THE POPULIST STYLE

Trump, Le Pen and Performances of the Far Right

Théo Aiolfi

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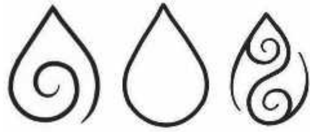
Pour Christophe



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INTRODUCTION: POPULIST STYLE AND PERFORMANCES OF THE FAR RIGHT

Do you remember what you were doing when you learned that Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America on 8 November 2016? After months following a campaign more surreal than any I had watched before and consulting countless polls that predicted Hillary Clinton as the winner, Trump's victory felt preposterous. Given the never-ending stream of live reactions on my phone, it seemed that I was far from the only one, as pundits and experts everywhere seemed to share my astonishment. Of course, American citizens were most directly impacted by the result, but Trump's election was one of those historical events whose ripples extend way further than the confines of the country where they took place. During the months that followed, Donald Trump became the most talked about politician on the planet.

After a presidential term that was just as chaotic and shocking as his campaign had been, Trump's defeat against Joe Biden at the following presidential elections in 2020 seemed to mark a form of return to normality. Trump would end up in the history books as an embarrassing mistake, a one-off anomaly that remained constrained by the solidity of the American political institutions. And while the assault of the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021, for which he has been indicted for incitement of insurrection, demonstrated the violence of the threat that Trump had fostered, it also appeared like the last nail in the coffin of his political career. Surely, no former president could ever entertain the hope of being re-elected after an event like this, after facing four indictments at both the federal and state level for nearly one hundred felony

charges. But Trump's resilience continues to shock and surprise, every criminal accusation framed as one more proof of the conspiracy of the elite against him and reinforcing the zeal of his supporters. As of the time where these lines are written, in the early months of 2024, Trump seems well on track to win the Republican primaries once more and is heading towards a second duel against outgoing president Joe Biden. While this book does not claim to make predictions about what is going to happen in late 2024, it instead offers to go back to the roots of the Trump phenomenon by examining the 2016 presidential campaign and framing his surprising victory as part of a larger conversation on far-right politics, representation and populism in Western countries.

There were indeed many factors accounting for the surprise around Trump's victory, most notably the oddities of the indirect system of presidential election in the United States (which allowed Trump to win despite losing the popular vote by nearly three million votes) or shortcomings in polling methods (Kennedy et al. 2018). But outside of technical considerations, what made this election result so remarkable largely had to do with its victor, Donald Trump, who had run one of the most abrasive campaigns in the history of the country. Focusing on 'law and order', economic protectionism and a xenophobic form of nationalism, Trump's agenda did not drastically differ from that of other Republican candidates. Rather, Trump stood out from his peers for reasons beyond the measures he advocated. Building on the image of a successful businessman he had honed over fourteen years starring in the reality television show *The Apprentice*, Trump entered the campaign as an outsider seeking to 'drain the swamp'. His campaign quickly became characterised by the repeated transgressions of political norms, from his egregious lies (Pfiffner 2020) to the use of demeaning nicknames for his rivals (Quealy 2021). Framing himself as the leader of a movement that would save the American people from a discredited elite, Trump was quickly described as a populist (Norris and Inglehart 2016; Ostiguy and Roberts 2016), with all the negative undertones associated with the term. And conversely, as Trump became synonymous with populism, the opposite also became true as the 45th president became the face of a new wave of populism, a concept with a much longer history going back to agrarian movements of the nineteenth century, but which had since then undergone a drastic 'semantic drift' (Jäger 2017) which will be discussed later.

Fast-forward nearly six months after Trump's election, to 23 April 2017, the day of the first round of the French presidential election, where Marine Le Pen, leader of the then *Front National* (FN),[1] reached second place with 21.30 per cent of the votes in a very close race with three other major candidates. More than beating her own record she had set five years before (17.90 per cent), Le Pen made a historic achievement: the highest electoral result ever for a radical candidate in France. Le Pen thus joined the second round of the election for the second time in the history of her party, following the success

of Jean-Marie Le Pen, her father, in the 2002 elections. However, a major difference between them is that, very much like Trump's victory, her father's qualification to the second round of the election was seen at the time by the political intelligentsia, and the voters more generally, as not only surprising but also shocking. Jean-Marie Le Pen's brand of far-right politics was then framed as a threat to French democracy itself (Stockemer 2017: 23). Massive protests attended by more than a million people were organised, most other candidates reluctantly endorsed Jacques Chirac, the outgoing president, as part of a *front républicain*, and Chirac himself refused to even debate with his adversary.

In contrast, Marine Le Pen's accession to the second round of the election was met with relative indifference. Following years of political normalisation, she and her party steadily gained electoral ground and Le Pen's presence in the second round was widely anticipated by most polls.[2] Although she lost the second round of the election against her centrist rival, Emmanuel Macron, she did not suffer her father's pariah treatment. Protests opposing her were marginal, she faced a weakening 'republican front' – given that she was endorsed by Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, another conservative candidate, and that radical-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon refused to endorse either candidate, even though he did endorse Chirac in 2002 – and she faced Macron in the first presidential debate for a far-right candidate in France. In other words, where her father's success in 2002 was inconceivable, Marine Le Pen's rise to the second round encountered few obstacles. Despite her eventual failure at breaking the glass ceiling of the second round of the election, her unprecedented success should not be underestimated. Le Pen also presented herself as an underdog candidate – both respectable and radical – who would save France from a catastrophic situation created by the incompetence of the current elites on immigration and radical Islamism.

Such a type of discourse was of course not a novelty from Le Pen. Building on the legacy that her father had built in his party, and even actively coordinating his last presidential campaign in 2007, Le Pen herself had already campaigned for her first campaign in 2012. But although she had already undertaken the process of normalisation of her party, the agenda she defended was faithful to the fundamentals of the far right (Alduy and Wahnich 2015), which led to a campaign centred around a much more explicitly radical and nationalist line than in 2017. Although this campaign was moderately successful, beating the record established by her father in 2002 in terms of share of the vote (16.86 per cent in 2002 vs 17.90 per cent in 2012), she remained far from her two mainstream rivals, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. As such, this first relative failure was accompanied by an increased focus on the *dédiabolisation* process, a softening in tone and the adoption of a people-centric rhetoric which helped her ground her claims to be 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016). As such, even though Le Pen's steady normalisation sharply contrasted with

Trump's bombastic takeover of the Republican Party, she was also frequently described as a populist (Gross and Lebourg 2016; Ivaldi 2017). And just like him, she also became one of the most prominent faces of populism in Europe (Nossiter 2017) as she particularly stood out as one of the rare female leaders to be described as such (Geva 2019).

My argument in this book is that, despite all their differences and even the apparent contradiction between Trump's outrageous antics and Le Pen's softening rhetoric, the guiding thread uniting these two cases is indeed populism. However, the understanding of populism underpinning my argument is radically different from that of mainstream analysts given that, building on Moffitt's (2016) approach, I define populism as a political style. In this introduction, I will firstly provide an overview of the rationale behind this choice for a critical and interdisciplinary approach to populism. Secondly, I will justify my choice of a comparative research design to engage with the populist style and the reasons why I selected Le Pen and Trump to develop this comparison. Thirdly, I will defend the focus on presidential elections and introduce more at length the two political actors that constitute the 'cast' of my analysis: Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump. Although I will exclusively engage with their respective campaigns for the 2016 and 2017 presidential elections, these two politicians were far from strangers to the citizens of their countries when they started campaigning. To ground my analysis in the local context and provide a 'thicker' (Geertz 2008) understanding of the events, I will offer a summary of the public life of these politicians prior to their campaigns, detailing crucial elements of background information. Finally, I will detail the structure of this book and provide an outline of the forthcoming chapters.

Populist Style and Performances of the Far Right

While I disagree with many of the reasons underpinning the standard descriptions of Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump as populists, most notably the moralistic judgement and covert accusations of incompetence or demagoguery associated with it, I agree with those scholars that populism played an important role in both of those presidential campaigns. Indeed, despite the differences between those two political actors, I argue that their electoral success was the culmination of two contrasting strategies which both relied on a shared commonality: their use of the populist style. But before developing my definition of populism as a style and how it differs from earlier uses of the concept, let us take one step backward and consider why these two politicians were so deeply associated with it.

Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the concept of populism became so ubiquitous in the mediatic and academic depictions of Trump and Le Pen. Their electoral success deeply resonated with the rising wave of reactionary politicians and nationalist projects across the world, whose most recent success was

the victory of the 'Leave' campaign at the Brexit referendum in June of the same year, sealing the historic departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Dubbed the 'new nationalism' by *The Economist* (2016), this movement became the electorally successful avatar of a deeper change among far-right political actors that modernised their communication to make headways into mainstream political discourse (Winter 2019). Inspired by the theoretical innovations of the French '*Nouvelle Droite*' (Bar-On 2001; Rueda 2021), this modernised far right has developed its presence online while also influencing more traditional political institutions and politicians. Although populism is not directly associated with the more extreme fringes of these far-right movements, it has been used to refer to those political actors adopting the modernised version of far-right politics in an electoral context.

Challenging what they called the 'populist hype', Glynos and Mondon (2016: 13–15) criticised this semantic shift from describing these actors as primarily populist instead of far-right, which downplays their ideology, grants them a veneer of popular legitimacy and further discredits by association any other radical alternative, from the left notably. I do concur with their call to be more cautious and critical about the way populism as a concept and signifier is used in political and academic discourse. However, I argue that, outside of its frequent conflation with the far right and the moral judgement from those who use it, populism does capture a fundamental component of what made these far-right actors successful in their electorally driven endeavours.

In opposition to those who talk about populism as a set of beliefs or ideas (Mudde 2017a; Müller 2016), the perspective adopted in this book is built around the intuition that the nature of populism is fundamentally different from the ideological beliefs to which it gives shape. Starting from the premise that populism is not located at the level of ideational content, I instead argue that it is a matter of political form. Put differently, populism is not about *what* politicians like Le Pen and Trump are saying, it is about *the way* they articulate it. That ontological shift from content to form, from ideology to style, thus implies acknowledging the intrinsically performative and theatrical dimension of populism. As such, adapting and expanding a definition created by Moffitt (2016), I will develop throughout this book an interdisciplinary approach to populism as a political style, that is a repertoire of performative practices that can be strategically mobilised by any political actor to convey their ideological agenda.

Applying it to the aforementioned politicians, such a radical conceptual change means that neither Trump nor Le Pen were inherently populist during their campaigns, as their primary attribute remained their ideological commitment to nationalism, conservatism and so on. Their practices, in other words their political performances, were populist, but it would be misguided to describe them as populist themselves. Although I may occasionally use the

shortcut of 'populist actors' or 'populist politicians', I want to emphasise the importance of dissociating the actor from their actions. This therefore means that it would be more accurate to describe them as politicians who strategically used the populist style to further their agenda.

At its core, the populist style is made of three complementary components: articulating an antagonism between people and elite through a populist leader, transgressing the rules of established politics to stand out from other politicians and developing a crisis narrative of a society under threat. Each of these elements were mobilised in the performances of Le Pen and Trump during their respective campaigns, but what is particularly noteworthy is that they were expressed differently depending on the personal idiosyncrasies of each performer and on the local context. Acknowledging this does not undermine the notion of a unified populist style, but on the contrary showcases the versatility of the concept of style which has both an individual as well as a collective dimension (Aiolfi 2023). Every style holds within itself a 'potential for individualisation'[3] (Bordas 2008: 220), which explains how, within the same repertoire of the populist style, each political actor will imprint it with their own idiosyncrasies. Thus, before expanding on these specificities of the populist style, how they were chosen and the implications of adopting this approach to populism, which will be the purpose of Chapter 2, I will develop the rationale behind the choice of a comparative case study between Trump and Le Pen.

Comparative Research Design and Case Selection

When it comes to research design, the most important epistemological premise to acknowledge is that this book is located within a post-positivist and interpretive framework. I am sceptical of any epistemological stance aspiring to reach objectivity and accept instead that 'the production of knowledge is itself also and simultaneously productive of the world' (Jackson 2011: 114). In opposition to the positivist quest for causality, objective explanations for why a phenomenon happens, or generalisability, the universal application of a claim to all cases, contextualisation is one of the guiding principles of interpretive research. Interpretive research is based on the idea that meaning-making is necessarily contingent and subject to interpretation. As such, the quality of post-positivist research depends on whether it is 'sufficiently contextualized so that the interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013: 47). In consequence, instead of attempting to isolate a specific variable whose value would differ between cases, a comparative analysis grounded in an interpretive inquiry will provide a 'thick description' (Geertz 2008) of the differing aspects of the phenomenon at hand by highlighting context-specific variations of two closely related cases.

More generally, qualitative methods are much more adapted to the level of details in interpretive research than quantitative methods. However, as opposed

to a single case study, I chose to introduce a comparative dimension to this work by contrasting two case studies to explore the differences in the way the populist style is expressed across two contexts to develop a better understanding of its specificities. Indeed, exploring the interaction between form and content implies facing the issue that both are deeply entangled, which is reflected in the literature on populism by the frequent conflation between populism and nationalism (De Cleen 2017). As such, a comparative research design is particularly helpful in providing different examples of the way ideology, style and context are interconnected, which can highlight specific points of entanglement that might be absent or expressed differently in the other case.

Comparative research in its most general understanding is about choosing cases that share important similar features but also substantial differences in the aspect of the phenomenon that is explored (Halperin and Heath 2016: 209). Mill (2002) distinguished two types of comparative endeavours: those focused on very different cases to highlight their similarities, called method of agreement, and those focused on comparing cases that share central similarities to highlight their divergences, called method of difference. This book adopts a research design based on the latter, a method of difference, focusing on three central similarities between cases. First, the ideological agenda of the political actors which is characterised by social conservatism, economic protectionism and exclusionary nationalism. This places them on the far right, or more precisely on the radical right.[4] Second, the political and institutional context of the campaigns: Western liberal democracies with a strong presidential component during a relatively similar electoral context, that of presidential elections. Third, the presence of populism, which was commonly highlighted in the literature. Even before I adopted the approach to populism as a style, my initial intent was to better understand the recurrent relationship between far-right politicians, like Le Pen and Trump, and populism, with which they were systematically associated.

I chose in this book to focus on the specific interaction between populism and far-right ideology, rather than comparing how it interacts with other ideologies to offer a nuanced analysis of the different ways populism gives shape to the same content. As my earlier description of the elections in the United States and France hinted at, there were notable discrepancies between the way Trump and Le Pen led their respective campaigns. These differences are precisely what a comparative research design seeks to capture. The decision to explore right-wing uses of populism particularly stemmed from the streak of successful electoral results from the aforementioned wave of politicians from this 'new nationalism'. Their relative success in the 2010s led to an upsurge of contributions to the academic debate on populism (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), which was also echoed by a dramatic increase of the presence of the concept in the media (Krämer and Holtz-Bacha 2020). More specifically, the

frequent misuse of populism as a euphemistic synonym for radical-right politics (Glynos and Mondon 2016) was also an important factor in undertaking such a research project which hopes to clarify the relationship, interconnections and divergences between the two concepts.

Of course, populism has not been solely linked to nationalist politics, as it has been associated with socialist parties like *Podemos* (Kioupkiolis 2016) and *Syriza* (Katsambekis 2016) or even more ideologically ambiguous movements like the *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy (Lanzone 2014; Ivaldi et al. 2017). Undoubtedly, these other cases have also contributed to the rise in popularity of the concept and a comparative work incorporating the left-wing counterparts to Le Pen and Trump, respectively Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Bernie Sanders, would be another stimulating project. I, however, chose in this book to maintain my focus on the intersection between populism and the far right for several reasons. Firstly, a comparison between four politicians would have been substantially more challenging to implement, and I preferred to maintain a consistent level of 'thickness' in the analysis for both politicians. Secondly, both Le Pen and Trump crossed electoral hurdles that their left-wing counterparts did not, respectively reaching the second round of the election and not only winning a primary but also the whole election. This made the success of these right-wing politicians even more noteworthy. Thirdly, to be fully reflexive about my own biases as a left-leaning researcher, one of my purposes for this project was to gain a better understanding of the appeal of these far-right politicians whose electoral success puzzled so many experts on the left and the centre. Merely condemning them on moral grounds as demagogues is intellectually unsatisfying, which also reinforced my conviction in the importance of thoroughly investigating their cases.

These two specific case studies were also chosen through a combination of general and comparative factors. In 2016, Trump became the new face of populism through his surprising election to the highest office in the most powerful country in the world, which was on its own an extremely symbolic event that demonstrated the electoral power of this new wave of far-right politicians. But outside of symbolism, his presidency also had very material consequences for not only American citizens, but also for the many countries in the world relying on the United States for economic trade, military protection, and more generally political leadership. This made Trump by far the most visible example of a far-right politician whose populist style had led to electoral success. By contrast, Le Pen did not reach the same level of success that Trump did. However, she remained one of the only examples of far-right politicians who succeeded in enabling a marginal party to achieve mainstream acceptance without altering its ideological core (Bastow 2018). Compared to Trump's abrupt takeover of the Republican Party, Le Pen's rise to political prominence has been steady but uninterrupted since she inherited the *Front National* from her father in 2011. Slowly eroding most of the

symbolic stigma and electoral hurdles that hindered her party, Le Pen brought to fruition a strategy of *dédiabolisation* (de-demonisation) which consisted of preserving most of the ideology of her party while changing its style by cleansing it of any overt form of racism and anti-Semitism. Her repeated electoral successes since she became the president of her party, as well as her unusual position as a female leader, gave Le Pen a prominent place as one of the most successful 'populists' in European politics and beyond.

Setting the Stage and Introducing the Cast

I have chosen for this book to analyse the campaigns of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, which started more than a year before the day of the election. This notably allowed me to delineate a timeframe within which specific political performances, like rallies or debates, could be isolated. But outside of this pragmatic consideration, the choice to focus on presidential elections also had theoretical reasons. Elections are a crucial time for democratic politics as they represent the symbolic moment where the power that was endowed to the political representatives is temporarily given back to the electors among which new representatives will emerge. As such, they open a field of possibilities and represent a unique time for politicians to establish or renew a direct link with their audiences. Furthermore, in presidential regimes like France and the United States, the presidential election also holds special significance as the citizens elect *the* person that will figuratively represent their country, acting as a symbolic embodiment of the will of their fellow citizens for several years. In other words, candidates for a presidential election make what Saward (2010) called a 'representative claim', a performative claim to have the legitimacy to represent their fellow citizens in a way that will convince a majority of the electorate. This electoral stage thus makes a presidential campaign particularly tailored to the analysis of individual political leaders. Although supported by a group of people assisting them, politicians act as both the figureheads, lead speakers and main proponents of their representative claim. All in all, presidential campaigns are unique opportunities wherein politicians openly expose themselves and their political convictions to public scrutiny within a legally and symbolically codified context. In other words, they constitute the 'rhetorical and symbolic arena in which voters and candidates participate ritually in the complexities of the presidential struggle for power' (McLeod 1999: 360).

While I will justify more thoroughly the theoretical reasons to focus on political leaders and not on movements or parties in Chapter 2, it is important prior to any analysis to acknowledge that politicians are actors both in the theatrical and political sense of the term. What that means for this research project is that politicians are performers whose actions are shaped and constrained by wider social structures. But, as they navigate the 'background symbols' (Alexander 2006: 58) of their society, they retain a form of agency: they are capable

of strategically choosing which one to mobilise in their discourse and for which purpose. However, unlike actors in a play or movie who step out of the role after the performance ends, their performance is not limited to public events. Hence, this blurs the line between public and private life, what Goffman (1959) respectively called the front and the backstage, which are deeply intertwined in the case of a political actor. As a result, the *persona* – the public image – of a politician is a central component of their campaigns, which encourages personal identification from the audience. In addition to this, it is important to point out that politicians do not start their campaign as unknown entities, they are already associated in the audience's mind with their prior image. Consequently, to provide some crucial background information about them and a description of what their *persona* was at the start of their campaigns, I will introduce the 'cast' of this book through a critical biography which seeks to provide a contextual basis to better understand the journey of these two political actors.

Marine Le Pen

The youngest in a family of three daughters, Marion Anne Perrine Le Pen was born in 1968 in the suburbs of Paris. Her childhood was profoundly shaped by the political presence of her father. Nicknamed the 'Devil of the Republic', Jean-Marie Le Pen has been a polarising figure in French politics since the 1950s. Following an impulse from *Ordre Nouveau* ('New Order'), a neofascist organisation seeking a more politically acceptable outlet, the former paratrooper was turned into the figurehead of the *Front National* (FN) which became the first party to unite far-right groups in France since the Second World War. His relentless attacks on immigration accompanied by a plethora of anti-Semitic and racist comments made him a pariah in the French political scene, but also a prominent target for antifascist movements. This in turn prevented his daughters from growing up 'normally', making them targets by association of verbal but also physical assaults. These violent attacks came to a peak with a bomb attack on the Le Pen family apartment in 1976. Marine Le Pen, eight at the time, claimed to have been deeply shaped by this event which led her to the realisation that her life would be inextricably linked to her father's political engagement.

For the Le Pen family, there was no boundary between private life and political activism, which accounts for the development in her of a 'deeply ingrained conscience of being a target' (Le Pen 2006: 20). Soon after the bomb attack, Jean-Marie Le Pen inherited the fortune of Hubert Lambert, a royalist sympathiser of the FN who died prematurely and chose to bequeath his wealth to the party's founder. This suddenly propelled Marine Le Pen from the middle class to a wealthy lifestyle in Saint-Cloud, one of the most upper-class suburbs of Paris. This also provided her with the economic capital to supplement the

social capital (Bourdieu 1990) that she inherited from her father's political relations, both key facilitators in starting her political career. Especially after the heavily publicised divorce of her parents in 1984, Marine Le Pen, sixteen years old at the time, cut ties with her mother and developed a strong loyalty towards her father (Le Pen 2006: 101–26).

After joining the bar in 1992, Marine Le Pen worked as a lawyer for six years. In 1998, an internal conflict within the FN pushed Marine Le Pen's eldest sister, Marie-Caroline, initially seen as the heir to the political legacy of their father, to side with Bruno Mégret, a rival figure within the party. This event, which her father forcefully described as a 'treason', left her ostracised for decades from both family and party, creating an opportunity for her two younger sisters to step in her place. Given the lack of political ambition of her second sister, Yann, Marine Le Pen intensified her involvement with the FN. Already active in the party, which she had joined when she was eighteen, she gave up her position at the bar to set up a legal branch within the FN. In the following years, Marine Le Pen gave birth to three children and divorced for the first of two times. Her self-proclaimed status as a single mother who raised her three children on her own became a crucial part of her personal storytelling. It was notable for being at odds with the image of social conservatism of the far right in France, where divorcees were frowned upon by the traditions of the Catholic church.

Until 2002, Le Pen's life voluntarily remained distant from the public eye, but this changed with Jean-Marie Le Pen's unexpected accession to the second round of the presidential election. Given the scope of his anticipated defeat on the evening of the second round, very few high-ranking members of the FN were willing to comment on the event on national television, and Marine Le Pen was the only one willing to join the largest TV channel for the evening, becoming the *de facto* voice of her party for her first appearance on television. Describing herself as reluctant to go, Le Pen (2006: 236) candidly claimed that her ignorance of the rules of political debating was her strongest asset, making her appear franker and bolder than her more seasoned colleagues, including future rival Jean-Luc Mélenchon, then member of the socialist party. More than this, that evening, Le Pen demonstrated remarkable ease and command of the rhetoric of her party. Far from the naïve ingénue that she claimed she was at the time, Marine Le Pen appeared in control and consistent during her interventions, lambasting the treatment of her father as an outcast and challenging the other guests for the track records of their political parties in power. All in all, this first televised appearance was a breakthrough for Le Pen which catalysed her emergence as a politician of national relevance.

The years from 2002 to 2007 saw Marine Le Pen steadily climb in the hierarchy of the party. Although her rise was tainted by accusations of nepotism due to her status as daughter of the founder, she unwaveringly established

herself as a central figure in the party. She notably suggested a new strategy seeking to bring the FN into the political mainstream: *dédiabolisation* (Le Pen 2006: 257), or de-demonisation. To do so, she pushed the FN away from the 'far-right' label by taming its divisive rhetoric, condemning overt racism and anti-Semitism but also trying to soften the aggressive image of her father. This issue became especially salient in 2007, when Jean-Marie Le Pen's last bid for the presidential election, for which she took the role of strategic director, led to his defeat at the fourth place. Part of this disappointing result was due to the repeated attempts of Nicolas Sarkozy, the right-wing candidate, to court the FN's electorate by emulating its discourse (Mondon 2013). However, the old leader's infamous reputation also remained a factor of disaffection and his age of seventy-nine did not compare favourably with the youth of his challengers.

It is in the context of her rise inside the party that Le Pen (2006) published her first and currently only autobiography, *À contre flots* ('Against the currents') in 2006. As she narrated her childhood and early political life with detailed anecdotes, the two main features of the book were its antagonistic frame and its defensive tone. Portraying herself as the victim of a multifaceted animosity, she described her life as a succession of struggles that she overcame. Throughout the book, Marine Le Pen mobilised 'a special brand of victimhood – that of the dutiful daughter, born into her father's world, and doing her best to manage the hostility that she encounters as a result. She use[d] the child's naïve point of view, narrating by allusion, in order to strip her opponents of content and context' (Weigel 2017: 1). In the book, Le Pen depoliticised her own life narrative, offering the image of a resilient woman for whom politics was not an opportunistic career choice but rather an obligation that imposed itself onto her and that she only reluctantly embraced. She also repeatedly used the memoir to defend herself against internal accusations of nepotism, describing her father as being 'a thousand times more demanding to his own family than to outsiders' (Le Pen 2006: 90) and his behaviour as the exact 'opposite of nepotism. . . . He is even often the last one to realise the qualities of his children!' (ibid.: 237).

At eighty-one, Jean-Marie Le Pen eventually declared his intention to resign from the presidency of the FN, leading to an election during the 14th Congress of the FN in 2011. This Congress ended up being the apex of a long-standing opposition between Marine Le Pen and Bruno Gollnish, the heir apparent of her father and leader of the more conservative wing of the party. She was elected with two third of the votes, asserting the dominance of her *dédiabolisation* strategy against the more traditionalist wing of the party. This election helped her acquire more control over both her image and that of the party more generally. She developed a more professional and pragmatic outlook to political campaigning, surrounding herself with a new generation of advisers, presenting her party as 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016), and

herself as a young and modern leader. In 2012, Marine Le Pen ran for the first time in the French presidential election on the modernist line developed during the previous years. Despite a record-breaking 18 per cent of the vote in the first round, her bid ended far from the second round, demonstrating that, even with its new strategy and despite the proof that there was considerable potential for electoral improvement, the FN had to make more progress if it aspired to defeat the more established political parties of France.

In 2015, a flurry of anti-Semitic and negationist comments from Jean-Marie Le Pen served as the final trigger for Marine Le Pen to distance herself from her father, evicting him from the very party he had funded. This rupture was highly symbolic as Le Pen framed it as the ultimate public proof that her de-demonisation strategy was a genuine change of convictions and that the FN had truly become a mainstream party. Le Pen also progressively reinforced the visibility of the *Rassemblement Bleu Marine* ('Navy Blue Rally') which she created as a movement to broaden her appeal beyond the limits of her party. Le Pen sought to break with her father's contentious name by using to her advantage the sexist trope of female politicians being referred to by their first name instead of their last name: 'the use of the first name which 'minorises' (in the sense of making minor) women politicians here humanizes (in the sense of making her human, in opposition with her father)' (Matonti 2013: 16). Criticised as another step diverting power away from the party and concentrating it in her hands, this increasing focus on herself was also the demonstration that the FN had become a dynastic party defined first and foremost by the personality of its leader (Stockemer 2017: 51). On 8 February 2016 on national television, Le Pen announced her second bid for the presidency, claiming that she 'will be candidate because [she] thinks politics needs truth, and French politics needs courage. It needs someone who believes in what they stand for'.

Donald J. Trump

Donald John Trump was born in 1946 as the fourth child and second son of Frederick Trump and Mary McLeod. His father, whom he described as his 'most important influence' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 65) was himself the son of a wealthy German immigrant to the United States but developed his fortune as a real estate developer in New York. Donald Trump, who confessed that he 'wasn't exactly well-behaved' (O'Brien 2005: 85) was sent to military boarding school from thirteen to eighteen. After his graduation in 1964, he 'flirted briefly with the idea of attending film school', saying that he 'was attracted to the glamour of the movies' and admired the craft of 'great showmen' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 77). In contrast with the down-to-earth attitude of his father, Donald Trump claimed that he inherited his 'sense of showmanship from [his] mother, . . . who always had a flair for the dramatic and the grand . . . and loves splendor and magnificence' (ibid.: 79–80). Because of the traditional values of Fred Trump and

since his eldest son, Fred Jr., did not show much interest in a career in business, Donald Trump quickly became the natural heir to his father's company.

Although he frequently depicts himself as a self-made man who built a billion-dollar fortune using a 'small one-million-dollar loan' from his father, a euphemistic claim that has been thoroughly debunked,[5] this downplays the symbolic and social capital that, just like Le Pen, he inherited along with the wealth of his family. After an Ivy League education, Trump's ambitions grew beyond the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, where his father was exclusively doing business. In all public descriptions of his life, Donald Trump emphasised this shift to Manhattan in the 1970s as the great point of departure from his father's way of doing business and, more implicitly, as the beginning of his rise as an unparalleled real estate entrepreneur. In 1978, after the renovation of the Grand Hyatt Hotel, he acquired the rights to develop the building most associated with his name, Trump Tower. Until then, Donald Trump remained largely out of the public eye, although his marriage with Ivana Zelníčková in 1977 was one of his first ventures into the 'people' section of New York newspapers. His repeated confrontations with Ed Koch, the mayor of the city who refused tax abatement for Trump's housing complexes because they would only benefit the richest residents, turned him into a local celebrity. This status soon expanded beyond New York as he became a frequent guest on network television, particularly after the inauguration of the Trump Tower in 1983.

Building on that momentum, Trump chose to further depart from his father's subdued way of doing business by investing in personal branding. This idea of turning his last name into a label rapidly became a signature tool for Trump's self-promotion. In addition to that, he hired a ghost-writer, Tony Schwartz, to write his first autobiography, *The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987), which was foundational in establishing Trump's *persona* in the public eye.[6] Schwartz described with remorse how he 'contributed to presenting Trump in a way that brought him wider attention and made him more appealing than he is' or, in other words, how he 'put lipstick on a pig' (Mayer 2016). In the book, Trump was depicted as a skilled businessman, ruthless yet sympathetic, whose life was nothing less than a succession of exceptional deals. More than this, Schwartz presented deal-making as an aesthetic achievement rather than a selfish economic act, as a means rather than an end. This was a crucial shift in portraying Trump as a driven craftsperson who 'gets his kicks' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 1) from the beauty of a successful deal, and not as a greedy capitalist. To reinforce this sympathetic persona, Schwartz mimicked 'Trump's blunt, staccato, no-apologies delivery while making him seem almost boyishly appealing' (Mayer 2016). The book, which became an instant bestseller, remains by far the most successful of his many autobiographies.

In his first major attempt to expand beyond real estate, Donald Trump invested in gambling, ignoring his father's admonition to stay far from this

insecure and volatile business. Given the confidence he had in his 'Midas touch' ability to make any commercial venture flourish, Trump did not take the measure of the economic disaster that his casinos quickly turned out to be. Starting with the overly ambitious and unsustainable Taj Mahal, which filed for bankruptcy only a year after its opening, every Trump casino was declared bankrupt as Trump was forced to renegotiate with his debtors to handle several billions of dollars of debt. In addition to these massive financial issues that heavily troubled the narrative of success he had crafted, the more personal side of his *persona* was tainted when his 'power couple' image with Ivana ended after she publicly accused him of cheating, leading to a heavily mediatised divorce in 1991. Aged forty-five at the time, Trump's *persona* suffered doubly from the blows to both his personal and financial reputation, tarnishing the flawless image he had attempted to establish for decades. Throughout the 1990s, as his romantic life continued to fill the pages of gossip magazines, Trump partly lost control of the personal narrative he had crafted for himself as a successful businessman, becoming instead the embodiment of the excesses of the 1980s and not a credible commercial partner for investors.

In the 1990s, Trump did attempt to offer a counter-narrative to this fall from grace, particularly in his third autobiography, *The Art of the Comeback* (Trump and Bohner 1997) where he portrayed himself as both the victim of a situation beyond his control and a 'survivor' who successfully made a 'comeback'. He also attempted to enhance his image of a seducer constantly surrounded by women, hinting at a sexist perspective on life where value in men was based on their achievements but value in women was based on their attractiveness: 'in Trump's vocabulary, a superlative man is *successful*, a superlative woman is *beautiful*' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 160). Trump also transitioned from real estate to show business, investing in beauty pageants and wrestling, and making cameos in various movies and television shows. However, the real trigger of his pivot to entertainment was his first foray into reality television with *The Apprentice*.

The show was pitched to Trump in 2003 as a unique opportunity to showcase his wealth as well as giving him the central role as 'the main character, the arbiter of talent, the boss – judge, jury and executioner in a weekly winnowing of young go-getters desperate for a chance to run one of the mogul's businesses' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 211). Reluctant at first, Trump then quickly embraced the show for which he was both the star and the executive producer during fourteen seasons. Immediately met with excellent ratings, the show's popularity became a spectacular catalyst for the revival of Trump's career. Where his earlier attempts had failed at giving public salience to his comeback narrative, *The Apprentice* sharpened it and amplified the storytelling of Trump's wealth and business skill, allowing him to restore his credibility to a level that even surpassed that of *The Art of the Deal*. While many staff

members involved with the show now claim that this depiction was exaggerated to make him appear more charismatic on television yet clearly larger than life, these hints of distanciation remain hard to perceive. But even if it is undeniable that *The Apprentice* team did substantially contribute to rejuvenating the image of their star, Trump himself embraced the process willingly, 'honing a blunt speaking style accentuated by short, declarative sentences; delivering taunts – sometimes playful, sometimes searing – at the finalists; and captivating the audience with a theatrical sense of timing' (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 214). Even if it built on Trump's media-savviness and thespian skills, I overall concur with Kranish and Fisher (2017: 220) when they argued that the reality show 'was a sustained development of a character, a powerful mainline into the American consciousness, an essential bridge on the journey from builder to politician'.

Although he did consider running a presidential campaign as an independent in 1999, it was only emboldened by the success and momentum of *The Apprentice* that Trump concretely translated his fame into political capital. He then reinvented himself as a political commentator on various issues like foreign policy. Indeed, despite never having held or even run for an elected office before, the reality show had done such an impression at selling the 'image of the host-boss as supremely competent and confident, dispensing his authority and getting immediate results' that, to Kranish and Fisher (2017: 219), 'the analogy to politics was palpable'. This meant that, even as a political novice, Trump could do more than bypass the main channels of political communication: he had privileged access to them and embraced his position as a political outsider as a strength. His influence became especially notable after Barack Obama's election, through his implication as one of the most vehement proponents of the so-called 'birther' movement, a conspiracy theory whose proponents shed doubt on whether Obama was born in the United States. The years leading into the 2016 election saw Donald Trump more solidly establishing himself as a vocal political figure on the national scene. Acknowledging that running outside of the bipartisan system was not a viable option, he eventually anchored himself within the Republican Party in 2012, notably through his programmatic nineteenth book entitled *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (Trump 2015) which sought to affirm his conservative credentials. On 16 June 2015, emulating a famous shot used countless times on *The Apprentice*, Trump went down the golden escalator of Trump Tower to declare his first formal candidacy for president of the United States of America.

Book Structure and Chapter Outline

Now that the stage of this book has been set and its main actors introduced, I will develop the structure of the book by detailing the outline of the following chapters. This book is divided into six chapters, the first three constituting the

theoretical and methodological section of the book, and the final three providing the empirical development of the book.

In **Chapter 1**, I will develop a literature review on the contentious concept of populism. Starting from the etymology and historical uses of the concept, I will investigate the main ways it has been used in the contemporary literature. Distinguishing the ideational, strategic, and discursive approaches, I will then highlight the main tenets of these major definitions of populism. However, acknowledging that the very concept of populism is controversial and contentious, I want to go beyond a strict literature review and consider common connotations and conflations of populism that affect its use in the public discourse. Taking cues from the literature on anti-populism, I will show the need for a critical engagement with populism by contesting its association with demagoguery and anti-pluralism. Furthermore, populism is too often conflated with the far right, framed as nationalist and even potentially authoritarian. In order to clarify the boundaries of populism, I will thus elaborate on the central ideological features of the far right, discussing the way populism differs from the exclusionary nationalism of far-right actors, as well as how they can get intertwined.

Following this literature review, I will discuss in **Chapter 2** my choice to align with the discursive-performative approach to populism (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021) as the theoretical framework of this book, and most specifically embracing the stylistic approach (Moffitt 2016). In this chapter, I will make the case for the use of a distinction between content and form, examining the implications of this dialectical relationship for the study of populism. After a genealogy of the various ways populism has been described as a style and a more specific discussion on the concept of style, I will argue for a theoretically deeper conceptualisation by describing its connections with the Laclauian tradition of work on populism. Although this book follows the footsteps of the trailblazing work of Moffitt (2016), this chapter also details the substantial ways I depart from it. First and foremost, I will make the case that populism is an interdisciplinary concept at the intersection of politics and performance. Following this, I will adapt Moffitt's definition of populism as a style through this interdisciplinary lens, clarifying several key concepts like performance, performativity and repertoire while also bringing conceptual consistency to what he described as the three core features of populism. I will argue that they are most productively reframed as performative clusters: performances of identity, transgression and crisis. Finally, in the light of a discussion on the theoretical relevance of embodied performances for populism, I will justify my choice to analyse populism through the cases of political leaders.

Approaching politics through the lens of style and performance has important implications for the methodology of the research I conducted, which will be developed in **Chapter 3**. I will begin by introducing my choice of

methods for this book which is a combination of computer-assisted critical thematic analysis (CTA) and an original interdisciplinary method designed for this book. Because of the logocentric bias of discourse analysis and the focus on artistic performances from scholars in performance studies, I will introduce my original tool suited to this theoretical framework, the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP). After having highlighted four constitutive elements of social performances – background symbols and foreground scripts, actor, audience and *mise-en-scène* – I will provide for each of them a set of questions which, when combined, constitute this PPAP. Lastly, I will discuss the three types of performances analysed in my book – speeches during rallies, presidential debates and political advertisements – and develop the theatrical specificities of each of these. Based on this discussion, I will explain how I constituted my corpus for this research project and provide a list of the specific performances that will be used as representative illustrations of the analysis I conducted.

After these three first chapters which constituted the first theoretical half of my book, I then move on to the empirical part of my research. **Chapter 4** focuses on performances of identity in the campaigns of Le Pen and Trump. I will make the case that the populist style is built around the simultaneous articulation of two collective identities, the people and the elite, and examine the specific case in which they are articulated by and through a political leader. Examining Trump and Le Pen's performances, I will then successively examine how each of these complementary identities have been performed. Starting with the people, I will consider literal references to the word in their performances, before moving on to cognate words associated with it, most specifically the nation. Following this, I will discuss the elite that Le Pen and Trump are antagonising in their performances, demonstrating that the overarching signifier of 'elite' loosely connects many disparate groups on both domestic and global levels. After the assessment of these two collective constructions of identity, I will analyse the way the two leaders depicted themselves, showing that they incorporated in their performances a hybrid combination of commonality and particularity, or in other words, 'ordinariness and extraordinariness' (Moffitt 2016: 52), to ground their populist representative claims.

In **Chapter 5**, I will first discuss the limits of describing populism as 'flaunting of the low' (Ostiguy 2017) by arguing that such a conceptualisation fails to capture performative practices beyond 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016: 57). Departing from earlier approaches, I will thus introduce the alternative concept of transgression (Aiolfi 2022), defined as the violation of a norm of political relevance, arguing that it better captures the diversity in the norm-breaking behaviours of populist actors. Introducing a new typology that distinguishes transgressive performances depending on what type of norm they break, I will then engage with three specific subtypes: performances disrupting interactional

norms, which are concerned with the proper way to interact with other actors; performances disrupting rhetoric norms, which refer to the expectations about how political actors ought to present themselves; finally, performances disrupting theatrical norms, focusing most specifically on the implicit norm of naturalism in political theatre and on the context-specific traditions and customs of each country. Examining the corpus, I will provide various examples of transgressive strategies used by Trump and Le Pen in order to highlight similarities and contrasts between them.

Chapter 6 describes the third performative cluster of the populist repertoire, performances of crisis. By examining the recurrence of a depiction of a society in crisis in the corpus, I will demonstrate that both Le Pen and Trump's campaigns did not merely react to a particularly critical situation, they performatively articulated the image of a society in crisis. However, rather than speaking about a singular crisis, I show that it would be more accurate to describe them as performing a complex crisis *narrative* that incorporates a multifaceted set of crises affecting various aspects of society. Reflecting two of the collective identities discussed in Chapter 4, I will also identify two sub-narratives of crisis that are respectively based on the excluded others and the elite. On the one hand, I will show that the first sub-narrative is grounded in Trump and Le Pen's far-right ideology – more specifically their exclusionary nationalism – and blames various out-groups (namely immigrants and Muslims) for the crisis. On the other hand, building on the anti-establishment component of the populist style, I will highlight how the second sub-narrative of crisis consists in framing the elite as responsible for and/or complacent about this critical situation.

Finally, the book's **Conclusion** brings together the three empirical chapters by offering a summary of the key distinctions between Le Pen and Trump, highlighting their differences in ideological, personal, contextual and rhetorical terms. Following this, I move on to a more prospective section which uses the insights drawn from this book to engage with the evolution of Trump and Le Pen, particularly during their subsequent presidential campaigns in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Adopting this longer-term perspective provides a critical evaluation of how the two candidates' use of the populist style has evolved since the campaigns examined in this book. After a brief discussion of the research agenda opened by this book, it ends with a few closing remarks on the significance of critically engaging with populism as a concept and a signifier, and what that implies for the future of far-right politics.

Notes

1. A year after that presidential election, in June 2018, Le Pen changed the name of her party into *Rassemblement National* ('National Rally'), abandoning the confrontational connotation of 'front' to replace it with the more unifying expression of 'rally'. This was arguably another step in her *dédiabolisation* ('de-demonising')

strategy, which I will later discuss in the conclusion. Given that this book focuses on events anterior to that change, I will keep using its original name.

2. A collaborative article between *Le Monde* & *AFP* (2017) even lauded French pollsters for the much better accuracy of their results when contrasted with American and British ones.
3. All translations from French to English are my own.
4. Although it has limitations, which will be discussed in the next chapter, I follow in this book the classic distinction in the literature between extreme right and radical right that distinguishes them based on their relationship with democracy (Mudde 2019: 7; Rydgren 2018). While actors within the extreme right are opposed to democracy, radical-right actors accept (some) of the rules of the democratic game. The far right is used as an umbrella term that includes both radical and extreme right.
5. See for instance the *New York Times* investigation led by Barstow, Craig and Buettner (2018) for which the authors won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting.
6. This influence extended way into the 2016 campaign, as Trump declared in the speech where he announced his candidacy that 'We need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal*', to which Schwartz sarcastically replied in a tweet: 'Many thanks Donald Trump for suggesting I run for President, based on the fact that I wrote *The Art of the Deal*.' (Mayer 2016).

