality. Past becomes mutable, changes reality and that is detrimental to objective truth. These are different outcomes of nationalism identified by Orwell and they prove his opposition towards it. It suggests that Orwell would have criticized right populism and his nationalist nature, which goes against the values he stands for. That's why the association between Orwell and populism can only concern left populism, with which he is more likely to share a common ground.

To conclude, I have defined populism and drawn a distinction between right and left populism which is mainly based on the nationalist nature of right populism and their essentialization of the people. Pointing out the main features of left populism will allow the comparison between them with Orwell's democratic socialism. However, before doing so, I will address the limits that may exist in the association between Orwell and left populism.

2. Absence of common study between Orwell and populism

In this second part, I will try to explain why there is this lack of common literature between Orwell and populism and why associating Orwell with left populism has its limits. I will start by emphasizing the vagueness of the concept of populism that would have triggered Orwell's attention and associated it as a meaningless word. To pursue this idea, I will then explain why the discursive style of populists, especially the use of empty signifiers, would have warned him since the importance he gives to political language. Finally, I will show that Orwell's democratic socialism and contemporary left populism have emerged in different eras and that Orwell's socialism would have lacked to answer certain demands from the people such as feminism or discrimination on sexual orientation. That will be done, without knowing how Orwell's thought would have evolved if he was still alive. Orwell's thought is known to have changed through his life and thus I will not try to imagine what his thought would have become but I will base my analysis on what we know of him from his writings and their interpretations.

2.1 The vagueness of the concept

If Orwell's association with left populism may be questionable and an object of debate, it is with no hesitation that he would have perceived populism as an example of newspeak and an illustration of the vagueness that characterizes political language, and thus he would have been interested in it. In *Politics and the English language*, Orwell emphasizes the degradation of modern English prose and explains that words are less and less chosen for their meaning but that we rather use ready-made phrases. In this way, words build the meaning of a sentence, and it is no longer the meaning that drives our choice of words. Words think for us. 1984 precisely illustrates this situation by the development of newspeak, a language created by the government that aims at replacing English. Among other actions, newspeak creates vague concepts called blanket words, which have an extended meaning and end up with having no concrete meaning at all. To go back to his essay, Orwell analyses meaningless words that are often words from political language such as patriotism, justice, socialism, or fascism. These words are abused, misused and vague. Populism or left populism are examples of this situation. Commonly, our understanding of populism comes from the media and is often used as an insult (Müller 2016). The word has been more likely used for a normative action rather than for an analytical one (Tarragoni 2019) which often creates conflation. Thus, Orwell would have criticized the use of the word populism and if he would have studied it, he would not have theorized it, as it did not theorize socialism (White 2008). He would have tried to make it understandable and accessible to common people. Orwell would have probably given his own specific meaning to it as he did with socialism and patriotism. The vagueness of populism and even more of left populism and the fact that Orwell never addressed the topic challenges their association.

2.2 The populist discursive style: empty signifiers

Another way to explain this lack of common literature is the possible reluctance that Orwell would have felt regarding the populist discursive style. Because I am comparing Orwell to left populism, I will focus on the discourse approach of left populists and more especially on the use of empty signifiers theorized by Laclau and Mouffe (2014). Laclau defines empty signifiers as figurative terms that cannot be replaced by literary terms meaning that they do not represent specific concepts or have an agreed definition. Empty signifiers may refer for example to “the 1% vs the 99%”, “Brussel technocrats” but also freedom or equality. These signifiers seem with no meaning, but Laclau does not consider it as a lack of ideology. Empty signifiers allow to articulate heterogeneous demands of the people and consequently to form unity within populism. The more emptied a signifier is, the more it can unify differential positions. It is one of the main characteristics of the populist discursive style according to Laclau and Mouffe. To develop their thought, the use of empty signifiers is to relate with their approach to reality. Both authors are post-structuralist meaning that they believe that social reality exclusively exists through construction and discourse. Consequently, there is no objective world or objective truth to which we could have access neutrally. Truth and reality are always in an ongoing negotiation process. Post-structuralism is not to be systematically related with populism. However, since Mouffe and Laclau are part of the first scholars to have theorized left populism and influence current left populist movements, it is interesting to see how their view is totally opposed to Orwell's.

On the topic of objective truth, the paper “Freedom, Cruelty and Truth - Rorty vs Orwell” by James Conant brings some key insights on the importance that Orwell gives to objective truth, as something that exists outside of human beings. Examples of objective truth are for instance “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” or “stone is hard”. The disappearance of objective truth would result in a world where truth is malleable and corresponds to social consensus. In this way, truth could be used by the dominant order, such as in *1984*, and be imposed on people. Consequently, people could not preserve their liberty (Conant 2012) since they could no longer rely on their personal experiences and own judgements and truth would exclusively be based on social construction and consensus. Thus, Orwell would be quite alarmed by the post-structuralism defended by Mouffe and Laclau. He would also be opposed to the use of empty signifiers to unify the demands of the people. As I precised above, Orwell criticizes the vagueness of certain concepts, concepts that are abused or in this case emptied of their meaning. At the time that Orwell wrote for the newspaper *Tribune*, he always aimed at educating people on politics or on the understanding of certain concepts (Rosat 2017). Thus, emptying words of their meaning is not part of his dynamic: on the contrary, language has to be concrete and to allow people to make a representation of what they are talking about. From the moment words become abstract, they are more easily manipulated. In this way, Orwell would have been radically opposed to the use of empty signifiers and thus to the discursive style proposed by Mouffe and Laclau. However, it is important to note that Orwell was always wary of the way politicians articulate their discourse and that he would not only have criticized the populists but the political discourse in general.

2.3 Evolution of the left toward more inclusivity

A last point I wanted to deal with is the notion of inclusivity and more precisely the level of inclusivity present in both contemporary left populism and Orwell's democratic socialism. They emerged in two different eras, the past decade for left populism and between the 1920s and the 1940s for Orwell's democratic socialism, two eras that do not share the same political concerns. Nowadays, left populists, the left in a general way, address many forms of discrimination such as homophobia, sexism, or racism (Cervera 2021). However, it is very likely that Orwell would have struggled to reconcile his own vision of socialism with these new demands (White 2008, Rodden 2021). Orwell is on the contrary known for his misogynist comments or characters, as Winston in *1984*, and for being antifeminist (Rodden 2021). Newsinger (2006) claims that his homophobia cannot be verified, even though his characters make homophobic comments such as in *Burmese Days* (Pordzik 2012). This aspect of Orwell's writings and personality is linked to the era in which he lived. Orwell's inclusivity, his will to favour and defend minorities or those suffering discrimination, is mainly towards common people and the working class who are excluded from the political life. On this point, we could note that Orwell develops the concept of the common man and not the one of the common human. It does not necessarily imply that he excludes women, but he does not include them either. That contrasts with left populist political programs that address feminist demands and propose measures to increase gender equality or equality between sexes, among fight against discrimination. Those subjects are absent from Orwell's democratic socialism and that may create a gap between his thought and left populism.

To conclude, I have tried to understand the absence of common literature between Orwell and left populism which may be a sign that the association of both has its limits. Scholars, who interpreted his thought, are fully aware of the importance he gave to a correct and precise use of language. So, associating him with left populism is not instinctive with a vague definition of populism and a discursive style that mirrors everything he criticized in the political discourse. Moreover, it may be quite delicate to associate his thought with left populist movements which intend to be inclusive. However, those last comments should not prevent from studying the link that may exist between Orwell and left populism. Because if Orwell and left populism differ on discourse and the use of words, there are many topics that bring them together such as the criticism against elites or the importance of people within democracy.

3. Why Orwell would have adhered to left populism

In this last part, I will explain why Orwell's democratic socialism is compatible, to some extent, with left populism. To do so, I will define Orwell's understanding of democratic socialism through the political project that he presented in *The Lion and Unicorn* that gives interesting insights on what's at the heart of his socialism. Then I will develop and define precise concepts or ideas that constitute his democratic socialism and that he shares with left populists: the common man, democracy, and patriotism. Since both - left populism and Orwell's democratic socialism - are never studied together, I make connections between sources studied on both topics and try to nuance these common points.