1

STAGING POPULISM

Populism was once described as an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie 1956): an internally complex concept that is commonly mobilised to signify different things without the emergence of any authoritative or consensual definition. Indeed, the literature up until the mid-2010s not only acknowledged the blurry boundaries of populism (Panizza 2005: 1), they often started their argument by 'acknowledging the acknowledgment' (Moffitt 2016: 11). In other words, defining what populism is, and more interestingly who or what qualifies as populist, has been one of the most central points of friction in the literature. Although the last decade has also seen the emergence of a consensus around the fundamental notion of an opposition between the people and the elite (Katsambekis 2020), two larger debates dividing scholars of populism remain. The first one pertains to the specific nature of the concept: what is populism concretely? A political strategy to win power? A set of beliefs rooted in popular democracy? A discursive frame that could be used by all kinds of political actors? A movement to reclaim power? The second point of disagreement relates to the potential existence of other fundamental features of populism. Should we restrict populism to the strict criteria of the opposition between the people and the elite? Or are we missing a part of the bigger picture if one does not look beyond this antagonism?

In this chapter, I will first provide a historical overview of the literature on populism, describing a variety of phenomena described as 'populist' from the late nineteenth century to the early 2000s, and offering insights into the

common themes uniting these disparate cases. Following this, I will introduce the three most prominent approaches to populism which define it as respectively a (thin) ideology, a strategy, or a discourse, exploring their strengths as well as their limitations. The perspective adopted in this book broadly aligns with the latter, particularly in its most syncretic iteration under the name of a discursive-performative approach to populism (Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt 2021). But because adopting such an understanding of populism has consequences beyond conceptual debates, it is fundamental to also discuss what a critical outlook on populism implies normatively and politically. For this purpose, I draw on the insights from the critical scholarship on anti-populism (Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Karavasilis 2017) to tackle various normative issues associated with populism: its weaponisation by the liberal centre, its negative connotations and its conflation with nationalism and the far right.

Historical Overview: From Early Examples to the 'Populist *Zeitgeist*'

Going back to the etymological origins of the word, populism stems from the Latin '*populus*', for people. This etymology explains why the notion of 'the people' remains, regardless of definitions, one of the few points of agreement for most scholars of populism. This 'people-centrism' (Stavrakakis 2017) is a commonality shared by two historical movements in the late nineteenth century which are often credited as the first occurrences of populism. First, the 'People's Party' in the United States adopted the nickname of 'Populist Party' to show their affiliation with the people. Second, the *Narodniks* (народники), from the Russian *narod* (народ) for people or folk, is often translated as 'populists' to describe their aspiration to reach the people. While these movements shared this explicit reference to the people, what united them first and foremost was their agrarian outlook on society. That being said, this is also where their proximity ends as they were very different in both purpose and structure. On the one hand, the People's Party was an agrarian party formed in the 1890s as a third party to challenge Democrats and Republicans by representing farmers against large corporations. On the other hand, the *Narodniks* were a group of intellectuals in the 1860s which 'went to the people' to promote agrarian socialism, believing that the peasantry would be the class leading the revolution in Russia (Canovan 2004: 247). As such, outside of this explicit connection to the people and although there are connections to these early precursors, these two examples substantially differ from what the contemporary literature now refers to as populism.

However, considering a third historical example from the nineteenth century helps shed light on a second complementary feature of a minimal understanding of populism: its 'anti-elitism' (Stavrakakis 2017). Indeed, in their concise history of populism, Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017: 4) discussed the case of

Boulangism in France in the 1880s. This movement was named after Georges Boulanger, a general fiercely opposed to the parliamentary regime of France's Third Republic, which he accused of being corrupted and disconnected from the people. Through his struggle against the political establishment, he became a popular figure that led an unlikely coalition that included monarchists, Bonapartists, workers and socialists. As such, even though its association with the people was less explicit than in the previous two movements, the main specificity of Boulangism was its opposition to the ruling elite.

Although populism lost traction as a concept for half a century, this anti-elitism, alongside the presence of a charismatic leader, remained a common thread that linked this third foundational example with the resurgence of a second wave of movements and politicians described as populist in Latin America starting in the 1950s. What is now called 'classical populism' was notably characterised by the rise of political actors like Getúlio Vargas in Brazil or Juan and Evita Perón in Argentina (De la Torre 2017). These politicians strongly challenged the political establishment of their countries and won elections through a platform which, very much like Boulanger, combined patriotism with socialism. Outside of Latin America, populism also became a recurring frame of analysis to investigate a wide set of loosely connected phenomena, from agrarian movements in Europe (Canovan 1981) to McCarthyism in the United States (Lipset 1960), through the perspective of many disciplines beyond politics, like history, sociology and economics. This eclectic array of scholarship demonstrated the rising appeal of the concept of populism but also led to the first debates about its nature. These most famously crystallised in a conference at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1967 whose discussions were adapted into a foundational volume edited by Ionescu and Gellner (1969). While this first cross-regional and cross-disciplinary overview of the literature on populism did not offer a definitive answer to what the concept meant, it became one of the first steps in establishing the literature as a cohesive whole rather than as a disparate set of reflections on an elusive concept.

But although interest in populism was budding in the 1960s, it has grown tremendously since the 1990s (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017: 10). This was due to successive waves of political movements and actors, particularly in Latin America and Western Europe, which were described as embodying various forms of populism, from both the left and the right. In Latin America, the emergence of Alberto Fujimori in Peru or Carlos Menem in Argentina was called 'neoliberal populism' (De la Torre 2017: 198), characterised by a return to neoliberal orthodoxy as opposed to the statism of their 'classical' counterparts. In the early 2000s, the 'pink tide' of radical-left politicians like Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, was framed as a third wave of populism in Latin America, dubbed 'radical populism'. Most recently, the election in 2018 of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, with a reactionary and

xenophobic platform inspired by the outrageous style of Trump (Mendonça and Caetano 2021), raised the question of the emergence of a far-right form of populism in the region (Gontijo and Ramos 2020).

In Western Europe, research on populism has focused on the resilience and growing acceptability of radical-right parties like the FN in France, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD) in Germany or the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) in the Netherlands. Although populism was sometimes associated with notable party leaders like Silvio Berlusconi (Fella and Ruzza 2013) or Marine Le Pen herself (Geva 2020), the mainstream tendency of the scholarship in Europe was to focus on parties (Mudde 2007) rather than on individuals, which stood in opposition with the personalistic angle of most of the Latin American literature. In addition to parties and politicians associated with the wave of 'new nationalism' mentioned in the introduction, various radical-left parties rose to prominence, particularly in Southern Europe. From *Podemos* in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece to the less ideologically rooted *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, these new movements which were also described as populist (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2013) challenged the far-right bias of the European scholarship on populism

Beyond Latin America and Western Europe, the dawn of the twenty-first century saw populism become a global phenomenon (De la Torre 2014; Moffitt 2016) as the literature expanded to engage with politicians throughout the world. From Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (Phongpaichit and Baker 2008) to Narendra Modi in India (Chakravartty and Roy 2015), from Michael Sata in Zambia (Resnick 2017) to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (Curato 2017), the concept of populism showed its ability to apply to a diversity of settings. Even in the United States, whose deeply bipartisan system seemed initially immune to radical challengers, the 2016 elections saw not only the emergence in these parties of a popular socialist candidate in Bernie Sanders, but also the triumph of Trump's new style of radical-right politics, two actors often described as populist (Staufer 2021). Although this sudden explosion of cases is complicated by reconsidering Glynos and Mondon's (2016) thought-provoking insight that it is mostly due to an academic and mediatic 'hype', this led many scholars to argue that contemporary politics were characterised by a 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2018; Cervera-Marzal 2020). In other words, populism had captured the 'spirit of the times', which was the title of Mudde's (2004) influential article: 'the populist *zeitgeist*'.

What Is Populism?

As could be expected from a literature whose object has recently become widely popular, the meaning of populism continues to be contentious and used diversely. But, if populism remains to this day 'a notoriously vague term' (Canovan 1999: 3), a growing consensus has begun to emerge around the notion that populism is

at the very least characterised by an antagonistic opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' (Katsambekis 2020). This combination between the aforementioned 'people-centrism' and 'anti-elitism' (Stavrakakis 2017: 529) is present in most of the contemporary definitions of the concept, making it a *de facto* minimal definition to populism. However, a few notable exceptions of definitions without explicit references to this minimal core remain, including notably Weyland (2017) and Ostiguy (2017)'s work. Furthermore, while there is a budding consensus about these core elements, there are two substantial disagreements within the literature which will be the focus of the following section. The first one is about what type of phenomenon populism is while the second one is about the existence of other core features, if any, that would be associated with populism. Given that nearly every author on the topic has their own twist on the concept, it is an impossible endeavour to exhaustively describe every single definition of populism in the literature. As such, I have chosen to focus on three approaches to populism which constitute the three most active and influential schools of thought in the contemporary debates (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Moffitt 2020). Of course, there is remarkable diversity even inside each of these approaches, which this modest summary cannot do justice to, but authors within them share similar premises and have built on these shared foundations a complex yet sophisticated scholarship.

Populism as an ideology

The first and most mainstream approach is led by Mudde who developed a succinct definition of populism as 'a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated in two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2007: 23). Populism as an ideology thus stands in opposition to two ideological poles: elitism and pluralism. This definition draws directly (ibid.: 15) from the morphological approach to ideology developed by Freeden (1996, 2003) who distinguished 'full' or 'thick' ideologies, like socialism or liberalism, from 'thin' ideologies. 'Thick ideologies' are conceived as a 'wide-ranging structural arrangement that attributes decontested meanings to a range of mutually defining political concepts' (Freeden 2003: 54). They are characterised by internal cohesion, a strong core of axiomatic concepts, and answers to a broad range of political issues. By contrast, 'thin ideologies' have a very restricted core and a limited number of shared concepts. Mudde argued that conceiving populism as a thin ideology accounts for the malleability of the phenomenon: 'Thin-centred ideologies such as populism have a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to – and sometimes is even assimilated into – other ideologies' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6), like socialism, nationalism or liberalism. Focusing particularly on socialism and nationalism, scholars from

the ideational approach have thus developed a useful typology distinguishing two specific forms of populism depending on what 'host ideology' they attach to: exclusionary populism for nationalism, inclusionary populism for socialism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Authors classified within this ideational approach do not necessarily endorse Mudde's exact terminology but what unites them is a commitment to the idea that populism is a coherent set of beliefs, combined with a 'thicker' ideology. In addition to Mudde's frequent co-author Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), other notable scholars from this tradition include Albertazzi and McDonnell (2007) and Rooduijn (2014). Although they do not follow Mudde's approach as directly, other major authors whose influential work follow the same core idea of populism as a worldview include Müller (2016) as well as Norris and Inglehart (2019). However, they emphasise its threatening nature for democracy much more explicitly than he does, associating populism with anti-pluralism, illiberalism and even authoritarianism. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) were more nuanced, describing populism as having the potential to be either a 'threat or a corrective to democracy', while still emphasising its opposition to pluralism.

Seeing populism as a thin ideology populism has proven very valuable as the basis for a rich number of empirical works, particularly positivist projects using quantitative methods (Norris and Inglehart 2016; Jenne et al. 2021). It was also one of the first approaches which managed to bridge the fragmented literature of populism beyond regional boundaries, arguing that their 'minimal' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 5) definition can easily apply regardless of historical or geographical context. However, its position as the mainstream approach exposed it to numerous challenges which revealed prominent flaws.

Aslanidis (2016a: 101) for instance criticised its binary aspect: for ideational scholars either one is a populist, or one is not. This dichotomous perspective underpins an essentialist conception of populism which fails to offer a nuanced portrayal of the way populism works in practice. Indeed, it neither accounts for the various cases of politicians who 'are' only populist punctually – during elections for instance and then abandon it once they reach power – nor does it provide nuance for distinguishing populist actors from one another, assuming that all of them believe in the tenets of populism to the same extent. An even harsher critique came from Freeden himself who condemned Mudde's use of his terminology, claiming that populism is 'simply ideologically too scrawny even to be thin' and 'emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred' (Freeden 2017: 3). Lastly, Katsambekis (2020) challenged the underpinning notions of homogeneity and morality in Mudde's definition, arguing that his approach added an unnecessary layer of normative judgement and pointing out that populism is not necessarily anti-pluralist, a point which will be developed in the second half of this chapter.

Populism as a strategy

The second approach, which has gained popularity among scholars focusing on Latin America (Roberts 2006), frames populism as a strategy. In his foundational text, Weyland presented populism as 'a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers' (Weyland 2001: 14). While other scholars may use different expressions than strategy – like political mobilisation (Jansen 2011) or mode of organisation (Roberts 2006) – the shared principle uniting them is that they see populism as something that is done. It is 'a mode of political practice' (Jansen 2011: 75), and is not ideologically coherent. Furthermore, the most important specificity of populism for them is thus neither its focus on the people nor its anti-establishment stance: it is the personalistic relationship created by a political leader with their followers (Weyland 2017). This choice to treat references to the people as secondary makes this approach particularly stand out in the literature as it frames populism as a modernised version of Caesarism or caudillismo: a political strategy built around a personalistic leader.

Stemming from its origin in Latin American scholarship where various waves of populism were characterised by their starkly different ideologies (nationalism, neoliberalism, socialism, conservatism . . .), authors from this approach have been understandably wary of attributing any ideational content to populism, focusing on what populist leaders *do* and not on what they *say*. As such, for them, ideological declarations and rhetoric consistency matter less in identifying populist actors than examining the direct relationship they establish with their voters. This directness is a key aspect of the second major feature of the strategic approach: the lack of mediation, institutionalisation, and organisation. For Weyland (2017: 58), populism thrives in political contexts where the link between leader and followers is as direct as possible. This therefore finds its expression in a preference for personal parties (understood as empty shells that offer more flexibility than established parties) or direct media of communications (like social media and television to reach their audience directly), as well as a relative prominence in developing countries with less stringent institutional contexts.

In contrast with the mainstream understanding of populism as an ideology, some scholars from the strategic approach have overall offered a gradational understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, even though Weyland sought in his initial article (Weyland 2001) to make populism a binary concept, he later recognised that such a stance 'may be too blunt for the nuances and grey zones that characterize the political world in its tremendous complexity and fluidity' (Weyland 2017: 65). Because 'leaders flexibly adjust to contextual opportunities and constraints and change color with the circumstances' (ibid.),

he then offered a subtler model to capture the 'fuzziness' of populism. Overall, one of the most thought-provoking points made by this approach is that it grants more agency to the political leader, framing them as an active actor willing to strategically mobilise the resources at her disposal to advance her political agenda.

However, this approach also suffers from several flaws, and most importantly its unsuitability to analyse cases outside of developing countries. Because of its focus on un-institutionalised contexts, proponents of this approach implicitly assume that populism primarily emerges in developing democracies. This makes their definition extremely restrictive by automatically removing from consideration most European politicians. For instance, the assumption that populism is incompatible with party organisation and a persistent institutional background implies that the Le Pen dynasty is *a priori* excluded from being described as populist, even though it fits the criteria of other approaches. Furthermore, the originality of choosing to forgo people-centrism and anti-elitism can also be seen as a liability since it means that the strategic definition becomes synonymous with personalistic leadership – and to other cognate concepts relating to strongman politics like caudillismo, Bonapartism or Caesarism – and could be applied outside of politics to any organisation revolving on charismatic leaders. Another major weakness of this approach is that it remains exclusively focused on material factors, completely ignoring the symbolic, ideational and even performative components of politics, thus limiting their understanding of how these personalistic leaders evoke and sustain the loyalty of their followers. Finally, although this is not explicitly stated in their work, the strategic approach tends to depict followers as 'not particularly rational, smart, or enlightened, with a concomitant *mépris des masses* – also viewed as fickle and unable to put forward interests' (Ostiguy et al. 2021: 3), leading their top-down perspective to not sufficiently account for the relational dimension of populist practices.

Populism as a discourse

The final approach I will tackle is by far the most diverse, hosting within itself at least three strands of authors sharing substantial differences. What unites them all is an understanding that populism is broadly defined as a discourse that antagonistically opposes the people and the elite (Katsambekis 2020). In addition to that, whereas the former two approaches are dominated by scholars focusing on empirical research, typically in a positivist tradition, this approach is 'by far the most common approach among political theorists', a preference that Moffitt (2020: 21) attributes to 'its roots in the work of Ernesto Laclau'. As a reflection of this influence, this strand of the literature openly embraces critical theory, adopting a social-constructionist (Wodak 2020; Ostiguy 2017) or even a post-structural ontology (Laclau 2005a; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017).

This perspective, which is also called the 'discursive-performative' approach (Ostiguy et al. 2021; Moffitt 2020), is broadly made up of three sensibilities. The first one includes scholars that openly place themselves within the lineage of the post-Marxist work of Laclau (1977; 2005a; 2005b), following the Essex tradition of 'discourse theory' (DT) like Panizza (2005), Mouffe (2018) or Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2013). The second one is made of scholars that define discourse in a more constructionist way, whether it is through critical discourse analysis like Wodak (2020) or by diverging from the Laclauian orthodoxy (Aslanidis 2016a). The third one, sometimes called the sociocultural approach (Ostiguy 2017) challenges the excessive focus of language of the other discursive scholars. Inspired by Bourdieu's sociology, Ostiguy (2009) developed the thought-provoking idea that populism's specificity lies in its 'flaunting of the low', the cultural mobilisation of 'low' signifiers to appear more 'popular' in the social sense. Inspired by the performative turn in social sciences (Giesen 2006), Moffitt (2016) framed populism as a political style whose appeal lies in both its theatricality and performativity.

Whether they endorse or depart from it, Laclau's foundational work remains a point of reference for scholars in this approach. His theoretically dense argument starts from the notion that antagonism is a fundamental feature of politics (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and that every political project starts with the division of two opposing groups. These groups are constructed when several unsatisfied socio-political 'demands' (Zicman de Barros 2021) coalesce into an aggregated whole. He defined populism as the logic through which this aggregated demand both constructs 'the people' and 'the elite', draws an 'antagonistic frontier' between them, while being embodied by 'the leader which becomes a symbol-maker' (Laclau 2005a: 160) of a radical alternative to the *status quo*. Understood this way, populism is not simply a political logic, it is *the* logic of the political, which means that at a very fundamental level, Laclau claims that *all* politics are populist:

> If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative. (Laclau 2005b: 47)

Proponents of the ideational approach have criticised Laclau's work for being overly formal and 'extremely abstract' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 7), while positivist-leaning scholars from the discursive approach have criticised it for lacking in empirical value, arguing that it 'fails to provide objective comparative methodological instruments, remaining indifferent towards any quantitative valuations' (Aslanidis 2016a: 97). Others like Moffitt (2016: 25) have also criticised Laclau for being overly wide-reaching and, as a result,

remaining vague about the practical applications of his framework. In response to these challenges, scholars from the Essex tradition have modernised Laclau's work (Stavrakakis 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Mouffe 2018), providing a minimal definition to challenge the hegemony of Mudde's definition (Katsambekis 2020). Authors from the second strand of the discursive approach, like Wodak (2020), have side-lined Laclauian concepts, using their own 'grounded' approach which offers 'a clearer methodological toolkit for examining populism' (Moffitt 2020: 24). Others like Tormey (2018) and Moffitt (2016) have sought to develop a third way, adapting part of Laclau's work into their own work without fully committing to all the tenets of the Essex School. For instance, Ostiguy (2017: 84) added a Laclauian flair to his redefinition of populism as 'the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the 'low'' (Ostiguy 2017: 84).

One of the reasons why Laclau's perspective has proven so influential is because of its critical innovations. Most notably, he shifted the theoretical focus from populism as a phenomenon that exists *a priori*, towards a conception of populism as something being done and enacted. This conception 'acknowledges that populists do not speak to or for some pre-existing 'people' but arguably bring the subject known as 'the people' into being through the process of naming, performance or articulation' (Moffitt 2016: 24). In other words, the concept of the people, just like its opposite of the elite, are empty signifiers, that is 'a symbol pointing to a non-saturated symbolic space' (Zicman de Barros 2023: 11), a discursive construct whose meaning is constructed through their articulation by a political actor.[1] Such an ontological shift thus implies a change of focus for discursive scholars from seeing populism as an attribute of an actor to a political practice, which is a commonality with scholars from the strategic approach. However, unlike them, discursive scholars defend a post-foundational epistemology which implies a radical materialism. While they recognise a material reality, they claim that its meaning only emerges through discourse, which highlights the importance of the symbolic and performative dimensions of politics.

Of course, it is a challenge to make more generalisations about an approach which is incredibly diverse and in constant evolution, but I want to clarify that I have chosen to place the contribution of this book within the wide umbrella of this discursive-performative approach to populism. And because I offer in this book a theoretical framework that is critical about how populism is being (mis)used, one needs to delve deeper into the normative debates surrounding populism. Indeed, populism itself has never been a neutral term in the public sphere (Goyvaerts 2023) and in recent years, it has gained increasingly negative connotations. Going beyond the classic literature review I have been developing so far, the following section of this chapter will discuss what the theoretical implications of going beyond the conflation between populism and far-right

ideology, more specifically its exclusionary nationalism, and the corollary assumption that populism is a threat for democracy.

Towards a Critical Approach to Populism

As outlined above, the polysemy of populism has grown to such a degree that it is difficult to delimit precise boundaries for what political actors and phenomena it covers. The concept has also been conflated with others like nativism, demagoguery, or amateurism. Given that one of its few commonly agreed features is a reference to the people as an empty signifier, it is rather ironic to acknowledge that populism itself has become an empty signifier (De Cleen et al. 2018: 651).

The theoretical approach to populism underpinning this book is critical, that is the reflexive and challenging common-sensical knowledge of what the concept means. To do this, and before developing in detail what populism *is* for the purpose of this book, it is necessary to start by specifying what it *is not*. Doing so is more than a mere rhetorical exercise, as it progressively clarifies where this book is located within the scholarship and challenges theoretical assumptions that are often taken for granted.

Beyond demagoguery and anti-pluralism

Paradoxically, even though the epithet is widespread in political discourse, very few political actors self-identify as populist. Indeed, unlike socialist or conservative, which are political labels willingly embraced by all kinds of political actors, populism is typically used to describe one's opponents but rarely oneself. In other words, populism lacks 'self-ascriptive properties' (Tormey 2018: 260).

The main explanation for this is provided by a recent subset of the discursive approach to populism which studies 'anti-populism' (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2013, 2019; Moffitt 2018). This scholarship shows that this relative absence of self-identification is due to the derogatory connotations associated with populism as a signifier, used both by journalists, academics and even politicians themselves (Goyvaerts 2023). As such, beyond the study of political actors typically associated with 'populism', a critical perspective on populism ought to also look at those actors who strategically use populism in its negatively inflected meaning to discredit their opponents. In other words, 'populism is inconceivable without anti-populism' (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 12). One of the main findings of this literature on anti-populism is that populism is 'often invoked to criticize and delegitimize a range of political projects, from the radical right to the radical left [in] journalism, politics and academia' (De Cleen et al. 2018: 655). Anti-populist discourse is thus mobilised by the dominant players of the political sphere, and particularly those like centrists and liberals who strategically benefit from discrediting challenges to the moderation of the centre. Framing any form of radicality as dangerous and demagogic is a powerful

tool which builds a modernised version of the infamous 'horseshoe theory' that places far right and left back-to-back, as equally threatening for democracy. In short, anti-populist discourse implies that 'there is no alternative' to the liberal status quo, and scholars who do not consider this strategic use of the term fail to grasp part of its controversial dimension.

Beyond its use by political actors, Moffitt (2018: 5) argued that anti-populism is 'the default position for the academy, and as a result, its 'naturalness' makes it somewhat invisible and seemingly unworthy of explicit study'. For instance, many authors and even approaches start from the more or less explicit premise that populism is morally wrong and should be fought against. Their reasoning typically associates populism with illiberalism and/or anti-pluralism, two reasons for which they see populism as fundamentally opposed to liberal democracy. Müller (2016: 58) for instance argued that 'populists should be criticised for what they are – a real danger to democracy'. Rummens (2017: 568) described populism as 'a threat to liberal democracy' because it 'tends to undermine the individual liberties of parts of the citizenry as well as to disregard constitutional checks and balances [and] fails to recognise the democratic legitimacy of its political opponent'. Other scholars go even further than this, arguing that populism could 'degenerate' into authoritarian forms of government like fascism (Eatwell 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Even when this argument is not stated explicitly, it can often be found implicitly when considering the conceptualisation of populism, which may include authoritarian or xenophobic components. This is notably the case of Norris and Inglehart (2016, 2019) who chose 'authoritarianism' as one of the three core components of their definition of populism.

It is worth noting that both Norris and Inglehart, Rummens and Eatwell loosely base their own definitions of populism on Mudde's ideational approach which is itself ambiguous about the role of morality (Kim 2022). While I showed above that the position of proponents of the thin-ideology approach is much more nuanced, arguing that populism is both a 'corrective *and* threat to democracy' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012), it still rests on an implicit normative stance. Indeed, their definition of populism makes morality central, arguing that the populist ideology always implies a 'moral discourse . . . pitting "the *pure* people" against "the *corrupt* elite"' (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 490). And this is one of the foundational differences between the ideational and discursive-performative approaches: while both agree with the centrality of 'the people' and 'the elite', most mainstream scholars automatically add normatively connotated adjectives to them.

The notion of a '*pure* people' implies a form of idealised homogeneity that smoothly aligns with far-right conceptions of the people, while 'the *corrupt* elite' implies not just a deficiency but a corruption that can easily lean into conspiratorial discourse (Markou 2022). One of the most explicit examples of this

is found in Müller (2016: 19) who views populism as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but . . . ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior'. In addition to morality, another element undermining the apparent neutrality of the ideational approach regarding any *a priori* normative stance on populism is that its advocates share the perspective that 'fundamentally, pluralism is a direct opposite of populism' (Mudde 2017a: 34.). This claim stems from the belief that populism only operates through a homogenisation of the people, arguing that the people invoked through the populist ideology does not allow any alternative outside itself, which would be an inherent negation of pluralism.

I argue that this spectrum of views is based on normative judgement and simplifications that ought to be challenged as forms of anti-populism. As a rebuttal to the argument that populism is intrinsically anti-pluralist, Katsambekis (2016, 2020) demonstrated that populism's articulation of the people and the elite does not systematically operate on moralistic terms and that it can also be pluralist. In other words, 'populist politics do not have to eradicate the differences between the different groups and demands that are grouped under "the people"' (De Cleen et al. 2018: 655). Regarding the conspiratorial undertones of 'the corrupt people', Markou (2022) convincingly dissociated populism from the logic of conspiracy theories and showed the problematic implications of such a conflation. All in all, one cannot stress enough that 'populism can be found in certain authoritarian politics, but not all populist politics are authoritarian, and not all authoritarian politics are populist' (De Cleen et al. 2018: 653), which also serves as a basis for Mouffe's (2018) plea for left-wing political actors to embrace populism. Indeed, it is only when considering one specific type of populist practices, those of far-right political actors, that this association works, which leads me to my second point.

Beyond the far right: Populism and nationalism

In addition to its associations with demagoguery and amateurism, populism also suffers from a very common conflation with far-right politics. One of the main consequences of the 'populist hype' (Glynos and Mondon 2016; Goyvaerts et al. 2024) is that many politicians and parties are not called as such in the media, but instead described as populist first and foremost. This euphemistic description of the far right does not simply conceal their ideology, it also grants them a type of popular legitimacy. But before developing the roots of this association, one needs to briefly go back to the foundations of what constitutes far-right ideology. Defining the boundaries of any ideology is always a complex endeavour, but the case of the far right has always been a particularly complicated one.

Indeed, just like populism, it is also lacking 'self-ascriptive properties' (Tormey 2018: 260), which means that few political actors openly and proudly

claim the label of far right. Furthermore, the quest for its 'essential' characteristics is further complexified when considering the radical/extreme divide of the far right. Indeed, most scholars on the topic recognise that 'it is sometimes difficult to make a watertight distinction between the radical right and the extreme right' (Rydgren 2018: 2), which shows the need for a fluid definition, which accounts for 'variation within the far right without losing sight of that which unites it' (Shroufi 2024: 16). Below, I will highlight key features of a far-right ideology without pretences for exhaustiveness.

Firstly, the far right is socially conservative or even outright reactionary in its outlook on social issues. While conservatism is more generally an attribute of the right, the far right logically takes this further by emphasising the need for a return to traditional values and to a certain vision of an idealised past. For example, this conservatism may be rooted in religious values, in gender norms, in national traditions or in a combination of these and many others. This ideological characteristic is one of the most fluid since its intensity may drastically vary from one actor to the next, but a convenient shortcut is that the more extreme far-right actors are, the more reactionary they will be. Radical-right actors like the ones studied in this book even claim to embrace progressive causes like the defence of LGBT rights or feminism, but an analysis of their gender politics shows the superficiality of this positioning (Gustin 2023) which only serves their exclusionary agenda against other out-groups.[2]

Secondly, the far right is characterised by its firm stance on security, often referred to as 'law and order', encouraging stricter and harsher punishments for law infringement. This can be seen as an extension of the previous element, its reactionary outlook, as part of what Rydgren (2018: 2) calls the far right's 'general sociocultural authoritarianism'. Far-right political actors advocate for a return to a stronger and more direct form of political authority, which can thus range from reinforcing the power and means of armed corps like the police and the army as advocated by radical-right actors, to the establishment of an authoritarian regime restricting political pluralism which is the goal of fascistic groups on the extreme right. The centrality of security over other themes, like economics which is notably more peripheral in the far right than in other ideologies, thus comes with a focus on authority. Far-right actors value hierarchy and order, which Camus and Lebourg (2017) connect to their 'organicist' vision of society, seeing society as a homogenous living being whose integrity is damaged by an external threat and needs to be restored through authoritative action.

Thirdly, and this directly relates to this organicism, one of the most defining features of the far right is that it is an exclusionary ideology. Indeed, society in a far-right perspective rests on certain criteria – for example, national, ethnic or racial – that unites its members and differentiates them from others. The far right's organicism entails 'the rejection of every form of universalism, in favor

of autophilia (the valorization of the 'we') and alterophobia' (the stigmatisation of the 'them'), which 'absolutize differences (between nations, races, individuals, cultures)' (ibid.: 21) and make them immutable. While they may be framed in neutral terms, these differences are rooted in a hierarchical perspective that implies a superiority of the characteristics of those inside (locals, natives . . .) from those of outsiders. However, it is important to point that, while the far right always relies on an exclusionary 'us vs them' divide, who is included in the 'us' or in the 'them' may vary drastically (Shroufi 2024).

Indeed, in response to the defeat of the far right after the Second World War and its marginality as a political ideology, a major innovation has been developed by intellectuals, most notably Alain De Benoist and Dominique Venner from the *Nouvelle Droite*. They shifted the locus of the 'us vs them' differences away from biological criteria and towards cultural criteria instead, most notably ethnicity and religion. This 'cultural turn in racism' (Rueda 2021) has allowed contemporary far-right actors to dissociate themselves from Nazism and fascism, while maintaining a certain ideological continuity. And while some fringe extreme groups still claim forms of biological racism like 'white supremacy', radical-right actors have entered the political mainstream by defending 'ethnopluralism' or *droit à la différence*, the idea of different and separate ethnic groups that cannot and should not mix. This thus justifies their xenophobia and 'provide[s] new ways to rationalize ethnic stigmatization and discriminatory policies against non-European immigrants' (ibid. 234) while preventing accusations of overt racism.

Furthermore, this exclusionary component of far-right ideology accounts for many common xenophobic policies defended by far-right actors like welfare chauvinism, that is restricting the provisions of the welfare state (social security, pension, unemployment benefits . . .) to the members of one's country, and specifically not to foreigners. Finally, and that is especially relevant to understand the success of radical-right actors, the 'us and them' opposition has found its most electorally successful resonance on the 'national' scale, which is why most radical-right actors claim the label of 'patriot'. Indeed, the logic of ethnopluralism aligns particularly well with the divide between those inside a country and foreigners, which is why most radical-right actors frame their exclusionary stance through nationalism.

And this is precisely where this discussion goes back to the topic of populism. When scholars conflate populism with the far right, they rarely point at most of the ideological features developed above like its social conservatism or its 'law and order' stance on security. Instead, the most common association is made between populism and the exclusionary nationalism of the far right. When the Cambridge dictionary declared 'populism' word of the year 2017, Mudde (2017b) wrote an opinion piece in *The Guardian* where he criticised them for describing populism as nothing more than a cynical ploy used by

demagogues. He argued instead that what they meant and the word that should have won that title was 'nativism', the expression he uses to refer to the exclusionary form of nationalism.[3] For him, 'populism functions at best as a fuzzy blanket to camouflage the nastier nativism' (ibid.) and argues that more attention should be paid to dissociating populism from the exclusionary nationalism of the radical right.

Beyond even the specific case of 'nativism', nationalism as a whole is conflated with populism, which begs the question of what differentiates them. I call this conflation, with long precedence and staying power in the study of populism, the nationalist pitfall. One of the oldest examples of this can be found in Ionescu and Gellner's (1969) influential collection of essays, where populism was described by Stewart (1969: 183) as 'a kind of nationalism'. This pitfall is also often present in quantitative studies[4] like Jagers and Walgrave (2007: 322), for whom a 'complete' case of populism must develop an exclusionary and homogenised vision of the people, or Norris and Inglehart's (2016: 6), who chose nativism as a core component of populism. Even when nationalism is not directly mentioned, it is often implicit for authors like Müller (2016) who frame the homogenisation of the people as a feature of populism. Criticising Müller's definition of populism, Rydgren (2017: 492) argued that it 'captures well the features of radical right-wing parties', and more provocatively added that 'maybe it fits too well; it reads more like a (partial) definition of radical right-wing parties than of populism generally'.

This conflation of concepts, or at the very least assumed parentage, is not surprising as there are both empirical and theoretical overlaps between populism and nationalism. Indeed, 'many of the most prominent instances of populist politics have been nationalist . . . and nationalisms have often had a populist component' (De Cleen 2017: 342). Furthermore, although its influence has been contested by other political actors, from international organisations to multinational corporations, the nation-state remains the privileged area for political expression and representation. This explains why most, but not all,[5] forms of populism appear on the national scale. To put it differently:

> The nation-state remains the primary context for democratic political representation and public debate, making references to 'the nation' unavoidable for most political discourses. Usually operating within a national context, even forms of populist politics that do not endorse a nationalist programme tend to speak in the name of a people defined at the national level. (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 201)

Despite these conjunctural 'justifications', falling into the nationalist pitfall is extremely problematic for scholars of populism. Beyond the inherent theoretical value in clearly distinguishing two concepts that may empirically overlap,

associating populism with nationalism is misleading. It overemphasises the populist component of radical-right movements while simultaneously downplaying the prominence of their exclusionary nationalism that are much more central to their ideological convictions (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 12). It also leads to a misunderstanding of the distinctive characteristics of populism and skews the analysis of other forms of populism by framing them as nationalist as well. This also blurs the ideological analysis of radical-left actors embracing the populist repertoire, whether they are parties like *Podemos* or politicians like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, by scanning their discourse for nationalism instead of socialism which is much more central to their ideological line. As mentioned earlier, it is important to reassert that left-wing forms of populism may also be combined with references to nationalism, especially since radical-left actors like those mentioned above operate on a national stage. However, their articulation of the nation, and more importantly for this analysis that of the people, differs substantially.

As a way to avoid this nationalist pitfall, proponents of the ideational approach distinguish 'exclusionary and inclusionary populism' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), emphasising nativism as the specific characteristic of the former. Mouffe (2018), whose discursive conception of populism otherwise drastically differs from Mudde's, made a similar distinction between right-wing and left-wing populism. In her vision of populism as a way out of the 'post-political consensus' between centre-left and centre-right parties, she claimed that the articulation of an opposition between the people and the elite can take two forms. Either it 'construct[s] a "people" that excludes numerous categories, usually immigrants, seen as a threat to [its] identity and prosperity' (Mouffe 2018: 24) for right-wing populism, or constructing a people based on 'the mobilisation of common affects towards equality and social justice' for left-wing populism (Mouffe 2018: 6). However, even these theoretical distinctions insufficiently described the relationship between nationalism and populism, and more particularly failed to explain why they intersect and even overlap so frequently.

De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) arguably offered the most sophisticated attempt at disentangling them by using a discourse-theoretical perspective to discuss the links between these concepts. In the 'architectonics' representation they develop, the main difference between nationalism and populism lies in their nodal points, in other words what signifiers are central for them, and their directionality. On the one hand, nationalism is characterised by a focus on the 'nation' built around a horizontal 'in/out' axis 'with the 'in' consisting of the members of the nation and the 'out' comprising non-members' (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 309). This distinction is for them inherently exclusive, since it inevitably creates a separation between in-group and out-group, but its rigidity depends on how easy it is for outsiders to join the nation. In this perspective,

exclusionary nationalism is then the most rigid form of nationalism, based on ethnic–cultural lines and thus on a closed vision of the nation. On the other hand, the nodal point of populism is the 'people', and it is characterised by a down/up axis which distinguishes the 'people' as underdog at the bottom from the 'elite' at the top, or in other words '"the people" as a large powerless group and "the elite" as a small and illegitimately powerful group' (De Cleen 2017: 345). As an empty signifier (Zicman de Barros 2023), the 'people' thus articulated can then embody a multiplicity of meanings and, while it is not necessarily homogeneous, one of its defining features is that it synthesises within itself a plurality of actors and concerns.

Although far-right politicians may also mobilise the signifier of 'the people', and thus a form of populism, their articulation of the people overlaps and is eventually equated with that of 'the nation' (Anastasiou 2019), understood in a purely exclusionary way. While one could argue that, even in its most inclusionary versions, the elite is excluded from the people – which would mean that populism is intrinsically exclusionary – this exclusion is not done in the way that far-right actors exclude their out-groups. Instead, the elite is separated from the people in an antagonistic (Mouffe 2011), and thus symbolic way. Indeed, 'in contrast to exclusionary nationalism's exclusion of certain groups of people from political participation (political exclusion) and from access to state resources (material exclusion) because of their ethnic–cultural background, the antagonism between the people-as-underdog and the elite does not in itself exclude 'the elite' from the *demos* and from access to state resources' (De Cleen 2017: 352).

Disentangling nationalism and populism offers a way to avoid the nationalist pitfall by providing a robust explanation of the overlap between both. In the case of the far-right use of populism, this prominence of the signifier of the (exclusionary) 'nation' over that of the 'people' (Anastasiou 2019) explains why many authors argued that it was their nationalist dimension that should be emphasised before their populist one. This notably explains Mudde's (2007) choice to use the terminology of 'populist radical right' instead of 'radical right populist'. Likewise, Rydgren (2017: 485) argued that 'it is misleading to label [radical right] parties [as] "populist parties", since [they are] mainly defined by ethnic nationalism, and not a populist ideology'. Even if this nuance may appear purely semantic, what these authors feared is that some of the key characteristics of these actors, namely 'their xenophobia, their racism, their targeting of minorities, and their nostalgia for a more 'pure' time with closed borders' (Moffitt 2018: 12), would either be mistaken as characteristics of populism instead of a far-right ideology, or downplayed as secondary elements to their populism. This furthermore allows me to complete the main criticism outlined in the previous section: the negative opinion and moralistic judgement of many scholars towards populism – their anti-populism – is misguided since what they

condemn is not populism but rather the way far-right politics mobilise populism to conflate people and a closed understanding of nationalism.

But this conclusion has another crucial consequence for the development of this book's perspective on populism. Indeed, focusing more closely on the relative prominence of exclusionary nationalism over populism substantiates my rejection of the premise that populism is a set of ideas or, in Mudde's terms, an ideology. If at first glance, the aforementioned conclusion goes in the direction of the argument that populism is a thin-centred ideology overtaken by a 'stronger' or 'thicker' host ideology, this raises several issues. Rydgren succinctly summarised the main one:

> This view, that populism is always mixed up with a 'host ideology' (such as nationalism) makes intuitive sense. . . . At the same time, however, it begs the question why we should then focus on populism, being a minor part of these parties' ideology, rather than on the 'host' ideologies. (Rydgren 2017: 491)

The analytical challenge raised by Rydgren is that of the empirical relevance of populism when its main ideas are so much less prominent than that of its 'host' ideology. As was briefly mentioned above, Freeden (2017), who coined the very concept of a thin ideology, developed this point when he disputed Mudde's choice to describe populism as one. For him, where other thin-centred ideologies like feminism or ecologism had 'the potential to become full if they incorporate existing elements of other ideologies', populism remained 'ideologically too scrawny even to be thin' (Freeden 2017: 3). This can notably be accounted by Mudde's reliance on nationalism, the supposedly fuller 'host' ideology of right-wing populism, which Freeden (1998) always defined as a thin ideology itself. More generally, Freeden reached the conclusion that, in terms of ideology, populism is 'emaciatedly thin rather than thin-centred' (Freeden 2017: 3).

Although advocates of the ideational approach willingly acknowledge the ideological shallowness, and even emptiness, of populism, the discussion of this chapter has showed that this categorisation remains conceptually unsatisfying and leads back to the question of the nature of populism. My argument is that instead of trying to forcefully categorise populism as an ideology, or more generally as a set of beliefs or ideas, populism is better understood by developing the question of the interaction between content and form. This is an idea that was developed by many authors from the discursive-performative approach, and even within the work of Laclau (2005b: 33) himself. Nowhere is this clearer than when De Cleen et al. (2018) discussed how to approach populism critically. Against the tendency in the mainstream scholarship to frame populism as inherently anti-pluralist, they claimed that these authors 'ignore how populist parties and movements can be inclusionary in their normative

vision and pluralist in the way they seek to achieve this normative vision' (De Cleen et al. 2018: 655). By analytically separating the 'normative vision' of populist actors from *the way* they achieve this vision, they follow the distinction between content and form that I just suggested. Even more clearly, they quoted Laclau in a crucial excerpt:

> Consequently, this conceptualization of populism goes against the tendency to see populism as a set of ideas about politics and society: the focus shifts from the 'contents' of populism – what are the demands formulated by populist actors, what is their ideology – to how it articulates 'those contents – whatever those contents are'. (Laclau, 2005b: 33). (De Cleen et al. 2018: 655)

I completely concur with this perspective which argues that, rather than being purely content based, the specificities of populism lie in the interplay between form and content, and are more precisely located at the level of form. Instead of looking at *what* the beliefs of a 'populist' are, it is important to acknowledge how populism operates in terms of *the way* these beliefs are being articulated, a point that is rarely addressed, even in the discursive approach.

Notes

1. The concept of 'empty signifier' alone would deserve a much longer elaboration, which would substantially extend this section. For thorough and critical assessments, see Zicman de Barros (2023) and Linden (2023).
2. For more on the instrumentalisation of progressive struggles by radical-right actors, see for instance the growing literature on 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017).
3. Although they are functionally equivalent, I choose in this book to use the expression of 'exclusionary nationalism' instead of 'nativism' for two reasons. First, its root in the word 'native', also used to refer to indigenous people, makes it difficult to adopt in the postcolonial context of countries of the Global South, an ambivalence that Mudde (2007: 13) acknowledged. Second, the concept euphemises the racist and xenophobic processes of exclusion it entails. For a longer discussion on the topic and a discourse–theoretical redefinition, see Newth (2023).
4. There are exceptions to this generalisation, like Jenne et al. (2021) who interrogated the relationship between populism and nationalism through a quantitative lens.
5. See, for instance, research examining the form populism takes on the transnational (Panayotu 2017), local (Chou et al. 2022) and global levels (Schmidt 2021).

2

REDEFINING THE POPULIST STYLE

'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing.'
Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1990 [1895])

The previous chapter started its critical overview of the academic literature on populism with two of the most central questions in the field: what is the nature of populism? And are there other characteristics than the opposition between people and elite? In this chapter which serves as the theoretical backbone of the book, I will provide my answers to both questions and a justification for these choices. Firstly, I argue that the most adequate concept to grasp the nature of populism is that of *style*. The concept was hinted at when discussing the divide between form and content, and even mentioned in passing, but it deserves substantial elaboration. Secondly, in addition to the discursive and performative articulation of 'the people' and 'the elite' – which are part in my approach of what I call *performances of identity*, I argue that there are two more constitutive elements to the populist style: *performances of transgression* and *performances of crisis*.

I am well aware that these two answers are not consensual in the literature of what is now controversially called populism studies (De Cleen and Glynos 2021), and that even many like-minded scholars from the discursive-performative approach, who are otherwise sympathetic to the premises of my research, will disagree with these theoretical choices. More than this, the approach that I outline in this chapter does not seek to be authoritative and definitive, but

rather an attempt at refining the stylistic approach in the continuation of my first theoretical intervention in the field (Aiolfi 2022), the volume I co-edited on performing left populism (Petrović Lotina and Aiolfi 2023) and even an upcoming collaboration on the aesthetics of populism (Zicman De Barros and Aiolfi Forthcoming).

One of the most stimulating implications of working within the discipline of performance studies, which informs substantial parts of this book's interdisciplinary framework, is that it teaches the need to embrace instability and fluidity. Nothing, not even ideas, are as solidly set in stone as the ink on these pages may lead us to believe. Nevertheless, this chapter is the opportunity to develop what makes the stylistic approach outlined in this book stand out not only from the mainstream scholarship on populism, but also from kindred research in the discursive-performative scholarship (Ostiguy et al. 2021) and more specifically from earlier work defining populism as a style like Moffitt's (2016) influential first monograph. Beyond this positioning within the literature, this chapter also tackles some of the larger debates that I have consistently been seeking to address in my research: the dialectical relationship between form and content, the salience of an interdisciplinary perspective combining political science and performance studies, as well as the centrality of performativity, aesthetics and representation in populist practices.

'Discourse' and Its Limitations

Affinities and divergences with the discursive approach

As the previous chapter highlighted, the critical approach to populism developed in this book has many affinities with the discursive tradition in populism studies, and particularly the research put forward by the Essex School (Laclau 2005a; Katsambekis 2016; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Mouffe 2018). To start with the foundations, my approach shares the poststructuralist premises of discourse theory as it was developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) which, in the case of populism, do not take 'the people' and 'the elite' as pre-existing groups and instead examine the way they are constructed and articulated through populism. By postulating an ontology of 'radical negativity' (Mouffe 2013) based on the insurmountable existence of conflict in politics, poststructuralist discourse theory claims 'the 'impossibility of society' and the essential unfixity of all possible social objects' (Hansen 2014: 4). This means that social phenomena, like populism, do not have any essential meaning and are instead articulated in a contingent manner that is always contestable. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) thus highlight the importance of hegemony and antagonism, demonstrating the way populism itself articulates an opposition between the two contingent signifiers of 'the people' and 'the elite'.

One of the practical implications of this contingency is a move away from seeing populism as a fixed quality attributed *in æternum* to a politician or a party, an implicit premise in the mainstream scholarship, and instead conceiving populism more fluidly as a set of practices. Furthermore, this poststructuralist ontology also implies a move beyond material elements to understand the way populism emerges in the public discourse, which means acknowledging the discursive as well as performative dimensions of politics. As was done in the end of the previous chapter, the framework of discourse theory finally provides the tools to question and contextualise the normative debates around populism as a signifier itself. To be more specific, I largely agree with the 'rules of engagement' with populism laid out by De Cleen et al. (2018), which inform key aspects of the criticality of my own framework.

However, despite this common ground which provides the foundations of the broader 'discursive-performative approach to populism' (Ostiguy et al. 2021) within which the critical scholarship coalesced, there are also points of divergence. As a *caveat*, although this book is firmly located within the performative strand of the literature, I need to acknowledge that I do not claim to speak on behalf of other scholars adopting a similar understanding of populism who may disagree with my points of divergence, focus on other elements, and even outright disagree with this book's choice to use the label of 'style' to refer to populism.

A first point of disagreement lies in a choice to move away from the generalising abstractions of discourse theory to further ground populism within sociocultural and contextualised political practice. While the situation is rapidly evolving as more and more efforts at 'discursive contextualisation' (Roch 2022: 6) have been provided by scholars from discourse theory during the last decade, the highly theoretical model of the Essex School meant that its most important contributions on populism were made in the subfield of political theory. As a result, many scholars like Ostiguy (2006) or Wodak (2020), who sought to conduct a more grounded type of research, developed their own theoretical frameworks. A second related divergence with the discursive approach is its relative lack of focus on the aesthetic and performative components of populism. Indeed, most of the scholars from the discursive school focus precisely on the textual component of discourse. While their framework theoretically covers the aesthetic, theatrical and performative elements of the articulation of populism, it is in practice insufficiently accounted for and analysed rigorously. Of course, there are notable exceptions like Savvopoulos and Stavrakakis's (2022) stimulating analysis of populist performances in Greek rap, but the focus on sociocultural elements of the performative strand of the critical scholarship gives it an originality that is particularly apparent in its empirical focus.

Politics through the lens of content and form

Finally, and this constitutes the most important divergence developed in this book, the Essex School's use of the concept of 'discourse' fails to differentiate form from content, a point which deserves substantial elaboration. As was discussed at the very end of the previous chapter, De Cleen et al. (2018) showed in their second rule of critical engagement a clear acknowledgement of a conceptual difference between content and form when it comes to populism. And indeed, I agree with their claim that 'populist politics embody an *articulatory pattern* – a *formal* reason or logic – whose elements (grievances, demands, identities, etc.) can have as their source any number of *ideologies*' (De Cleen et al. 2018: 652, emphasis mine). In their second rule, they thus explicitly distinguish the content of the demands expressed, which have at their source various kinds of ideologies, from the form they take, describing populism as an articulatory pattern. However, although this distinction between ideological content and its articulation is commonplace in the discursive scholarship on populism, both are placed within the same conceptual category, that of 'discourse'.

As a result, the conceptual consequences of this distinction between 'ideas' and 'articulation', in other words between content and form, are never properly addressed and remain surprisingly overlooked as both are combined into the catch-all concept of 'discourse'. For example, when De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017: 307) argued that nationalism and populism are 'analytically distinct discourses', the distinction between the ideological dimension of the former and the formal dimension of the latter were not addressed. Arguably, this absence of distinction stems from the totalising way the concept of discourse is defined in Laclau's (2005a: 13) work which encompasses every possible way meaning-making is produced in society. Consequently, because 'discourse' is a broad enough analytical category, the difference between an idea and its articulation may not be sufficiently significant for them to warrant the use of another concept. While such a rationale is completely justifiable, it maintains an ambiguity preventing a clear dissociation between populism and the ideologies it articulates.

This is the reason why, in opposition to this conceptual ambiguity, I argue that it is important to use a different concept than the catch-all 'discourse' if one wants to productively disentangle form and content at the analytical level, especially in the case of populism. For this book, I have thus chosen to define populism as a style, in clear contrast with its ideological content. By doing so, I also seek to formally move away from perspectives that see populism as a fixed set of ideas, suggesting instead that it is better understood as a form that can shape and be given shape by any set of ideas.

Through this 'thicker' understanding of style, the stylistic approach emphasises the need to genuinely consider the form that politics takes and aims to destabilise the dichotomy between form and content.

Populism and its alleged ideational content

While I will later justify the specific choice of the concept of style instead of other alternatives, I want to immediately anticipate the two fundamental objections to my plea to dissociate form and content in the case of populism which were powerfully expressed in Sorensen's (2021) recent monograph.

The first objection is more general and could be stated in the following terms: while the conceptual distinction between form and content is a theoretical possibility, it is impossible to practically dissociate them because they are connected through a 'mutually constitutive relationship' (Sorensen 2021: 40). This is a valid concern, which finds echo in the findings of various strands of research. Media and communication studies have consistently shown that the very choice of a form for a message can be seen in itself as content, as was elegantly coined in McLuhan's (1964: 9) influential quote that 'the medium is the message'. Conversely, scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds have shown that every ideology develops alongside a specific aesthetic form, whether it is Marxism (Liu 2000), feminism (Hein 1990) or Nazism (McFee and Tomlinson 1999). However, the practical impossibility to dissociate form and content does not mean that analysing their interaction is a fool's errand. On the contrary, this is an understudied area of research that could yield rich and original results. Any theoretical endeavour inevitably simplifies the complexity of politics, and I do want to acknowledge that this dichotomy between form and content is a simplification. However, one cannot examine the dialectical relationship between the two without drawing some type of conceptual boundaries which is what I do by distinguishing ideology as a cohesive set of ideas from political style as an articulating medium for these ideas.

The second objection more specifically pertains to populism: seeing populism as pure form and articulation is an oversimplification of the concept which does not fully grasp its nature. In one of the most sophisticated and compelling formulations of this argument, Sorensen (2021: 83) claims that populism is best conceived as a 'communicative process' containing both ideational content and performative form, which is a way for her to 'bridge the literature's classification of populism as *either* ideology *or* performance' (ibid.: 9) and solve the divide between ideational and discursive approaches to populism. However, her argument on the ideational content of populism suffers from the same limitations of scholars defending the idea of populism as a 'thin ideology'. Following Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), she attributes to populism a moralistic dimension, arguing that its division between people and elite relies on a 'moral claim' which implies a 'latent antipluralism and illiberalism' (Sorensen 2021: 43), even though she does point at its emancipatory potential. As was discussed above, this 'morality thesis' (Katsambekis 2020: 2) has been challenged repeatedly on the grounds that it 'pathologizes populism on the

basis of characteristics without which politics as such is hardly conceivable' (Kim 2022: 498). Furthermore, Sorensen's argument also struggles with establishing the boundaries of the ideational content of populism. She skirts around that issue by pointing at the sensitivity to context of populism:

> Populism's ideas are not a coherent web of well-developed political concepts, as we see it with the grand old systems of belief. Nor does it impose values or issue positions on its constituents. Rather, its ideas are unusually malleable. They are shaped by public perceptions of democracy, address common grievances, and are given meaning in response to the dominant mode of representation of a given context. (Sorensen 2021: 273)

I wholeheartedly agree with her call to further contextualise populism: in faithfulness with the post-foundational roots of the approach I defend, any discussion on a concept ought to pay specific attention to the contingency of what it studies. However, Sorensen's flexibility on context leads her to frame the ideational content from other ideologies as the content of populism itself, claiming for example that 'different populisms across the globe have very different ideational contents that range from calls for *inclusion of minorities* into the political process to *illiberal exclusionary ideas*' (ibid.). Indeed, the latter ideational content, the 'inclusion of minorities', is a characteristic of progressive ideologies like socialism, while her mention of 'illiberal exclusionary ideas' is another way of referring to the exclusivism of the far right which was discussed in the previous chapter. If populism becomes defined by the contextual ideational features of the ideologies it espouses, it loses explanatory potential and conceptual originality. It is thus more productive and rigorous to disentangle them, attributing such ideational content to the ideology of the actor mobilising them and focusing on the specific characteristics of populism.

But even after removing this contextual ideational content it draws from ideology, one could make the argument that there is still some minimal ideational content to populism. Stripped to its very core and regardless of ideological interaction, populism always relies on the belief of a society where the people have been deprived of their power by an elite which misuses it. In other words, 'if populism adopts an issue position, it is to make a broader point about undemocratic elite representation' (ibid.). It is thus counter-hegemonic, contesting the current repartition of power and advocating the need for radical change. Finally, it is grounded in the belief in the democratic legitimacy and sovereignty of the people. I leave the debate about whether these statements are cohesive enough to constitute an ideology to the specialists of the concept. However, to go back to the earlier point that there is always some form to content and some content to form, I do not believe it is theoretically possible to completely abstract

populism from content, nor do I think we would gain much by achieving this. But because of its reliance on the empty signifiers of 'the people' and 'the elite', this kernel of ideational content is itself malleable and unstable enough that it will substantially change as it gets discursively shaped by ideologies like that of the far right. As such, I acknowledge once more that it is a simplification to describe populism as form, but it remains the most productive way to emphasise its flexibility and articulating role while also analysing the way it shapes and is being shaped by ideational content.

Populism as a Political Style

The pioneers of the stylistic approach

After having established the importance of the dialectical tension between ideological content and populist form, the last question remaining relates to the choice of the concept to use in order to capture the formal nature of populism. Scholars from the discursive tradition, seeking to emphasise its articulating role usually choose to talk about populism as a political logic (De Cleen et al. 2018), a central concept in the work of Laclau himself and a reference to the 'logic of difference' and 'logic of equivalence' which are fundamental to understanding the way populism operates in his framework (Laclau 2005a: 78). In this book, I choose instead to use the concept of style for multiple reasons. But before detailing them, and as was hinted at by the title of this chapter which seeks to *re*define the populist style, it is fundamental to recognise that I am far from the first one to use the concept and to assess their work to understand both their choices, advances and limitations.

Going back before the beginning of the populist hype (Goyvaerts et al. 2024) of the 2010s, pioneers of what is now called the stylistic approach include Taguieff (1995), Kazin (1995), Knight (1998), Canovan (1999), as well as Jagers and Walgrave (2007). However, it is also important to note that this first generation of scholars used the concept of style in very different ways and their scholarship could hardly be called a cohesive approach in the way that the ideational, strategic and discursive approaches were at the time. This heterogeneity, which some may frame as inconsistency, primarily stems from a vague use of the concept of style, relying on its intuitive nature instead of defining it in a systematic manner. Typically, style was mobilised in the early literature as nothing more than an extension of discourse, rhetoric or even strategy. However, many of these authors chose the concept as a result of a diagnosis that shares striking similarities with mine: Canovan (1984: 314) argued for instance that populism is 'a matter of style rather than substance', Knight (1998: 226) started from the premise that populism 'does not . . . relate to a specific ideology' while Taguieff (1995: 9) pointed out that populism 'has no particular ideological content. It is a political style applicable to various ideological frameworks.'

Earlier definitions however, still associated the concept of style with that of discourse, emphasising populism's rhetorical dimension, a choice that was particularly apparent in Kazin's (1995: 5) description of populism as 'a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric' and for Canovan (1984: 313) who described populism as 'a rhetorical style'. The notable exception to this conflation between discourse and style was Knight's (1998) work on Latin America in which he went 'beyond the formally discursive and rhetorical level of analysis . . . and gesturing towards the more performative and affective dimension' (Moffitt 2016: 31) of the populist style. However, although his use of the concept went beyond this rhetoric dimension, Knight's definition of a political style, as he humbly recognised it himself, suffered from being 'vague and imprecise' (Knight 1998: 231), taking its intuitive meaning for granted and only loosely defining it as a 'way of doing politics' (ibid.: 234). While recognising the foundational influence of these pioneers in developing the concept of a populist political style, the widely different ways they defined and applied the concept of style left the stylistic approach scattered and inaudible within the broader debates in the specialist literature on populism.

Systematisation and popularisation: Moffitt's definition

This situation changed with the more recent work of Benjamin Moffitt, who developed in his first monograph, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Moffitt 2016),[1] the first systematic and sophisticated definition of populism as a political style. Although I amend it substantially, his approach is the main theoretical influence for this book. Before discussing the specific features of the populist style, Moffitt chose to start his theoretical framework with a discussion on political styles more generally, answering a common criticism in the literature that 'political style is a broad [and] not clearly delimited concept' (Weyland 2001: 12). This issue extends beyond the specialist literature on populism as the notion of style in politics has remained slippery and vague, and is used to refer to a variety of phenomena but rarely defined in a systematic way. In Moffitt's words, political style 'exists as a kind of academic placeholder to group certain phenomena together, or as shorthand for a political 'something' that is ephemeral and difficult to pin down' (Moffitt 2016: 33). These two types of use, he argued, constitute two distinct yet interrelated ways of approaching style in politics. In the first case, style becomes synonymous with *patterns* and serves as medium for a typological exercise aiming to 'order or bring together disparate objects or phenomena with similar characteristics to schematise them in a comprehensible fashion' (ibid.). In the second case, style takes a more general meaning, being practically equated with form. As I will explore later in this chapter, even though these two types of uses are not enough to constitute a clearly defined

definition, they are an excellent step in the right direction, showcasing various key features of style.

Now, moving on to a more specific definition of what a *political* style is, Moffitt drew inspiration from three authors engaging with various adjacent disciplines to political science: rhetoric for Hariman (1995), communications for Pels (2003) and political philosophy for Ankersmit (2002a). Going back to the two uses of style he outlined, Moffitt claimed that Hariman uses the first one, providing a typology of four political styles (realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic) that remains mostly grounded in their rhetorical dimension, while Ankersmit and Pels use the second one, focusing on the aesthetic dimension of style in relationship to democratic politics. Although their approaches substantially differ, the common point which Moffitt established between these authors is that 'they take seriously the often-ignored 'shallow' elements of political style and imbue the concept with analytical substance' (Moffitt 2016: 37). Moffitt then synthesised the work of these three authors into his definition of *political styles*, understood in the plural sense, as 'the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life' (ibid. 38). This first attempt at a systematic definition of political style is laudable, as it precisely clarifies the boundaries of such a slippery concept.

Finally, turning to the specifics of his model, Moffitt defines populism as a political style characterised by three core features: (1) 'An appeal to "the people" versus "the elite"; (2) "Bad manners"; (3) Performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (ibid. 45). Before examining each of these components and his rationale for selecting them, I want to stress the influence and impact of Moffitt's research on the scholarship on populism. Even though citations are a very flawed measure of academic success, the numbers achieved by his agenda-setting article (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) and his first monograph (Moffitt 2016) are nothing short of remarkable in the context of social sciences, with more than 1300 citations for the former and over 2600 for the latter, as of 2024. Beyond these quantitative measures, Moffitt's research brought a level of visibility to the stylistic approach which it never reached before. Not only did it become increasingly acknowledged by the mainstream scholarship as an alternative to the ideational definition (Brubaker 2017), but it particularly affected the landscape of the critical scholarship, bringing theoretical depth and revitalising interest for the perspective. Its complementarity with the sociocultural approach defended by Ostiguy (2017) led to discussions of a wider 'performative approach' (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021). As part of this new synthesis, it was even recognised as a worthy partner to the discursive tradition within the 'post-Laclauian consensus' created around a unitary 'discursive-performative approach to populism' (Ostiguy et al. 2021).

A superficial concept? Towards a deeper understanding of style

However, whether in its earlier forms or in the more systematic version offered by Moffitt, the stylistic approach was not only met with praise. Indeed, it has often been dismissed in the populist scholarship because it ontologically focuses on something considered 'shallow' or 'futile', while being usually oversimplified by proponents of other approaches. Fieschi (2004: 115), for example, criticised this approach for 'not doing [populism] justice . . . implying something frivolous or at the very least inessential or superficial', while Müller (2016: 40) authoritatively asserted that populism was not 'just a question of style'.

Although some of this criticism could be attributed to the allegedly superficial way style is seen by scholars from a mainstream perspective, these criticisms also find echo among like-minded scholars from the discursive approach which would theoretically be more open to the inclusion of aesthetic and performative components. Some of them evoke thought-provoking concerns like Kleinberg (2023: 56) who recognised 'obvious merits to the performative approach' but warned against 'the danger for potential ahistoricism and the conflation of style with articulation'. Pointing at the flaws of the influential description by Hofstadter (1996) of a 'paranoid style' which inspired some of the authors from the stylistic approach to populism, he rightfully pointed at the need for any definition of style to pay attention to the contingency of stylistic attributes to avoid fetishising them. He furthermore pointed at the theoretical limitations of not separating the wider process of articulation from style. I argue that these valid challenges stem from an ambiguity in the definitions of style, or lack thereof, in the literature on populism. The understanding of style I outline below seeks to avoid this kind of ahistoricism by emphasising its contingency and fluidity. It furthermore separates the formal process of articulation from what style is, which is more limited and only represents one of the ways discourse is being articulated, but research in the stylistic approach should heed Kleinberg's warnings to avoid the pitfall of reifying style by focusing only on its ontic manifestation and ignoring its ontological functions.

However, some discursive scholars dismiss the stylistic definition for reasons closer to those used by mainstream scholarship. For example, De Cleen et al. (2018: 653) argued that populism is not 'a "popular style" of talking, acting or looking like "ordinary people"' and brushed the concept aside without other justification than its alleged superficiality. A more developed critique is addressed to the stylistic approach by Stavrakakis et al. (2017: 424–5). Although they conceded that a Laclauian definition 'bears similarities with a body of work that understands populism more as a political communication style [Jagers and Walgrave 2007, Moffitt 2016], [they] prefer the term "discourse" or "discursive logic", since discourse constitutes the core material of analysis and should not be treated as something secondary or superficial – an unavoidable connotation of "style"' (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 424–5).

In addition to conflating two very different definitions of style – given that Jagers and Walgrave's definition has little in common with Moffitt's – this criticism constitutes a perpetuation of the prejudice that associates style with superficiality. While there are important criticisms to make to most definitions of populism as a style which did remain limited to surface level elements, I argue that the critical points raised in this quote stem from a misunderstanding about the ontological nature of style as a concept, which remains associated to connotations of being inherently secondary and superficial. Even if an argument could be made, following the conclusions of Mudde (2007), Rydgren (2017) and even Stavrakakis et al. (2017) themselves, that populism *is* indeed secondary to the ideological content that it articulates, I seek to go further by rejecting the simplistic dichotomy that underpins these comments. Indeed, the implicit claim behind these criticisms is that the substance, the set of ideas and beliefs, the ideology or however it is called in the literature, is always more important, and thus superior to the form that it takes. This binary opposition, where 'one of the two terms governs the other' (Derrida 1981: 41), implicitly reproduces the noble position of studying the content, *what* is being said by a political actor, while relegating the analysis of style, *how* it is being said, to an inherently inferior and thus less interesting position. Because of this, although other scholars from a Laclauian perspective did make claims that one should go beyond content to look at the articulation of politics (De Cleen et al. 2018: 655), these claims are hard to take seriously without challenging this inherent hierarchy and granting form an equal analytical footing to content. And as was discussed earlier, it is conceptually unsatisfying to use the same concept to talk both about ideological content and its modes of articulation.

What the stylistic approach to populism does in this case is provide a framework to go beyond this conceptual blur. By focusing on form as a lesser explored dimension of the political, the approach of this book is then in a unique position to comprehend what makes populism so difficult to grasp when one remains purely at the level of content. It furthermore provides a theoretical explanation for the ideological hollowness or lack of substance that populism is often criticised for, its 'empty heart' (Taggart 2004: 280), as well as accounting for its shape-shifting nature and versatility. However, to overcome more explicitly the accusations that the very word has 'unavoidable connotations' (Stavrakakis et al. 2017: 425) of being superficial and futile, a more precise definition of style ought to be provided.

Seeing 'style' as necessarily superficial stems from a shallow and partial understanding of the concept. Style does not merely refer to fashion and theatrics, it is a concept with a long history that captures unique features of social life (Aiolfi 2023). Etymologically, the word comes from *stylus*, the name of a cylindrical instrument used in Ancient Mesopotamia to write, or more precisely engrave, on a wax tablet. A metonymic shift led the word to shift from the tool

to the act of writing, and then more generally to the way of doing or being. There is a rich tradition of research on style spanning anthropology (Schapiro 1953), art criticism (Ackerman 1962) and many others but the concept is notoriously difficult to pin down (Bordas 2008: 14). However, one can nevertheless point to three recurring characteristics in the many uses of the concept: (1) style describes a form, a manner or a way of saying, doing or being, rather than a content; (2) style has a singularising function, making it possible, to identify repeated patterns whether it is for an individual or for a group; (3) style has an aesthetic dimension which includes but is not necessarily limited to artistic features. All three of these characteristics provide valuable insights when applied to a political phenomenon as slippery as populism, focusing on form, identifying repeated patterns while also acknowledging the aesthetic dimension of politics as central. However, one of the main benefits of seeing style through the lens of these three characteristics is that it goes beyond equating style and form itself. Style can hence be seen as a specific use of form which singularises those it characterises.

Furthermore, the concept of style has the unique ability of capturing the tension between collective patterns and individual practice. Indeed, style is both used on an individual level, to refer to the idiosyncratic characteristics of a singular person or piece of art, and on a collective level, to highlight shared patterns uniting a group of otherwise disparate elements. Each style therefore has a 'capacity for individualisation' (Bordas, 2008: 220) which means that, within it, individuals will adapt the 'constant forms' (Schapiro 1953: 287) of a style through their personal lens, developing their own style within a larger style. This is for instance how we can speak of the 'Magritte style' as part of the Surrealist style. When applied to the case at hands, the flexibility of the concept of style does not only identify a wider populist style, based on shared patterns and tropes, it also provides a lens to understand the way it is appropriated by individual political actors through their idiosyncratic lens. In other words, political actors mobilising the populist style 'embody their own distinct characteristics, not only in terms of the ideologies adjunct to their populism but also in terms of the very "style" of populism each performed' (Venizelos 2023: 224). This hence allows us to distinguish the 'Trump style' from the 'Le Pen style' while acknowledging their shared features.

All in all, the concept of style is compelling and intuitively accessible, particularly due to the multiplicity of its use. From fashion to architecture, music to everyday interactions, the pictural arts to writing, everybody is familiar with the word 'style' and has at the very least a vague idea of its meaning. Furthermore, the aesthetic dimension of style makes it particularly well-suited to capture understudied facets of politics like theatricality and performance. It hence makes the concept a fitting vessel for interdisciplinary research, providing a way to bridge political science with communication and performance

studies. While a concept like logic is an excellent fit for pure political theory, style brings attention to the concrete and embodied nature of politics, connecting abstract discussions about aesthetics with the more grounded sociocultural elements of political performances. Finally, because the negative connotations of style might make some 'serious' theorists reluctant to adopt it, the choice to embrace it as a central locus of analysis is thus a provocation aimed at making these scholars question their prejudices vis-à-vis this stimulating concept.

Fleshing out Moffitt's approach

Even if many of the critiques for the stylistic stemmed from a limited understanding of style and its relevance, there are nevertheless changes to make in Moffitt's definition to adapt it to this ambitious conception of style. Especially coming from an interdisciplinary perspective, what is most striking with Moffitt's definition is that although he framed Hariman, Ankersmit and Pels as his main influences, there were several elements in his definition that did not originate from any of their works. The central concept of 'performance' first and foremost, but also that of 'repertoire', are both elements that Moffitt only very briefly discussed even though they constitute essential analytical units for his approach. On the one hand, he did acknowledge the influence of several broader academic movements, including 'the "constructivist turn" in studies of political representation [and] the "performative turn" in cultural sociology' (Moffitt 2016: 38), as well as that of major authors in the study of political performances, like Burke, Goffman, Austin, and Butler. On the other hand, he remained surprisingly vague about their influence and the specific meaning he attributed to the concepts he deployed. And while Hariman, Ankersmit and Pels's works are discussed at length, the rich literature on political performance, a concept that is nevertheless central to his work, is only referenced in passing in a quick list of names referred to as 'various antecedents' (Moffitt 2016: 38), rather than as major influences. It was for instance surprising that Tilly (2006), a likely inspiration for his concept of repertoire, was relegated to a minor reference representing the 'turn towards social action in political sociology' (Moffitt 2016: 38). These imprecisions remain particularly puzzling, standing in contradiction with his overt aspiration to make his theoretical perspective as detailed and transparent as possible to bring more depth to the ill-defined concept of style. This is the basis of my main criticism of Moffitt's approach: although substantially more sophisticated than earlier uses of political style, major analytical gaps remain, which not only open him up to the very criticism of vagueness he sought to avoid, but also hinder the full potential of the stylistic approach.

Such a criticism can also be addressed to the specific sub-categories Moffitt highlighted as components of the populist style. By analysing twenty-eight cases of politicians typically categorised as populists in the literature,

Moffitt inductively suggested a set of three core elements: (1) 'An appeal to "the people" versus "the elite"; (2) "Bad manners"; (3) Performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (Moffitt 2016: 45). Although they are innovative, these categories remain disconnected from one another and more generally from the main definition of a political style he himself coined. More than that, their links remain under-theorised and conceptually inconsistent: these features simultaneously include discursive framing ('appeal to "the people" versus "the elite"'), sociocultural practices ('bad manners'), and performative construction ('performance of crisis') which were all different analytical categories without developing the way they are connected.

Indeed, only the third feature – performances of crisis, breakdown, or threat – directly refers to the notion of embodied performances that is central in his understanding of political style, whereas the phrasing of the other two categories remains much more ambiguous. The concepts of 'appeal' and 'bad manners' for instance is never explicitly defined in relation to that of performance. Another issue with 'bad manners' is its lack of clarity regarding what 'manners' precisely means, especially since the concept is typically used in quotation marks, perhaps to prevent the risk of appearing moralistic when talking about manners as 'bad'. The choice to describe it as 'a coarsening of rhetoric and a disregard for 'appropriate' modes of acting in the political realm' (Moffitt 2017: 44) insufficiently details what this category includes specifically, making it overly reliant on anecdotal examples, and thus somewhat descriptive.

Finally, whether it is 'appeal' or 'manners', these two concepts lack connection to the broader notion of a repertoire and clarifications about their nature. Are they compounds of various political performances or something else entirely? Overall, although their identification and juxtaposition are undoubtedly innovative, Moffitt's three features are insufficiently defined and connected to his definition of political style, lacking the theoretical elaboration to make them more than descriptive tools to identify populism in action. This main flaw is notably due to the superficial use of the concepts drawn from performance studies, most notably that of performance which was taken for granted and never defined. Indeed, while Moffitt's efforts to draw inspiration beyond the specialist literature on populism are laudable, introducing for example concepts drawn from political communication, and political theory, I argue that he does not go far enough in this hybridisation and remains constrained by the boundaries of political science. This is where this book seeks to make an intervention in fleshing out the stylistic approach by engaging with a major disciplinary influence that Moffitt overlooked despite being present throughout his work: performance studies.

Beyond Politics: The Legacy of Performance Studies

I argue in this book that a more sustained interdisciplinary engagement with performance studies can solve many of the limitations raised above. Whether

intended or not, the influence of performance studies is latent in Moffitt's approach, which provides this book with an opportunity to simultaneously fill the gaps in his approach and incorporate the legacy of performance studies to the stylistic definition of populism.

Performance studies was born from the need to analyse human performances beyond the ritualised structure of theatre. Since its emergence in the 1980s through the work of authors like Taylor (2003), Schechner (2013) and Fischer-Lichte (2008), performance studies has developed beyond theatre studies as an independent academic discipline with a growing influence on other parts of academia, leading to what has been called a 'performative turn' in social sciences (Giesen 2006) and humanities (Domanska 2007). Synthesising and shedding new lights on a range of concepts coming from not only theatre but also sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, gender studies, communication studies and philosophy among others, performance studies is an openly and proudly interdisciplinary field. Its strength is built on two major concepts whose analytical influence explains its appeal and success as a discipline: performance and performativity. These concepts, which were sometimes explicitly mobilised in Moffitt's promising approach lacked a definition, which is the purpose of the following sections.

Populism and performance

Going back to the very root of the concept, a 'performance implies any action that is conducted with the intention of being to some degree witnessed by another' (Rowe 2013: 8), what Schechner (2013: 28) succinctly called 'showing doing'. In other words, a performance is an action characterised by two necessary conditions: relationality, that is the presence of two people engaging in a social interaction, and reflexivity, that is the awareness that an interaction takes place and has meaning (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 4). Although the concept has historically been associated with the context of theatre, such a broad definition encompasses a much larger set of phenomena. Indeed, 'performance is a very inclusive notion of action; theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualisation in animal behaviour (including humans) through performances in everyday life . . . to rites, ceremonies and performances of large-scale theatrical events' (Schechner 1977: 1). Another important difference must be drawn between whether something 'is performance' or can be analysed 'as performance', a distinction notably suggested by Taylor (2003: 3) and Schechner (2013: 38). In the former case, something 'is' a performance if and only if the social context and norms consider that it is, which is for instance the case of a theatrical performance. On the other hand, the latter definition constitutes a much broader frame since any situation implying an actor and an audience can be studied 'as performance'. According to Taylor (2003: 3), more than the core concept of the discipline, 'performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyse events *as* performance'.

More specifically, politics can be productively studied as performance: every aspect of political life involves a performance of some sort. From official ceremonies organised by a government to the protests of its opponents, from the public process of legislation in parliament to the storytelling surrounding the private life of politicians, from the campaign speech of a candidate to the very choice of their clothing, performances are a fundamental feature of politics. Political performances are defined by Rai (2014a: 1–2) as 'performances that seek to communicate to an audience meaning-making related to state institutions, policies and discourses'. To put it differently, because 'politics is a social necessity that is evident at all levels of society, [political performance is] a brand of "showing doing" with some degree of political intent behind both the act and (potentially) the witnessing' (Rowe 2013: 11). While many scholars in politics have used theatre and performance as a mere metaphor (Parkinson 2015), a useful shortcut that immediately 'sets the stage' to develop their concepts through a frame that every reader intuitively understands, there has been in recent years a growing effort to develop an interdisciplinary perspective that combines political science with performance studies. The most developed and openly interdisciplinary work combining both disciplines was developed by Rai and Reinelt (2015) who, drawing inspiration from Burke's (1969) *Grammar of Motives*, encouraged scholars from both disciplines to study what they called a 'grammar of politics and performance'. Starting from the premise that politics and performance are 'inter-related discursive and embodied practices' (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 4) sharing similar structural rules, they suggested that interdisciplinary collaboration would contribute to fleshing out a common grammar, by which they mean 'a set of recognisable rules or codifications that facilitate communication'. Such a grammar of politics and performance exists at the intersection of both disciplines but should not be seen as fixed entity since any grammar 'shifts and changes over time, and thus allows for a space to re-form and re-enact rules through everyday subversion of some codes and renegotiation of others' (Rai and Reinelt 2015: 2). It is also worth noting that their interdisciplinary endeavour was further expanded in an even more ambitious handbook on politics and performance (Gluhovic et al. 2021) which provides not only theoretical elaboration but a large array of empirical illustrations of interdisciplinary research.

Going back to Moffitt's work, his approach used quite extensively the vocabulary of theatre and performance, although he rarely provided a definition for the theatrical concepts that he mobilised. For example, the very structure of his 2016 monograph is organised around chapters successively called 'the performer', 'the audience' and 'the stage', to discuss respectively the populist leader, 'the people' and lastly crisis and the media. But while he does not openly acknowledge the influence of performance studies, it would be a mistake to conclude that Moffitt is part of these authors who only use the vocabulary of

theatre as a convenient metaphor. On the contrary, his approach went beyond superficial adoption by mobilising the tools and concepts of performance studies in a sincere manner, as more than just useful heuristic devices but as key concepts underpinning his own approach. While many scholars link drama and performance to superficiality, 'insincerity, strategizing, manipulation and spin' (Parkinson 2015: 19), Moffitt is sceptical about that stance and argues instead that 'this vocabulary captures the inherent theatricality of contemporary populism, while also bringing the mechanisms of populist representation into focus' (Moffitt 2016: 154). He even criticises scholars who treat political style as synonymous with 'rhetoric, communicative strategies or discourse' and claimed that such a view was incomplete without consideration for 'the performative, aesthetic and relational elements of contemporary populism' (ibid.: 4). In other words, the use of the conceptual toolbox of theatre and performance is not just for him an elegant choice of metaphor: these concepts are underpinning the ontological foundations of his model, hence placing it *de facto* in the lineage of Rai and Reinelt's (2015) grammar of politics and performance.

And even beyond the stylistic approach *stricto sensu*, this connection between populism and performance has in recent years received an increasing amount of attention from the scholarship on performance studies. Deploying an array of methods and empirical case studies that are unusual in the political science literature, this growing body of research showcases the potential and timeliness of such interdisciplinary interventions. For example, Marino (2018) explored the Bolivarian revolution of Venezuela through the lens of collective identification and popular power. Reinelt (2019) applied Laclau's framework to explore the way past movements fighting for racial justice like the Black Panthers inspired the populist aesthetic of Black Lives Matter. And in one of the most thought-provoking contributions of recent years, Rowe (2022) drew from the tools of applied theatre to examine the potential and pitfalls of populism in the digital age. Continuing the endeavour which we pursued in an edited volume on the performance of left-wing populism (Petrović Lotina and Aiolfi 2023), I hope that this book's interdisciplinary ambitions will encourage a more direct interaction between these two highly complementary literatures.

Populism and performativity

In addition to performance itself, one of the most fundamental concepts of performance studies is the notion of performativity. And although he extensively utilised the related adjective 'performative', often used interchangeably with 'performance', Moffitt surprisingly never defined performativity in spite of its centrality in his approach. While there is relative consensus around the meaning of performance, performativity is a much more contentious concept whose use and meaning have substantially evolved since its inception, which is perhaps why Moffitt chose not to offer a clear definition of the concept. Originally

coined by Austin (1962) within his theory of speech acts, the concept was used to explain the power of the utterance of words. Austin sees performativity as the effect of 'performatives', utterances that induce a change in reality, like a pledge or a promise, as opposed to 'constatives', statements that merely describe a specific situation. Austin's performativity is limited to a strict set of rules, described as the 'felicity conditions' which meant that the phenomena it covered was rather narrow. This led to an amendment of the concept by Searle (1969), who emphasised the importance of the actor's intentionality for performativity to operate. However, both of their definitions remain strongly attached to language, thus omitting any non-verbal elements in performativity seen as irrelevant, which explains why their definition is now described as a 'thin' definition of performativity restricted to linguistics.

'Thicker' accounts of performativity emerged through the work of post-structural authors who, following Derrida's emphasis on the citational and iterative nature of performativity, allowed the concept to be less reliant on words and drew more attention to the effects of actions in a more general sense. The most prominent example of such an understanding of performativity is found in Butler's (1988, 1990) work on gender in which she famously defined it as 'a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988: 519). Drawing inspiration from this 'thick' understanding, the way performativity is used in this work nonetheless differs from Butler's perspective as it focuses less on the structural determinants that shape the performing subject and highlights instead the ontological effects it establishes through performance. Rai's definition expresses this in her definition of performativity as 'a philosophical term . . . to mark the efficacy, success or failure of performance at achieving its intended effects' (Rai 2014a: 17). Put differently, 'where performance is an act . . . performativity is the enactment based on that act' (De Vries et al. 2014: 285), which hence implies that performativity is a 'mode through which ontological effects . . . are established.' (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007: 408). Understood this way, performance and performativity are symbiotically linked: performances constitute the site on which performativity comes into action while performativity expresses the ontological effects that performances create.

In Moffitt's approach, there are at least three major points that implicitly mobilised the concept of performativity. Drawing inspiration from Laclau (2005a: 103), when Moffitt argues that populism is the phenomenon through which the populist leader 'brings the subject known as "the people" into being through . . . performance' (Moffitt 2016: 24), he describes the people as a product of performativity, showing its centrality for his approach even though he does not explicitly use the word. This very same dynamic is also present when Moffitt mobilises Saward's (2010) concept of the representative claim that considers representation not as a fixed quality but as the product of the representative's performance. Finally, performativity is also central in Moffitt's (2015) discussion

of crisis, based on Hay's (1999) distinction between crisis and failure, as he argues that crisis needs to be symbolically mediated through the strategic performance of a political actor seeking to 'spectacularise' a failure.

All in all, the main argument made throughout this section is that, even if it has been scarcely mentioned in Moffitt's work, the stylistic approach to populism is intrinsically interdisciplinary, located at the productive junction of politics and performance. The central concepts of performance studies are not merely mobilised on the margins of the approach, they are central to its very logic and to its most innovative insights. This consequently highlights the relevance, and even the necessity, of an interdisciplinary perspective combining politics and performance to holistically assess the way populism works.

The Performative Clusters of the Populist Repertoire

Now that functional definitions of style, performance and performativity have been established as foundations for this revised version of the stylistic approach, the last part of this chapter will revisit Moffitt's conception of a political style and adapt the key features he associates with the populist style to improve their consistency and coherence. But before doing so, there is one more fundamental concept that was undertheorised in his work: that of repertoire. In his definition, Moffitt (2016: 38) described political styles as 'repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances', but it is surprising that its central component, the concept of repertoire, was neither defined nor developed, and barely referenced in his discussion of political style.

The archive and the repertoire

Indeed, the only acknowledged influence in his use of repertoire is Hariman's definition of political style, described as a 'set of rules for speech and conduct . . . informing practices of communication and display . . . operating through a repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions . . .' (Hariman 1995: 187). As one among several components of Hariman's definition, 'repertoire' remains underdeveloped as a concept, never explicitly defined, and limited to its rhetorical dimension. As discussed earlier, another potential influence for Moffitt's use of repertoire could be Tilly (2006), who he briefly referenced but without explicitly associating him to the concept. In his assessment of what he called 'contentious politics', Tilly argued that claim-making performances conglomerate into repertoires, using the concept in a way that is very reminiscent of the one made by Moffitt. However, Tilly's understanding of both concepts remained superficial as he admitted using both repertoires and performances as 'theatrical metaphors' (Tilly 2006: 34). While he argued that doing so 'calls attention to the clustered, learned, yet improvisational character of people's interactions' (Tilly 2006: 35), he did not share the common ontological stance of the stylistic approach in which

performances are more than mere metaphors but instead constitutive elements of a shared social reality.