3.1 Definition of Orwell's democratic socialism

First of all, Orwell has defined his understanding of democratic socialism in *The Lion and The Unicorn* (1941), an essay written during World War Two in which he proposes a few measures for the implementation of socialism in England. He describes socialism as the "common ownership of the means of production" (II, I) to which we need to add, approximate equality of incomes, political democracy, and the abolition of all hereditary privileges. In this case, nationalization was combined with the right to private property (such as clothes or furniture), which Orwell perceived as the basis of individual self-determination. To precise this definition, Orwell considers that the common ownership of production by the state - land, mines, ships - is not sufficient to build a socialist and equal society. Firstly, to reach equality, people need to look at each other as equals (Newsinger 2008) meaning that their needs and interests should be looked at with equal consideration. Orwell rejected any form of inequality if it was socially unnecessary (Makovi, 2015) but still admitted that some inequalities could be justifiable in terms of common good (White 2008). That's why Orwell wishes to implement approximate equality. In this way, people could feel solidarity towards each other and a sense of community where everyone has a common fate (White 2008). Secondly, political democracy is necessary in order to prevent socialism from turning into totalitarianism as it happened in the USSR. Collectivization has a tendency to lead to potential abuse of power in socialist states and thus the people need to have control on the government. Thereby, we see that Orwell's socialism is a combination of nationalization and individual freedoms (of self-determination, of autonomy or political). Thirdly, Orwell considers the end of class division as the essence of socialism and wants any hereditary privileges, especially in education, to be abolished. This constituted another step to build an equal society. So, this definition given by Orwell himself is a rather political definition than an economic one (White 2008, Crothers 1994). The biggest concern of Orwell lies in social relations and bases socialism on the certitude that human society "could be a great deal better than it is at present, and that most of evil that men do result from the warping effects of injustice and inequality". Thus, he founded his socialism on humanism and values such as equality, liberty, fraternity. He attempted to

make socialism more human and not to theorize it. I will now put specificities of his socialism in dialogue with aspects of populism, proving that the two share similarities.

3.2 Common people and democracy

The origins of Orwell's socialism are multiple: they lie in his personal experiences but above all in his realization regarding class domination and the misery in which the lower classes of society lived (White 2008). As Makovi emphasizes, Orwell became a socialist more out of disgust with the way the poorest were treated than out of admiration for a planned society. He was very sensitive towards discrimination that he associated mostly with the liberal economic order and expressed his revulsion against the neoliberal thought of Hayek (Crothers 1994). This resonates with left populism since they claim to stand for people discriminated against by neoliberalism. However, Orwell does not identify the same categories of people suffering discrimination than left populism. As expressed earlier, Orwell does not address discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation but rather economic discrimination or between social classes (Newsinger 2006). Gender, feminism, or inclusivity are rather contemporary topics in politics. What coincide between the two is their opposition to the economic system and the will to bring a decent life back to discriminated categories of society.

The emergence of both is a reaction against the dominant order but also to a certain betrayal of the left. Left populism expresses hostility towards traditional left parties that have accepted the neoliberal order and consequently the discrimination that came with it (Tarragoni 2019). They no longer represent left core values. However, one aspect to nuance is that some left populist movements such as *La France Insoumise* perceive themselves as new, while it is not that accurate on some topics. For example, there are many similarities between the economic program of Mitterand in 1981 and the one of *La France Insoumise* (Cervera 2021). Thus, the idea of renewal of the left among left populists should be taken with nuance and distance. This betrayal is also felt in Orwell's socialism at two levels: communism and the Labour party. On one hand, during the Spain War, Orwell lived his first experience of socialism for a short time in Barcelona, where social classes no longer existed, but the communists betrayed the revolution and became totalitarian. From this time, Orwell has always distinguished his socialism from communism. On the other hand, Orwell was not a supporter of the Labour party until 1943. It would be inaccurate to say that he felt that it had betrayed the left, but he often reproached the Labour its lack of egalitarianism and ambition in the policies they implemented. Thus, Orwell developed a new vision of the left, as left populist movements tend to do.