To reconcile the useful concept of repertoire with the interdisciplinary framework of this work, I suggest instead to consider one of the most prominent contributions to the literature in performance studies developed by Taylor (2003). In a path-breaking book, Taylor discussed the productive tension between the archive and the repertoire, engaging with the question of how knowledge and memory are produced, reproduced, and transmitted. She described the two forms that it may take: either 'the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)' or the 'ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)' (Taylor 2003: 19). Challenging the preponderance of archives in Western epistemology, which favours written and discursive forms of knowledge, she made the case for reconsidering repertoires of embodied actions as valuable loci of human communication. While only written text matters from the perspective of the archive, re-introducing the notion of the repertoire enables the possibility to make sense of performances as more than just text in action and emphasises their intrinsic value in capturing a complementary aspect of social life that discourse alone fails to grasp. Conversely, 'part of what performance and performance studies allow us to do, then, is take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge' (Taylor 2003: 26). Going back to repertoire's etymology as 'treasury, inventory', she argued that one of the specificities of the concept is that it gives a more prominent role to individual agency by implying a 'finder, discoverer', and emphasises the fundamental importance of the 'presence' of individuals in creating and preserving 'acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge' (Taylor 2003: 20). However, the most relevant strength of Taylor's concept of the repertoire lies in its fluidity and flexibility. Although specific performances may disappear, their meaning and their intent take another life through the action of another performer and the concept of the repertoire captures this continuity:

> As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. Sports enthusiasts might claim that soccer has remained unchanged for the past hundred years, even though players and fans from different countries have appropriated the event in diverse ways. Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers (and even individual dancers) swear they're always the same. But even though the embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same. (Taylor 2003: 20)

Taylor's understanding of the concept can be very productively associated with the study of political styles, including the populist style. While keeping the core of the concept, I have decided to extend her concept by talking about repertoires in the plural form in the same way that Moffitt emphasised the plural dimension of political styles. This showcase that, beyond the repertoire as a principle, one can imagine a multiplicity of repertoires of embodied practices united by common principles and shared meanings. Such an adaptation of the concept of repertoire to the grammar of politics and performance captures how a certain way of doing politics maintains a continuity while being embodied by a multiplicity of potentially disconnected actors that perform in a myriad of different sociocultural contexts. Beyond Hariman's understanding of the word that was reduced to its rhetorical dimension and Tilly's metaphorical use of the term, incorporating Taylor's definition emphasises the open-ended and constantly evolving nature of political styles, whose shape constantly changes but that remain united through a common lineage of meaning-making. Using repertoire in this light, I concur with Moffitt's definition of a political style but reckon that it can be stripped down of redundancies by being simply described as *a repertoire of embodied performances*. To go back to the specific case at hand, populism is then one among a diversity of political styles, a way of doing politics whose characteristics are defined by the kind of performances within it.

From features to performative clusters

As a reminder of the discussion above, Moffitt inductively suggests a set of three core elements constituting the populist political style: (1) 'An appeal to "the people" versus "the elite"; (2) "Bad manners"; (3) Performance of crisis, breakdown or threat' (Moffitt 2016: 45). While these three concepts provide a strong foundation, I have argued above that these features are not only inconsistent with one another but also with the larger notion of a repertoire. More generally, their descriptive nature can be analytically refined by reframing them in the light of this chapter's discussion on performance. Thus, by adapting Moffitt's concepts through this lens, I argue that the populist style is based on three types of performances: (1) *performances of identity*, (2) *performances of transgression* and (3) *performances of crisis*. More precisely, I prefer referring to them as performative clusters, as the concept captures the proximity in meaning and purpose of performances within one specific cluster. Each of these categories are ideal types (Weber 1978: 6), which is an acknowledgement that, in practice, none of these types exist in a theoretically pure way. Indeed, any populist performance will typically incorporate elements from several, if not all, performative clusters at the same time.

As such, these performative clusters merely represent different facets of the populist style that do not individually stand for the whole repertoire

but whose specific combination of the three is constitutive of the populist style. Another caveat I wish to highlight is that the names of these clusters have been voluntarily left broad to keep the typology pithy, which means that they ought to be understood in the specific way that they are developed in the next section. Indeed, while one could for instance argue that every politician engages to some extent in performances of identity (Schechner 2013: 46), this work discusses a very specific way of articulating identity, both in terms of the representative and the represented. What is more, each of these are necessary but not sufficient components of the populist style. Mobilising the frame of the people vs the elite is a common trope used by all kinds of political actors, particularly during electoral campaigns. Likewise, transgressing the rules of politics is not an exclusively populist practice (Aiolfi 2022: 10) and the staging of crisis can be found in a wide range of circumstances (Hay 1995). In this typology, the populist repertoire is characterised by the simultaneous presence of all three of these performative clusters.

A related point to emphasise on this topic is that this approach does not seek to provide a definitive list of who is a populist and who is not. While some politicians arguably embody these characteristics to a nearly archetypical extent, I would like to reaffirm that the stylistic approach does not conceive of populism as a fixed binary dividing between populists and non-populists, but rather as a continuum along which political actors can adopt the populist style to a different extent. Although for some of them, populism may become a signature political style, others may only embrace the populist style for a specific occasion and for a limited time. As such, I want to insist that when I talk about ‘populist actor’ or ‘populist performer’, it should be understood as a convenient shortcut to describe actors who use the populist style.

In summary, such a typology of three performative clusters unites the disparate performances constitutive of populism in clusters. It also identifies their commonalities, while still allowing for analytical flexibility for the various performances whose features overlap with more than one category. More than this, defining these performative clusters as ideal types leaves the model open to change and accounts for the contingent and multifaceted nature of populist performances. In the next sub-sections, I then elaborate on the characteristics of each of the three aforementioned performative clusters, discussing what they encompass and how they relate to similar concepts in the literature.

Performances of identity

Performances of identity constitute the first and most fundamental performative cluster of populism. Identity is understood broadly as the social construction

of what makes a group or individual distinctive from others. Inspired by post-structural understandings of the concept, notably Derrida (1978) and Butler (1990), I adopt an anti-essentialist stance on identity, which does not refer to a form of pre-existing essence that would intrinsically characterise someone or something. Instead, identity is an unstable and relational concept that is 'always spatially, temporally and ethically situated' (Hansen 2013: 33) as well as performatively constructed. Because marking identity is a central function of performance (Schechner 2013: 46), performances of identity are arguably part of the repertoire of every politician.

However, the specificity of the populist style is that it is characterised by two interconnected ways of performing identity: one at the collective level and another at the individual level. Firstly, at the heart of the populist style is a performative claim (Saward 2010), that of representing 'the people'. As such, the first identity symbolically performed through populist performances is the collective construct of the people, which operates on the down/up axis highlighted by De Cleen (2017: 345). However, because performing identity is an eminently relational act, it always involves the mirror articulation of another construct whose negative characteristics act as a foil to these positive characteristics (Hansen 2013: 17). In the case of populism, this collective entity defined negatively is 'the elite', whose identity depends on the way 'the people' is constructed. Secondly, this collective claim to represent the people, and conversely challenge the elite, can be grounded into the embodied performance of an individual, the populist leader who treads the subtle tightrope between performing ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016: 52). Therefore, the third component of the 'triad of populist representation' (Casullo 2021: 77) is the individual performance of self as the leader. In other words, this cluster incorporates what Moffitt (2016: 46) calls 'the appeal to "the people" versus "the elite"', which is in effect a specific construction of the 'us against them' logic. But it emphasises the way this performance of two antagonistic collective identities is reflected within individual performances of self that mirror a similar antagonism between resembling the people and going above it.

As was described in the previous chapter, the opposition between people and elite constitutes the most minimal feature of populism. However, by emphasising the notion of antagonism, this cluster is particularly indebted to Laclau's work who famously described the way populist actors performatively articulate a dichotomic vision of society through what he called the 'antagonistic frontier' (2005a: 160). Going back to the question of the interaction between form and content, it is thus fundamental to consider the way ideological content shapes the blank slates of the people and the elite as empty signifiers. For instance, when considering who is included in the elite, a politician combining populism with socialism will focus on depicting the economic oligarchy, 'the wealthiest 1%', as part of this problematic elite. Such a choice widens their ideological

class struggle beyond the orthodox language of class essentialism (Moffitt 2020: 65). Conversely, politicians from the far right may include intellectuals, artists and people with a high cultural capital in their elite as part of their challenge to progressive politics. Likewise, when considering the articulation of the people, a left-wing politician using the populist style will frame it as an inclusive construct that is open to anyone who identifies with it (Katsambekis 2016; Markou 2017). Conversely, far-right politicians, like Trump or Le Pen, define the people in a more restrictive way, along ethnic–cultural lines which results in a further division of society into an in-group and an out-group (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 309). As a result, because this book focuses on the far right, it is important to not only consider who is included in the people, but also who is excluded from it. From this intersection between populist style and exclusionary nationalism, it is important to consider both the elite but also the excluded 'others', typically immigrants or minority groups, and see how these others are associated with the elite, as will be discussed in the third performative cluster.

In addition to the collective identities of the people and the elite, the final component of performing identity is that of the populist leader. To paraphrase De Beauvoir (1986) through Butler's reading of performativity: one is not born a populist leader, but rather becomes one. Indeed, in the process of articulating the antagonism between the people against the elite, a political actor is much more than an outsider merely acknowledging political facts, although they might claim or even genuinely believe that they are. Instead, they also perform their own identity as both a part and the voice of the people on behalf of which they speak. Indeed, through populist performances, a specific political actor performatively becomes a populist leader, even though the success of their representative claim remains in the hands of the audience (Saward 2010). As a result of this relational understanding of identity, while actors using the populist style performatively shape the people and the elite, embodying the former and distinguishing themselves from the latter, they are in turn shaped and co-constituted as populist leaders themselves.

But although populism is built around a representative claim to represent the people, its symbolic power does not rely on 'mirror representation' (Diehl 2017: 361), that is on accurately reflecting the people. Instead, the leader's performance of self is more accurately described as 'synecdochal representation' (Casullo 2021). Just like a synecdoche, whereby a part is used to describe a totality, this form of representation implies strategically choosing one part of self to represent the whole constituency, but also keeping other parts completely different from the represented to stand out from them. Put differently, the identity of the populist leader is developed through hybrid performances of self as both an ordinary member of the people and as an extraordinary individual embodying within themselves the unity of the people. This tension between performances of commonality conveying ordinariness and performances of singularity demonstrating

extraordinariness is a 'tightrope walk' (Moffitt 2016: 52) for any performer. In doing so, the populist leader thus embodies the tension between people and elite, simultaneously performing proximity and distance with the people. I also want to point out that the 'paradoxical double address' of 'performing ordinariness ("I am like you and understand your concerns") alongside extraordinariness ("I am an exceptional and gifted leader")' (Drake and Higgins 2012: 381) is not exclusive to populism. Indeed, arguably every politician that reaches a certain level of celebrity and aspires to representative roles needs to address this tension. What is unique of the populist style is the core importance of this paradoxical injunction that constitutes the foundation of their claim to be different from other politicians. The use of the populist style makes this 'tightrope walk' particularly crucial and central for their legitimacy to use the repertoire of populism.

Consequently, in addition to capturing the collective performances of the people and the elite which are the central focus of the discursive tradition in populism research, this first cluster also engages with the performances of self of individual political actors in their synecdochal representation of the people. A particular angle through which this aspect can be productively captured is through the lens of gender which allows for a rich analysis of populist performances of self-identity and of the leader's own body. This point was notably made by Geva (2020: 7) who used the stylistic approach to make the thought-provoking point that populism is a 'gendered performative style structured by hegemonic masculinity and femininity'. On the one hand male populist actors emphasise their hyper-masculinity through for instance references to their sexual prowess or their physical aptitudes, while on the other hand female leaders portray what Mason (2010: 190) called a 'frontier femininity', a combination of traits associated with hegemonic masculinity (strength, toughness . . .) with others associated with hegemonic femininity (empathy, caring . . .).

Performances of transgression

Performances of transgression are performances where populist actors voluntarily break norms for a specific performative purpose, a concept that bears similarities with what has been described elsewhere as 'disruptive performances' (Sorensen 2020). Whereas the former cluster was particularly indebted to the Laclauian tradition in the study of populism, the main influence behind this second cluster is the sociocultural strand of the critical literature, most notably Ostiguy's (2009, 2017) work on populism as 'the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the "low"' (Ostiguy 2017: 84) and Moffitt's concept of 'bad manners' (2016: 58). However, this performative cluster is also where I depart most sharply from Moffitt's work by introducing more nuances to 'bad manners', challenging the idea that populist performances are only based on 'flaunting the low' and introducing a new interdisciplinary typology of transgressive performances (Aiolfi 2022).

The idea that populism is a transgressive style originally stems from Ostiguy's introduction of the high–low axis. Starting from the postulate that the traditional left–right axis was not sufficient to capture the diversity and the appeal of political actors, he introduced a complementary spatial axis placed orthogonally: the high–low axis. This new sociocultural axis broadly refers to 'ways of *being* and *acting* in politics, . . . ways of *relating* to people' (Ostiguy 2009: 5). To clarify this relatively vague first definition, Ostiguy specified that 'high and low are in many ways about private expressions in the public sphere, or if one prefers, the publicization of the private man' (Ostiguy 2017: 77). In a nutshell, the high is characterised by being polished, well-behaved, and educated. Conversely, the low is vulgar, coarse, and culturally popular. In other words, the 'high' represents the local standards for politicians which typically include a developed vocabulary, a sophisticated understanding of society and so on. On the other hand, the low is the attribute of populist actors who transgress the rules of the high. Moffitt incorporated this sociocultural low into his approach by calling it 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016: 57). Defined as 'a general disregard for appropriate ways of acting on the political stage' (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 392), 'bad manners' encompasses a wide spectrum of performances, 'including self-presentation, use of slang, political incorrectness, fashion or other displays of contempt for "usual" practices of "respectable" politics' (Moffitt 2016: 58).

However, while I could have simply adopted either concept, by naming this cluster 'performances of the low' or 'performances of bad manners', I chose not to when considering the purpose of the strategic mobilisation of the low. Moffitt emphasised that actors adopting the populist style 'simply seek to distance themselves from other political actors by acting quite *differently* to them' (Moffitt 2016: 60). This notion of differentiation is essential to grasp the effect produced by 'flaunting the low': more than a strategy to become more appealing in a disconnected and abstract way, its purpose is to become *more* appealing *than other politicians*, relying on the contrast created to perform a form of authenticity that others do not have. Indeed, political actors use these 'bad manners' to distance themselves from the norms of politics and appear more authentic than the stiff politicians tied to the high standards of the elites. However, while I agree with Ostiguy and Moffitt that borrowing from the low is a common, and perhaps the most obvious, way to performatively break the conventions of the political game, it is not the only possibility. Their perspective implies that every political norm belongs to the sociocultural high and, conversely, that the only way to break them is by 'flaunting the low'. I claim instead that a politician does not have to be rude or vulgar to appear different from others: they merely have to break a rule that separates them from others.

Building on that intuition, I developed the concept of transgression as an alternative to both 'flaunting of the low' and 'bad manners' (Aiolfi 2022).

Transgression is understood here in its broadest interpretation as the violation of a norm of political relevance, whether that norm is directly political, socio-cultural, ethical, legal and so on. As such, transgression is a versatile concept encompassing a multiplicity of disruptive practices. Because of the potentially endless number of transgressive performances emerging from such an open-ended definition of transgression, it is important to offer ways to distinguish them from one another to make the concept more palatable and applicable to empirical analysis. For this purpose, I have developed a typology of transgressive performances dividing them into three categories depending on what type of norms they are primarily breaking: (a) performances disrupting interactional norms; (b) performances disrupting rhetoric norms; and (c) performances disrupting theatrical norms. In short, interactional norms are about an actor's relationship with others, rhetoric norms are about the way actors express themselves, while theatrical norms are about the rules of the political game.

Of course, this distinction is to some extent arbitrary since these various levels of political performances do not stand in hermetic isolation and are all interconnected, complementary and even overlapping in practice. Lastly, an important caveat is the acknowledgement that the performative repertoire of transgression is *not* an exclusive feature of the populist style. Indeed, transgression is more generally a 'strategy for newcomers' and for 'marginal actors' (Braud 2012: 74). While many politicians using the populist style fall into either or both categories, they are not the only ones, which shows the importance to consider the three performative clusters not in isolation from one another but as complementary aspects of a multifaceted style.

Performances of crisis

Finally, performances of crisis constitute the third and last constitutive cluster of the populist repertoire. This type of performances completely turns upside-down the stance held by many scholars in the literature on populism who claim that 'some degree of crisis . . . is a necessary precondition for populism' (Laclau 2005a: 177) or that populism 'surges most strongly in contexts of crisis' (Roberts 1995: 113). Instead, Moffitt (2015) argued that populist actors themselves actively perform the image of a society in crisis to convince their audiences that they live in a turning point of history where their vote will change politics for the better (Taggart 2004: 282). The key difference that made his approach stand out in the literature is that it sees crisis as an *internal* component of populism, when mainstream approaches consider crisis as an *external* phenomenon, very often causally related to populism. Building on the criticism that the concept of crisis lacks clarity and definitional boundaries while also being itself a product of complex causality (Knight 1998), Moffitt offered a constructionist perspective on crisis. This shifts the way crisis is conceived from an objective and measurable phenomenon 'towards a view of crisis as a phenomenon that

can be experienced only through mediated performance, whereby a systemic failure is elevated to the level of perceived 'crisis" (Moffitt 2016: 118), a performative act described as the 'spectacularization of failure' (Moffitt 2015: 197).

Such an ontological shift acknowledges that there is not one single universal understanding of crisis that can be objectively defined, but rather a multiplicity of contingent phenomena linked to their cultural, social and political context which must be symbolically mediated, in other words framed, for them to emerge as a crisis. This definition thus emphasises the performative dimension of the concept of crisis in the sense that the very idea of crisis comes into being through the performances of a political actor to a specific audience. That is not to say that crises have no basis whatsoever and, to develop this idea, I use Hay's (1999) distinction between failure and crisis. In his influential work, he defines a systemic failure as 'an accumulation or condensation of contradictions' preventing a system from perpetuating itself, 'whether perceived or not', while a crisis is 'a condition in which a failure is identified and widely perceived, a condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated' (Hay 1999: 324).

However, while I generally follow this constructionist perspective on crisis, acknowledging that the performative construction of crisis constitutes one of the core elements of the populist style, I also agree with the criticism of Stavrakakis et al. (2018) who argued that the binary opposition between 'objectivist' and 'constructionist' scholars, between those who see crisis as external and objective and those who see crisis as internal and socially constructed, is reductive. Indeed, these two poles, which reflect the duality in Hay's (1995: 63) definition of crisis as both 'a moment of objective contradiction' and a 'subjective intervention', can be better understood by not opposing them but instead framing them as a dialectic, 'a political choreography [between] externality and internality' (Stavrakakis et al. 2018: 14). Although such a change in perspective may seem theoretically minor, it encourages more contextualisation of the performer of crisis within the wider society, considering how the internal articulations of crisis from an actor resonate with external systemic failures, but also their interaction with the crises embodied by other actors.

The main purpose of performing crisis is to produce a feeling of urgency. Indeed, because 'a failure does not automatically necessitate a demand to act with immediacy and decisiveness' (Moffitt 2016: 120), it is through the mediation of a political actor that will performatively construct the vision of a society which reached 'a crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck 2006: 358) that the perception of a crisis will emerge and imply an urgency to act and solve that crisis. To turn the crisis into 'a moment of decisive intervention' (Hay 1999: 323), actors using the populist style will thus 'spectacularise', to borrow Moffitt's (2016: 120) term, the failure of the system to foster an impetus to act promptly. One could argue that, since elections are for example always framed

as a decisive moment of choice for the electors to be mobilised meaningfully, performances that produce urgency belong more generally to the repertoire of all political actors. However, what characterises populism is the extreme to which these performances are brought: this facet of the populist style does not simply evoke the need for decisiveness, it mobilises the vital urge to act implied in the notion of crisis. As noted by Taggart (2004: 282), 'the idea of living at a turning point in history is an important one for populist ideas', which illustrates that, more than it just being a decisive choice, populist actors mobilise the concept of crisis as a 'situation that necessitates a vital decision that is seen as so significant and all-encompassing as to both change and delineate the course of history' (Moffitt 2016: 119).

When applying Moffitt's framework to crisis as performatively articulated, another important consideration to consider is the multiplicity of crises invoked by the political actors. Although he talked about crisis in the singular form, in practice, performing crisis is less about 'spectacularising' *one* specific failure than it is about incorporating a multiplicity of apparently disjointed failures into a wider narrative. This is precisely the point made by Laclau through concepts like the 'logic of equivalence' (Laclau 2005a: 78). Indeed, although these failures can involve a myriad of aspects in public life – like the economy, security, ecology, education and so on – politicians adopting the populist style combine these heterogeneous failures into a singular narrative of a multifaceted crisis of society. It is for this reason that I choose to adopt the terminology of 'crisis narrative' (Stavrakakis et al. 2018: 11) to acknowledge the internal complexity of these performances of crisis. Furthermore, considering the strong influence of the ideological content in determining the content of these crises, I argue that the populist crisis narrative of far-right politicians is characterised by the dual articulation of two sub-narratives of crisis. Mirroring the articulation between content and form, these two complementary narratives are (1) an exclusionary sub-narrative which blames the excluded 'others', typically immigrants in far-right politics, for causing the crisis and (2) an anti-establishment narrative of crisis which frames the elite as either actively conspiring to produce a crisis or complacent with the situation.

Embodiment and Political Actors

The last point that I would like to address in terms of theoretical framework is the choice to consider two political leaders as the central objects of analysis, and its implications in terms of agency and performance analysis. Given populism's contentious status, it is not surprising that scholars have chosen a wide variety of political actors to approach it: beyond political leaders, many have focused on parties, especially in large-scale quantitative studies (Norris and Inglehart 2019), while others have chosen to analyse populism through the lens of social and political movements (Aslanidis 2016b). These various

methodological decisions reflect the aforementioned debates in the literature about the nature of populism and choices derived from one's ontological stance regarding populism. The question of the role of the leader in populism is especially relevant because, even if there is a form of consensus in the literature which acknowledges that leaders are important, there are debates regarding how important the leader is and whether they are a necessary feature of populism.

In the context of the stylistic approach to populism used in this work, the choice to focus on political leaders is mainly grounded in the interdisciplinary framework of politics and performance. Indeed, to go back to the definition of a political style, populism is a repertoire of embodied performances which hence means that the notion of embodiment is central to this understanding of populism. To use Taylor's (2003) terminology, in contrast with other approaches to populism that take a more 'archival' perspective to research – focusing on texts and other enduring materials as bases for analysis – considering populism as a repertoire shifts the focus on the 'presence' of the performer that reproduces and perpetuates the repertoire. In this perspective, political leaders like Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, are the central actors of the populist repertoire. Although it is important to consider the wider context surrounding them – notably in terms of party, movements and supporters – to develop a holistic perspective of the performances, political actors thus remain the most fundamental unit of analysis. This comes with the limitation that the stylistic approach struggles to capture populism in the context of 'post-representative' political movements (Tormey 2015) with a more horizontal structuration and a desire to bypass representation like the *Occupy* movements or the *Gilets Jaunes* in France, which is where the strengths of the discursive scholarship best complement it.

In terms of performativity, this choice of the leader as the central unit of analysis is also coherent with the core dynamic of the stylistic approach which argues that both 'the people', 'the elite' and the leader are mutually constituted through performative effects. Focusing on the populist leader in this case does more than provide information about their personal identity, it also allows for an analysis of the kind of 'people' that they performatively articulate. In contrast with some approaches to performativity, like Butler's (1990) who emphasised the power of the wider social dynamics at play within a specific performance, the choice to approach performativity from a theatre and performance perspective reverses this stance ontologically and methodologically. Indeed, it instead highlights the agency of the actor in reproducing a specific repertoire which opens a discussion regarding the strategic purposes conveyed through social performances (Goffman 1959). However, it is important to stress that this does not equate to an assumption that societal constraints do not exist. Even in an actor-focused perspective, performers are far from free, but rather bound and shaped by the contingent norms of the context within

which they perform, which is why this approach focuses so much on the role of transgression in undermining, shifting or reproducing these rules.

There is one final point of departure from Moffitt's work that needs to be acknowledged. To account for the higher importance in populist performances of corporeal elements, that is performances revolving around the leader's body, than in mainstream politics, Moffitt argued that populist performances are radically different from other political performances. Building on Kantorowicz's (1957) discussion on the two bodies of the king in a monarchy, the 'body natural' (the physical body) and the 'body politic' (the transcendent body symbolising the unity of the people), he argued that populism is not merely focused on symbolic representation. Instead, just like totalitarianism (Lefort 1986), Moffitt claimed that populism 'can be read as an attempt to re-embody the body politic' so that 'the leader does not simply *represent* "the people", but is actually seen as *embodying* "the people"' (Moffitt 2016: 64). In other words, populist leaders for him are more than representatives of the people, they performatively *become* the people, like the king did in premodern forms of representation.

Peetz (2021) offered a strong challenge to this claim as she demonstrated that populist performances remain bound by the rules of symbolic representation as being audience-focused, relational and intensely personalised. Premodern embodiment of the body politic on the other hand is qualitatively different as it is 'literal, holistic, organic, and focused on those in power', as well as characterised by a 'depersonalization' to 'symbolize the immutability of the social order' (Peetz 2021: 566). She warned that framing populist performances as dissimilar to other modern forms of representation might blind us to 'the importance of embodiment as one of the repertoires of affective, metalingual engagement' (ibid.: 568) that is particularly prominent in populism due to its focus on the personalised performance of the leader. Therefore, without presenting populist performances as qualitatively different from those of other politicians, Peetz's argument further reinforces the need to examine populism as a form of political practice which particularly relies on embodiment. It thus provides another justification to methodologically analyse populism through the perspective of the political actors embodying it, which is precisely the focus of the following chapter.

Note

1. This monograph follows a collaborative article (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) which introduced the basis for the full approach and set its agenda. It is worth noting that Tormey later dissociated himself from Moffitt's stylistic approach and offered his own definition of populism as a *pharmakon* (Tormey 2018).

3

ANALYSING POLITICAL PERFORMANCES

After having developed the theoretical framework underpinning this book, I now turn to the methodological choices made to engage with Trump and Le Pen's embodiment of the populist style. I will first establish my choice of methods, which is a combination of critical thematic analysis (CTA) and an original tool I designed for this book: the Political Performance Analysis Protocol (PPAP). To explain why I developed this new method, I will discuss the limits of discourse analysis in capturing the non-verbal components of performances, and those of performance analysis in capturing political phenomena. I will then discuss the differences between social and artistic performances by engaging with the concept of authenticity. To design the PPAP, I hybridised Pavis's (2003) influential questionnaire for analysing performance with Alexander's (2006) typology of the various elements of performances. I will then discuss the four elements considered for my analysis: (1) background symbols and foreground scripts; (2) actors; (3) audience; (4) *mise-en-scène*. For each of them, I have developed a set of questions compiled in the PPAP, which will be written below and that can be found in a compiled version in Appendix I, available as an online resource. I then discuss the various types of political performances considered for this work, including speeches, debates, and advertisements, elaborating on their specificities and the rationale to study them. Finally, I will detail my selection of sources for the corpus of performances and explain how I will make references to them.

Methods

In this book, I emphasise the performative dimension of populism and its stylistic features, a choice that rests on the ontological choice to approach politics 'as performance' (Schechner 2013: 38). But more than a theoretical framing, performance is simultaneously 'the methodological lens' (Taylor 2003: 3) and the main unit of analysis for this work. This implies a necessity to adopt methods that are suited to the specific challenges of analysing political performances. For this purpose, I have chosen two complementary methods which I will describe below: CTA and performance analysis.

Critical thematic analysis

To grasp the three performative clusters of the populist style, I chose a type of methods that could deductively capture these clusters in action while remaining inductively open to theoretical change. For this purpose, the first method I have chosen to analyse political performances in Le Pen and Trump's campaigns is computer-assisted CTA. This is part of a wider tradition of qualitative research called thematic analysis, which Clarke and Braun (2017: 297) described as 'a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data'. What distinguishes thematic analysis from other forms of discourse analysis is its focus on themes, as 'patterns of meaning' emerging from a source. To summarise its strengths, thematic analysis is systematic, flexible and accessible. Most importantly for the context of this work, it is particularly well-suited for the comparative analysis of a corpus of varied sources as it looks 'across the dataset rather than within one case' (Rivas 2012: 367). However, because of the post-foundational epistemology of this work, I want to clarify that I more specifically used CTA, the critical strand of thematic research. It differentiates itself from more positivist forms of thematic analysis by adopting a post-structural perspective that engages with the contingent construction of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006: 85) and by 'considering how the patterned results are connected to larger social ideologies, linking frequency and forcefulness to the influence of dominant social discourses' (Lawless and Chen 2019: 4–5).

Just like other forms of analysis in the social sciences, there are two ways to conduct a CTA: inductively, beginning with a broad research question and letting the themes emerge organically from the sources, or deductively, beginning with a set of themes that emerge from the theory and letting them evolve in contact with the sources (Rivas 2012: 368). Because my book is theoretically driven, the type of thematic analysis I have conducted is deductive, starting with the three performative clusters of the populist style identified in the previous chapter (identity, transgression, and crisis). However, it is important to emphasise that analysis is never a one-way street, as the inductive and deductive qualifiers only describe

the start of the research. Even the most inductive analysis inevitably begins with theoretical *a priori* guiding the researcher, and deductive analysis goes deeper than blindly applying prior concepts to one's dataset. On the contrary, analysis is a dynamic process characterised by a constant back and forth between theory and empirics, a point which notably applies to thematic analysis (Williams and Moser 2019). In the case of this work, some example of this back-and-forth dynamic are the typology for transgressive performances and the sub-narratives of crisis which both emerged organically from the corpus.

To be more specific, the way CTA works is through the process of thematic coding (Rivas 2012), that is exploring the corpus and identifying codes, 'the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data' as well as the 'building blocks for themes' (Clarke and Braun 2017: 297). My thematic coding was conducted on NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). There are many advantages to CAQDAS as they can handle large corpuses of sources and make the coding more systematic and modifiable. Furthermore, they provide a large variety of functions through 'linking tools, coding tools, query tools, writing and annotation tools, as well as mapping and networking tools' (Hassan 2012: 173). More than a convenient alternative to traditional methods, these tools allow researchers to increase the precision and sophistication of their analysis, offering a way to highlight flaws in the coding system, showcase quantitative trends and provide comparative information about the corpus. However, although NVivo can process videos, its tools are primarily aimed at processing textual information. This was the main issue that I faced during my thematic analysis: although it provided crucial insights about the verbal component of my sources, CTA could not sufficiently grasp meaning-making emerging from non-textual factors like the staging of the performances, the visual elements mobilised by the performers, reactions from the audience and so on. This pushed me to explore alternatives to find a complementary method that could capture this crucial aspect of my cases.

Performance analysis

Thematic analysis, just like most types of discourse analysis, suffers from a logocentric bias, that is an excessive, and at times exclusive, focus on text. Of course, it is difficult to make generalisations about a methodology as diverse as discourse analysis, which has been adopted and adapted in all disciplines from the humanities and social sciences. More specifically, discourse means different things in each discipline, and there have been nearly as many definitions as there have been scholars using it. In an attempt to clarify this situation, Schiffrin et al. (2015: 1) argued that all definitions of discourse fall into three main categories: '(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes non-linguistic and non-specific instances of language'. The first definition is primarily used in linguistics, to

contrast discourse with other units of language like words, syllables, or morphemes. The second definition corresponds to the most traditional understanding of discourse as synonymous to language more generally. Although these definitions have proven invaluable to many scholarly works, they are intrinsically logocentric and discard from their focus anything beyond language. In contrast, the third type of definition of discourse extends its meaning beyond language, following the post-foundational theories of authors like Foucault (1972) or Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Laclau (2005a: 13) for instance described discourses as 'structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements'. However, even for scholars endorsing this extremely wide definition of discourse, the task of empirically engaging with the non-linguistic elements remains delicate as political theorists did not provide practical tools to do so. Even empirically minded scholars from the post-structural tradition like Hansen (2013: 192) confessed that discourse analysis struggles to capture the non-verbal components of discourse, which have been described as the 'fuzzy boundaries of discourse studies' (Roch 2019).

There have been many attempts to tackle that complex issue of how to approach social phenomena beyond language. For instance, scholars from critical discourse analysis have suggested to consider language, image, performance and so on, as 'semiotic modes' whose combination constitutes discourse (Van Leeuwen 2015). In this perspective, discourse is characterised by its 'multimodality', and discourse analysts should read all these dimensions semiotically, that is as signs. Others, like Luff and Heath (2015), have suggested that the solution to this issue lies in 'transcribing embodied action'. Inspired by ethnomethodology, this type of method thus offers sophisticated systems to turn extra-linguistic elements back into words, where they can be analysed. However, whether it is turning the non-verbal elements of discourse into semiotic modes or transcribing them, I argue that these approaches cannot adequately capture performances holistically. Indeed, while they provide stimulating avenues to explore body language or visual elements, their exclusive focus on non-verbal *signifiers* means that they fail to consider anything beyond semiotics and notably the wider context of a social interaction. For instance, they would not capture the dynamic relationship between performer or audience, the strategic agency of the actor or the sociocultural contingency of a political event. As such, they merely provide a useful but incomplete snapshot of social interactions because they only focus on signifiers without considering their dynamic nature as performances. In order to overcome this methodological impasse, I have thus chosen to turn to performance studies in addition and a complement to the literature in social sciences on interpretive and critical methodology.

There is an extraordinary diversity of methods used by scholars in performance studies, from archival work to practice as research and ethnography (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011). However, I have more specifically decided to

use and adapt performance analysis, one of the signature methods of performance studies, as the central method for my work and as an inductive complement to the deductive use of CTA. Just like discourse analysis in social sciences, there is hardly a unified and exhaustive definition of performance analysis. Stemming from the long tradition of literary and theatre criticism, the first academic attempts at developing a systematic account of performance analysis 'flirted with the technical vocabulary of semiotics' (Auslander 2004: 4) to bring a form of scientific rigour to the exercise, which came under heavy criticism (Pavis 2003: 13). Since then, although semiotics remains an important part of performance analysis, it has moved away from 'scientific' analysis towards a form of eclecticism (Counsell and Wolf 2005) that incorporates insights from a wide set of approaches including 'cultural anthropology, sociology, feminist theory, cultural and literary theory' (Auslander 2004: 4).

Among the various works on the topic, I chose to follow the footsteps of Pavis (2003), who produced one of the most practical accounts of performance analysis. He most notably developed a questionnaire (Pavis 1985: 208–12), which he updated several times until its latest iteration (Pavis 2003: 37–40), that provides a set of questions to engage with a performance. Even if Pavis's questionnaire is biased towards theatrical performances, its flexibility allows it to address many other types of artistic performances, as proven for instance by Auslander (2004) who adapted it to the analysis of music. However, although it applies well to artistic performances, Pavis's questionnaire cannot be directly used for social performances[1] as some of its questions and categories do not apply or function in the same way. For instance, Pavis emphasised the intentionality of dramaturgical choices, which are not as tightly controlled since there are no directors in social interactions. Likewise, although storytelling does play a role in politics for instance, social performances are not necessarily organised around a narrative structure. Finally, the actors and the audience do not play the same role that they do in artistic performances, which implies a need to edit or even remove some of the questions about them. In other words, the reason why Pavis's questionnaire does not apply is because there are major differences between artistic and social performances, which I will discuss in the following section.

From Artistic to Social Performances

Although I argued in the previous chapter that artistic and social performances can be both analysed 'as performances', they are substantially different yet interrelated phenomena. Indeed, they do share the minimal characteristics of a performance as 'any action conducted with the intention of being seen by someone else' (Rowe 2013: 8): relationality and reflexivity. Electoral politics even share many other crucial features with theatre: for instance, being based on pre-existing scripts, mobilising a combination of ideational and material elements, and typically

engaging with a wide audience. However, even though they are both forms of 'showing doing' (Schechner 2013: 28), the main divergence that is relevant for this work lies in the role of authenticity and artificiality. At a very fundamental level, artistic performances are based on the premise of a distinction between the artificial fiction and an authentic reality (Ringer 1998: 8).

More specifically, the time and space within which an artistic performance takes place diverge from the time and space of the 'real world' in which the audience is located. Bakhtin (1981: 84) expanded on this idea by introducing the concept of chronotope as 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in Literature'. That does not mean that artistic performances are disconnected from life. On the contrary, just like other forms of art, theatre does more than reflect life: it interrogates and challenges it. Without going too in-depth into the specificities of theatre, the power of artistic performances lies precisely in the materiality of the actor: 'The human body, the actor, is always *representational*: he will always remind the critic of the world beyond the stage' (Marranca 1981: 57). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that many contemporary artistic performances are actively seeking to blur these lines (Fischer-Lichte 2008) and some forms of performance art purposefully seek to make this distinction obsolete (Ward 2012).

However, the difference between the chronotope developed during a performance and the spatio-temporal context of the audience in 'real life' has many implications. Spectators of an artistic performance are presumed to be aware of the artificiality of the performance: they implicitly recognise that the actors are playing a role, they engage willingly in the experience knowing it will have a beginning and an end, they are potentially aware that the performance they will witness is mediated by a specific *mise-en-scène*, they know that events taking place during the performance are scripted and narrated, that a death or a feud on stage or on screen will not have 'real' consequences outside the performance. Even if, as mentioned above, avant-garde performances challenge these established boundaries, it is the very existence of these boundaries that create the specificities of artistic performances (Bataille 1986: 64).

On the other hand, social performances follow different rules. Because this distinction between reality and fiction is not present during social performances, authenticity takes a different meaning. In theatre, authenticity has been at the heart of crucial debates going back to the origin of the art form. To quote just two of the most famous examples, French philosopher Diderot (2000) wrote in the eighteenth century about the 'paradox of the actor', claiming that great actors are removed from the role they project. In complete opposition to this argument, Russian theatre practitioner Stanislavski (2013a, 2013b) developed in his famous system of method acting the notion that it was the actor's prime goal to find authenticity as they embody the character they are playing. However, while its use on the stage remains an open question (Schulze 2017),

authenticity is one of the fundamental purposes of social performances. As was eloquently described by Goffman (1959), because of the unescapable need for impression management during social interactions, human beings as social animals are in constant performance of self. This performance of self gets strategically adapted, consciously or not, depending on who they interact with. But because acting is associated with deceit and falsehood, social performers have the delicate task of maintaining the illusion that there is no distinction between their social role and a hypothetical 'true self'. This means that it would be a simplification to claim that this need for social performances to conceal their own artificiality is an inherent feature that is true regardless of context. On the contrary, the 'naturalism' of social performances is a contingent imperative of modern societies which are characterised by their 'antitheatrical prejudice' (Grobe 2020: 793–5).[2] However, that situation might evolve as audiences over the world are becoming increasingly media-savvy and reflexive about social performances, particularly on social media (Hogan 2010).

Regardless of its contingency, this imperative of naturalism means that performed authenticity becomes a particularly important stake for public figures like politicians (Miller 2001). Writing within the context of representative politics, Saward (2010: 69) for instance argues that 'ultimately, a defining feature of a good performance may be that it does not look like a performance at all'. He later adds that 'a part of the whole understanding of political performance is a performer's respect for the fact that audiences will not want to be overly conscious of, or be forced to reflect upon, their awareness that this is indeed a performance. All involved need to play along with the idea that sincerity and authenticity outweigh the performative aspect' (ibid.: 176). Defending a similar line, Alexander (2010: 12) argues that 'because political performance succeeds only when it seems natural, it must not betray its own construction'.

Beyond the performances of public figures, the necessity of naturalism applies to all sorts of social performative constructs. One of its most prominent illustrations was developed in Butler's (1990: 179) discussion of the performativity of gender as 'a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions'. Elsewhere, Rai (2014a: 7) hinted at the effects of a performance feeling authentic as she argued that 'performances deemed to be authentic carry legitimacy and authority; performers give authenticity to performances through their assuredness, their conformity with the somatic norm, their sense of entitlement to the cultural landscape in which they perform, and therefore to the social relations they reflect.' Overall, in the context of societies shaped by 'antitheatrical prejudice' (Barish 1985), this shift from the acknowledged artificiality of artistic performances to the performed authenticity of social

performances implies that analysing the latter should adapt to this naturalistic imperative, seeking to unravel the very mechanisms that political performances aim to conceal.

Challenging the naturalism of social performances

This notion of performed authenticity as the purpose of social performances is central to the work of American sociologist Alexander (2006). In his approach of 'cultural pragmatics', he notably developed a detailed typology of the constitutive elements of social performances and how they interact with one another. He highlighted seven elements: background symbols, foreground scripts, actor, audience, *mise-en-scène*, material means of production and mediating powers. For him, because of the complexity and differentiation of individuals within contemporary societies, social performances are characterised by a segmentation of these elements that are 'de-fused' (Alexander 2006: 32). According to this view, the intrinsic purpose of social performances is to re-fuse the various segmented elements into a seamless whole. Put differently, 'performances in complex societies seek to overcome fragmentation by . . . achieving authenticity' (Alexander 2006: 56). Because not all social performances are seen as authentic, he then developed a spectrum of potentialities for performances that can go from re-fusion to de-fusion: 'to the degree they achieve *re-fusion*, social performances become convincing and effective – more ritual-like. To the degree that social performances remain *de-fused*, they seem artificial and contrived' (Alexander 2006: 32).

Even though his typology of the constitutive parts of social performances remains particularly useful, one needs to nuance the kind of universal and ahistorical perspective Alexander advocates, which notably rests on a problematic dichotomy between 'simple' and 'complex' societies but also fails to contextualise the contingent foundations of his model. Indeed, he does not acknowledge that the naturalism of fusion, which is to him the ultimate goal of any social performance, may not always be the gold standard. Just like Saward and Rai in the excerpts I showcased above, Alexander makes assumptions about the audience's desire to believe in the illusion of authenticity. Grobe (2020: 795) challenges the 'repressed theatricality of fusion', wondering 'just how credulous the public was – how widespread their desire for naturalism. It is now clear that Alexander was begging the question. He assumed that politicians would want "to make their image seem natural and their messages real". But fusion ain't the only game in town' (ibid.: 793). While Alexander (2010: 290) does acknowledge a 'new level of media reflexivity' and 'new self-consciousness about performativity' in the wider public, he attributes it to the fact 'that the elements of performance are more differentiated and de-fused'. However, it would be a limitation to judge the success of a social performance purely through the narrow lens of fusion, which implies a need to open analysis

to other more transgressive modes of performing that do not even seek to be naturalistic (Day and Wedderburn 2022), as will be discussed in the case of Trump's theatrical transgressions in Chapter VI.

Adapting performance analysis to political performances

Even though I depart from the strict focus on fusion of Alexander's model, his typology of the constitutive elements of social performances remained incredibly useful to conduct a holistic analysis of political performances. Etymologically speaking, 'analysis' stems from the combination in Ancient Greek of '*ἀναλύω' (analúō)*, which means 'unravelling', and the suffix '-σις' (-sis) for 'the process of'. This etymological origin, which includes at its root the idea of cutting apart, led Pavis to the conclusion that the term 'performance analysis' was 'not the most felicitous' in the sense that it implies a '"butchered" effect – a *mise-en-pièces*' (Pavis 2003: 8), which will inevitably translate into the analysis. Such an 'atomisation' (Pavis 2003: 21) of the performance into minimal units runs the risk of dismantling the dynamic of the performance, downplaying the interactions between its various constitutive elements and losing sight of the 'bigger picture' at the heart of the performance. This was the major criticism I levelled against other methods of non-verbal analysis like multimodality (Van Leeuwen 2015) or transcription (Luff and Heath 2015). Methodologically speaking, it is then important as an analyst to work against the pitfall of *mise-en-pièces* by adopting a holistic approach. This pragmatically means being mindful of not analysing any element individually but instead constantly seeking to highlight their interconnection and interdependence, while also analysing the performance as a *gestalt*, a whole that is more than just the superposition of its parts. In this regard, the PPAP follows the principle that Pavis (2003: 17) called 'vectorization', 'associating and connecting signs that form parts of networks, within which each sign only has meaning through the dynamic that it relates to other signs'. This means the constitutive questions discussed below are designed in a way that enables the analyst to turn each political performance into a dynamic network of 'weblike threads' (ibid.) that resonate with one another, including some redundancy and call-backs to the other components.

Building on this discussion about the differences between artistic and social performances, and in the absence of a direct alternative to Pavis's (2003) questionnaire that would apply to social performances,[3] I have chosen to design an original protocol inspired by Alexander's (2006) work that could apply to political performances. For this purpose, I will engage with four of the constitutive elements of social performances, following but also adapting Alexander's typology. Even if Alexander's framework provides the foundation for the PPAP, his work had a more general purpose, as it aspired to tackle all forms of social performances. Because of the focus of this book on populism as a *political*

phenomenon, it was thus necessary to adapt Alexander's insights on social performances to the specificities of political performances. Most specifically, his work insufficiently accounts for power dynamics and the mechanisms of political representation, which is why I have decided to complement it with Rai's *Political Performance Framework* (PPF) for analysing democratic politics (Rai 2014a) which assesses:

> How political actors – individual and institutional – harness material bodies, rituals and ceremonies, sounds and voices with great effort and labour to generate a political syntax that is both accepted and challenged by different audiences; and how the interactions between performance and its reception generate politics. (Rai 2014a: 3)

While I do not follow *stricto sensu* the categories of the PFF, the framework developed by Rai provides a critical perspective on the role of power and privilege within political performances. In addition to that, I also depart from Alexander through the choice to focus on only four elements of performance, which I believe are the most salient of his typology: symbols and scripts, actor, audience and *mise-en-scène*. I will discuss in depth each of these components, and then emulate Pavis's methods by providing a set of questions that reflect each of the aspects mentioned. When taken together and compiled, these four sets of questions constitute my original tool for performance analysis, the *Political Performance Analysis Protocol* (PPAP), which can be found in Appendix I as on online resource. Even though the PPAP was designed for the purpose of better analysing the populist style, the questions within it are general enough that they could be applied to the analysis of any political performance in a democratic context. I modestly hope to fill a gap in the literature which was lacking a concrete tool to holistically analyse political performances.

Elements of Political Performances

Whether it is an artistic or a social one, approaching a performance holistically can easily become overwhelming for even the most prepared analyst. Beyond the textual dimension of the performance, whose own analysis is already a complex task, looking more broadly at the theatricality of the action adds a set of elements that are so interwoven within the performance that assessing their importance and role is challenging. Because performance analysis engages with the aesthetic dimension of the performance (Bleiker 2001), attention must be paid to acoustic, visual, and even kinetic elements that participate in the performance. All in all, in order not to get lost within an intricate web of irrelevant details, the strategy adopted here breaks down the various elements of a political performance into interconnected categories. The way Pavis (2003: 37–40) suggested doing this was through a questionnaire which would work

as a crucial tool for analysis. While the answers to each question do not always appear explicitly in the empirical results discussed in Chapters III, IV and VI, the filled forms of the PPAP for each of the performances provided a detailed account of their theatrical qualities and a large amount of inductive data that 'thickens' the overall analysis.

1. Background symbols and foreground scripts

In his work, while Alexander conceptually distinguished symbols and scripts as two different elements of social performances, he often conflated them within a broader category due to their symbiotic and deeply interdependent relationship (Alexander 2006: 33). For the purpose of the PPAP, I have thus chosen to follow his lead and consider both elements as two subparts of a larger whole.

Performances do not take place in a vacuum: they are located within a specific space and time, their textual component is shaped by the requirements of a specific language, and they tap into a specific set of social and cultural resources to transmit meaning. In other words, political performances are necessarily cultural since they are contingent and grounded in a wider culture that simultaneously shapes and limits the potential forms the performance may take. This is precisely what is understood by *collective background symbols*: the deep systemic sociocultural resources shared within a political community or, in Alexander's (2006: 58) words, 'the already established skein of collective representations that compose culture – the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws'. Rai (2014a: 8) emphasised the importance of these background symbols in shaping 'the mode of representation [of the performance], which is framed within recognisable cultural narratives and symbols'. These background symbols are extremely varied and can be drawn from a myriad of sources ranging from ancestral myths, oral traditions and historical accounts to more recent political ideologies, social trends, and popular culture.

Combined, these background symbols constitute the collective imaginary of a specific 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) where the performance takes place. With the widespread development of globalisation, however, few of these background symbols are strictly limited to the borders of one society, and while some are arguably global, their meaning necessarily remains articulated through the performance in a deeply localised way. In a post-structural sense, these are never static but rather in a dynamic and interconnected relationship with performances: background symbols shape performances but performances themselves have the potential, and sometimes the aspiration, to reshape these collective representations by introducing new symbols, subverting others, and undermining older ones. While the question of how background symbols are formed is way beyond the scope of this book, I wanted to emphasise this

situation of constant flux that allows culture to be more than a monolithic and immutable whole.

Foreground scripts are the point of connection between the background symbols and the contingency of the performance, a crucial element used by the performer and articulated through dramatic techniques to bring these collective symbols into the performance. I define *foreground scripts* as the immediate discursive component of the performance that imbues it with meaning, the textual referential that verbally articulates and condenses the substance and the action conveyed through the performance. Or, to put it differently, 'from within a broader universe of meanings, performers make conscious and unconscious choices about the paths they wish to take and the specific set of meanings they wish to project. These choices are the script – the action-oriented subset of background understandings' (Alexander 2006: 58). Unlike the usual definition they hold in artistic performances, scripts in political performances are not necessarily written in advance and planned, although some of them are. Scripts can indeed be codified by traditions, written by speechwriters or by the actors themselves. They can be meticulously learned and rehearsed: oath-taking ceremonies (Rai 2014b) for instance are perfect examples of this type of planned scripts where actors are supposed to precisely know their script. However, scripts can also emerge spontaneously, being improvised, and created on the spot, as well as having the potential to combine preparation and improvisation. Political speeches showcase this spectrum of possibilities, from politicians who use the constant assistance of a prompter to those who completely improvise their speech on stage.

Because of their textual component, foreground scripts are the part of the performance where discourse analysis and the literary dimension of semiotics can be applied most productively. Narrative techniques, like storytelling, foreshadowing and framing, as well as all forms of rhetorical devices – notably the semantic ones (hyperbole, allegory, metaphor, anaphora . . .) – are mobilised in the script. This makes them particularly central in the analysis and complex to unravel. Among them, an important particularity of the way performance analysis engages with text when contrasted with other forms of discourse analysis is the paramount importance given to narrative. Alexander mentioned a variety of dramatic techniques that scriptwriters use to impact the narrative of their script: 'cognitive simplification', whose purpose is to simplify the narrative create adhesion from the audience; 'time-space compression', whose aim is to create within the performance a stage-like chronotope; 'moral agonism', which implies framing the script as a fight between good and evil; and 'twisting and turning', which means breaking the linearity of the script by introducing twists and turns to keep the audience engaged (Alexander 2006: 59–63).

The interconnection between background symbols and foreground scripts implies a shift from the collective to the individual, from the general to the

specific. As developed earlier, background symbols are inherently collective, shared by a group of individuals that recognise them. By contrast, scripts are intrinsically specific, as their contingency means that they are completely dependent on the context in which they are produced. They moreover serve as a bridge between the deeper elements of a collective culture and the situated circumstances within which the audience is interacting with the actor. To go back to the earlier discussion on the imperative for naturalism, foreground scripts will only be seen as authentic by the audience if they convincingly mobilise background symbols that resonate with this audience, which is why it is crucial to consider both elements in interconnection.

To summarise this discussion, the questions for the PPAP pertaining to the background symbols and foreground scripts are the following:

1. What are the main background symbols evident during the performance?
2. Why have these background symbols been chosen? How do they relate to the spatio-temporal circumstances of the performance?
3. Who and what are these symbols associated with? The performer(s)? The audience? Others outside the performance?
4. What are the main themes and narratives developed in the script of the performance? How do they relate to the background symbols of the performance?
5. Is the script's narrative linear, variable or a type of hybrid?
6. What narrative and rhetorical devices are being used in the script? What is their role, and which are most prominent?
7. Was the script prepared in advance or improvised? If, in whole or part, it was written by the actor(s), how does that influence the performance?

2. Actor

Politics has always been embodied by flesh-and-blood individuals. Beyond texts, symbols and ideologies that remain abstract without human embodiment, what ties together political performances is the political actor (Peetz 2021). In his micro-sociological analysis, Goffman depicted how social life inevitably involves performing to manage the impressions made onto others. He concluded his ground-breaking first book by arguing that 'the very obligation and profitability of . . . being a socialised character forces us to be the sort of person who is practised in the ways of the stage' (Goffman 1959: 162). Politics is no exception to this statement, quite the opposite. Indeed, the idea that politics *is* theatre often seems intuitive, and even obvious to many scholars and political actors. Because 'political leadership is part theatre', Cronin (2008: 459) for example argued that 'most leaders, especially political leaders, more than they want to admit, need well-developed acting skills'.

A playwright himself, Miller (2001: 1–2) claimed that ‘political leaders everywhere have come to understand that to govern they must learn how to act’. In other words, politicians are not just actors in the metaphorical sense, but also in the theatrical one.

But where the presence of an actor in artistic performances is taken for granted, the aforementioned antitheatrical norm of naturalism means that actors in political performances must conceal their status as actors in order to appear authentic. While actors in theatre and movies play roles that are clearly distinct from their individuality, this distinction between public life and personal life is not as formally separated in social performances. This therefore means that politicians, like other celebrities, are forced to play their own role both in public and in their private life, which Goffman (1959: 66–87) conceptualised respectively as the ‘front stage’ and ‘backstage’. The absence of a formal ‘backstage’ in social life, especially in the visual age of social media, implies that political performers must downplay the differences between their social role or *persona*, and their private self. Furthermore, political actors in democratic settings ‘perform a role they often do occupy, but their ability to maintain their role incumbency is always in doubt; their legitimacy is subject to continuous scrutiny’ (Alexander 2006: 70).

Actors are at the heart of political performances: they are the embodied link between the audience on the one side, and the collective background symbols and foreground scripts on the other side. In relation to the audience, Alexander (2006: 55) argued that the aim of political actors is to create ‘the emotional connection of audience with actor and text [and] the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience’, which he respectively called psychological identification and cultural extension. This means that actors are arguably the most crucial element of political performing, the centre of the performance as they communicate the background symbols to the audience through their scripts.

In terms of empirical analysis, there is a wide range of elements to take into account and I chose to highlight three of these dimensions: acoustic, visual and kinetic. To start with this acoustic dimension, Pavis (2003: 131–40) drew attention for instance to the voice and the tone of the actor and advised to pay careful attention to diction, elocution, and intonations. Indeed, just like their theatrical peers, political actors have a significant control over the acoustic elements of their performance which is why public speaking training is so important early in their careers. In practice, this means that they can change its pace, intensity and rhythm for a variety of theatrical purposes. For example, choosing where to pause during a speech grants specific emphasis to certain elements of the script, speaking slowly and clearly can give an impression of control and *gravitas* whereas fast enumerations can produce a rushed feeling of intensity and urgency.

In addition to this acoustic dimension of acting, an analysis of the actor must also focus on a multitude of visual elements. These notably include facial expressions and the gaze of the actor, which is a key component in conveying explicit meaning as well as implicit undertones, from emotions like hope or surprise to subtle cues like sarcasm or uneasiness. Furthermore while the realism of political performances means that masks and make-up are less important than in artistic acting,[4] clothing is a crucial component of the actor's performance. While flamboyant costumes are also rarely used by political actors in a Western context,[5] there are subtler ways politicians can illustrate themselves through their clothing. For example, even in the most standard attire of a formal suit, the choice of the colour of the tie can represent political allegiance: red being typically worn by left-wing politicians and blue by right-wing politicians. Of course, these are not the only factors to consider, as some political actors see red as a symbol of power while politicians belonging to ecologist parties will favour green for its association with the environment. A more transgressive choice could be to wear informal clothing to bridge the distance with the audience. And even beyond these, one needs to consider the wider sociocultural norms like masculinity and femininity, social class, religion or ethnicity which are expressed through the choice of clothing and attire, which can also provide valuable insights.

Gender, as well as these other identity markers, also come into play through gestures and body language, another important component of the analysis of the actor (Pavis 2003: 65–88; Rai, 2014b). This kinetic, or kinaesthetic, dimension of acting is also important in a performance analysis. Just like facial expressions or gaze, movements of the body and postures convey meaning that is at times intended and at others unintended. Indeed, the way a political actor occupies space can provide information about their intention, their confidence and more generally their acting style. From the choice to sit down or move around the performance stage to the use of gestures as supplements or replacement of speech, there are countless minute kinetic details to consider when analysing a performance.

Interpreting the meaning behind these acoustic, visual and kinetic elements is a complex endeavour which has become the specialty of semiotics – the study of signs and symbols – as a fundamental component of performance analysis. Developed through the work of scholars in linguistics like Saussure (2011) and Barthes (1994), semiotics as an academic discipline seeks to explore meaning-making in human activities regardless of the medium employed to convey that meaning. Semiotics used to be *the* dominant method for performance studies, but recent reassessments of the method have highlighted its flaws (Lucy 2001) and undermined its hegemony. As a result, semiotics has become incorporated as a major yet not dominant tool within the performance analyst's toolbox. The subtleties of semiotics when it comes to analysing the actor lies in the

distinction between the intended and the unintended. While it is often impossible for the analyst to determine *ex ante* what was intended or not in a performance, it is important to incorporate both dimensions within the analysis and acknowledge the limitations in one's access to this information. Indeed, intended choices by the actor can be seen as part of the *mise-en-scène* of the performance, but unintended and more generally improvised actions also contribute to meaning-making conveyed to the audience.

One of the key functions of acting in performance is that of conveying emotions. Whether actors simulate them or tap into what Stanislavski (2013a: 177–208) famously called 'emotion memory' in his method acting, emotions are a fundamental part of the process of performance. Although they can be fostered by other factors pertaining to *mise-en-scène*, including for instance the use of music, the collective atmosphere developed within the audience (Solomon 2023) or the type of shots used in the case of edited performances, the performer has a central role when it comes to producing the affective component of a performance. The scholarship on affects and emotions is incredibly rich and sophisticated, crossing every discipline mobilised in this book, whether it is politics (Ahmed 2014; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014), performance studies (Phelan 2003; Tait 2021), or even research on populism itself (Eklundh 2019, 2020; Wodak 2020). As such, the PPAP does not claim to exhaustively address these questions, but instead encourages the analyst to consider which emotions are mobilised by the actors in a specific political performance, their purpose and to engage with this wealth of literature to explore them more at length.

A final dimension of the analysis of the actor is the concept of performative labour in relation to those of 'score' and 'underscore' of the performer. Using the polysemy of the word 'partition' in French, which both means a score in music and a division into parts, Pavis argued that, during a performance analysis, 'the actor is subjected to *partition* in two senses of the word; dissection into various zones (gestures, facial expression, voice, gaze, etc.), and reduction to a kind of musical score recording the signs he emits or that seem to be perceptible in him – or rather *on* him' (Pavis 2003: 96). This notion of score is borrowed from Stanislavski who considered it the desired outcome of a well-rehearsed performance:

> If one could retain every phase of the work of all participants in the production, one would obtain a sort of orchestral score for the entire play. Everyone involved would have to play the notes of their role very precisely. (Stanislavski 2013b: 319)

To break away from the superficiality of only looking at the external signs of the labour of the actor, the 'score' that results from the preparation, Pavis (2003: 97) also highlights the need to acknowledge the 'underscore', 'the sum of

situational factors . . . and of technical and artistic know-how on which the actor leans in order to realise his score'. This underscore includes notably the preparatory work, 'the years of training and acculturation' (Pavis 2003: 99), that the actor had to go through before the performance. This concept of 'underscore' mirrors that of performative labour developed by Rai (2014a: 7) in her PPF, through which she emphasised the work that had been put into the preparation of the performer. 'Learning to perform is of course also historically embedded and therefore social in character – training manuals and courses are one source of learning, but so is our *habitus*, our social and political histories' (Rai 2014a: 8). By addressing this aspect, she furthermore showcased the usually overlooked issue of the training costs of performing for actors, including their privileged or marginalised social position, which impacts the way they perform.[6] This more generally relates to what Bourdieu (2008) called the *habitus* of actors, that is the unconscious embodied habits and skills that result from one's cultural capital. Incorporating considerations about the actor's past, social status and training allows the analyst to go beyond the 'tip of the iceberg' of the performance. While the performance itself remains the centre of the analysis, reflecting beforehand on the actor's background, as I did in the introduction, grants a further layer of critical depth to our understanding of the performance and its context.

To summarise this discussion, the questions for the PPAP pertaining to the actors are the following:

8. Who are the main actor(s) in the performance? What social roles are they enacting? How do these roles relate to their *persona*?
9. What performative labour did the actor(s) carry out before this performance? Were they trained or did they have experience with acting or performing? How does this specific performance relate to the actor's underscore (habitus, privileges, background . . .)? How does this impact their performance?
10. How do the actor(s) speak? What information can be gathered from their voice, pitch and tone? Which intensity and rhythm are they using in the performance? How do these acoustic elements impact the broader performance?
11. How are the actor(s) dressed? What information can be gathered from their attire or accessories? Do they follow or depart from dress code standards? How do these visual factors impact the broader performance? How do other visual factors such as facial expression and gaze impact the broader performance?
12. How do the actor(s) move on stage? How do they occupy space? What information can be gathered from their gestures and body language? How do these kinetic factors impact the broader performance?

13. What are the main emotions conveyed in the acting of the performer(s)? What purpose do they serve in the broader performance?
14. Which of these elements are intended by the actor(s) and which are not? How does this affect the performance?

3. Audience

Every performance requires at its core two participants: an actor and a spectator. Since politics refers in its broadest sense to 'the affairs of the city', most political performances will be oriented towards a large number of people, an audience rather than simply an individual spectator. This apparently simple observation leads to several issues that have been at the heart of many debates in social sciences. As was mentioned earlier, the main issue in contemporary societies lies in the fact that 'audiences are not only separated from [the] performers but also are internally divided among themselves' (Alexander 2006: 75). This means in turn that there will be as many interpretations of any performance as there are members of the audience, leading to the thorny question of how to capture audience reception. Beyond the analyst, this issue also applies to the political actors themselves, who need to tailor their performance to the specific audience that they want to convince. Moreover, electoral politics add a further layer of complexity by introducing voters as another sub-division of the audience.

To clarify these issues, Saward's (2010) notion of the representative claim provides several key insights. His initial premise is that democratic politics are based on the concept of representation. But against established understandings of the concept that frames it as a static phenomenon granted on specific occasions (Pitkin 1967), he portrayed representation as a performative act, which he called a representative claim. These claims are extremely varied and can be made about a person or a group of people, but also about the 'essence' of a country, a region, about nature in general, future generations and even about members of other species. 'Moreover, all of these claims are directed to an audience, which might consist of a large or small, proximate or dispersed, or self-aware or disparate set of people' (Saward 2010: 38). In this sense, one needs to distinguish the audience, the group an actor speaks *to*, from the constituency, the group an actor speaks *for*. While these groups can (and typically do) overlap with each other, as is the case of many political performances taking place during electoral campaigns, it is important to distinguish them conceptually in the analysis. This stands in contrast with traditional theatrical performances, for which this distinction is not fundamental, but where the only audience that matters is physically present to watch the stage. By contrast, audiences for political performances go beyond physicality:

> Unlike a theatre audience, citizens or constituents are not necessarily present as audience; performances in political institutions are carried out

> for both the audience present – 'the empirically present listeners' – and the 'ghostly audiences' outside the spatial parameters of performance. (Rai 2014a: 10)

In addition to that first distinction between audience and constituency, one also needs to distinguish between *intended* and *actual* audiences and constituencies. On the one hand, the intended audience is the group of people to which the performer seeks to communicate, while the intended constituency is the group the performer claims to speak for, or in other words to represent. On the other hand, the actual audience is the group of people who are conscious of receiving the performance, while the actual constituency is 'the group whose members recognise the claim as being for and about them, who see their interests as being implicated in a claim' (Saward 2010: 50). To adapt Saward's terminology, the *intended* side of the audience/constituency is *actor-driven* – political actors intentionally choose before and during the performance who the performance is targeted to – while the *actual* side of the audience/constituency is *recipient-driven* – it is beyond the will and control of the political actor (Rancière 2008). Such a distinction mirrors closely the difference between the two complementary sides of a performance: production and reception.

Given the multiplicity of audiences for any political performance, engaging in depth with the reception side of performances poses challenges beyond the scope of this book. Indeed, entire academic subfields, like 'audience research' in cultural studies and sociology (Livingstone 1998) or 'audience reception' in media studies (Nightingale 2011), have been developed to address them. But it is important at this stage to specify the boundaries of this work as well as the limits of its methodology: the methods detailed throughout this chapter only engage with performance production, the actor-driven side of political performances. This, however, does not mean that the audience is not an important component of this performance analysis, but rather that questions asked about the audience are related to the production side of the performance, pertaining for instance to the way the type of audience affects the performance and how actors choose to represent their audience.

To bring clarity to the relationship between the representative claim and political performance, it is important to emphasise that 'representation is not something external to its performance, but is something largely generated *by* the making, the performing, of claims to be representative' (Saward 2010: 66). Seen in this light, representative claims are embedded within political performances and are thus performatively articulated through the performance. Furthermore, performativity also operates in the co-construction of the representative and the represented, a situation rooted in the aesthetic nature of the very concept of representation. Indeed, 'representation' similarly refers to a work of art that seeks to capture a certain aspect of reality, to represent it, just

as much as it refers to a claim by a political actor to talk in the name of a certain group of people. Ankersmit (2002b: 34) pushed the comparison further by arguing that there is an 'aesthetic gap' between representative and represented, just as there is one between a painting and the object it represents. Saward (2010: 74) endorsed this stance when he claimed that 'there is an indispensable aesthetic moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent. A representative – or someone making a representative claim – has necessarily to be creative. He or she has to mould, shape, and in one sense create that which is to be represented'.

Conversely, political actors making a representative claim shape their own image to fit the claim that they are making: a claim to be embodying a certain aspect of the constituency implies acting in a way that the intended audience will find convincing, thus reshaping the public identity of the actor accordingly. An implication of this goes back to the discussion in Chapter II on the performative nature of populism. 'The people' as an empty signifier can be assimilated in the case of populism to the concept of the intended constituency. This will be explored more in depth throughout Chapter IV but using the concept of representation as an aesthetic performance allows one to better understand the purpose of populist actors who make a series of representative claims to talk in the name of the people.

Each representative claim has a different intended audience and constituency, and of course a different actual audience and constituency in turn. In this sense, although there might be a physical audience to a political performance, there is no constituency 'out there' which pre-exists the performance. It is thus important to showcase which constituency is being represented performatively, in which way and what part of the audience is being excluded through this construction. Indeed, because of this inevitable aesthetic gap, representative claims only constitute a perspective, an angle, instead of 'truly accurate' depictions of the constituency. This further justifies the choice to focus on the actor-driven part of the audience: looking at the representative claims embedded in a political performance tells us more about the actor's aesthetic choices than about the actual constituency they claim to represent.

Building on this, the choice by a political actor to performatively 'render-present' (Derrida 2007: 106) a certain audience as the constituency underpins an implicit claim about another part of the audience which is *not* represented. Consequently, performance analysis should not only tackle what is the visible audience constructed by the actor, but also the invisible audience omitted from the representative claim. Saward talks about the partiality of representative claims and uses Spivak's (1988) concept of 'the subaltern' to argue that 'the subaltern can be produced, positioned and silenced through a process of representation' (Saward 2010: 78). Therefore, looking critically at the production process of political performances challenges the apparent neutrality of the audience and

highlights the deeper aesthetic issues pertaining to the 'distribution of the sensible' (*partage du sensible*) to use the terminology of Rancière (2004).

Finally, constituencies are not passive in this representation process. While 'the would-be constituencies addressed may accept, or indeed embrace, the constitution of their identities in amenable directions' (Saward 2010: 68), they can also resist, oppose, and even reject them. Rai (2014a: 9) discussed this issue of 'resistance to claim-making' by showcasing the multifaceted ways resistance can take place: disruptions of political proceedings, the subversion of hegemonic codes and narratives, feint ignorance of the performance and even humour are all ways through which a representative claim can be rejected (Smith and Brassett 2013). On the other side of the spectrum, Saward mentioned 'acceptance events' which can also take many forms. Most relevant to this work, 'some 'acceptance events' may be clear to participants and observers – a free and fair election with a reasonable turnout in the case of elective representation, for example.' (Saward 2010: 152).

Although this dimension is more relevant to works focused on the reception side of the performance, emphasising the active reaction of the audience remains important for production side analysis because it sheds light on the dialectical relationship between actor and audience. Going back to the more empirical aspect of that discussion, a live audience may react to a performance in very different ways, from warm enthusiasm to cold silence, and in turn shape the way the performer acts in reaction to this. It is thus important to incorporate that into the analysis.

To summarise this discussion, the questions for the PPAP pertaining to the audience are the following:

15. Who is the intended audience for the performance? If the performance makes a representative claim, who is its intended constituency? How are audience and constituency related?
16. How do the actors relate to the audience and to the constituency? Are they portraying themselves as 'one of them'? As distinct from them? How do they attempt to achieve that portrayal?
17. If a representative claim is being performatively made, how is the constituency portrayed by the actor(s)? What symbols and images are used to represent it?
18. Is there an invisible audience beyond the visible one? What is the impact of the performance's representation of this audience (is it silenced or granted agency)?
19. Is the performance taking place in front of a live audience? Is part of the audience physically present during the performance? If so, what is the impact of that presence on the broader performance?

4. Mise-en-scène

Last but not least, the fourth constitutive element of political performance examined in this work is the theatrical concept of *mise-en-scène*, a French expression which literally means 'putting into the stage/scene'. The *mise-en-scène* of a performance refers to the set of aesthetic and dramaturgical choices allowing the performance to take place in a specific time and place: 'the challenge of instantiating a scripted text' (Alexander 2006: 63) in unique circumstances. Pavis called it, 'the confrontation of text and performance' or more precisely the 'confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience' (Pavis 1988: 87). From the most general decisions about the way the actors engage with the audience to the most minute choices about the lighting of the stage, *mise-en-scène* covers a broad variety of elements.

In artistic performances, the *mise-en-scène* of a play or film is the work of a specific individual, the director, or team of individuals whose purpose is precisely to tailor the way discourse is set into motion. By contrast, political performances are typically not characterised by the external intervention of a distinct director in charge of the *mise-en-scène*. Instead, the choices of *mise-en-scène* in politics can be seen along a continuum where, on the one side, political actors personally take care of every single aspect of it or, on the other extreme, a situation where they delegate all these theatrical aspects to a team of advisers, coaches, consultants, and specialists. Alexander (2006: 64) highlighted this aspect when he argued that:

> For social dramas, in which scripts are attributed in a more contemporaneous and often retrospective way, *mise-en-scène* more likely is initiated within the act of performance itself. This coordination is triggered by the witting or unwitting sensibilities of collective actors, by the observing ego of the individual . . . or by suggestions from an actor's agents, advisers, advance men, or event planners.

That being said, and as will be later discussed, this is not always the case as several types of political performances also use a director. With the professionalisation of politics and the mediatic rise of the television as a popular tool for political communication, televised performances like political debates, or visual communication like advertisements, may involve an external director in charge of the key theatrical and cinematic decisions to complement the primary role of the political actors themselves. This is notably the case for instance in the French presidential debates (Félix 2017).

Several aspects of the *mise-en-scène* have already been discussed in the section on the actor: the style of acting, the types of gestures, the specific choices of clothing and make-up are all examples of elements of the *mise-en-scène*, as long as they are intended by the actors. But I have chosen to leave these in my

discussion on the actor because they can also include unintended elements that can be very insightful, most notably all forms of unexpected body language including facial expressions and gestures. Because it is extremely difficult for the analyst to be certain *ex ante* of which elements were controlled or not, I have chosen to incorporate them into the analysis of the actor rather than into that of the *mise-en-scène*. In other words, the *mise-en-scène* is the only purely actor-driven aspect of a performance, as it results directly from the explicit and implicit choices of the performer. In this sense, analysing it means paying specific attention to the strategic choices of the actor.

However, an important caveat to be considered for the analysis of political performances is that the actors and their team are rarely, if ever, in charge of *every* choice of *mise-en-scène*. Many political performances, like debates in electoral campaign or institutional ceremonies, follow rules that have been set by traditions or legal rules. As such, their organisational practicalities are only partially in the hands of the politicians. Instead, key strategic agency is granted to external actors, like a media corporation or an administrative institution. In most democratic countries for instance, the candidates must attend debates during major elections where they only have partial control over the layout of the room or the lighting of the stage, even if they do control parts of the *mise-en-scène*, namely all the choices pertaining to the actors themselves, like clothing and acting. These decisions to externalise part of the performances are made to ensure equality between the actors and to prevent biased choices that would favour one actor over the others. That being said, the distinction is not completely clear-cut either, since, in addition to these elements completely controlled by the actors, many apparently external choices of scenography – like the use of lecterns instead of a table and chairs, the temperature in the room or the background behind them – are open to negotiation between the performer and the external agent responsible for it. Although these choices may appear cosmetic, they are taken very seriously by the involved actors who seek to perform in an environment that is as favourable to the success of their performance as possible. Called, the 'pre-debate debate' by Schroeder (2016: 15), these negotiations are also important strategic elements that should be accounted for in the analysis.

This importance given to these negotiations also emphasises the role of scenography, a major subset of the *mise-en-scène* which can be defined as the art of creating performance environments. Scenography includes, among others, the aesthetic choices related to light and sound, as well as those made on props, on the acting space and on its layout. In terms of lighting for instance, performing with a natural light for instance implies choosing a specific angle that will not blind the audience looking at the actor or allow clear takes on camera if the performance is being recorded. It also means deciding which moment of the day is more propitious for the performance to take place, as the light at dusk,

dawn or noon will vary significantly. Choices of scenography are even more obvious when using artificial lights, during a rally for example, as there is more flexibility about the number of ways the performers' body will be made visible, using several spotlights to focus the attention on them if needed, or on the audience if interaction is planned. In terms of sound, the importance of rhythm and silence has already been discussed earlier, but these elements of pacing, as long as they are intended and controlled, are also part of the *mise-en-scène* as they influence audience reaction.

Another significant aspect of the scenography is the way the physical platform of the stage is being symbolically shaped for the performance. Beyond material considerations that ensure for example that the performer can be heard – which will affect the decision to use a microphone or the actor's natural voice – staging is crucial for the interaction with the audience. Using an elevated platform or podium in a rally creates a distance between the actor and the spectator. Conversely, town hall meetings encourage proximity between the performer and the audience since both are on level ground. The choice to perform a speech in the middle of a crowd instead of using the typical layout with a proscenium and a backstage may be made to emphasise the actor's proximity to the constituency that she claims to represent.

Another important part of *mise-en-scène* lies in the use of specific props and accessories as objects can play a very specific symbolic role when brought into the performance. They can even 'serve as iconic representations to help [the actors] dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent' (Alexander 2006: 36). To use one of the most influential definitions on the concept, icons are visual artefacts or images that are 'widely recognised and remembered, understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics' (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 27). Icons can emerge in a variety of ways, from photographs featured at the front of a newspaper to viral memes, and the *mise-en-scène* of a political performance can be one of them. Mahatma Gandhi provided a variety of examples of this concept of icons developed in performance. His choice for example to wear modest hand-made clothing came to be associated with his *persona* as a leader from the poorer parts of India. When asked after an audience at Buckingham Palace in 1931 if he felt underdressed, he answered that 'The king had on enough for both of us' (quoted in Brown and Fee 2008), a statement that cemented his attire as an iconic symbol of his fight for independence against British colonialism. Another prop he often used in public performances and photographs was his hand spinning wheel, which became another iconic representation of his political creed that it is 'the patriotic duty of every Indian to spin his own cotton and weave his own cloth' (ibid.). Both examples demonstrate how choices of *mise-en-scène* can serve larger symbolic purposes

by not only capturing the visual attention of the audience through these material objects, but also by tapping into the history of a culture or a movement.

Finally, considerations of *mise-en-scène* are especially relevant when it comes to video performances. Since they are shot in advance and produced by a team of specialists, they follow different rules of scenography than live performances. This brings them closer in nature to a film where many other factors should be accounted for. Music for instance, while being sometimes used during rallies and other official ceremonies, plays an even more central role in videoclips where it impacts the tonality as well as the rhythm of the performance. Editing and *montage* are other elements that distinguish video performances from live performances and specific attention should then be dedicated to the way the video is structured. In addition to these, the analysis of such performances also implies paying specific attention to cinematic techniques including the use of shots (long, close-ups, sequence, low-angle, aerial. . .), discussing their technicality as well as their symbolic purpose within the broader performance.

To summarise this discussion, the questions for the PPAP pertaining to the *mise-en-scène* are the following:

20. What are the key strategic and aesthetic decisions taken for this performance? What are their theatrical purposes?
21. Which aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are being controlled by the actors? Which ones are not? Which have been negotiated and by whom?
22. What is the scenography of the performance (scenic design, lighting, sound . . .)? How does it evolve throughout the performance?
23. What is the layout of the physical stage of the performance? How is it used?
24. What kind of props and accessories are being used on stage? For which purpose?
25. For video performances, what cinematic techniques are used, with regards to music and editing? How do they impact the performance?

Detailing the Methodological Process

Overall, CTA and the PPAP[7] are complementary methods in two main ways. On the one hand, CTA was used deductively by focusing primarily on the linguistic components of the performances studied. On the other hand, the PPAP was used inductively, focusing primarily on the extra-linguistic components of these sources. As such, they provide an interdisciplinary as well as a methodological balance that enhanced the depth of the analysis of my two case studies. To be more specific and transparent about the way the corpus was engaged with, the PPAP first provided the inductive foundation to get a detailed overview of each

performance. It was completed over repeated engagement with various live recordings of the performances found on YouTube, both during the viewing, to write down noteworthy elements, and after them, to summarise them. Following the first viewing, the transcript of each text was then inputted in NVivo and deductive coding began based on the three core clusters of the populist style – identity, transgression and crisis – which were each associated to a 'node' on the software. After a first layer of general coding along those overarching nodes was finished, I went back to the PPAP to identify more detailed patterns which resulted in the identification of sub-categories. Following this, these categories were converted into sub-nodes which allowed me to engage in a second round of more detailed coding, thus refining the general coding and occasionally adding new elements that had been omitted in the previous round. Finally, because some of the points developed in the PPAP, particularly when it came to non-textual elements like body language and scenography, were not properly captured by NVivo, I included these manually in the software and integrated them into the structure of the book. These patterns were repeated multiple times, moving from inductive to deductive analysis, all the way until the final drafting stage of the following three empirical chapters.

Types of Performances

Now that the concrete steps of the methods have been established, there is one last point I have yet to tackle to close this methodological chapter: the choice of sources from the presidential campaigns of Le Pen and Trump. Given that a political style is an open-ended repertoire of embodied political performances, analysing a repertoire evidently implies looking beyond one specific performance, or even one single type of performance otherwise the analysis will be of very limited relevance. But because this work does not claim to be exhaustive in tackling every single performance done by the two politicians during their campaign, I had to select the most relevant sources. Indeed, even within the relatively short period of a campaign, there was a plethora of performances available. To give an illustrative example using only one performance format, Trump held the staggering number of 323 rallies throughout his campaign, which makes the prospect of a 'thick' analysis of the entirety of them nigh impossible, time-consuming and of limited interest because of potentially redundant findings. Leaving this type of exhaustive research to quantitative research better suited to tackle this vast pool of data, my work will instead focus on three types of specific political performances to illustrate various aspects of the populist style: (1) Rallies; (2) Presidential debates; (3) Campaign advertisements.

Performances drastically change depending on whether they are scripted or improvised, who their audience is, what kind of media format they rely on, what affective, political, and even ceremonial role they play. I will discuss in the following section each of these three types of performances, developing

their main characteristics as well as addressing why they were chosen through a discussion of how they interact with the four constitutive elements of a performance discussed above.

1. Political rallies

Rallies are the most traditional form of political performances and by far the most frequent type of performances in both campaigns. As a subtype of political demonstration, one of the most important features of rallies is their live audience. In the democratic context of electoral campaigns, their main political purpose is to mobilise support and promote the election of a specific person or party. Just like concerts during the tour of an artist, rallies during a campaign are mass events characterised by a certain form of repetition. While there is variation from one rally to the next, they share a broadly similar content determined by the political agenda of the candidate as well as a rather established structure that is codified through customs and sometimes even law. Stripped to their core, rallies during a presidential campaign start with a speech given by the candidate, who may or may not be introduced by another speaker, and conclude as the speech ends, typically with some form of closing music to indicate the end of the performance.

To push the analogy with a music tour even further, just as concerts are events where fans come to see musicians they like, political rallies during modern election campaigns gather within their audience a majority of supporters, who seek to show support for their candidate as well as an opportunity for unmediated contact. This direct proximity of the rally should, however, be nuanced since rallies are typically characterised by a distinction between the audience space and the scene, with a boundary protected by security staff. As such, audience members rarely have an opportunity to speak directly with the politician, let alone share the stage with them. In addition to this, political rallies during a presidential campaign are heavily personalistic, particularly in the political context of France and the United States. While there may be other actors on stage, like introductory speakers or several audience members during the conclusion, there is only one main actor throughout the performance: the candidate, making rallies an ideal opportunity to analyse them in detail.

In addition to the presence of a supportive audience, it is fundamental to emphasise that rallies are also political events where the actor has a lot of agency in terms of the *mise-en-scène*, since they and their team can control most relevant details on matters of lighting, sound and music among others. As a result of this important level of control, they are a type of performance that is especially comfortable for the political actor, because this control of the situation and a mostly sympathetic audience provide a favourable environment for the performance.

Another main feature of political rallies is their heavy emphasis on text. Because speeches typically last more than an hour – sometimes much longer – there is a predominance of verbal communication throughout the performance.

One of the consequences of this relatively extended length is that in most cases, and at least in the cases of both Le Pen and Trump, the speech of the performer is scripted. Speeches are written in advance – often by a team of scriptwriters with potential input from the politician – and read from notes or a teleprompter. As such, they are close to written language, which implies a relatively higher level of language when compared to other political performances.[8] It is for this reason that rallies are especially relevant to the close analysis of script which, given that they are the most detailed opportunities for politicians to develop their ideas, will often be rhetorically richer than in other performances. This is supported by quantitative analysis of speeches that show more complex sentence structure and clearer articulation of key ideas (Biber and Conrad 2009; Wang and Liu 2018; Savoy 2018). Given the static aspect of the performance, rallies thus provide an opportunity to focus on language, engaging with the symbols mobilised and the central rhetorical devices used during a performance.

Finally, an important element to mention for the political rallies studied in this book is that they were all live recorded, and thus televised or at least accessible to a wide audience. This means that, in addition to the primary audience that is physically present to the performance, a larger secondary audience could access the performance even after its end. Furthermore, because performances were filmed, it was important to consider cinematic choices made in terms of recording, like the type of shots and number of cameras used.

2. Presidential debates

Debates during presidential elections are codified rituals with many symbolic functions: the peaceful agonistic confrontation between opponents, an acceptance of public scrutiny from the entire constituency as well as a temporary truce to meet and speak with one another on neutral grounds, among others (Coleman 2000). In the contemporary context of the rise of direct and personalised forms of interaction through social media, presidential debates have become national events in both the United States and in France. Inaugurated by the debate between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 in the USA, the format of the televised debate has spread throughout the world. They were introduced in France during the 1974 election opposing Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand and became a staple of French political culture ever since.

In contrast with rallies, the *mise-en-scène* in debates is only partially controlled by each actor. Because of the formal rule of equity, they are only partly organised by the political actors and their teams. Indeed, not only are candidates limited by a need to agree with their rival about the modalities of the performance, they are also constrained by the control of a third party that guarantees the neutrality of the event. In the United States, debates have been sponsored and organised from 1976 to 1984 by the League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan civic group, and ever since by the bipartisan Commission

on Presidential Debates. In France, the organisation of the debate has been shared by TF1 and France 2, respectively the largest private and public television networks of the country. While some constraints are legally set, like the strict equality of speaking time in France, most of the staging choices remain open to negotiation between the two debaters, their teams, and the organising bodies (Schroeder 2016: 15).

Political actors during a debate are not the only ones on stage and must accommodate with the presence of other actors such as moderators, that chair the debate and set the terms of the discussion, or sometimes audience members, as is the case during debates using the 'town hall' format. In this setting, several members of the audience thus take, albeit to a limited extent, the role of 'spect-actor' (Boal 2005) by intervening in the performance through direct question to the candidates. It is important, however, to mention that the type and role of the audience differs depending on the debate. A live audience can either play the role of active participants – as is the case of town hall debates – of a reactive crowd – as it happened during many presidential debates where laughter and direct reactions are actively recorded – or of a silent crowd – as was for instance required for the first and third debates between Trump and Clinton. Often, a live audience may not even be present, which was the case during the debate between Le Pen and Macron, where the performance took place on a television set.

In addition to the varying role of a direct audience, because presidential debates are televised performances, they also appeal to a much larger indirect audience that can watch them on TV. It is thus crucial to consider technical decisions related to the cinematic techniques, most particularly which video shots are included and who supervises the direction of the performance. An often-debated topic between candidates involves for example the inclusion of reaction shots, that is shots of a candidate while their rival speaks, which can showcase unintended facial reactions, thus forcing both actors to constantly be on their guard.

One of the main differences between rallies and debates is the intended audience. While rallies are directed at a mostly supportive audience that is already convinced by the political arguments of the performer, presidential debates are directed at the nation, that is the whole constituency that candidates claim to represent. Even though debates are of course never watched by the entirety of the citizens of the country, they attract substantial viewership: 84 million viewers for the first Trump/Clinton debate and 16.5 million viewers for the Le Pen/Macron debate. This represents in both cases a fourth of the entire population of the respective countries, making these debates the most popular political event of both countries. This affects the actors who consequently perform in a way that is more likely to convince undecided voters of their representative claim and to affirm their presidential stature.