These new visions of the left - populist and Orwellian - have a deep consideration for the people, outside the discrimination they are suffering from. Orwell has created the figure of the common man that he describes as apolitical and amoral since neither moral doctrines nor political ideologies actually direct his conduct (Rosat 2013). The common man is driven by his personal experiences and the common world. The common world refers to the capacity of all to establish statements independent of what the others may say. It is a world of objective truth (Conant 2012). It means that there are truths outside of us, such as the famous example of 1984: $2 + 2 = 4$. Thus, being able to establish those truths is the primary characteristic of the common man. Orwell adds that the common man is passive in the face of major events, in front of which he feels helpless. His passivity makes him sensitive to disruptions of the world

and attached to reality. Moreover, the common man demonstrates common decency, a characteristic conceptualized by Orwell, which gathers values such as rectitude, generosity, hate of privileges and a desire for equality. Common decency is the way to build something common to the different social classes, to create fraternity and a way to reach a fairer and more equal society (Rosat 2013, White 2008). In this way, no socialist movement can reach equality if it does not include common people in their project (Newsinger 2006) and if not based on common decency. On the contrary, Orwell criticizes intellectuals who do not identify themselves as common men and tend to forget the common world because of the empty words that they use in their discourse. Language has become mechanical for them and distances them from the common world, which is why Orwell would have criticised the notion of empty signifiers developed by Laclau. Intellectuals need to recognise themselves as common men in order to be democrats (Rosat 2013). This distinction between the common man and the intellectual is reminiscent of the opposition made by left populists between the people and the political elites. Left populists consider the elites as corrupted but also as deaf to the demands and needs of the people, that's why they present themselves as representatives of the people and put them at the heart of their programs.

Indeed, both aim at bringing the people back to the centre of politics and give them a specific role within the democratic apparatus. Before emphasizing their relationship with democracy, it is crucial to highlight that neither left populist nor Orwell essentialize the people. Orwell does not essentialize the working class or attribute a leadership role to it (Rosat 2006) for the implementation of socialism in England. It is not by nature destined to make a revolution. However, the mobilization of the people is key for their political project. That is because the people were not sufficiently mobilized and ready for a revolution, that Orwell gave up his idea of socialist revolution in England from 1942 (Crothers 1994). It does not imply that he stopped believing in his convictions, but he knew that the path to socialism and an egalitarian society was long and tortuous and without the participation of the common people, equality could not be reached. Populist movements also require the mobilization of the people since they appear in democracies and need voters to be elected or at least to be part of the opposition forces in the parliament. One difficulty that they meet is that they often make electoral breakthroughs but are rarely hardy (Cervera 2021) which has several explanations and one of them is the infidelity of their electorate. Populist movements, because they are on the margins of the political spectrum, are often a fad which explains the volatility of their voters who are young and more likely to abstain. Consequently, populist movements often struggle to assert themselves on the political scene in the long term. Thus, the role of the people in Orwell's democratic socialism and left populism firstly lies in their mobilization, then attribute them a role of participation. However, their method of participation varies. Orwell is vague on the concrete functions of the common people within democracy, even though he wishes them to be involved. If he includes common people in his socialist projects, it is also to apply their values to democracy such as common decency, that would result in a reinforcement of democracy. Left populism is more precise on the topic, especially with the project of radical democracy developed by Chantal Mouffe among others. Left populism questions the power of citizens within liberal democracies or representative democracies and note that only a small part of the political elite concentrate the power, while the majority, except in times of elections, is excluded from any political participation (Tomès 2019). Thus, radical democracy aims at increasing the participation of citizens which is challenging when we realize the disinterest in politics among the population. In order to generate interest for democracy, Mouffe proposes to mobilize emotions and passions that would revive the love of citizens for their country and government and that would consequently push them to take part in democracy (Cervera 2019).

People need to be mobilized around an identity, a project and a leader that embody liberal values (equality and liberty for all). Another point is that left populist movements start by increasing the participation among their activists. For example, *La France Insoumise* proposes working groups on draft bills and pushes through leaflets a desire for action and creativity within the party. If elected, the idea would be to expand those actions to all.