Furthermore, the script of the performers during a debate is affected by several other factors. Firstly, the antagonistic nature of the format of a debate,

which pits two politicians against each other, encourages confrontational speech with a double purpose of 'disqualification of the adversary' and 'self-qualification' (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2019: 76). Although debates in principle imply the idea of convincing one's rival, it would be a dangerous breach of character for the debaters to confess having changed their mind following the debate. As a result, the actual target of the debate that actors ought to convince are not their rival but the voters, which is why presidential debates are confrontational and arguably sterile. Secondly, despite the aforementioned need to appear presidential, actors also have to balance this with an imperative to not appear too distant and disconnected from the national audience. Consequently, and also partly because of the immediacy and oral nature of the exchanges between both performers, candidates typically adopt a lower level of language that is closer to a spoken register. Thirdly, due to time constraints and the need to be reactive to the unpredictability of the other politician's performance, the script in a debate is partly improvised. Although candidates now undergo extensive preparations for the debate (Schroeder 2016: 92), rehearsing with a team of professionals, memorising one-liners and so on, this never completely removes the unpredictable aspect of a debate. As opposed to the more controlled setting of a rally, the introduction of a degree of accountability and unpredictability is what makes debates stand out from other political performances. Fourthly, in contrast with the static and uninterrupted nature of speeches during a rally, gestures, facial expressions, and body language play a more prominent role during presidential debates, especially given the possibility of unintended reactions from either performer.

Debates are therefore a good way to understand how an actor responds to disagreement, handles pressure, and finds a balance between assertiveness and diplomacy. Indeed, in conditions that are much more stressful and confrontational, it is the unpredictable nature of the performance that makes presidential debates such a popular spectacle for a large audience, as well as a worthwhile choice for analysis.

3. Political advertisements

Finally, political advertisements constitute the third type of political performances analysed in this book. In our visual age, advertising has become a crucial way for candidates to criticise their opponents, show how much better their policies are or a combination of both, which respectively corresponds to 'attack', 'advocacy' and 'contrast' following an influential typology in political communication (Jamieson et. al. 2000). Advertisements also differ from the earlier two types of political performances because they are recorded and shot in advance instead of being live performances.

Because of their format as a hybrid performance which combines both political message and aesthetic production, political advertisements are unique

opportunities for political actors to interact with their audience at a distance. This artistic dimension is especially visible in the way the production works: using the cinematic techniques of moviemaking, advertisements are constructed through an aesthetic and technical process of montage. Modern debates sometimes make use of a director whose role is to ensure that the video recording of the event goes smoothly as well as to choose the best shots and camera angles to provide the audience with the clearest viewing experience. However, political advertisements take it a step further through the use of a dedicated team of specialists, including at the very least a director, a camera operator, a sound engineer and an editor. The performance also needs to be worked through successive stages, first a shoot if the actor appears within it, potentially a voice-over, the addition of background music and then video editing. All in all, political advertisements functionally operate like a movie and thus should be analysed by taking this specificity into account. As a result, to a much more pronounced extent than debates and rallies, political advertisements are artistic products that rely much more heavily on the non-verbal component of performance, like acoustic and visual elements. While this does not mean that there is no textual dimension to political advertisements, which is rarely the case, this rather suggests that text loses its primacy and allows for other signifiers to contribute more evenly to meaning-making. Consequently, this also makes semiotics particularly relevant to the analysis of these specific performances which heavily rely on symbols and non-textual messages.

Another specificity of the format is that the actors in a political advertisement are aestheticised in a way that provides a different perspective about them than in other political performances. This allows them to specifically choose the way they want to be perceived by their audience, emphasising specific characteristics while downplaying others to strategically construct an image that produces a better impression than usual. Just like rallies, advertisements offer full control to the actors in terms of both script and *mise-en-scène*. Even more so than for rallies, every potential detail of the performance can be controlled and adapted to produce the exact effect wanted by the actors and their team, an aspect also influenced by its short format.

They are, however, closer to presidential debates in terms of the audience that these advertisements are targeted at. While some of them in the United States are only strategically targeted at a limited audience, like the citizens living in a specific swing state, most advertisements in a presidential campaign are designed with the purpose of reaching the entire constituency. This means that they aim to convince undecided voters rather than preaching to the choir (Fallis 2017). Although their popularity is not easily comparable to that of debates that are one-time events, these advertisements have the advantage of being made with the intent of being replayed, whether it is as part of commercial breaks on television or as online videos available on streaming websites.

In terms of script, the very short length of political advertisements contrasts with previous types of performances. Because rallies enable an extensive exposition of a politician's agenda through speeches and because face-to-face debates give both politicians the time to develop their perspective, they usually last at least an hour. By contrast, the length of an advertisement must remain short and fast-paced to convey most of its information succinctly. It aims to introduce the candidate and must hence catch the attention of the viewer quickly, which means that it cannot hope to be as exhaustive and in-depth as a speech. To adjust to these time constraints, the script of an advertisement thus needs to be simultaneously concise, straightforward and impactful. As a complement to the visual and acoustic elements mentioned above, this makes storytelling an especially strong stylistic device allowing advertisements to convey a narrative in an efficient way. Although there is an argument to be made about the loss of relevance of televised advertisements in the age of social media,[9] the omnipresence of visuality in the internet culture (Wise and Koskela 2016) makes advertisements a form of content that is perfectly adapted to the medium since they are both short, visually impactful as well as easy to share and to access. Overall, their aesthetic dimension, enhanced through their visual and cinematic aspect, makes advertisements a fascinating object of study for a performance analysis and the perfect illustration to practically address the 'visual turn' in populism studies (Moffitt 2022). Table 3.1 visually summarises the relationship between elements and types of performances as described in the previous section.

Table 3.1 Interactions between elements and types of performances

PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS/TYPES	RALLIES	PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES	ADVERTISEMENTS
SYMBOLS & SCRIPTS	Mostly scripted Long and exhaustive Emphasis on text Close to written language Prominence of rhetorical devices	Partly improvised Long and reactive Confrontational Unpredictability Close to oral language	Fully scripted Short and concise Emphasis on non-textual aspects Prominence of narratives
ACTORS	Unique performer Central role Mostly static	Several performers Shared centrality Stronger importance of body language	Unique performer Central role Dramatisation and aestheticisation of the performer
AUDIENCE	Live audience Targeted at supporters	(Live audience) Targeted at whole constituency	No live audience Targeted at whole constituency
MISE-EN-SCENE	Strong control Importance of theatrical choices	Partial control Negotiated	Full control Importance of cinematic techniques

These three types of performances are far from the only political performances that take place during a presidential campaign. Many others – including radio and televised interviews, group debates, press statements, visits of symbolic locations and so on – can provide valuable insights to the analysis of political style. More recently, the spectacular rise in prominence of social media, like X (formerly known as Twitter) or YouTube, has allowed the emergence of new forms of performances. In relation to my specific case study, Trump's tweets constitute a notorious example of a feature of his political style that deserves more attention (Ott 2017; McDonnell and Wheeler 2019).

However, studying social media in general, or Twitter/X in particular, had major downsides which justify my choice not to engage with them. Firstly, the extreme quantity of output in Trump's case would have made the comparison with Le Pen completely unbalanced, given that her usage of Twitter was comparatively limited. Secondly, while publishing a post or a tweet online undoubtedly counts as a form of performance, their primarily textual nature would have stood out from the other types of performances studied in this book, as their theatricality remained extremely limited and the PPAP would have offered little more than other specialised methods, if not less.[10] Thirdly, and in an extension of the former two points, studying social media posts would have required a complete overhaul of my methodology, as studying an overwhelming amount of textual data would have been much more suited to quantitative content analysis. For these reasons, I have chosen not to engage with Trump's Twitter profile, although I recognise this as a limitation of this work.

Corpus Selection

The research project which this book synthesises included the analysis of a wide range of empirical data, including all the debates attended by each politician, every advertisement video produced by their campaign team, as well as a sample of around twenty rallies for each candidate towards small and large audiences alike. However, I have chosen for this book to only focus on a limited corpus of key examples for each type of political performance. This was done with the purpose to present the empirical results with more clarity, limiting the repetition of very similar occurrences and anecdotal examples as well as providing a 'thick description' (Geertz 2008) of the political performances analysed. In the corpus I present, I have thus selected one representative example from each of the two campaigns for each type of performance.

The only exceptions to that were presidential debates, for which I included every performance available. Given that in France, there is only one debate which takes place in between the first and second round of the election, I had no choice but to engage with the debate between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron. In the United States, there were in total three debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the first and third sharing a similar traditional format with

the French debate, and the second following the 'town hall' format. My rationale for using all three of Trump's debates and not one is that the debate in France was much longer – more than two hours and a half in total – than the debates in the USA – which lasted around one hour each. As such, analysing three debates for Trump was a way to get a much longer sample of analysis that was closer to the time Le Pen had to debate. Moreover, although I considered ignoring the second debate as its 'town hall' format made it an outlier in my corpus and had no similar equivalent in France, its theatrical and performative specificities made it particularly worthy of inclusion, if only to understand how a change of format impacts a performance. As such, even if it did not perfectly fit with my comparative endeavour, its unique features convinced me to keep it in the corpus.

For rallies, I chose to focus exclusively on one rally for each politician which was most representative of their campaign as a whole. To avoid cherry-picking a rally that would fit my theoretical framework, I selected in both cases a major rally with an extensive speech covering all the central recurring themes of their campaigns: security, immigration, economy, identity, and terrorism. To further select one rally among the larger sample of rallies fitting these broad criteria, particularly in Trump's case, I introduced another criterion for selection: the proximity to election day, which allowed me to compare speeches produced during a similar context of electoral urgency.

Finally, the choice of the political advertisement was the easiest to do as Le Pen only produced one national advertisement prior to the first round of the election which is the one I studied. Likewise, the advertisement I chose in Trump's case was the only one that was broadcast nationally and not only in the 'swing states'. As such, it was aimed more generally at the entire people, making it the only one actually suited for comparison.

As a result, here is the corpus of every political performance covered in this book:

A. *Le Pen Rally*: Campaign speech for the 'grand meeting' at the Zénith of Paris (17/04/17)
B. *Trump Rally*: Campaign speech for the rally at Sun Country Airlines Hangar in Minneapolis, MN (13/10/16)
C. *Le Pen Debate*: Televised presidential debate between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron for the 2017 French presidential election, moderated by Nathalie Saint-Cricq of France 2 and Christophe Jakubyszyn of TF1 (03/05/17)
D. *Trump 1st Debate*: First presidential debate between Donald J. Trump and Hillary R. Clinton for the 2016 US presidential election, moderated by Lester Holt of NBC, in Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY (26/09/16)
E. *Trump 2nd Debate*: Second presidential debate between Donald J. Trump and Hillary R. Clinton for the 2016 US presidential election,

moderated by Martha Raddatz of ABC and Anderson Cooper of CNN, in Washington University, Saint Louis, MO (09/10/16)

F. *Trump 3rd Debate*: Third presidential debate between Donald J. Trump and Hillary R. Clinton for the 2016 US presidential election, moderated by Chris Wallace of Fox News, in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV (19/10/16)

G. *Le Pen Advertisement*: Official campaign advertisement entitled 'Au nom du people', published by Marine Le Pen for the 2017 French presidential election (05/02/17)

H. *Trump Advertisement*: Official campaign advertisement entitled 'Donald Trump's Argument for America', ran nationally by the Trump campaign for the 2016 US presidential election (04/11/16)

The full transcription of each political performance analysed in my corpus can be found on an online repository hosted by Edinburgh University Press. Each of them is associated with a capital letter (from A to H). In-text citations from the corpus are thus made through references to that letter and the specific page where the quote is found, for instance (C: xii) to refer to the twelfth page of the third performance of the corpus, in this case the televised debate between Le Pen and Macron.

Notes

1. Political performances, as they were defined in the previous chapter, are a subset of the larger concept of social performances.
2. This notion of an antitheatrical prejudice in contemporary societies has been a rich debate, in performance studies and beyond, for decades. For a historical perspective and detailed account on the topic, see the highly influential eponymous book by Jonas Barish (1985).
3. This does not mean that scholars in performance studies only engage with artistic performances. On the contrary, it is precisely the openness to all forms of performances 'beyond the stage' (Marranca 1981: 58) that distinguishes performance studies from theatre studies and dramatics. However, I could not find a direct equivalent to Pavis's type of analysis adapted to social performances.
4. Going back to the discussion on the antitheatrical prejudice, the necessity to aim for verisimilitude prevents the more extravagant choices of make-up from being legitimate options, thus encouraging naturalistic and minimalistic choices. Of course, this is a norm, and some political actors may voluntarily break it, as will be discussed in the discussion on transgression.
5. The rationale is the same as for make-up. Flamboyant apparel would be too stylized, or camp, and as such would excessively emphasise the artificiality of the performance. But conversely, using camp clothing can be used precisely to emphasise the artificiality of a construct like gender, as shown by drag performers (Dodi 2021).

6. The specific connections between populism and privilege have remained underexplored in the literature. See the recent contribution by De Cleen and Ruiz Casado (2023) to examine the relevance of the concept for the study of populism.
7. A blank copy of the Political Performance Analysis Protocol can be found for reference and further use in an online repository hosted by Edinburgh University Press.
8. An important caveat to this claim is that once they are alone on stage, the political actors regain more agency, being far from their advisers, and are free to follow the script or improvise. In the 2016 campaign, Trump was notorious for his long and improvised rants which typically doubled the length of the script that his team had sent to the press.
9. It is for instance notable that the Trump campaign had one of the lowest outputs of advertisements for a US presidential candidate ever, which reflects Trump's strategy to rely on social media.
10. Analysing posts from a more visually driven social media like Instagram would have perhaps been more adapted to the research I conducted, as was for instance done convincingly by Mendonça & Caetano (2021) on Jair Bolsonaro's Instagram profile. However, other forms of visual analysis (Bleiker 2018) would have been more fitted to it, and neither Le Pen nor Trump used Instagram as a major channel of communication, unlike other radical-right politicians like Bolsonaro or Matteo Salvini (Bracciale and Martella 2017).

4

PERFORMING IDENTITY

> '*The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated*.'
>
> Judith Butler – *Gender Trouble* (1990)

In this chapter, I focus on performances of identity. Broadly defined as the social construction of what makes a group or individual distinctive from others, the concept of identity I use in this chapter is influenced by post-structural thought (Derrida 1978; Butler 1990). What that implies is an anti-essentialist stance on identity, at odds with the idea of a pre-existing essence. Instead, identity is framed as an unstable and relational concept that is 'always spatially, temporally and ethically situated' (Hansen 2013: 33) as well as performatively constructed. Because it is contingent and uncertain, identity is characterised by its *aporia* (Campbell 1992: 144), a state of doubt and emptiness, which implies the need for an endless cycle of repeated performances that each seek to stabilise identity without ever achieving this permanently. In addition to the importance of instability and repetition as 'the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities' (Butler 1990: 42), the other fundamental aspect of the concept is its relationality. Indeed, the articulation of distinctive features for self inevitably involves the mirror articulation of another, which is contrastingly characterised by the absence of these features (Derrida 1978). As such, identity is about drawing a boundary between what is self and what is not. It

is hence ontologically produced through the simultaneous and complementary 'processes of linking and differentiation' (Hansen 2013: 17): linking disparate features into an apparently cohesive whole and differentiating oneself through the foil of the other(s) who do not share these characteristics.

Populist Performances of Identity

The centrality of performance and performativity in this articulation of identity is reflected in the works of scholars like Schechner (2013: 46) who described 'marking or changing identity' as one of the fundamental functions of performance. Extending this notion to the realm of politics, this therefore suggests that performing identity is arguably part of the performative repertoire of every political actor. However, what makes populist performances of identity different from others is that they simultaneously constitute two interconnected forms of identities: on the one hand, they present politics as an antagonistic opposition between the people and the elite (Laclau 2005a: 160); on the other hand, they ground this collective claim to represent the people against the elite into the embodied performance of an individual, the populist leader who must tread the delicate tightrope between performing ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016: 52). Of course, these populist performances of identity are defined here very generally but they are always adapted to the specific context of each individual case and are fleshed out in a diversity of ways by actors using the populist style as a medium for their political ideology. Whether it is the limits of 'the people', the choice of who is included in the antagonised elite or the myriad of ways a political actor performs their own identity, populist performances of identity constitute a blueprint for politicians willing to embrace it. It is a generic template for framing one's agenda through the antagonistic lens of a conflict between people and elite.

To develop more visually the way populist performances of identity operate, I offer a schematic representation (Figure 4.1) of the three co-constitutive elements performatively constructed in an embodied populist performance: the people, the elite and the leader, which constitute the 'triad of populist representation' (Casullo 2021: 77).[1] These elements are differentiated from one another depending on whether they rely on collective performances of identity coalescing a large group of individuals – like the elite and the people – or whether they are articulated as individual performances of self – as is the case for the identity of the populist leader. Furthermore, they can also be distinguished depending on whether they rely on performing *commonality* – like performances of the people – *particularity* – like performances of the elite – or a *hybrid* combination of both – as is the case for performances of self by the leader.

In this perspective, the people is articulated through collective performances of identity relying on commonality, emphasising shared traits between members of the group through what Laclau calls the logic of equivalence (Laclau

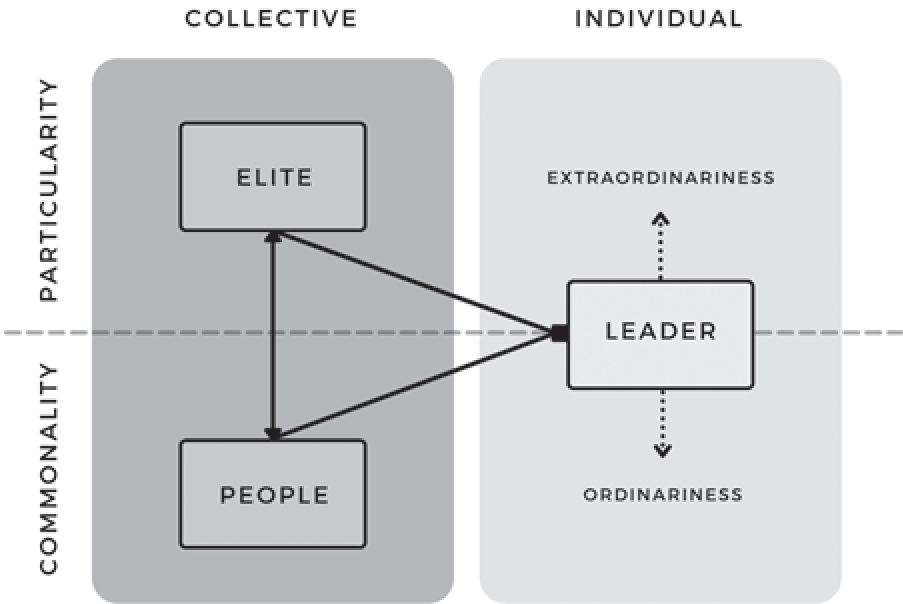

Figure 4.1 Populist performances of identity

2005a: 78). More generally this performance of the people relies on 'background symbols' (Alexander 2006: 58), that is the deep systemic sociocultural resources shared within the political community where the performance takes place. Placed in opposition and in an antagonistic relationship to the people, the elite is also constructed through collective performances of identity. But, following Laclau's logic of difference (Laclau 2005a: 78), its articulation emphasises particularity, that is characteristics that set this group apart from the rest of society. People and elite in the populist framework are thus in tension, which is represented here with a double arrow, co-constituting each other in reference to what the other is not.

The final piece in this puzzle that ties them all together is the role of the leader whose performance of self is hybrid, combining and balancing references to commonality and particularity. This hybridity is produced because of the need for populist leaders to simultaneously show their proximity with the people that they claim to represent and establish their legitimacy as a representative of the people. They both need to show that they are 'one of us' through references to commonality, while justifying their leadership position by making the case for their own exceptionality. Doing too much of the former would destabilise their role as the centralising point of identification for the people.

Doing too much of the latter would distance them from the people and associate them with the elite that they have sworn to fight. This tension between ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016: 52) is also represented here by a double arrow and justifies the position of the leader in between references to commonality and particularity.

Just like other political performances based on a representative claim (Saward 2010), the success of populist performances of identity is conditional to the acceptance of the represented audience and they can be embraced or rejected to various extents. This acceptance is complex to measure, but because of their 'formality, regularity, publicity and transparency' (ibid.: 85), elections in a democratic system constitute a strong test to those claims as well as a central source of legitimacy for the actors making these claims. Given the totalising ambition of representing 'the people', the stakes are extremely high for populist representative claims, which means they are most frequently mobilised within the context of nation-wide elections[2] like the presidential campaigns analysed. Given the complexity and detailed nature of each performance, this chapter will not attempt to be exhaustive in its coverage of every single facet of identity but will focus instead on the trends and tendencies that emerge from comparing the two performers across various types of performances.

Collective Performances of Identity: The People and the Elite

In populism studies, the antagonistic pairing of the people and the elite is the one characteristic of populism on which most scholars agree (Katsambekis 2020). Its nature is the subject of larger debates, but it is rare for authors on populism to completely omit these categories. Indeed, even the few authors whose definitions of populism do not explicitly include the components of people-centrism and anti-elitism, like Weyland (2017) or Ostiguy (2017), incorporate them in their discussions or use them as indirect frames of references. Laclau (2005a: 160) described populism as the articulation of a dichotomic vision of society, through the 'antagonistic frontier' that seeks to contest and reshape the current political he.

Through its construction as the point of convergence of unmet political demands, the people in populism is the locus where this unifying sense of commonality takes shape, offering a counter-hegemonic narrative of obfuscated agency with which isolated and powerless individuals can identify to restore their power. Conversely, the elite is constituted as the focal collective of powerful individuals embodying what is wrong with the authoritative structures of the political system, the part of a democracy that does not function properly and should be changed. As such, the people and the elite are mutually co-constituted as collective entities that are exclusive to one another, although they are deeply connected through a power asymmetry benefiting the elite at the expense of the people. But because these constructs remain hypothetical in this

abstract form, they are concretely given shape through the performances of the political actor that fills these collective signifiers with both implicit and explicit meaning, which is what the following analysis endeavours to do.

Performing the people

In the cases of Trump and Le Pen's presidential campaigns, the first striking element that emerges from the corpus is the vagueness surrounding the people as it is mobilised by the two performers. Especially considering the breadth of the corpus, explicit references to 'the people' remain relatively rare. Indeed, when looking for direct occurrences of the word 'people',[3] what appears is that both Le Pen and Trump use it around twenty times in total, across the corpus. There are even performances, like the first presidential debate, where Trump never made any reference to 'the people' while his rival Hillary Clinton used the expression more than him. What this demonstrates is that although these literal references to the people can serve as a starting point, a narrow analysis restricted to strict references to the term will not completely capture what is meant more broadly by the political actor. In consequence, I will first consider explicit references to the people in the corpus before extending my analysis to less explicit ways for both politicians to performatively articulate the people.

Literal references to the people: Superlatives and class rhetoric

When considering the exact occurrences of the people in Trump and Le Pen's discourse, there are two major elements to note. Firstly, they are significantly more frequent in scripted performances, like speeches and advertisements, than in the semi-improvised context of the debates. This is particularly obvious in the cases of the two political advertisements where literal references to 'the people' are featured prominently in the very beginning and ending of both ads. Le Pen talked about her 'love' for the 'impetuous and tenacious people' of France and concluded with the motto of her campaign, pledging to take power 'in the name of the people' (G: ii). Similarly, Trump began his advertisement with a textbook example of populist articulations of identity: 'our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt political establishment with a new government controlled by you, the American people'. He then ended the advertisement in a similarly archetypical populist way, arguing that 'the only people brave enough to vote out this corrupt establishment is you, the American people' (F: i). This choice of wording and editing for the advertisements, and to a lesser extent in the rallies with a scripted speech, is undoubtedly strategic. It highlights in both examples an awareness of the 'people-centric' frame that is not used spontaneously, otherwise it would feature in relatively equal measures in unscripted performances like debates, but instead tactically. Indeed, and particularly in the case of Trump where the mirror concept of the elite is frequently used in the same sentence as that of the people (B: i; F: i), this demonstrates that populism

was not as deeply rooted in their performances of identity than other signifiers that occupy a more central place.

Secondly, direct references to the people are also relevant when considering other concepts associated with it or used in its place. For Trump, two expressions appear prominently. The first one is the association of people with 'great' and 'greatest', as in the second debate where he said that 'we have to use our great people' (F: xxxii), using the ambiguity of meaning of the term to talk about 'the greatest people on Earth' (F: xxxv) to refer both to the American people in general and to a specific group of people (in this debate, the military, business people and so on). The use of superlatives and exaggeration has always been a signature characteristic of Trump's rhetoric, a feature that he openly acknowledged in his most famous autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*, arguing that people always 'want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 58). Hence, just as he used superlatives when talking about his businesses and properties, Trump also applied it to the American people, emphasising, however, that this greatness was partly lost and ought to be recovered, as is most obvious in his iconic motto and promise to 'Make America Great Again'. In contrast with superlatives, this feeling of loss and humiliation (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021) was most apparent in the other major semantic field associated with the people in Trump's performances: that of the despised people. In his rally, he included himself as part of 'the forgotten people, people that are so great, but the forgotten men and forgotten women' (B: vii). Making a reference to a quote Clinton used to describe Trump's voters, he furthermore reminded the audience of the second debate that 'she calls our people deplorable, a large group, and irredeemable' (E: xxvii), and generalised the condescendence of Clinton's remark as a sign of the disdain held by the political elite against his voters and himself. Reclaiming this insult of 'deplorable' was a way for Trump to use these anti-populist attacks transgressively. By depicting himself as the only one to acknowledge and even embrace this 'accursed part' (Bataille 1976: 17) of the people, he distanced himself from other politicians.

Le Pen used a similar strategy in the debate against Macron, using his own anti-populism to depict him as disconnected from the people. When he accused her of only attacking to 'dirty the image of others', Le Pen returned the jab by referencing various patronising comments Macron made during his campaign like 'calling the Gap workers illiterate', 'asking unemployed people to buy a suit' and 'calling the inhabitants of the North of France drunkards' (C: lxii). She then brought together these anecdotal comments and acted as if they applied to the entirety of her voters in the first round of the election: 'and what about the nine million voters [who chose me], that you tried to dirty during this second round? . . . There are millions of French people that you despised throughout this campaign with your insulting comments' (C: lxiii).

Even if the transgressive process of showing the distance between their rival and the people was the same, there were two noteworthy differences between Le Pen and Trump's depiction of the people. The first one is that when she talked about factory workers and unemployed people, Le Pen frequently framed the identity of the people using the lens of class, most specifically of the working class, through numerous references to poverty (A: x), precarious employees (A: iv), very small companies (A: x; C: iii–iv), and even economic redistribution which she called 'national solidarity' (A: iii; C: lxv). By contrast, Trump hardly made any reference to social class outside of a mention in his campaign advertisement. Instead, he exclusively focused on the perspective of companies instead of that of workers, as could be expected of a self-styled business leader. This choice for Le Pen to add this layer of class to her representation of the people can be traced back to her appropriation of what Alduy and Wahnich (2015: 54–55) called 'leftism', a specificity of her rhetoric at odds with the historic line of her party. Presenting her agenda as 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016), Le Pen adopted elements of left-wing rhetoric[4] to compete with the declining socialist party for the votes of the working class. This strategy, consistent with populism's antagonistic frame, was used on multiple occasions during the corpus, framing Macron as the condescending lackey of 'big business' (*'le grand patronat')*, 'booed by workers' (C: x) because he made 'unbridled globalisation' his 'mission statement' (A: viii). By contrast, she depicted herself as the defender of the poor who will not 'let the popular and middle-class toil, pay and make sacrifices' (A: x–xii) anymore.

The other main difference with Trump on this topic lies in her depiction of the people. In her rally, Le Pen's direct references to the people were overwhelmingly positive, emphasising associations with pride and power as can be seen in the following examples: 'This call coming from your chests is the call of the whole people, of our people. It is a scream of love, a scream of common sense that means France is ours' (A: ii); 'We the patriots, we walk purposefully, sure of the strength of the people' (A: xii). This relates to the other major association of concepts with the people for Le Pen, that is its linkage to the nation and to the fatherland ('*la patrie*'), systematically framed positively in the context of her nationalist discourse. Indeed, most references to the people in Le Pen's discourse were preceded or followed by mentions of either France directly or the French nation. Take the introduction of her advertisement where the reference to the people which was mentioned before should now be read in its larger context: 'I love France. I love with all my heart and soul this age-old nation which cannot be subdued and its impetuous and tenacious people' (G: ii). Likewise, the introduction of her speech began with an anaphora, one of Le Pen's favourite rhetorical devices, where Le Pen conflated people and nation as she argued that 'Sunday's [election] is historic. Historic for France. Historic for our people. Historic for our nation' (A: i). More rarely, Le Pen also

associated the people with the even more connoted concept of the fatherland (*la patrie*), as when she argued that her policies 'follow the same philosophy: love and protection of the French people, love of the fatherland' (A: xi).

These systematic associations demonstrate Le Pen's deep ideological commitment to nationalism (Alduy and Wahnich 2015: 66–73) which was even more explicitly apparent when Le Pen discussed the French identity: 'Being French is more than an administrative status, it implies a feeling of belonging and solidarity with the French people. Being French is an honour' (A: ix). For Le Pen, being part of the people means being French, or more precisely being part of the French nation that is united around 'our intimate parentage, our intangible legacy, our traditions, our beautiful language, our way of life, our conception of the world and of mankind, our values' (A: i). Thus, even if she framed herself as 'the candidate of the people', she remained first and foremost 'the candidate of France . . . of its culture, of its civilisation' (C: i).

It is important to acknowledge the crucial difference with Trump's use of the concepts of nation and fatherland, or more precisely its lack thereof. On the one hand, it is indisputable that Trump promoted a form of exclusionary nationalism in every performance of the corpus, discussing his protectionist policies of 'America First' (B: vi) through a glorification of the 'tremendous potential' (E: ii) of the US nation wasted by local elites, threatened by immigrants and abused by foreign countries that are 'stealing our companies and our jobs' (D: ii). But on the other hand, what emerged from the corpus is that Trump barely ever used the word 'nation', and never included close alternatives like 'fatherland' or 'motherland', preferring instead less ideologically connoted expressions like 'country' or simply 'America'.

I argue that this contrast is best understood when comparing Le Pen's deeply rooted ideology with what Kranish and Fisher (2017: 289) described as Trump's 'transactional' approach to politics, that is an opportunistic commitment to whatever political ideology best served his business interests. In his nineteenth book, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (Trump 2015), Trump attempted prior to the launch of his campaign to solidify his ideological stance and show that his days as a political agnostic were over, hiding the fact that his partisan allegiance never remained stable as Trump switched parties seven times between 1999 and 2012 alone. Comparing himself to Ronald Reagan, who also belonged to the Democratic party before committing to be a Republican, he claimed to be 'a conservative Republican with a big heart' arguing that he was 'by nature' a conservative person who 'didn't decide to become a Republican. That's who [he has] always been' (Trump 2015: 98). However, the comparative analysis from this corpus reveals that this ideological instability also translates into his political style and is particularly salient in his rhetoric which was much less consistent and focused on collective performances of identity (whether it was of the people or nation) than Le Pen's.

Indeed, not only were Le Pen's performances of identity a more prominent cluster in her use of the populist repertoire overall, but she also performed collective notions of the people or the nation nearly twice as much as Trump did. Conversely, and reflecting his experience with the hyper-personalistic format of reality television, notably through his role as the lead star of *The Apprentice* for fourteen seasons, Trump relied substantially more on individual performances of self as a leader than Le Pen did, as will be developed in the third section of this chapter.

Beyond the literal people: Nation, far right and the excluded 'others'

When considering the way these two politicians perform the people, it is important to widen the scope of analysis beyond strict mentions of the people to also include its underlying depictions, verbal or otherwise, that emerged through indirect references to associated terms, many of which were already mentioned above like 'France'/'United States', 'nation', 'fatherland' or even more generally the collective 'we'. The main tendency that emerged from this broader look at the corpus is the confirmation that Trump spent very little time explicitly associating himself with the people, instead focusing on creating distance between him and the other politicians, marking very forcefully his anti-establishment stance but not systematically building a symbolic or embodied connection with the American people. One of a few exceptions to this can be found in this noteworthy quote in the second debate: 'I see . . . the potential our country has, we have such tremendous potential' (E: ii). In addition to being one of the rare uses of the plural form of the first person in Trump's discourse, this sentence is also representative of his underlying vision of the American people as characterised by their great potential, their aspirations to become wealthy and their attachment to freedom. He also stresses that Americans are 'smart' (D: xiii) enough to know when they are being deceived. However, the flip side of this positive perspective is that Trump simultaneously framed the American people as hurt and weakened by years of 'stupid' leadership (B: iv, viii; F: xxxi), 'ripped off' by foreign countries (F: xii) and generally disregarded by other politicians.

Another salient element of the construction of the people in Trump's case was the way he isolated immigrants, particularly Mexican ones, from the people, speaking of 'bad hombres' (F: vi) that let 'drugs flow in like it's candy' (B: v). More than this, this far-right perspective that excluded immigrants from the people was clear in his way of addressing minorities. Undoubtedly, there were superficial efforts throughout his campaign to make his vision of the people appear inclusive. This strategy was obvious beyond the text in his choice to incorporate close-ups of people from various ethnic groups in the first seconds of his advertisement. But it was also apparent discursively in his boastful claim that he 'developed very, very good relationships over the last little while with the African American community' (D: xxiii). However, whenever he mentioned

minority groups, it was always in a peripheral manner and most of the time in the context of crisis. Muslims were hence automatically linked with terrorism (E: xiv), ethnic minorities like Hispanics and African Americans were systematically associated with insecurity, violence, and gang wars (D: xviii), while queer minorities were instrumentalised in a passing mention to criticise the backwardness of Arab countries (F: xxii). This latter example is a clear demonstration of what Puar (2007) called 'homonationalism', the instrumental deployments of a queer-friendly rhetoric for racist and Islamophobic ends. While members of the audience from these minority groups may still relate to Trump's message based on the 'American Dream' of wealth and success, they must embrace a totalising depiction of the people in which their difference in treatment and in opportunities remain non-existent. As will be further discussed in Trump's individual performance of gender, this also applied to women: his 'respect' for them was only mentioned as a defence against allegations of sexism by his opponent (E: iii; F: xx). All in all, what Trump's reluctance to address issues of race, religion and gender demonstrated is that the audience who he claimed to represent was neither diverse nor inclusive. As such, every minority was completely silenced in his apparently all-encompassing but implicitly exclusionary representation of the people.

These elements also applied to Le Pen's articulations of the people, although she was more nuanced and explicitly attempted to address this criticism. However, she did not do that in her visual performances. A clear example of this can be found in her advertisement which only briefly featured French voters, and nearly all of them where white men except for an elderly white woman. To understand why Le Pen did not even attempt to portray diversity in her short video – unlike Trump's campaign team which paid lip service to the notion of inclusivity in the first few seconds of his advertisement – one needs to consider the contextual differences in political communication and cultural values between France and the United States. On the one hand, politicians in the United States have historically defined their county as a 'nation of immigrants' characterised by its 'melting-pot' society or more recently by its 'multiculturalism' (Parrillo 2015: 2–3), and thus emphasised the importance of diversity in political communication. On the other hand, French politicians have historically been attached to the notion that France is characterised by its universalism. In this conception of identity that is particularly present in the speech of conservative politicians like Le Pen, every layer of identity for French citizens, no matter how important they might be, is subsumed under the overarching and unifying level of French identity. Although the myth of French universalism has been challenged on countless occasions (Schor 2001), it remained prominent in Le Pen's performances of identity, partly explaining her political choice not to perform diversity, and further showcasing her commitment to a nationalist conception of the people.

Le Pen's nationalist frame was particularly apparent in her choice to refer to individual members of her audience as her 'compatriots', embracing the far-right undertones associated with the word 'patriot' in French, instead of '*concitoyens*' ('fellow citizens'), the more neutral form that Macron preferred in the debate. However, this was compensated by Le Pen's strategy to find balance between showing her allegiance to her more extreme sympathisers through dog-whistling (Haney-López 2015) and showing signs of good faith and openness to the general audience. The most notable example of that duality was found in the moments in the rally where, she echoed on multiple occasions the phrase '*On est chez nous*' ('We are at home') [A: ii, iii, v, vi], one of the most famous far-right chants in France, while simultaneously anticipating criticism that her conception of the French people was exclusionary.

To show her good will, she directly addressed the allegedly excluded part of her audience 'fellow compatriots born abroad and foreigners who live in France with dignity, work and do not cause any problems to anyone, you have absolutely nothing to fear from my presidency'. Developing the typically French universalist discourse on identity, she added that 'I will only consider you as French, completely and totally French. We will not look at your origins, your skin colour, or your religion. You will be French citizens' (A: x). Similarly, after an anaphora that argued that 'behind massive immigration' lie 'delinquency', 'Islamism, 'terrorism', 'immediate threat' and even a 'challenge to our civilisation', she mildly nuanced her excessive generalisations by clarifying that 'obviously, this does not mean that every migrant is a delinquent, an Islamist or a terrorist of course' (A: viii). Just like Trump before her, these very limited attempts to appear inclusive and open to foreigners poorly hid the evidence that Le Pen's discourse remained overwhelmingly anti-immigration and xenophobic.

Indeed, one occurrence of relative friendliness to foreigners cannot compete with the sheer number of direct (twenty-eight references to immigration or migrants in her rally alone) and indirect mentions of the issues allegedly caused by migration in France. In sum, even if Le Pen claimed that her perspective of the people was inclusive in its universalism, the way she talked about minorities left very little doubt that this was anything but lip service to the ideal of inclusivity. For instance, references to Islam in Le Pen's discourse were systematically associated with terror and fundamentalism, but never with the overwhelming majority of the Muslim community in France. Although she did not explicitly exclude them from her performance of the people, the only Muslim people named in her performances were Islamic terrorists. And just like Trump, the only times Le Pen specifically mobilised other minorities in the debate, women, and gay men, they were both instrumentalised to attack radical Islamism (C: xxvii, xxxi), a cynical stance that Macron commented on by sarcastically praising her (C: xxxi). However, despite these parallels between

the two political actors, it is important to highlight how much more prominent Islamophobic rhetoric was in Le Pen's case than in Trump's. Indeed, Le Pen proportionally made four times more references to Islam and Muslim people than he did, showing the centrality of the theme for her.

Discussion

All in all, this analysis of the way Le Pen and Trump respectively performed the people first and foremost demonstrates the fundamental importance of ideological content in shaping populism. From the strategic conflation between people and nation to the exclusive conception of national identity that implies a collective 'other' that does not belong to it, the exclusionary nationalism of the far right accounted for most of the similitudes between both politicians and was by far the largest ideological element giving shape to the empty signifier of the people. As argued by Anastasiou (2019: 1), this prominence reveals the subordinated position of the people in right-wing populism which is 'parasitically signified *vis-à-vis* the hegemonic signifier "the nation"' whose ideological message both subsumes and replaces it.

Another noteworthy element to highlight is the valence, or tonality, of these performances of identity overall. If we were to place them on a binary between positive and negative, negative performances of identity were dominant in the repertoire of both Le Pen and Trump, which translated into a higher presence of anti-establishment rhetoric than of a people-centric one. In other words, the two politicians spent more time negatively framing the elite than positively portraying the people. Furthermore, although one could have expected references to the people to be purely positive, in opposition with the negative framing of the elite, the cases here were more nuanced. Indeed, references to the people were occasionally positive, particularly when making references to its resilience and potential. But in more than half the cases, they were negative, focused on the powerlessness and forgotten status of the people they claimed to represent. It is difficult to ascertain whether this is specific to populism or due to the far-right's negative focus on alterity, but it nonetheless warrants mention.

Another salient element emerging from this analysis is the strategic dimension of the people-centric frame. Unlike the concept of nation, which is heavily connoted and associated with right-wing rhetoric, the empty signifier of the people is for far-right politicians an attractive alternative with less ideological baggage that allows them to present their ideas with a new 'coat of paint'. More than a genuinely empty signifier, the people is associated with popular will and is hence imbued with democratic authority. Unlike the nation, whose political defence may appear arbitrary and disconnected from electoral reality by relying on symbolism, the people offers both materiality and legitimacy to political actors that claim to represent it. Furthermore, as was argued by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), the verticality of the frame of the people is

complementary with nationalism's horizontality. What this verticality discursively implies is the ability to identify one's cause with that of the underdog and the powerless, a positive connotation that can be combined with a horizontal fight against foreign influences by associating the oppressive elite with the threatening others. This complementarity accounts for the centrality of populism in the discourse of far-right politicians who aspire to offer a modernised version of their ideology without leaving themselves open to accusations of xenophobia. In the cases of Trump and Le Pen, a closer examination of their performances showcased 'the hegemonic stronghold of nationalism' (Anastasiou 2019: 12) and the superficiality of their commitment to inclusivity. However, it is important to acknowledge that the lens of far-right ideology, despite its dominance as an ideological frame, interacted with other contextual and personal facets of their performance of the people, which emphasised the relevance of a holistic analysis to avoid over-deterministic accounts of the phenomenon.

Performing the elite

Out of all the components of performing identity across the corpus, the articulation of the elite was by far the most widespread in quantitative terms, amounting to nearly half of all performances of identity for Le Pen and for Trump. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the nearly 400 occurrences of anti-establishment discourse when combining both cases, the elite was depicted as an extremely multifaceted whole, coalescing an extensive number of potentially conflictual categories that formed the loosely defined 'system' (A: iii; B: ii) the two politicians fought against. In her advertisement, Le Pen decided to remain elusive by condemning all 'those who lied, failed, betrayed, led the people astray and lost France' (G: ii), as was Trump in his, warning the American people against the threat of a 'global power structure' (H: i). To bring clarity to these voluntarily blurry depictions of the elite, this section will follow the main distinction that emerged from the corpus between the elite at the national level – which is what Le Pen was referring to – and international or even global elites – which Trump was condemning in this statement. Furthermore, unlike the signifier of the people which remained rather cohesive, the elite as it was performed in the corpus was much more heterogeneous as the two politicians constructed a sort of performative patchwork which interwove various unrelated groups. As a result, I will henceforth be referring to the elite in the singular form when referring to the general conglomerate but talk of elites in the plural form when describing the specific groups that make up this heterogenous construct.

Global elites

Starting from the more abstract references to the elite, the first type of elites emerging from the corpus is that of global elites, collective groups operating beyond the national border. For nativist politicians like Trump and Le Pen,

these groups were particularly dangerous because they are made of individuals who, at least symbolically, renounced their national allegiances to operate beyond the surveillance and control of the nation-state. Among those, the first group mentioned by both politicians is what Trump referred to as the 'global special interests' (H: i) or, in other words 'globalised finance' (A: ii) as Le Pen put it. Using other vague expressions like the aforementioned 'global power structure' (H: i) or the 'forces of money' (*'puissances de l'argent'*) [C: lxii], these elites were only loosely defined, evoking the idea of a threat that 'doesn't have your good in mind' as they 'partner' with 'those who control the levers of power in Washington', stripping the 'country of its wealth and put that money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities' (H: i). As was pointed out by Alduy and Wahnich, these references, based on greedy and nationless crooks, bear a striking resemblance with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Furthermore, the vagueness of these descriptions leaves them voluntarily open to any interpretation which could act as dog-whistling 'code-words' (Alduy and Wahnich 2015: 109) targeted at the extreme part of their sympathisers, using this ambiguity to shield themselves under the guise of plausible deniability, were they ever accused of anti-Semitism.

Although Trump did not elaborate beyond those ambiguous statements, Le Pen developed her accusations of this global elite by using a narrative influenced by socialist rhetoric: pointing specifically at 'the oligarchy' (C: xii), Le Pen accused the 'voracious finance' (A: iv), 'bankers' (C: xlvi) and 'big business' (*'le grand patronat')* (C: x) to use their 'ultraliberal ideology' (A: vii) to encourage mass immigration because it benefits them. According to her, their 'ultraliberalism' (C: lvi) caused 'unbridled globalisation, uberisation, precarity, social brutality, the war of all against all and economic plundering' (C: i). Mirroring her many references to the working class and the poor when describing the people, Le Pen demonstrated in this corpus the breadth and depth of her appropriation of left-wing rhetoric, showing that she could convincingly adapt the anti-establishment discourse of counter-globalisation movements to promote her far-right ideology. Even though Trump highlighted similar concerns on the economic impact of migration, he stuck very strictly to his pro-business rhetoric by not focusing on wage precarity and instead on factories being outsourced (B: iii). For instance, outside of his advertisement, he never attributed these issues to a globalised elite, blaming first and foremost local elites for signing 'horrible' trade deals (F: xiv) and by corollary the reified countries (China, Mexico) that made a profit from the USA's position of weakness. All in all, unlike Le Pen who seemingly challenged globalisation and sought to denounce free trade agreements (C: vii), Trump never questioned the liberal rules of global trade, offering as a counter-intuitive solution that 'we're going to renegotiate trade deals. We're going to have a lot of free trade' (F: xiv).

When considering articulations of the elite beyond the nation, a specificity of Le Pen's case lies in the Eurosceptic aspect of her rhetoric, a feature already widely documented in the literature on populism (Ivaldi 2018; Roch 2021). Given France's status as a member of the European Union, law and policy making, among others, have partly become European processes and not merely national ones. This has been presented as a loss of sovereignty, a central issue for far-right politicians like Le Pen who incorporated Euroscepticism in their political agenda (Melhuish 2022). Predictably, Le Pen thus included EU civil servants of all stripes as part of the global elites that threatened the sovereignty of France. Throughout her performances, she framed them as lacking any sort of accountability and democratic legitimacy given that they were 'bureaucrats whose names we barely know and that we did not elect' and 'technocrats who have all the powers because of treaties that [my] opponents in this election signed . . . against your will' (A: ii). The latter being a reference to the signature of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007 which incorporated many dispositions from the unratified 'Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe' that the French population rejected in 2005. European elites, led by 'commissioners without fatherland' (A: iv), were hence problematic because they benefited from the complicity of local elites who allowed them to gain power and left France 'deprived of its choices' (A: ii). Although they were often described as 'anonymous technocrats' (A: iv) in Le Pen's performances, European elites were sometimes embodied in the person of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor at the time, who was mentioned on multiple occasions and framed as the real holder of political power in French politics, with the ability to pick '*protégés*' among French elites (A: vi) and to prevent them from ruling without her 'blessing' (C: li).

Local elites

In addition to these global elites whose accountability and nationless status made them particularly worrying in Trump and Le Pen's perspectives, the other category of elite they placed in opposition with their articulation of the people was the composite and even more heterogeneous compound of local elites. Firstly, one can mention the local economic elite, often conflated with the global economic elite. It is notably telling that the expression of 'global special interests' in Trump's advertisement (H: i) was completely interchangeable with the very widespread local equivalent of 'special interests' (B: i; D: iv; E: xxxiii; F: xxiv) which he used in every other performance with the same ambiguity that left it open to conspiratorial and possibly anti-Semitic interpretations. Even if he did not commit to left-wing rhetoric quite as openly as Le Pen did, Trump made a few comments that criticised various members of economic elites in the USA, most notably bankers when he accused Clinton of being corrupted by 'all her friends at the banks, Goldman Sachs and everybody else' (E: xviii)

or even more openly when he made a call to 'all Americans who are tired of a government that works for Wall Street' (B: i). However, applying a similar reasoning to that in the previous sub-section, his occasional critique of American economic elites remained extremely limited and did not include any hint that he sought to challenge the economic system in any way. Le Pen, on the other hand, doubled down on her use of left-wing rhetoric to frame immigration as a ploy by the local economic elite. She for instance argued that 'immigration is only seen as chance for big businesses [to] lower wages' (A: vi), repeatedly attacking Macron, claiming that he 'never ceased' to be a 'cold-hearted banker' (A: ii) for whom 'everything can be sold and bought' (C: xiv) and emphasising that he had plenty of 'friends' (C: lxvii) and even 'mates' (A: x) among French businessmen and CEOs.

But undoubtedly the most prominent targets of the anti-establishment strategy of Le Pen and Trump were political elites. As leader of a marginal political party, Le Pen described members of mainstream parties as 'system profiteers' who should be afraid of her rise to power since they would pay for their 'mistakes and betrayals for so many years' (A: xii). In addition to their disdain vis-à-vis the people, her main accusation towards them was one of 'complacency towards Islamic fundamentalism', or worse of being completely 'submissive' like Macron was (C: xxvii). This latter expression is notably both a reference to the popular 2015 novel *Soumission* written by reactionary author Michel Houellebecq in which he depicted a society controlled by a Muslim party, and an appeal to the supporters of her radical-left rival, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who ran under the banner of *La France Insoumise*. Le Pen repeatedly insisted on her references to Islamism, arguing that 'this fundamentalist ideology recruits on our land by using the weakness of soul of our leaders or using the voluntary blindness of some local politicians' and that France would pay the price of the political elite's 'cowardice' if her agenda was not applied (C: xxxiv).

Another accusation she levelled at French political elites was their disrespect of popular sovereignty, referencing the aforementioned Treaty of Lisbon (A: ii), depicting Macron as the embodiment of 'the most extremist submission to European federalism' (C: xliii). When mentioning Fillon, her rival from the mainstream conservative party, she made another use of left-wing rhetoric by criticising his staunch defence of austerity politics as 'offering stale bread and water for the weak, opulence for the rich' (A: xii). As this example demonstrated, Le Pen did not solely frame Macron as a member of the political elite; she did the same for her rivals of all stripes, from the conservative right to the outgoing socialist government and even including Mélenchon, the radical-left candidate who was nonetheless described as seeking to 'bring down [French] institutions' and coordinating 'the submersion of the country by immigration' (A: xii).

Trump's call to 'drain the swamp' (B: ii) in Washington became one of the chants of his supporters, based on the promise to 'replace a failed and corrupt

political establishment' (H: i). But the main difference with Le Pen in their respective depictions of their local political elites was that Le Pen presented French politicians as not only complacent but also actively undermining national identity by collaborating with the economic and European elites, whereas Trump primarily depicted American politicians as incompetent. Pointing at the 'stupidity of [American] leadership' (F: xxxi), he claimed to be 'disappointed in congressmen, including Republicans' (E: ix) because they were all 'typical politician[s]. All talk. No action' (D: xii). Whether it was foreign policy where the USA had 'political hacks making the biggest deals in the world' (F: xxxii) or the denial vis-à-vis Islamic terror, Trump insisted on the passivity and lack of skill of American politicians, in contrast with his own business and leadership abilities. Using his rhetoric signature of the hyperbole, he for instance concluded the third debate by claiming that he would 'do more for African-Americans and Latinos than [Clinton] can ever do in ten lifetimes' (F: xxxv).

In addition to this description of the political elite as incompetent, Trump also emphasised another feature of the political establishment that sharply differed from Le Pen's depiction, that is the Democrat's allegedly wasteful belief that the government should 'basically rule everything' as 'their method of fixing [anything] is to go back and ask Congress for more money, more and more money' (E: xii). This representation of American politicians as dependent on excessive government interventionism was at the opposite of Le Pen's depiction of the French political elite whose 'ultraliberalism' (C: lvi) led to excessive *laissez-faire*. Lastly, while Le Pen included every other political actor in her wide-encompassing notion of the elite, Trump was overall more lenient with Sanders, the socialist rival to Clinton. In what was likely an attempt at attracting a share of his voters and fracturing the appearance of consensus after her nomination, he frequently mobilised his name to attack Clinton (E: vii; D: xxvi; F: xxviii).

Another group that was included in the elite by both Trump and Le Pen were intellectuals and technocratic elites, albeit to a much less systematic extent. Trump for instance criticised the Federal Bank's director for 'doing political things by keeping the interest rates' at a high level (D: xii) and saying that he did not hold much 'respect' for electoral 'pundits' (B: iii). Le Pen was more virulent when she referenced the intellectual elites in France, calling them 'armchair revolutionaries' (A: iv), criticising 'the pretentious holier-than-thou individuals that claim to be our elites' (A: iii) and arguing that they were arrogant towards people who were not educated in universities (C: lviii). When it came to the legal elites of magistrates and judges, both politicians reached similar conclusions, with Le Pen claiming that most of them in France were 'politicised' (C: lxii) against her side and Trump describing justice in the USA as a 'rigged system' (B: ii) which protected the political elite.

Last but not least, in both cases, journalists were depicted as part of a mediatic elite opposed to the people. Le Pen for example claimed that 'the

media of the system do not like it when you profess your love for France' (A: iii) and repeatedly pointed at their connivance with mainstream politicians like Macron. Using another of his typical 'truthful hyperboles' (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 58), Trump described journalists as 'the world's most dishonest people' (B: iii), echoing Le Pen's criticism by claiming that they were 'lying people, these are people that rig the system' (B: vii) and insisting that the media 'have poisoned the minds of the voters' (F: xxiv).

Discussion

Unsurprisingly, the dominant image of the elite projected by Trump and Le Pen was overwhelmingly negative. Despite nuance in their performances of the people which incorporated a combination of positive and negative elements, there was not a hint of a redeeming quality for the elite in either depiction, which illustrates the importance of a negative foil in populist performances of identity applied through the lens of a far-right ideology. In contrast with performances of the people, the role of far-right ideology was also less over-determining, giving more leeway to other factors in shaping the exact way the elites were antagonistically framed. However, the main way far-right ideology influenced the multiple types of elites in both performances was through the complementary notions of either active complicity or passive complacency towards phenomena linked to political alterity (immigration, Islamic fundamentalism and even terrorism). Although emphasis could be granted more on complicity – as was the case for Le Pen's performances – or on complacency – in Trump's case – they both systematically associated the elite with the othered group, hinging on an underlying message of active or passive guilt: the elite could have prevented the situation from degenerating into a crisis by protecting the people against this threatening out-group, but it did not.

The other main characteristic of these performances of the elite were their extreme heterogeneity: in both cases, the empty signifier of the elite was flexible enough to incorporate the main areas of public life, representative politics of course but also business, journalism, justice and so on. In sum, the elite was used by the two political actors to coalesce and crystallise every form of opposition into their narrative, regardless of whether their positions as 'elite' were antithetic or opposite to one another. There does not seem to be much that politically connects an investor for Goldman Sachs from a Marxist intellectual, but they were performatively combined, albeit for different reasons, within the aforementioned collective of the elite.

In terms of scenography, a noteworthy difference emerges in the way the two politicians depicted the elite visually, particularly in their respective advertisements. On the one hand, Trump chose to give a human face to 'the elite', by synecdochally equating it with a few targets of choices: Hillary Clinton of course, but also Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and George Soros – who he

also named and shamed multiple times during the second debate (E: xix; xxi; xxiii). In his advertisement, there were in total more shots of these people who embodied the elite than there were of Trump himself. On the other hand, Le Pen chose a completely opposite strategy by never depicting her rivals directly in her advertisement. Indeed, even when she attacked those who 'have lied, failed and betrayed' and those who 'have misled the people and lost France' (G: i), no faces were shown as Le Pen attempted to make herself the nearly exclusive focus of the video. Although she did mention names directly in her rally speech and in the debate, this difference in the staging of their advertisements reflects a deeper difference between Trump and Le Pen. Indeed, while the former repeatedly relied on practical and concrete examples in his arguments, showing instead difficulties with abstract concepts, the latter had an opposite preference, demonstrating her comfort with abstract arguments but struggling more whenever she mentioned specific examples.

Finally, although Le Pen hinted at more substantial changes to the status quo than Trump did through her adoption of an anti-globalisation rhetoric, the criticism of the elites from these two actors, no matter how brutal it might have been, did not imply a concrete shift towards a radically popular counter-hegemonic version of the political system instead. In many ways, and particularly in the case of Trump, it seemed that taking their populist narrative to its conclusion would not imply a destruction of the elite, but instead the reconfiguration of another type of elite (Kruse 2018). In other words, the far-right projects of both Le Pen and Trump did not offer anything more than replacing a failed elite with another elite.

Individual Performances of Identity: The Populist Leader

A striking paradox is particularly relevant in the cases of Trump and Le Pen, as in most other cases of political leaders embracing the populist style. Although they claim to represent 'the people', their *habitus* reflects a dominant social position: that of a member of the elite, a paradoxical tension which De Cleen and Ruiz Casado (2023: 5) named as 'populism *by* the privileged'. Indeed, having the opportunity to compete seriously in extremely selective elections suggests that they possessed not only the economic means to participate in the costly process of a campaign, but also enough social and symbolic capital to be considered credible contenders. Of course, this balance of economic, social, and cultural capitals differed substantially. Le Pen fulfilled the criteria of traditional member of the political elite as a career politician and the heiress to her father's party, whereas Trump's capital came from the family business he inherited and his notoriety as a reality television star, making him part of the economic and arguably social elite of his country. But in both cases, that meant an advantage in terms of 'performative labour': having lived a life under the public eye, they shared 'the privilege of formal and informal, normalised and ritualised training in public performing' (Rai 2014a: 7).

To understand how this privileged position as member of the elite could be reconciled with the narrative that places the populist leader as a representative of the people against the elite, it is necessary to consider the second layer of populist identity: performances of self from the leader. Indeed, abstract notions of people and elite only take shape through their performative articulation by the individuals articulating this antagonistic frontier. The empty signifiers of the people and the elite do not refer to a pre-existing reality, they are ontologically created through the process of performativity. And as established above, the relational nature of identity means that political actors themselves are conversely shaped through their mobilisation of the populist style, meaning that their very identity as populist leader is simultaneously co-constituted in the performative process.

These collective articulations of the people and the elite are crystallised through the embodied performance of the populist leader. However, although populism is characterised by a representative claim vis-à-vis the people, it is not built on accurately reflecting the character of the people. Instead, their representative claim is based on a hybrid form of representation which Casullo (2021: 78) called 'synecdochal representation'. A synecdoche is a rhetorical device whereby a part is used to describe a totality. By extension, this form of representation relies on strategically accentuating a part of one's identity as representative of the whole community, but also emphasising one's differences from the represented. In other words, they must perform *commonality* with the people on some level, but also *particularity* to justify their own exceptionality as aspiring leaders. While every political leader aspiring to represent a large group of people arguably faces this challenge, the case of populism heightens the stakes of succeeding in such an endeavour. The populist style relies on the acceptance by one's audience of the legitimacy of a politician's special link with 'the people'. The following section will then explore the way Le Pen and Trump's individual performances perform this hybridity between ordinariness and extraordinariness in connection with the public *persona* outlined in the introductory chapter.

Commonality: Performing ordinariness

Performances of ordinariness refer to the myriad ways for political actors to depict themselves as close to those they claim to represent by emphasising what they have in common with them. In the case of populism, this consists in presenting oneself as part of the people, or in other words, in a 'mirror representation' of the people (Diehl 2017). However, because of the symbolic distance between the daily lives of ordinary citizen and the status of a professional politician – with all the privileges that come with it – politicians seeking to perform ordinariness must transgressively break away from the standards of politics to show that they, too, live 'ordinary lives'. This is further complexified when considering that many

politicians come from wealthy backgrounds or, at the very least live a more privileged life than most of their fellow citizens (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado 2023: 2). This means the gap between ordinary citizens and politicians is often material just as much as it is symbolic. As such, a common strategy for populist actors to perform normality is to break the norms of their social class and professional sphere, which many examples below will demonstrate. The following chapter will provide a longer discussion on the specificities of transgression and their centrality in my case studies, but it is important to highlight this crucial interaction between those two performative clusters.

Because this point is particularly relevant to this discussion, I have chosen to isolate two forms of rhetoric transgressions (Aiolfi 2022: 7–8) whose core purpose is to project an ordinary identity for populist leaders: performing 'the culturally popular and the 'from here" (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021: 62). Originating in the work of Ostiguy (2017), these concepts respectively refer to adopting behaviours associated with the popular class and emphasising local belonging to a specific place. These two characteristics are for instance combined in Trump's New York accent, more specifically from Queens, which is thick and easily recognisable. His accent instantly allowed the audience to identify where he was from, grounding his *persona* in a clearly defined locality. But more than that, unlike other forms of English associated with a high prestige, like Received Pronunciation, or the more neutral American English spoken in Washington, the accent from Queens is associated with stereotypes like directness and pugnacity (Guo 2016). This contributed to making Trump sound decisive and tough, as well as giving working class inflections to his language. But while aspects of the 'from here' were implicitly present in Trump's voice, his local identity – whether it is that of a New Yorker or that of an American – was less often mobilised in his performances of self.

A noteworthy exception to this statement pertains to Trump's mobilisation of the imagery of the American nation. Although he rarely emphasised his own American identity, Trump followed the traditional codes of patriotism that dominate rallies in the United States, particularly within the Republican Party. The most obvious symbol of that in the scenography of his performances lies in the prominent role given to the American flag. From the pin on his shirt to the eight clear shots in his advertisement where it is present (compared to Le Pen's two less visible shots in her advertisement), the American flag and its colours are omnipresent in Trump's *mise-en-scène*. Music was another major medium for Trump to mobilise the American identity. The songs used before and after his speech during the rally were primarily borrowing from the classic repertoire of country and rock music, which not only showed his connection to the 'culturally popular' but also his attachment to American genres of music. Trump's choice to use the unabashedly patriotic song 'God Bless the USA', by country music singer Lee Greenwood, as his introductory song before beginning his

speeches represents the ultimate demonstration of his commitment to embrace and perform American patriotism.

Going even further than that, albeit in a subtler way, Le Pen also strongly emphasised her local identity throughout her campaign. In contrast with Trump, Le Pen's accent in French is fairly neutral, although one could note that the pitch of her voice, which is deeper and huskier than that of other female politicians, makes her distinctively memorable. However, the way she developed the 'culturally popular' and the 'from here' was mostly through visual and textual references. The popular aspect was most obvious in her advertisement (G: i), where she was shown drinking a coffee and chatting with ordinary people in a *bistrot*, the archetypical meeting place of the French working class. She notably projected her Frenchness in the debate, where she repeatedly portrayed herself as the ultimate defender of French culture (C: i; C: lii). She was even more emphatic in her rally speech as she proclaimed her love for 'our traditions, our beautiful language, our culture, our way of life' (A: i). But references to a local identity were once again most salient in the advertisement where Le Pen not only mobilised French monuments like the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe, but also paid an extended homage to her native region of Brittany. In an overt depiction of her roots, she used the beaches and cliffs of Brittany as metaphors for France's 'impetuous and tenacious people' (G: i) and depicted herself as an experienced sea captain to demonstrate her local rootedness as well as her leadership abilities. Le Pen's attachment to Brittany also appeared in a more subdued manner in the choice to use a bagpipe and Celtic instruments in the instrumental songs that introduced and closed her rally performances, as well as in her campaign advertisement. Going beyond an otherwise typical introduction that treads the line between martial conviction and upbeat confidence, the use of these instruments was yet another nod to her attachment to her home region, which added an underlying layer of local identity to her personal depiction of self.

In addition to projecting a culturally popular and local identity, performing commonality may also take the form of a distanciation from the rest of the political elite. Indeed, not only were Trump and Le Pen articulating a collective image of a failing elite, they also explicitly excluded themselves from it.[5] They did so by framing themselves as qualitatively different from 'them', notably through an emphasis on their former career as respectively a businessman and a lawyer or by direct association with their voters. For example, Trump did this in the beginning of his rally as he claimed that he 'used to be on the other side' of politics. Implying that he used to be part of the elite, he claimed to now have joined the side of the audience, unlike his rival: 'she's with them. I'm with you' (B: i). To project ordinariness, both politicians also made direct references to their private lives, showing they were also regular people outside the public stage. This was overall less common for Trump, although there were occasional

examples of this through family anecdotes, like his disjointed reference to his youngest son when talking about cyber warfare: 'I have a son, he's 10 years old, he has computers. He is so good with these computers. It's unbelievable' (D: xxvi). Interestingly, Le Pen, who is usually quite secretive about her personal life, chose to embrace it more openly during this campaign as she accepted interviews with gossip magazines like *Paris Match* (Le Guay 2017). Although she rarely talked about herself, only briefly mentioning her career as a lawyer (C: lxi) to mark her authority, the one major exception to that was her advertisement, where Le Pen sought to appear more relatable. She staged herself looking at a family album as she talked about her commonsensical perspective as a woman and a mother of three (G: i).

In the context of this discussion on performing their own individuality, the use of gender in the performances of both politicians was particularly salient. While I will later engage with the way Trump accentuated his masculinity to project power and extraordinariness, Le Pen used her femininity to emphasise her ordinariness and soften her image. From the use of a short skirt on her campaign poster to the choice of a rose as her logo, one of the characteristics of Le Pen's campaign was her strategic emphasis on femininity (Chira 2017). As one of the most visual components of her 'de-demonisation' strategy, Le Pen broke from the masculine image associated with her father by emphasising a softer feminine side. In a classic illustration of femonationalism (Farris 2017; Gustin 2023), she also instrumentalised her femininity to justify her Islamophobic agenda (A: ii–iii; G: i), claiming that the 'development of Islamic fundamentalism' was not only affecting her as a politician, but also more personally 'as a woman' (G: i). However, Le Pen's emphasis on her gender during her campaign primarily remained a way to perform ordinariness, showing that, as a twice-divorced mother of three, she could better relate to the struggles of ordinary women than her male rivals. All in all, femininity through motherhood featured repeatedly in her representations of self, especially as a strategy to soften her image of an 'iron lady' (Geva 2020: 7) by introducing calculated vulnerability and relatability to her performances.

Particularity: Performing extraordinariness

Although showing commonality with the people is crucial to make one's representative claim legitimate, appearing too ordinary might diminish their standing as leaders. As such, Le Pen and Trump had to show why they were special enough to be, more than anybody else, the representative of the people. In addition to 'mirroring' (Diehl 2017) the people, it is crucial for aspiring populist representatives to show their particularities, the crucial way they differ from the rest of the people. This tension between balancing this extraordinariness remains important as the distance created with the people should not prevent symbolic identification:

> The populist leader [is] both father and (older) brother. He is like me, but better than me. He is *not* mainly an authority figure, as are kings, patriarchs, Founding Fathers, Pinochet, etc., but an 'empowered brother' who allows transgression and emancipation. And if he is to be a father, he is a *close* father, physically and emotionally present, not a distant one. (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021: 61)

Ostiguy and Moffitt's references to masculine figures ('father', 'brother') are not coincidental as authority in Western countries remains a gendered concept favouring performances of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jansens 2019). In contrast with the way Le Pen accentuated her femininity to appear more in touch with the ordinary preoccupations of the people, Trump fully embraced the masculine codes of power. Pascoe (2017: 129) described Trump as mobilising 'masculinity as domination' along three axes during his 2016 campaign: 'bodily dominance, sexual assault and by positioning other men as sexually failed men'. But even outside of these directly aggressive ways to embody masculinity, Trump also projected his extraordinariness through hypermasculine tropes as he 'presented himself as an icon of American manhood: a confident, savvy, and aggressive businessman' (Dignam et al. 2021: 368).

Indeed, building on the *persona* he had developed throughout his time on reality television, Trump's main way of performing his extraordinary qualities was through his self-styled image as a shrewd businessman. This was particularly salient in the debates, as he hyperbolically claimed to have 'built an unbelievable company' (D: xvi), 'a massive company, a great company, some of the greatest assets, anywhere in the world' (F: xviii). This connection between performance of self and that of his company and brand may seem out of place but it is one of the performative characteristics of Trump, who, 'Long before he ran for president, [had] made his name conflating two performance modes: the cultural and the corporate'. He 'has never drawn a distinction between these two: the organizational performance of his brand and his constant cultural performance of himself' (Grobe 2020: 797–8).

Going beyond these verbal boasts of wealth and power, Trump also substantiated his claims by physically mobilising wealth. In the rally, Trump's performance began long before he started his speech as he arrived in his private jet which strategically landed near the audience. Before even uttering a single word, such a staged arrival made Trump's wealth a tangible reality for the audience. Likewise, although he occasionally chose a more laid-back look, Trump also embodied wealth through his clothes. Wearing an expensive watch, as well as a well-tailored suit adorned with a red tie, with semiotic associations to both the Republican Party and the so-called power tie linked with vigour (Kramer 2016), Trump simultaneously embraced the dress codes of two traditional male

archetypes associated with power: the politician and the businessman. In addition to his well-documented flaunting of wealth, such a classic attire hence remains a subtler way to remind the audience that he perfectly embodies the masculine codes of powers.

As a female politician, Le Pen was limited in her adoption of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) as she ran the risk of being framed negatively if she appeared too masculine, but not taken seriously if she looked too feminine (Jamieson 1995). This conflict between the patriarchal tropes of authority and the feminine tropes of docility led to a hybrid combination of masculine and feminine traits in her performances of self, which can be described as 'frontier' (Mason 2010: 190) or 'pariah femininity' (Schippers 2007). The way Le Pen expressed her extraordinariness was hybrid, particularly in her advertisement which was her only performance where gender took centre stage. On the one hand, she occasionally borrowed the codes of masculinity, as she did memorably in one of the final shots of her advertisement where she was seen steering a sailing boat. This shot was constructed as an obvious metaphor with her abilities to guide the country through the storm ahead, with a stereotypically masculine body language (G: i). On the other hand, Le Pen performed hegemonic femininity to emphasise her extraordinariness, most notably by association with the mythical figure of Joan of Arc by standing next to her statue in her advertisement, which symbolised her devotion to the French nation and sacrifice in its defence. Likewise, she also used the feminine archetype of the mother of the nation, 'suffering from insults to France as if they were addressed to [her] directly' (G: i). Geva described this hybridity as 'symbolic multivalence' through which Le Pen simultaneously occupied a multiplicity of roles: 'at once seen as daughter, mother, warrior, maiden, seductress, captain, and commander' (Geva 2020: 16). However, it is important to emphasise that this multiplicity of meanings remained limited to one performance in the corpus, the advertisement. Unlike Trump who consistently made his *persona* paramount in each of his performances, using his success and wealth to legitimise his claims, Le Pen generally did not make herself the centre of her own performances. This was notably apparent in her conservative choice of clothing and make-up during the rally and the debate, which once more embodied the characteristics of 'frontier femininity' (Mason 2010).

To better grasp this difference, between Trump's overt and hypermasculine performances of self and Le Pen's more subdued self-representation, Casullo (2021: 79) contrasted two types of 'markers of exceptionality': 'vigour and physical prowess' and 'restraint and morality'. Although she did not elaborate much on these, they fittingly correspond to the two ways Trump and Le Pen portrayed themselves as extraordinary leaders. In Trump's case, this notion of physical prowess is present throughout the corpus, notably in his accusations that Clinton lacked the stamina (D: xxxv) or could not physically keep up with

his number of rallies (B: i). By contrast, Trump thus implied that, despite being 70 years old, his physical fitness remained excellent.[6] Peetz (2021: 569–70) elaborated on that point, arguing that candidates in a presidential election must 'meet norms of perceived masculinity and attendant standards of physical strength and virility . . . associated with healthy, able-bodied masculinity', which is precisely what Trump chose to do.

Understood through this lens, Le Pen who faced a younger male rival in Macron could not compete on the similar grounds of exceptional strength that Trump did. As a result, she chose to emphasise her restraint and morality, that is implicitly taking the moral high ground to show that her struggle was righteous and moral. By associating herself with icons of French culture, like Joan of Arc, and framing her agenda as a defence of the 'intangible heritage' (A: i) of France, Le Pen chose to rely more on symbolism rather than on pure embodied performances like Trump did. This parallel to Joan of Arc was also present in the introductory and concluding songs to her rally whose triumphant tone was combined with medieval influences. As such, her promotion of self was based on a shift from performing her own extraordinariness to showing how extraordinary her cause was, dissolving her own identity within the fight for the fatherland (A: xii).[7] Such an interpretation accounts for Le Pen's choice to make individuality less central in her performances of self, while also suggesting the need to consider extraordinariness beyond direct embodiment and masculinity.

Discussion

The most striking difference between the two politicians is that, while both components were present in their respective performances, the balance between commonality and particularity were tilted in opposite directions. On the one hand, Le Pen performed ordinariness much more than extraordinariness, which reflected her *dédiabolisation* strategy in which normalising and softening her image remain her primary goals. On the other hand, Trump conversely performed extraordinariness much more than ordinariness, which was in the continuity of his earlier performative labour as a billionaire and reality television star who built his career around a narrative of exceptionality. What this thus confirms is that both political actors did not enter the performance as blank slates, but rather with a complex set of expectations from the audience and pre-established *personae*. Unlike the people and the elite, which were both open to interpretation and primarily shaped by the ideological content developed by the actors, the performances of self in these case studies were deeply affected by the prior image of each politician. In other words, while the people and the elite are indeed empty signifiers, I agree with Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) when they described the populist leader not as empty, but as an 'overflowing signifier'. Challenging Laclau's claim that the leader in populism was a blank surface of

inscription for countless narratives, they argued instead that populist leaders are constantly shaped by a myriad of competing meanings determining their characteristics and appeal:

> The populist leader therefore is not just 'any' surface of inscription – a blank screen ready for 'the people' to project their meanings upon. He/she has, much opposite to such a characterization, a quite particular and 'spectacular' topography as said surface of inscription: what you see, in many ways, is what you get, and it is certainly distinctive and divisive. The surface of inscription is 'fleshy', concrete, immanent, sensory, that is, particularly visible and audible. (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021: 62)

What that practically means is that, as was illustrated by the cases of Le Pen and Trump, politicians using the populist style to shape their political agenda come with their own particularities, both idiosyncratic and contextual. Consequently, their own identity is 'linked to the multiple interpretations of the leader that are invested within that person on the part of "the people" (that is, the different "readings" or "meanings" of the leader for his/her followers)' (ibid. 53). In contrast with a more orthodox interpretation of Laclau, this notion of the leader as an overflowing signifier grounds populist performances of identity within their performative context. Furthermore, it emphasises the contingency and relationality of the leader's identity, showing that they are not merely performing in a vacuum but in dialogue with the perceptions of their own audience.

Conclusion: A Choreography between Empty and Overflowing Signifiers

What makes the blueprint of populist performances of identity so compelling lies in its simplicity and antagonistic frame. While there is a myriad of other ways to perform its political identity for a politician, populism offers an intuitively simple narrative that bridges the gap between representative and represented, coalescing multiple 'social demands' (Laclau 2005a: 73) into a collective struggle against a common enemy. Unlike liberal performances of identity which favour consensus and the depiction of a harmonious society, populism is grounded in a deeply agonistic conception of democratic politics (Mouffe 2013). This conflictual vision of society based on opposing collectives shares affinities with the Marxist concept of class struggle, which explains why many socialist politicians adopt populism to widen their ideological struggle beyond the orthodox language of class essentialism (Moffitt 2020: 65). But, as was demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, the populist binary can also be effectively combined with a nationalist reading of society.[8] In this case, instead of framing the people as equivalent with the popular class, far-right politicians like Le Pen and Trump used the ambiguity of the signifier of the people

to exclude non-native citizens from its limits, drawing implicitly cultural and racial lines without resorting to open xenophobia. In this way, they erase the boundaries between *demos* and *ethnos*, turning the people into a homogenous manifestation of an exclusionary nation.

Furthermore, in addition to people-centrism, the second core component of populist performances of identity is its anti-elitism. Indeed, regardless of the ideological content that it embraces, populism implies a power asymmetry which is at best ignored or at worst actively sustained by the elite. But because the elite is just as empty a signifier as the people is, it is once more up to the political actors to load the concept with whatever meaning best fits their world view. While a Marxist perspective can easily align the elite with the economic structures of capitalism or, in a more old-fashioned way the bourgeoisie, Le Pen and Trump used the notion to include a diversity of actors. From their political opponents to technocrats, intellectuals, journalists and even magistrates, they conflated them into a homogenous group that undermine the national identity by facilitating or even actively encouraging 'mass migration'.

To better understand the articulation between these two collective dimensions, I want to take a step back towards, the roots of discourse theory. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 160) designed their understanding of conflictual politics by expanding the work of Gramsci (1971) into a post-foundational direction, focusing particularly on his notion of hegemony. In both of their later works, Laclau (2005a) and Mouffe (2018) both emphasised the counter-hegemonic purpose of populism as a contentious and agonistic form of politics. Understood through the interdisciplinary lens of this framework, hegemony can shed a new light on the position that populism occupies within Rai and Reinelt's (2015) grammar of politics and performance. Indeed, in an extension of their approach, Saward (2015) suggested a shift from thinking of grammar as a singular entity to multiple grammars that constitute this larger whole. He notably distinguished sovereign grammars as 'those deployed in the performative politics of the state or other established and constituted authorities' in opposition with critical grammars 'which are deployed in the performative politics of actors who question, criticise or seek to transform the foundations, dominant understandings of sovereign or authoritative structures' (Saward 2015: 218). The counter-hegemonic nature of the populist repertoire, especially in its collective performances of identity, places it in the categories of the critical grammars of politics and performance. However, while critical grammars typically 'particularise citizens and others, as individuals and/or members of distinct subgroups' (ibid.), populist performances of identity on the contrary borrow the tools of sovereign grammars that are based on performing 'the general and the homogeneous, a large-scale (often national) sense of oneness or commonality of attachment or belonging' (ibid.). Understood through this lens, populism can thus be understood as a hybridised

critical grammar that deploys the tool of sovereign grammars against them in order to subvert them.

Lastly, the final piece of the puzzle emerging from this chapter pertains to the individual level of identity, or more precisely the way a politician adopting the populist style performatively becomes a populist leader. When considering the way Trump and Le Pen performed their identities, the most striking element was how radically different their presentations of self were. On the one hand, Le Pen embodied frontier femininity to both soften her image and appear more relatable while also depicting herself as a selfless heroine fighting on behalf of the nation. On the other hand, Trump fully embodied the codes of hegemonic masculinity, emphasising his wealth while letting his outsider status and relatable way of speaking convey authenticity. As opposed to what I expected to find, this 'tightrope walk' (Moffitt 2016: 52) was not characterised by a proportionate equilibrium in either case, as Le Pen and Trump respectively emphasised the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of their image. Although there were similarities, the way each of them approached the task of balancing commonality and particularity substantially differed, notably in terms of gender and embodiment.

Another element worthy of further exploration was the notion of the populist leader as an overflowing signifier. Unlike collective identities like the people and the elite who remain blank slates until they are filled with ideological content, the leader cannot be because they would be unrelatable. In Ostiguy and Moffitt's (2021) words, 'who would identify with an empty signifier?'. My analysis confirmed that the identity of a populist leader is a contingent construct shaped by the context and past of each performer on the one hand, and by expectations from the audience on the other hand. This notably highlights that there is more to style than the interaction between populism and ideology, opening the analysis to a thicker understanding of the contextual dynamics present in each case. Further exploring this relationship between overflowing signifier (the leader) and empty signifiers (people and elite) would not only enrich theoretical discussions around populism, but it would also make analysis more sensitive to the multiplicity of factors that shape style and other performances of identity. Lastly, my analysis showcased the flexibility of the notion of a populist style in capturing shared patterns uniting the cases of Trump and Le Pen, as well as their idiosyncratic interpretation of this style. These two different cases thus demonstrate the inherent 'capacity for individualisation' (Bordas, 2008: 220) of the populist style, showcasing how both Le Pen and Trump adapted the collective forms of the populist style to further singularise their own personal styles.

Notes

1. One could argue that a wider definition of populism would only restrict its performances of identity to the former two elements: the antagonistic relationship between people and elite. Without going back to the endless definitional debates

which were developed in Chapters 1 and 2, I want to acknowledge that this would be a valid interpretation. However, the importance of embodiment makes the performance of the leader a key focus of the stylistic approach, and since individual performances of identity mirror collective ones, I follow the choice of those like Casullo that frame these elements as a triad.

2. Although the national context is the prime locus for populist performances of identity, the malleability of the signifiers of 'the people' and 'the elite' means that they can be applied to a much lower scale (e.g. the people of a specific city vs the local elite) or even to a much larger scale (e.g. through appeals to humankind as a 'global people'). For a longer discussion on municipal, provincial, regional, international and transnational populism, see Moffitt (2020: 43–8).
3. It is important to note that the word 'people' in English is ambiguous and includes not only the meaning of 'the people', which corresponds to the univocal word of '*peuple*' in French, but also other meanings like the plural form of 'person' or just references to a vague group of individuals, that correspond to other words in French like *'personnes'* or *'gens'*. Of course, only occurrences of the specific meaning of 'the people' were considered here.
4. More than their words, Le Pen also adopted aesthetic and visual elements of the socialist party, including their signature symbol of the rose in her campaign logo. See Chapter 5 on transgressive performances for an iconographic analysis of this transgressive choice.
5. To qualify this claim, it is worth mentioning Trump's ambiguous relationship with elitism. Kruse (2018) showed how Trump went from using 'elite' as a synonym for his brand to equating it with the political establishment, to then reclaiming it for him and his supporters ('Just remember that. You are the elite. They're not the elite.').
6. These examples go beyond the restricted corpus analysed in this book, but physical fitness was a recurring theme in Trump's campaign of 2017, from his comment about 'small hands' to the eulogistic letter from his physician which claimed that Trump's 'physical strength and stamina [were] extraordinary'.
7. The most vivid depiction of this can be found in the conclusion of her rally, where she quoted a poem by Henri de Régnier: 'It seems . . . / I can feel in the shadow, near me, with tenderness / The fatherland with its kind eyes that takes me by the hand'. In this poem most particularly, Le Pen subsumed her identity within the greater cause of the defence of the nation.

8 And at times a combination of nationalism with socialism, as was apparent in Le Pen's instrumentalisation of left-wing rhetoric.

5

PERFORMING TRANSGRESSION

> *'[Transgression] is like a flash of lightning in the night which . . . gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies . . . and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation.'*
>
> Michel Foucault, *A Preface to Transgression* (1977)

In this chapter, I will tackle the second cluster of the populist repertoire: performances of transgression. Transgression is understood here in its broadest interpretation as the violation of a norm of political relevance, whether that norm is directly political, sociocultural, ethical, legal, and so on. As such, transgression is an extremely versatile concept that encompasses a multiplicity of disruptive practices situated in the specific political context where they take place. Beyond the violation *per se*, what interests me most specifically in this chapter is the performative purposes of these transgressions. Although my approach heavily borrows from Moffitt (2016), this chapter is where I depart most from him since I find major limitations with his concept of 'bad manners'. Defined as 'a general disregard for appropriate ways of acting on the political stage' (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 392), 'bad manners' is grounded in Ostiguy's sociocultural approach (2009, 2017). Both argued for a definition of populism that would be more sensitive to sociocultural factors, an endeavour for which I have the utmost sympathy.

However, despite their differences, Moffitt and Ostiguy share an understanding of populism which is exclusively located at the level of the sociocultural

'low' (Ostiguy 2017: 77), that is based on breaking the rules of 'high' politics by using elements from the 'low', including slang, swearing or more general political incorrectness. By doing so, political actors use these 'bad manners' to distance themselves from the standards of politics and appear more authentic to the general public than the stiff politicians tied to these 'high' standards of the elites. I do agree with them that borrowing from the 'low' is a common, and perhaps the most obvious, transgressive strategy to performatively break the rules of the political game. However, this implies that every political norm belongs to the sociocultural 'high' and, conversely, that every transgression must borrow from the 'low'. I argue, however, that although some political norms are reflections of a high sociocultural capital, such as a rich and eloquent vocabulary, others like the norm of forthrightness, are harder to place on such a normatively binary scale. Moreover, such a perspective fails to account for the more nuanced ways transgressions are being used as part of the populist style. In other words, a politician does not have to be rude or vulgar to be transgressive and appear different from other politicians: they merely have to break a rule that separates them from others. In summary, my main divergence with Moffitt and Ostiguy for this second performance cluster lies in the choice to forgo normatively loaded and binary concepts like 'bad manners' and 'low' and replace them instead with the much more malleable concept of transgression, which vastly expands the potential of the performative cluster developed below. While I have kept this theoretical discussion brief in the context of this empirical chapter, with the aim to more practically showcase the empirical applications of transgression, a longer theoretical elaboration of this discussion can be found in my earlier work on 'populism as a transgressive style' (Aiolfi 2022).

Populist Performances of Transgression

In the following sections, I will discuss the most prominent transgressive performances used by Trump and Le Pen using examples drawn from the corpus. It is worth noting that the following list is *not* an exhaustive list of every way transgression takes shape in the populist style, not even of how far-right actors use transgression. Although every category has a sufficient level of abstraction to be applicable to the cases of other actors performing in different contexts, they only constitute the most salient examples used by each actor and may very well not be found in the same way, or even at all, in other similar cases.

For this chapter in particular, my exploration of these prominent performances includes a general outline of what each of them entails, prominent examples drawn from the corpus, as well as a discussion of their performative purposes. However, a major specificity of transgressive performances is that they are all directly based on the opposition to a particular norm, whether that norm is implicit or explicit. As such, I dedicate space in each category to highlight for each of these transgressions the specific norm they are disrupting. Finally,

I have additionally sub-divided these performances of transgressions depending on what type of norms they are breaking and inductively identified three categories: (a) performances disrupting interactional norms; (b) performances disrupting rhetoric norms; and (c) performances disrupting theatrical norms.

I define interactional norms as norms referring to the way an actor acts in relationship with others, that is, the rules that are expected to preside over the way two individuals interact. In the case of democratic elections, they typically include respect for the other candidates, attentively listening to differing perspectives, treating others as equals to oneself and so on. Rhetoric norms are the rules that are located at the discursive level and frame the way political speech ought to be transmitted. They encompass expectations around a certain register of speech for politicians that is factual and sophisticated while also respecting prescriptive rules of formality and grammar. However, rhetoric norms go beyond textual speech, as these rules apply to non-verbal components like ways to dress and behave on stage, as well as the gestural repertoire (Dutt 2021) of the performer. The main difference between interactional and rhetoric norms is that interactional norms take shape in the relationship between several actors while rhetoric norms are self-contained and do not imply other actors.