However, on the question of the participation and role of the people or common people, left populists and Orwell are quite ambiguous. If we study *1984* and *Animal Farm*, we perceive a kind of disenchantment of Orwell for the participation and empowerment of the people. In both fictions, the mass is malleable, does not think critically and obey with no second thought to a totalitarian government. That shows that Orwell never solved the issue of how to prevent socialist elites from keeping power and turning totalitarian as it happened in the USSR (Crothers 1994). Orwell proposes in his project a control from the people on the government but never explains how this control would be set up. In his two fictions, the people are quite passive in front of political domination. In *1984*, the proles that constitute 85% of the population live outside politics, they do not take part in it, do not live in the same areas as the members of the party and are not even targeted by propaganda. Once their basic needs are met, they will not pose any problem: that is how the government perceives them. However, at the end of the novel, Orwell writes “If there was hope, it must lie in the proles”. It proves that even at the end of his life, Orwell has never lost faith in the people, that he remained persuaded that they needed to be included in the political life but that he did not know how this could happen, how they could gain power. The position of left populists is also ambiguous but for other reasons. There is a discrepancy between what we find in their discourse and political programs and what actually happens within their parties (Cervera 2021). Cervera takes the example of the internal mechanisms of *La France Insoumise* in which activists actually lack rights and responsibilities. He defines militant power as anarcho-Cesarism. In other words, while their creativity and self-organization are brought out, their decision-making power is almost non-existent and concentrated in the governing sphere of the party. Moreover, the actions described above of working groups on draft bills are not efficient. They often represent laborious meetings whose results do not serve anyone outside the party. The party inscribes its will in anchoring itself in social mobilisations and offering them an institutional outlet, which could be seen as representation rather than participation.

Thus, we have seen that both left populism and Orwell democratic socialism appeared as reaction to unfair system of domination and a discriminatory economic order. Both have a will to bring the people back into politics, to make democracy more democratic and egalitarian. However, both positions need to be nuanced: Orwell for his uncertainty for the people to acquire power and left populists for their lack of coherence between their discourse and their internal organization and concrete actions.

3.3 Patriotism and other traditionally right values

The last point that I wanted to study that is both common to Orwell democratic socialism and left populism is the use of traditional right values and most importantly the concept of patriotism, central to Orwell's writings. Orwell defines patriotism as a “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life which one believes to be the best in the world but which has no wish to force upon other people”. He considers that patriotism can be a virtue as

long as it is related to loyalty, courage, and a willingness to sacrifice private desires for the sake of the common good (White 2008). Another way to describe Orwell's patriotism is as not an abstract love of one's country but as the preservation of a specifically English love of decency and democracy (Rodden 1990). According to Orwell, patriotism and socialism are no longer antithetical but complementary. Recognising the national identity of each state as unique allows to bring a sense of belonging, so of fraternity to the people, where they all feel as a full participant within society (White 2008). In this way, people adhere more easily to socialism and socialism is then founded on a solid basis. In other words, patriotism may serve the emergence of a socialist state. From these different insights, Orwell's patriotism can be interpreted as something that builds a common fate between people and consequently creates a sense of solidarity. This definition opposes patriotism to the concept of nationalism defined earlier in this development. By saying that, Orwell is part of the debate on the distinction between nationalism and patriotism. He distinguishes the two concepts in terms of aggressive and defensive attitudes: where nationalism aims at imposing and expanding its power and so exercising domination, patriotism is a devotion which is not forced on anyone.

Regarding left populism, it also reclaims traditional right values, or values that have been given up to the right-wing such as sovereignty, order, security, or patria (Cervera 2021). The idea of a left patriotism is not new to left populist movements. In France, there is a history of left patriotism that is taken up today by *La France Insoumise*, but it has not invented it. This comment also nuances the novelty that represents *La France Insoumise* on the political scene. What reveals this patriotic aspect is the will of both left populism and Orwell to take distance with internationalism. Socialism is commonly associated with it, with the idea to lead an international socialist revolution. Orwell explains that many intellectuals have detached themselves from their country and have seen a new patria in what internationalist socialism represented (Rosat 2013). Orwell, as his definition of patriotism suggests, remained deeply attached to England despite his experience in Burma and the system of economic exploitation that it embodied. As explained above, patriotism was crucial to Orwell, and he even declared in *The Lion and the Unicorn* that "No true revolutionary has ever been an internationalist". He considered that common people could not identify themselves to an internationalist socialism, that they could not relate to it (White 2008). So, Orwell aimed at distancing socialism from empty universalism and relating it to national identity. For left populists, patriotism is less central to their political programs, and I found few insights on the reasons for reclaiming those traditionally right values. One hypothesis that I could draw would be to say that populism is often a sign of a crisis of representation, of a political situation where people are divided. Left populism aims at unifying the people by articulating their heterogeneous demands (Laclau 2005, Mouffe 2018), and using patriotism could be used to achieve so. To that could be added a will to differ patriotism from the use of it by the extreme right movements, that always turn patriotism into nationalism. Thus, patriotism is common to Orwell and left populism and aims at unifying the people together and recreating a lost link between the state and the people.

To conclude this final part, I have defined Orwell's democratic socialism, firstly on the basis of his own writings. This has allowed to present the main concepts that constitute his political thinking such as the common man or patriotism and thus, to study the similarities that he shares with left populism. On left populism, scholars agree on the centrality that the people occupy, the inclusive definition of the people and its anti-establishment. Elements that we find in Orwell's writings: the opposition between common people and intellectuals, the role of

common people to build an egalitarian society and push us to think that Orwell may have adhered to left populism to some extent. However, some aspects of left populism are difficult to link with Orwell's political thought, such as the role of the leader and his charisma. Thus, this association with left populism has to be taken with distance.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study to what extent Orwell may have adhered to left populism. The idea was to study Orwell's democratic socialism, which often goes unnoticed in our common image of Orwell, and to see how it could offer a new lens to understand left populism.

Defining populism is already a challenge in itself and the distinction between right and left populism is still at the heart of lively debates. By opting for the existence of a left populism, I have distinguished it from right populism and proposed a definition, based on a critical analysis of recent publications that stand for an exclusive definition of left populism rather than for a general one of populism. Left populism is thus characterized by anti-establishment, an open definition of the people, a radicalization or at least a reinforcement of democracy and the use of traditionally right-wing values. It differs from a right populism characterized by nationalism and its consequences, an essentialized definition of the people and a restriction of democracy. This distinction distances Orwell's political thought from right populism while it brings him closer to left populism. However, there is no common literature to Orwell and left populism, which I did not expect when I started this research. Thus, I wanted to address this lack of literature and to try to interpret it. It allowed me to point out some limits to the association of Orwell with left populism and areas of disagreement, such as the discursive style. The key part of this research paper is the last one which questions whether or not Orwell's democratic socialism is a form of left populism. Between publications on Orwell and left populism, several similarities emerge, and I aimed at nuancing them, focusing on the political aspect of both, since economy is a subject less addressed by Orwell and offered less ground for comparison. What's striking is that Orwell's democratic socialism and left populism, even though they do not always attribute the same meaning or importance to them, share the same foundations: anti-establishment and criticism against the economic order, the empowerment of the people within democracy, reinforcement of democracy and right-values. That supports my hypothesis: Orwell is a left populist. However, I believe that Orwell's left populism would have been as his socialism, an unseen kind (Rosat 2013). He would have had his own definition of it and he probably would have been totally at odds with some aspects of the traditional form of left-wing populism. He would also have tried to make its understanding more accessible to common people to whom populism remains vague and meaningless. Those are only interpretations based on what Orwell has done with other concepts and on his will to inform and include common people in politics.

To open a discussion, this research makes me wonder what opinion Orwell would have had on the definition of the people given by left populists. I ask myself if he would have been optimistic about the important support that left populist movements such as *La France Insoumise* receive. These movements mobilize the people and thus, if we make the connection, common people. Orwell died without solving the issue of how-to bring people back to politics, which is well-illustrated by the proles in *1984*, who are excluded but also exclude themselves from politics. Orwell adds that without them, socialism cannot emerge. But nowadays, left populism gathers people, and if they do not represent a majority, they are a strong force of opposition. There are numerous people that do not feel represented or who do not take part in politics, but left populists try to address this issue. Thus, I wonder if he would

have considered that as an evolution of the common people, as a good path for them to be part of politics and if it would have comforted his thought on the fact that hope lies in the proles.

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