Last but not least, theatrical norms refer to a more abstract level of rules which constrain political performances. Going back to the discussion in Chapter 3 on the distinction between artistic and social performances, I showcased the implicit rules of naturalism and realism that come with social performances. In other words, 'a defining feature of a good [social] performance may be that it does not look like a performance at all' (Saward 2010: 69). Such a rule constitutes the prime example of a theatrical norm which comes with the tacit agreement between political actors not to highlight the theatrical nature of their performances. By hiding their devices and their mechanics, these tacit rules make the premeditated and carefully crafted dramaturgy of politics appear spontaneous and authentic. Using the case of Trump, Grobe showcased the power of such a transgressive move when facing norm-abiding politicians:

> [Trump] frames their stale liberal-democratic theater within his own fresh populist performance, demonstrating the difference between the two. The contrast is important: staying fully in character while he plays presidential, and then dropping character to make snarky asides to the audience, Trump implies that politicians behave as if they're starring in a stuffy, realist play. (Grobe 2020: 795)

Beyond an overarching norm like that of naturalism, there are many corollary rules like the lack of acknowledgment of theatrical artifices, be they the make-up applied before a public intervention, the coaching to improve their elocution or the work of a team dedicated to the *mise-en-scène* of their own rallies. Or,

for another example, one could point at the stigma associated with the use of *ad personam* attacks (Viktorovitch 2021: 97) that emphasise the disconnect between a politician's public *persona* and their private behaviour, the 'backstage' in a Goffmanian terminology. Although these theatrical norms are for the most part tacit, they also include more 'concrete' traditions and customs, like the formal rules of a debate, the laws that preside over an election and determine who can participate, under which conditions and so on.

In short, interactional norms focus on the relationship between political actors, rhetoric norms focus on the way actors express themselves, while theatrical norms care about the theatrical nature of the political game. Of course, this distinction is to some extent arbitrary since these various levels of political performances do not stand in isolation but are interconnected and overlapping. For example, a transgression like interrupting a rival during a public debate can be interpreted as a simultaneous breach of all three levels: a disrespect to one's opponent on the interactional level, an aggressive display of behaviour on the rhetoric level as well as a disdain for the rules of debating on the theatrical level. However, such a distinction remains analytically helpful to separate transgressive performances from one another depending on the main type of norm that they break.

Performances disrupting interactional norms

In this first category of transgressive performances, I will focus on disruptions of interactional norms, the rules determining how a politician ought to behave towards their peers. I will start with the most openly aggressive form of interactional transgression, *ad personam* objections, that includes all forms of direct attacks and insults aimed at one's rival, discussing their prevalence in Trump's case. I will then discuss a less linguistically straightforward type of transgression: insinuations and more precisely what Bell (1997) called 'venomous innuendos', showing notably that they are more common in Le Pen's case. Following this, I will discuss the dialogical practice of interruption, exploring its relationship with the concept of humour and comedic timing. Lastly, I will tackle the fundamental norm forbidding physical aggression in politics and discuss how Trump used his intimidating body language during the second debate to play with the limits of this norm in order to assert his power and control.

1. Direct ad personam attacks

Out of all the transgressive performances that emerged from the corpus, direct attacks were the most straightforward and aggressive way to break the rules of political interaction. They operate through an explicit criticism of one's rival personally instead of engaging with the content of their claims, also known in rhetoric as an *ad personam* objection (Viktorovitch 2021: 97–100). Although I mentioned *ad personam* attacks as potential transgressions of theatrical norms

when they focus specifically on disconnect between public image and private behaviour, this rhetorical figure can expand beyond that to include any direct derogatory comment on one's rival including their physical traits, mental abilities and so on. In all cases, these constitute a clear interactional transgression which break the norm of respect owed towards others, one of the most fundamental rules of political debating. It is important here to mark a gradation in intensity between insults, which are the rudest form of *ad personam*, and other forms of direct attacks, which are less openly disrespectful. Although attacks and insults are found in the discourse of many politicians,[1] it is a type of transgression that is much more common and central in the populist repertoire, appearing substantially more in both the cases of Trump and Le Pen than for their respective rivals. However, although the number of occurrences in the corpus shows that direct insults and attacks were salient for both, it would be unfair to say that Trump and Le Pen deployed them to the same extent. Indeed, the balance was heavily tilted in Trump's direction who used them nearly three times more often than Le Pen. This is not surprising given that this has become one of the signatures of Trump's rhetoric (Quealy 2021).

In the corpus, there is great variety in the ways Donald Trump and Le Pen attacked their political rivals. The most straightforward ones were direct insults addressed directly at their rival during the debates, like Trump calling Clinton a 'nasty woman' (F: xxxiv) at the end of the third debate or Le Pen describing Macron as submissive, emphasising her point in an anaphora where she described him as the 'candidate lying prostrate' (*'candidat à plat ventre'*) [C: lxii]. However, 'name-calling' during political debates remained rare, arguably a demonstration of the resilience of the norm forbidding politicians from directly insulting one another. But, in rallies, where the performance is aimed first and foremost at sympathisers and where accountability is less immediate than in a live debate with a contradictor, both politicians did not shy away from insulting their rival. Trump for instance used the demeaning nickname of 'Crooked Hillary' (B: vi) and called other politicians 'stupid' (B: iv, viii; F: xxxi), while Le Pen framed other French politicians as 'idiots' (C: viii) and described Macron as an *'eurobellâtre'* (A: vi), a neologism combining '*eurolâtre*', itself a demeaning neologism based on *'idolâtrie*' to refer to politicians allegedly 'venerating' the European Union, and '*bellâtre*' which refers to a handsome yet vapid man. While it was not present at all in the case of Le Pen, one last type of less explicit insult that deserves mention in Trump's case is his use of 'bodily parodies' (Goldstein et al. 2020), the use of a caricatural imitation to attack the way his opponents talk and act. In the corpus, he only mimicked Clinton's language a few times during his rally, but his more offensive insults, notably of a disabled journalist, made substantial headlines and warrants a mention here to show that insults need not be formulated verbally to have a powerful impact.

Beyond these occasional insults which remained scarce, direct attacks were much more frequent. Some of these directly targeted their rivals while remaining at the limit of the insult. Throughout the presidential debate, Le Pen for instance successively depicted Macron as 'scornful' (C: ix), 'not credible' (C: xi) and 'young on the outside but old on the inside' (C: xxxiii). Returning an attack initially coined by Bernie Sanders, Clinton's rival during the 2016 Democratic primaries, Trump repeatedly criticised her for having 'bad judgement' (E: xiii, xvii, xxi; F: xxviii), adding throughout the debates that she also had a problematic 'temperament' (D: xxxi), was 'outsmarted' by most foreign leaders (F: xi–xii), lacked 'stamina', 'business ability' or even any 'basic ability' (D: xxxv). In a similar vein to these personal attacks, several of the *ad personam* arguments during the debates focused on an aspect of the past of their rival, framing them in an extremely negative light. Macron was hence called by Le Pen a 'cold-hearted banker' (C: ii) who only knows how to 'skin alive' ('*dépecer*') companies and sell them (C: vi), while Clinton's career was presented as being a 'disaster as a senator' (E: xxiii), by Trump who also admitted with false humility that the 'one thing [she] has over [him] is experience', before further discrediting her by specifying that it was 'bad experience' (F: xvii).

Going even further than personal attacks, both candidates used *ad personam* arguments by association, that is attacks seeking to debase one's adversary because they are allegedly linked to a discredited person or group. This is a point of intersection with anti-elite performances of identity discussed in the previous chapter, which conflate their rival with the entirety of a failing establishment. Trump made this connection explicit by image association in his national advertisement where shots of Clinton appeared as he talked about 'those who control the levers of power' and 'global power structure' (H: i). As such, whenever he mentioned the 'political establishment' (H: i), Hillary Clinton was both figuratively and literally associated with it. In addition to these connections with the political elites, other attacks by association focused on personal ties. Trump repeatedly developed the constant connection between Hillary Clinton and specific politicians like Barack Obama, described as 'an incompetent president' (B: v) and, more prominently, her husband President Bill Clinton (D: vi; E: v). In the former case, Clinton's lineage as the Secretary of State of the outgoing administration made her the perfect target as the *de facto* representative of the last eight years of Democratic presidency.

Whether it was association with a failing outgoing administration or with a controversial figure, Le Pen levered similarly aggressive *ad personam* objections by association on her rival. Even if Macron was less susceptible to these attacks than Clinton given that he had left the government two years prior to the election, associating Macron with Hollande remained one of the central attacks Le Pen relentlessly pushed against him, focusing on his former status as minister and personal adviser. She bluntly nicknamed him 'Hollande Jr.' (C: xl) during

the debate and went even further during her speech by describing Macron as Hollande's 'sales representative' and the infantilising 'baby Hollande' (A: xii). Going even beyond the already strong words Trump used against Obama, Le Pen decried Hollande as 'an undecisive and incompetent president [that] lowered the presidency to the depths of ridicule' (A: xii).

Overall, direct *ad personam* attacks were a shared component of both Le Pen and Trump's repertoire. Even if Le Pen comparatively used less insults than Trump, she was on par with him regarding direct attacks, whether they were personal or by association. Although they are generally seen as dishonourable (Viktorovitch 2021: 97), these transgressive attacks provide an image of truthfulness for the transgressive performers, appearing more willing to speak 'truth to power' than their peers who choose not to use the strongest attacks at their disposal. By 'shouting' aloud things no politicians would dare say, this type of transgressive performance also makes them appear brave, as well as closer to the opinions that many citizens have about their representatives but are never able to voice.

2. Venomous innuendos and insinuations

While direct *ad personam* attacks had variations depending on their intensity and targets, they all shared the characteristic of being univocal and straightforward, or in other words, unambiguous in their aggressivity. By contrast, many transgressive attacks in the corpus were characterised by their passive-aggressive component, by which I mean that hostile meaning was mediated and not directly understandable without tone, context and other forms of extra-verbal information. They typically took the shape of insinuations, that is 'the communication of beliefs, requests, and other attitudes 'off-record', so that the speaker's main communicative point remains unstated' (Camp 2018: 42). Insinuations can be weaponised when they are turned into innuendos. Inspired by the concept of 'venomous innuendo' (Bell 1997), I define innuendos as a type of insinuation that contains a veiled or ambiguous reference attacking another actor.

This transgressive strategy was particularly prominent in Le Pen's case, notably during the debate. In what was one of the most commented quotes of the 2017 presidential debate, she admonished Macron by telling him 'You are trying to play student and teacher with me, but, as far as I'm concerned, that's not really my thing' (C: x). This brief sentence could be read at first glance as a direct *ad personam* attack focusing on Macron's professorial tone who was schooling Le Pen on economic issues. Another interpretation, perhaps only obvious to savvy observers of French presidential debates, is that Le Pen was placing herself in the lineage of Mitterrand who used 'I am not your student' as a comeback to Giscard d'Estaing's inquisitive questions in 1981. But the innuendo here was obvious to most of the French audience who, after it

had become heavily publicised, knew that Macron was married to his former French teacher in high school, Brigitte Macron. Especially given their unusual age gap of nearly twenty-five years and the circumstances of their meeting while Macron was still a teenager, their relationship had become a topic of controversy in the otherwise flawless storytelling that Macron had woven around his life. With this innuendo, Le Pen was alluding to a deeply intimate and personal part of Macron's character, drawing attention not only to his somewhat pedantic speaking style but also to his masculinity and romantic preferences. Another innuendo that perpetuated this theme of gender and masculinity was Le Pen's claim that, 'regardless of who wins the election, . . . France will be led by a woman, either me or Ms Merkel' (C: li), the German chancellor at the time. By blending her usual allegation that France was losing its sovereignty within a German-dominated European Union with undertones associated with power and gender, Le Pen managed with this quip to criticise Macron on seemingly political grounds while also evoking more ambiguously images of a weak masculinity and solidifying the insinuation of his allegedly submissive position vis-à-vis women.

Although they were less frequent, Trump also occasionally mobilised innuendos to criticise his adversaries. A frequent one that appeared repeatedly in both his rallies and during debates referred to the physical fitness of Hillary Clinton. When he did not directly attack her as lacking stamina, he often did it in a less overt way. During the first debate, he for instance contrasted once more his own rallies all over the United States with Clinton's secluded preparation for the debates, saying '[she] decided to stay home and that's okay' (D: xxii). Yet again, although Trump seemed to say that it was an acceptable choice, the tone and context of the sentence made it clear that this was not the case. Even as Clinton answered by reframing preparation in a positive light, Trump embedded within this claim two innuendos: firstly, that Clinton was physically unable to keep up with him, and secondly that she was not a naturally charismatic speaker like him. Another central innuendo throughout Trump's campaign pertained to the implicit idea that Clinton was a criminal protected by the system. Because he never explicitly detailed what her crimes were and left them open to interpretation, this made it difficult for Clinton to find a counter to this particularly disrespectful innuendo. In the second debate, when she claimed that it was 'awfully good that someone with the character of Donald Trump [was] not in charge of the law in our country' (E: vii), he immediately clapped back: 'Because you'd be in jail' (E: viii). This one-liner, which echoed the frequent chants of 'Lock her up' that Trump encouraged during his rallies (B: ii), further insisted on the insinuation of Clinton's alleged criminal status.

Overall, the major difference between them was that Trump's innuendos were not ambiguous given that they echoed his overt attacks, whereas Le Pen maintained the ambivalence of her innuendos which were used to convey different

attacks than the direct ones, separating much more clearly the two and using innuendos to make more pernicious accusations. Overall, just like direct attacks, innuendos are also *ad personam* objections which transgress the norm of respect towards one's partner. However, given that they rely on adding a layer of hostile intent to an apparently inoffensive sentence, they disrupt the norm of respect with more subtlety. They provide an opportunity to attack without appearing openly aggressive and confrontational, which was central to Le Pen's strategy of softening of her image and explains why she used more indirect attacks than direct ones. More than this, even to a partner who understands this implicit meaning, they allow for 'plausible deniability', meaning that 'even an uncooperative [listener] cannot react adversarially to it' (Pinker et al. 2008: 833). This hence makes innuendos more generally a transgression of the norm of forthrightness in expression, allowing them to convey a specific message to only one part of the audience without openly stating it in plain terms. This is exactly how the far-right strategy of 'dog-whistling' functions (Haney-López 2015) which Trump and Le Pen used repeatedly when talking about Islam and immigration, demonstrating the versatility of insinuations as both a medium to implicitly convey xenophobia as well as a powerful interactional disruption.

3. Interruptions and comedic timing

Interruptions refer to instances where an actor speaks while someone else is already talking, or more precisely when this other speaker holds formal or informal speaking rights. Because it requires another person on stage, interruptions are a specific transgression that are exclusive to dialogic and confrontational performances, which means that the debates are the only performances in the corpus where they are present. In both cases, they quantitatively eclipsed every other type of transgression during those performances, with more than 120 occurrences for Trump across the debates and close to 100 occurrences for Le Pen during her only debate with Macron. Moreover, they were three to five times more prone to using interruptions than their rivals.

A notable feature of debates is that speaking rights in this context are not just an abstract concept depending on the participant's relative understanding of the dynamics of dialogue. Instead, debates are structured by formal rules of speaking turn and time which are physically embodied by the moderators in charge of giving and withdrawing speaking rights. This therefore made interruptions more identifiable and less subjective than in more informal contexts. As was mentioned above, interruptions are a type of transgression that overlaps across all the levels of performances. However, they primarily disrupt the interactional norm of respect towards others by being a punctual assertion that one's speaking rights are more important than that of others, which is why it is discussed in this category. Interruptions can be distinguished depending on whether they were targeted at other participants or at the moderators.

The former type constitutes most occurrences of my corpus, which I interpret as evidence that the respect owed to the function of moderator is more resistant to disruptions than that owed to one's rival. But a more interesting way to separate them is to consider their purpose. Many of them were just brief denials of assertions that the candidates deemed so urgent to challenge that it could not wait for their turn to speak, like the very succinct 'Wrong' that Trump used more than ten times across the various debates.

But the most notable use of interruptions was through repartees, witty retorts demonstrating the performer's comedic timing. An example for Le Pen could be found early in the debate when Macron chastised 'the incompetence of governments for so many years' to which she answered 'including yours' (C: ii). The more memorable repartees in Le Pen's performance, however, appeared at the very end of the debate. Appearing to be on the defensive, she relentlessly interrupted Macron's conclusion with swift comments. After he called for a France 'without divisions', she retorted that 'you already reconciled the MEDEF and the CGT' (C: lxvi), respectively the largest right-wing employer federation and left-wing trade union in France. Following his claim that he would lead a 'renewal' of the political class, she sarcastically added 'with all the socialists, the socialist ministers, the socialist MPs' (C: lxvi), using Macron's support from the outgoing administration to showcase the hypocrisy of his claim. But the most memorable, as well as the most shocking, repartee of the evening happened at the very last moment of Macron's conclusion. Just as one of the moderators was congratulating them for reaching perfect equality in speaking time, Le Pen broke all conventions by interjecting after the customary end of the debate. As Macron concluded by saying 'This is what I want, and what I will lead', Le Pen jumped in and added 'With François Hollande' (C: lxviii), a continuation of her previous interruptions that intended to emphasise one last time that Macron was nothing but the heir, or worse the puppet, of the outgoing president. That final repartee was, however, widely regarded as excessive and rude, especially after the formal end of the debate (Pecnard 2017), even by the moderators themselves.

Given that American debates traditionally take place in front of a live audience, who beforehand 'promised to remain silent, no cheers, boos, or other interruptions so we and you can focus on what the candidates have to say' (F: i), it was easier in Trump's case to tell whether repartees were successful in convincing the audience. Indeed, although the exact reason for cheers or boos remains a matter of interpretation, their very presence despite this promise to remain silent demonstrates a certain level of engagement and approval by the live audience. In the second debate, whose town hall format offered more proximity between actors and audiences, Trump's repartees led to the crowd erupting in cheers or claps, like the aforementioned comeback to Clinton saying that it is good Trump was not in charge of the law, to which he answered 'because

you'd be in jail' (E: viii). Beyond his sarcastic words of praise ('that was a great pivot' [F: x]), Trump had a more difficult time in the third debate but still managed to make the public laugh a couple more times, notably when he genuinely but loudly thanked the moderator for using one of Clinton's quotes against herself ('Thank you' [F: ix])

Overall, interruptions in a dialogic setting were extremely common for both political actors. Focusing more specifically on witty comments, even though Trump had mixed fortune with the presence of a live audience, his comedic sense of timing allowed his repartees to land more successfully than Le Pen's which were more repetitive and aggressive. This difference can largely be attributed to Trump's performative labour as a reality TV celebrity who had honed this craft of one-liners over more than a decade of performing in the media, in contrast to Le Pen who had developed a reputation as a pugnacious debater but not as a particularly humorous one. Regarding the purpose of interruptions in general, the main reason they were used was to maintain control over the general dynamic of the performance. Leaving one's adversary able to develop their point fully might lead the conversation to go in directions where they are more confident and thus have an advantage. By interrupting them, transgressive actors push their rival to lose their train of thought or divert their attention. Although many of the interruptions in the corpus were not successful in disturbing their rivals, their sheer quantity impacted the flow of the debates. They prevented substantial discussions by focusing on details and even overwhelmed the moderators, as was particularly the case for Saint-Cricq and Jakubyszyn in the Le Pen/Macron debate and, to a lesser extent, Cooper and Raddatz in the second Trump/Clinton debate.

4. Intimidating body language and veiled aggression

The last type of transgressions disrupting interactional norms that was salient in the corpus was the use of an intimidating body language, and more specifically the invasion of another person's personal space (Sommer 1969). Just like interruptions, this type of transgressive performance was only possible in a dialogic context, that is when two or more actors interact in close physical proximity. In extension of the legal norm that forbids physical violence, this type of transgression is opposed to the symbolic norm in modern democracies that physical interaction between political actors ought to be minimal. Indeed, elections can only be considered a 'battle' or a 'duel' on a metaphorical and performative level. And although Trump allegedly 'dream[ed] about' (B: v) accepting Joe Biden's challenge to 'take him behind the gym', this kind of *bravado* is mostly understandable through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and gender norms (Leone and Parrott 2018).

The only performances where the political rivals appeared in physical proximity to one another were the debates. As part of this shift from a literal to a

theatrical confrontation, the only moment of direct contact between the politicians were the handshakes at the beginning and end of each debate. In addition to being a showcase of fair-play and respect for the rules of the debate, handshakes also constitute a corporeal way for two opponents to metaphorically demonstrate their respect for one another as well as their non-threatening behaviour. Although neither politician actively violated the fundamental norm banning violence, a subtler way to play with the limits of this norm was to do so through one's body language and stage occupation. In this regard, the contrast was important between Le Pen and Trump, especially comparing the performances where the rules forced them to remain steady, the first and third debate of the 2016 campaign where Trump and Clinton were standing behind a lectern and the 2017 debate where Le Pen and Macron were sitting on opposite ends of a table. While Le Pen appeared much more dynamic and mobile than Macron, who remained remarkably steady throughout the entire debate, parts of her behaviour like leaning back, repeatedly checking and touching her notes or her constantly shifting gaze hinted at a form of unease or even retreat. Trump, on the other hand, repeatedly extended his arms as much as possible to cover both ends of his lectern, making very frequent use of his hands to accompany his words, expressing intensity by pointing fingers and showing certainty with small circles. Taken altogether, this made Trump's kinetic presence more affirmed and engaging than Clinton's in the debates.

Furthermore, the second debate offered unique insights into Trump's body language because of the peculiar rules of the town hall format in which politicians are expected to move across the stage to directly answer questions from an audience of undecided voters. Unfortunately, there was no close equivalent to this type of performance during the French presidential elections, which means that no direct comparison could be made with Le Pen. In this town hall debate, Trump's movements made him a very imposing and at times intimidating presence: although he refrained from directly invading Clinton's personal space, which would have been interpreted as a direct aggression, he remained a looming presence when she was speaking, getting close to her on multiple occasions and imposing his proximity not only to Clinton, but also to the cameras capturing the debate. This was made especially apparent when contrasting it with Clinton, whose movements remained functional, moving closer than Trump did to the voters who asked a question, but immediately returning behind her lectern and rarely acknowledging the kinetic presence of her adversary on the stage, or playing to the cameras like Trump did.

This intimidating use of body language for Trump allowed him to project control and power during these staged confrontations, demonstrating ease and comfort as well as an authoritative attitude. The fact that Le Pen did not get a similar chance to move on the stage makes it difficult to establish a comparison, although some parallels can be made with her political advertisement (G: i)

where she was seen projecting a similarly assertive body language and adopting several of the codes of hegemonic masculinity: walking with determination, standing out in the middle of a crowd of journalists, exaggeratingly showing her command of a sailing boat. In a surprising contrast, Trump himself was only scarcely featured in his own national advertisement (H: i), preferring to focus instead on depicting the failings of the political establishment and images of the people. In the absence of a direct comparison with Le Pen, it is impossible to assume that Le Pen would have been as intimidating as Trump, had she performed in a similar format. However, what emerged from the corpus is that Trump was not afraid of subverting the norm of avoiding physical confrontation and playing with its limits.

Performances disrupting rhetoric norms

Being a politician in any country comes with its own set of expectations regarding the way a politician ought to express oneself, and there are many ways to subvert the expectations of the audience. The first type of transgression I explore in this section is the subtle process of linguistic differentiation, which means adapting to other politician's speeches to distinguish oneself from them linguistically. Building on the thought-provoking work of McDonnell and Ondelli (2020), I will challenge the preconceived idea that populism relies on a simpler language, focusing instead on the use of informality as a differentiation strategy. After this, I will address the complex topic of emotions and how they relate to the norm of rationality to show the increased importance of *pathos* over *logos* in Le Pen and Trump's discourse. Building on the humorous effects already mentioned in innuendos and comedic timing, I will elaborate more generally on the use of humour to transgress the gendered norm of solemnity. Lastly, I will explore the importance of visual and behavioural elements in transgressing the rules, developing the iconography of a visual transgression for each case: Trump's red baseball cap and Le Pen's logo as a navy blue rose.

1. Linguistic differentiation and informality

Speech is shaped by a wide variety of norms that limit what can be discussed, impose a language register and more generally provide a standard to emulate. Given the highly contextual nature of these linguistic norms, it is difficult to make sweeping statements about what is expected of politicians in every country. However, when making comparisons with mainstream politics, many scholars on populism contrast the sophistication and complexity of 'high' (Ostiguy 2017) politics with the so-called *Stammtisch* (beer table) discourse (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 64) or 'tabloid style of populism' characterised by the 'use of simple, direct language' (Canovan 1999: 5). Indeed, it is common in the literature to hold as 'a self-evident truth that right-wing populists use simple language [to] differentiate themselves from linguistically convoluted political

elites' (McDonnell and Ondelli 2020: 1) although this claim had yet to be systematically evaluated. In their thought-provoking cross-national study, which used multiple measures to assess the linguistic simplicity of various populist leaders with that of their mainstream counterparts, McDonnell and Ondelli (2020) offered eye-opening results as well as a more nuanced perspective on this question of simple language. Indeed, in a quantitative analysis that included the period examined in this corpus, they concluded that Trump was only marginally simpler in his speeches than Clinton and, even more surprisingly, that 'Le Pen's language during the 2017 presidential campaign was markedly more complex than Macron's' (McDonnell and Ondelli 2020: 8).

These results challenged the intuition of populism's alleged linguistic simplicity, encouraging the need to consider language in a more context-sensitive way. Indeed, many scholars have shown a growing trend of linguistic simplification in politics in both France (Arnold 2019) and the United States (Lim 2008; Savoy 2017). Considering this trend, one can thus identify two strategies of transgressions which depend on the standards of their rivals. On the one hand, Trump implicitly embraced this simplifying trend in opposition to the eloquent and sophisticated style of rhetoric embodied by his predecessor, Barack Obama (Kazemian and Hashemi 2014). On the other hand, Le Pen chose to place herself in opposition with Macron – who had adopted 'slogan-based simpler communication techniques derived from the United States model' (McDonnell and Ondelli 2020: 10) – by renewing instead with the traditional style of older French politicians. Most influential among these for Le Pen was Charles De Gaulle (Arnold 2019), whom she even explicitly mobilised as a reference (A: xi; C: liv). Even focusing only on speeches, the conclusion from this analysis is that being linguistically transgressive is very dependent on the national and local context where a politician performs. As such, it cannot be summarised by a binary opposition between the allegedly simple vocabulary of populists on the one hand, and the complex language of elite politicians on the other hand, thus reinforcing the need to move beyond the 'low' as the defining characteristic of populism.

However, considering only the speeches of Trump and Le Pen did not offer a holistic portrayal of their language as performers, which is why it was important to contrast this with the cases of the debates. An important specificity of debates is the absence of a fixed written script, and hence the reduced influence of other people, including for instance advisers or ghost-writers. This may lead to a drastically different way of speaking when political actors are left to their own devices, which was clear in this corpus but also confirmed more systematically by sociolinguistic analysis of the two campaigns. 'When debating with other candidates, Trump uses a smaller range of vocabulary, repeats his phrases and uses shorter words and shorter sentences' (Wang and Liu 2018: 308), which led Savoy (2018: 189) to talk about two distinct styles for Trump

in debates and in speeches, a stark contrast which is also apparent in my corpus. Likewise, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2019: 47) argued that Le Pen adopted a much lower register than Macron during their debate.

But to understand the commonalities between the two *modi operandi* of each politician, one needs to move beyond the quantitative outlook of measures like language complexity in sociolinguistics to also consider the qualitative idiosyncrasies found for Le Pen and Trump regardless of the type of performance. After leaving behind the notion of linguistic simplicity, I argue that engaging with the qualitative notion of (in)formality is more productive to understand this comparative case study. Indeed, while neither politician constantly used an informal language, which would be an excessive transgressive leap for their respective audiences, Le Pen and Trump regularly crossed the line of formality by using colloquialisms.

For Le Pen, these informal expressions included the repeated uses of *'boire un coup'* ('have a nip' [C: iv; xxvii]) and *'planqué'* ('stashed' [A: ix; C: xi]) or one-off expressions like '*c'est du bidon total*' ('it's total baloney' [C: xxviii]). But even though Le Pen used colloquialism much more than her rival did, her use of informality remained far behind Trump's. A notable feature of many of his informal expressions is that they were often aimed at others, whether it was at the vague figure of the political elite – described as 'stupid' (B: iv, viii; F: xxxi) and 'political hacks' (D: xii; F: xxxii) – or at the embodiment of this elite on the stage, Clinton, framed as a 'lousy president' (B: i) and called 'a nasty woman' (F: xxxiv). Trump's most memorable colloquialisms were repeated so much that they functionally became slogans: catchphrases that his supporters would instantly recognise and associate with him like 'knock the hell out of ISIS' (B: v; D: xxix; E: iii) and 'big league' (B: iii; D: viii; E: xix; F: viii).[2] Although the number of colloquial expressions remained low, which is notably why a quantitative approach would fail to capture this dimension of language, their occasional use produced a strong impression in the audience, making them particularly salient as they 'gave a particular coloration' (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2019: 54) to the whole performance.

Although I highlighted here the prominence of informality as a transgressive strategy for Le Pen and Trump, the main argument is that it was only one facet of a larger attempt for them to distinguish themselves linguistically from their respective rivals. As the discussion above on language simplicity highlighted, it is fundamental for the literature on populism to abandon morally loaded dichotomies like low/high (Ostiguy 2009) or bad/good manners (Moffitt 2016: 55) that carry an implicit value judgement to consider with more subtlety the way transgression operates. Instead of uncritically associating populism with simple language, a more productive way of conceiving its specificity thus lies in what I called linguistic differentiation, which may take the form of simpler rhetoric just as it could mean adopting a more traditional way of speaking.

2. Affective discourse and emotions

The next norm I will discuss is that of rationality, which finds its expression in politics through moderate and emotionally neutral discourse. Eklundh (2019: 21) traced the scepticism for affects in political theory back to Descarte's strict separation between mind and body in which the former ought to take a dominant role for decision-making. Borrowing an Aristotelian terminology, this has led to the tacit superiority in politics of argumentation based on *logos* rather than on *pathos*, a phenomenon attested by Mouffe (2000: 146) who criticised this 'rationalist perspective dominant in liberal democratic political thought'. Even if, in practice, most politicians mobilise a combination of rational and emotional arguments, the transgression in the two case studies consisted in granting a more prominent, and at times dominant, role to affective discourse.

The first point to emphasise is that the emotions most prominently mobilised in this corpus were shaped by ideological content. Indeed, in both cases, they were typical of far-right discourse, including prominently nostalgia (Kenny 2017), humiliation (Homolar and Löfflmann 2021), loss (Taggart 2001) or fear (Wodak 2020). A nostalgic vision of politics was particularly obvious in the key slogans of the campaigns. Even if Le Pen brought more visible emphasis to the slogan 'in the name of the people' as a way to perform her attachment to 'the people', another recurring motto present in every performance of the corpus was *'remettre la France en ordre'* ('bring order back to France') [A: xi; C: lxv; G: i]. In addition to the reference to 'order', typical of the far-right stance of 'law and order', what I want to emphasise more specifically here is the use of *'remettre'* ('bring back') which is a choice of wording that implies the existence of a better orderly past and the necessity to go *back* to it.

Even more prominently, Trump's iconic slogan, 'Make America Great Again', was characterised by a similar nostalgic logic encapsulated in the word 'again', implying that America used to be great but no longer is. This nostalgia was thus grounded in a loss that is also performatively articulated in their rhetoric, a point which will be developed in Chapter 6 when I talk about the crisis of the heartland (Taggart 2004). Le Pen did it extensively during her speech, as illustrated in a noteworthy anaphora where she described the French people as *'dépossédés'* ('deprived') [A: ii] of a lengthy list of elements including their 'sovereignty', 'law', 'territory', 'factories', 'jobs' and even 'hope'. Focusing more specifically on economic loss, Trump repeatedly used the image of a country that had been 'bled dry' (B: i; H: i), or even using one of his typical hyperboles by talking about 'the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world' (B: iii).

In addition to this loss, another dominant emotion mobilised by both politicians was fear, which found its most frequent expression in the use of a violent vocabulary. This violence was referred to in symbolic terms as much as in literal ones. Le Pen for instance metaphorically argued that the educational

system had been 'ransacked' by former governments (C: lviii) and called Macron an expert at 'skinning companies alive' (C: vi). But the violence she mentioned was often literal, speaking of 'police officers systematically attacked and burned' (C: xxxix), referencing terrorist events where French citizens were 'beheaded', 'had their throat slit' and even the specifics of 'explosive belts' (A: viii). In contrast with Le Pen, Trump was much less metaphorical whenever he mobilised violent vocabulary. He did speak figuratively of 'destroyed' youth (F: vi) and economy (F: xxxiv), but his rhetoric was otherwise systematically characterised at some point or another by graphic imagery. He for instance talked in great details of a farmer 'who was brutally beaten by illegal immigrants and left to bleed to death in his home' (B: v), of 'get[ting] shot in the street' (D: xxviii), made references to 'ISIS chopping off heads and frankly drowning people in steel cages' (E: iii), and even depicted abortion as 'rip[ping] the baby out of the womb of the mother' (F: v). This violent rhetoric fuelled fears in the audience by associating threatening images with their xenophobic or conservative arguments.

Overall, the prominent mobilisation of affective discourse was one of the central transgressions of rhetoric norms, disrupting the domination of *logos* by relying more intensely on *pathos*. More generally, this discussion highlights the importance of going beyond rationality to understand the affective appeal of populism (Cossarini and Vallespín 2017). That said, it remains important to state once more that the type of emotions and affects that Le Pen and Trump emphasised was strongly determined by far-right ideology, which explains why nostalgia and fear were so prominent in the corpus.[3]

3. Humour and solemnity

Humour is a deeply contextual phenomenon that can take a myriad of forms. In his playful pastiche of Rancière's (2004) concept of the 'distribution of the sensible', Holm argued that humour can only be analysed in the context of a specific 'distribution of the nonsensical, in relation to which it is simultaneously dependant, constitutive and productive' (Holm 2017: 8). I will focus primarily on its general role as a disrupting force of the rhetoric norm of solemnity, but I will also briefly touch on its weaponising of sarcasm to disrupt the interactional norm of respect. Solemnity is a norm funded on the implicit premise that politics is a serious issue that cannot be treated lightly, which in turn implies a certain way for politicians to speak and behave accordingly in order to maintain the symbolic power of their position (Geertz 1983: 124–5). Thus, in electoral contexts, it is important for political actors to perform this solemnity, even more so in presidential elections where this suitability is captured in the culturally sensitive concept of presidentiality (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002). However, strictly adhering to this norm of solemnity may lead a politician to appear stiff, rigid and distant from their audience.

It is hence not surprising that transgressive politicians attempt to bypass this norm without completely breaking it. There are many ways to disrupt the performance of solemnity, but I will focus here on the parsimonious use of humour in the corpus. This notion of parsimony is important here because the norm of solemnity is anchored deeply enough in French and American politics that choosing to entirely abandon it was not an option for either presidential candidate. As such, in a similar way to the use of colloquialisms which remained rare for both Trump and Le Pen, humour was scarcely found in this corpus, but its use was powerful enough that it gave each of its occurrences a strong salience and memorability (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2019: 54). Meyer (2000: 323) argued that the two main rhetoric functions of humour are dividing a group or unifying it. Unsurprisingly, every occurrence of humour in the corpus was divisive, that is specifically excluding the opponent as the target of the joke to make the audience laugh not only *with* the transgressive actor but also *at* their rival. Speaking about the 2017 debate, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2019: 71) concurred by pointing that 'just like in previous [French] presidential debates, there is no example of 'gratuitous' humour that would entertain the audience without containing an attempt to hurt the other candidate'. Whether it is because uniting humour was not part of Le Pen and Trump's repertoire or because the very nature of the electoral context primarily encouraged the use of divisive humour, this absence of light-hearted or self-deprecating forms of comedy were testimonies of the resilience of the norm of solemnity and the corollary need for candidates to perform presidentiality.

Outside of the venomous innuendos and comedic interruptions discussed above, another form that direct humour took in the corpus was sarcasm, the use of verbal irony to mock or criticise another person (Dore 2018). For Le Pen, sarcasm was expressed through litotes like her ironic understatement that 'Mr. Fillon has not really been a visionary' (A: ix) or rhetorical questions like 'did you think you had invented hot water?' (C: lx). In contrast with Le Pen who used them more scarcely, antiphrases were the most common form of sarcasm mobilised by Trump in the corpus like his repeated use of false praise through expressions like 'great job' (B: iii, F: xxx), his description of pundits as 'real geniuses' (B: ii), or his ironic compliment to Clinton shifting topic by telling her 'That was a great pivot' (F: x). The main difference between them hence was in the variety of forms that it took in their discourse. While Trump mostly stuck to the tried-and-true form of the ironic antiphrasis with a few variations, Le Pen developed her sarcasm through a wider set of rhetorical devices, in line with the more general observation that she showed more diversity in her rhetorical repertoire.

To go further in this discussion on humour and how it was mobilised in the corpus, it is also important to engage with the non-textual dimensions of this humour. Indeed, in addition to the exact wording of a joke, there are many

elements that contribute to convincing one's audience of comedic capabilities. After her debate with Macron, Le Pen was criticised by external observers (Romain 2017) for her facial expression when trying to appear humorous. Many of her smiles were accused of not being sincere, in other words of being categorised as 'non-Duchenne smiles' (Gunnery and Hall 2014), that is smiles where only the zygomatic major muscle is used instead of most facial muscles. Likewise, her performance suffered because of her repeated use of 'volitional laughter' (Bryant and Aktipis 2014), social laughter used deliberately rather than spontaneously. This stands in sharp contrast with her other performances, particularly the advertisement, where her attempt at 'de-demonising' her image implied avoiding at all costs accusations of contrivance. This hence demonstrates the difficulty for a political actor to maintain every aspect of their *persona* flawlessly even in dramatically different performance contexts. An interesting point of comparison is the way Trump handled his facial expressions in the debates. Moving from a stern face with lowered brows, focused eyes and a shut mouth when he is listening to exaggerated mouth movements with raised brows and a tense jaw while he is speaking, Trump did not attempt to smile except on very specific occasions where he let out a smirk after the positive reception of his jokes.

In addition to the mixed reception to her attempts at being humorous, it is important to note that Le Pen used humour significantly less than Trump did. Given his former career as a reality TV actor, the fact that Trump was overall more prone to use humour than Le Pen was predictable. His sense of comedic timing allowed him to turn aggressive comments into entertaining one-liners. However, there were also other factors at play when considering Le Pen's relatively lower use of humour and the bad reception of her attempts, notably the heavily gendered norm of presidentiality. Indeed, Le Pen not only emerged from an outsider party seeking to be taken seriously, which explains why she chose to downplay the image of marginality that her father had built around the party, but she also faced a stronger challenge because of the association between hegemonic masculinity and presidential power (Smirnova 2018). Put differently, Le Pen faced the 'female presidentiality paradox': 'to be viewed as 'presidential', female candidates must compensate for their conspicuous masculinity deficit' (Anderson 2017: 133) by hyper-performing some of the traditional attributes of masculine power. More than this, this makes certain transgressive strategies, like the use of humour, riskier for female politicians who have more to lose if it fails. This means that telling jokes are 'performance[s] that can enhance masculinity and imperil or diminish femininity' whose 'transgression can have serious consequences . . . for women.' (Kuipers 2015: 49). Therefore, even though some of Trump's incursions were either unsuccessful or counterproductive, as was the case in the third debate where the audience occasionally stopped laughing *with* him and started laughing *at* him (F: xx–xxv), he did not suffer excessive

consequences or make headlines in the news for these failures. In stark contrast, Le Pen's performance during her debate with Macron was heavily criticised in the media where she was described as sardonic or even flippant (Girard 2017).

Overall, this discussion emphasised that humour really is a 'double-edged sword' (Meyer 2000), and particularly so in the case of political performers competing in an election with so much at stake. On the one hand, the occasional use of humour may make the performer appear more approachable and relatable, the performance more entertaining all the while simultaneously framing the other performer as stiff and overly serious. More than this, the use of divisive humour can be powerful in an electoral context with its twin effect of bringing the audience to one's side while simultaneously excluding the target of these jokes. On the other hand, unsuccessful jokes may make the transgressive performer look flippant and 'un-presidential', thus isolating them in an outsider position. Furthermore, one needs to consider other factors like the deeply gendered dimension of humour which partly accounted for the especially tough backlash that Le Pen suffered after the debate, where her laughter was framed as fake and her jokes as inappropriate, or Trump's *persona* as a TV entertainer which made him much more prone to weaponising humour in his campaign.

4. Visual transgressions: Iconography of a red cap and a blue rose

Considering rhetoric norms so far, I have primarily focused on linguistic elements, borrowing heavily on the literature on sociolinguistics to ground my arguments. However, especially when reconsidering the polyvalence of the Aristotelian notion of *ethos*, it became apparent that many extra-linguistic elements play a substantial role in how a performer is perceived. Whether it is vocal tone and range, physical presence, gaze, clothing, gestures, speaking rhythm, body language, or even visual elements associated with the actors, these factors that are constitutive of the idiosyncrasies of a politician may also be used to transgress rhetorical norms. This is why, acknowledging the need for a 'visual turn' to the study of populism (Moffitt 2022), I seek to address these elements.

I already mentioned above Trump's assertive body language and the way he used it during the town hall debate to flirt with open aggression by invading his rival's personal space, but his choice of clothing during rallies deserves a more sustained discussion. During Chapter 4's discussion of Trump's performance of the archetypal image of a businessman, I focused on his typical choice of a tailored suit and tie as an external symbol of power and masculinity. In addition, given that the dress codes in business and in politics are similar, the productive ambiguity of this costume let him embrace both his *ethos* as a businessman and his current image of a politician. However, although he stuck with this safe standard for all the debates and his advertisement, Trump also oftentimes adopted a slightly more casual style of clothing during his rallies, including the one that I studied in this corpus.

When contrasted with the typical way he was usually dressed, there were two main differences. Firstly, the absence of a tie combined with the first button of his shirt undone, which gave him a more relaxed and relatable look. Secondly, the use of a red baseball cap with written in white letters his signature slogan, 'Make America Great Again' or its abbreviation, MAGA. Although it was only a minor variation of the suit and tie standard of male politicians in the United States, this outfit arguably constituted a transgression of the norm of clothing expected of politicians. By dressing down when specifically talking to 'his' audience, Trump made the choice to appear less solemn than expected in such circumstances to bridge the symbolic gap between him and members of the crowd, another illustration of those performances of ordinariness. Furthermore, given that variations in fashion are extremely rare for male politicians, even a small change like not wearing a tie, let alone wearing a baseball cap gave him a memorable look that made him stand out from others. Much more than a fashion statement, the red MAGA cap became an 'icon' of Trump's style: one of those 'widely known and distributed images that represent historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media' (Bleiker 2018: 8). Because it was relatively easy to produce and cheap to sell during his rallies, the red baseball cap became a material as much as a symbolic marker of identification among Trump voters. It was only a logical extension of this point that his advertisement (H: i) featured those red caps ubiquitously during the crowd shots of his supporters. Moreover, beyond his supporters, Trump was often portrayed with this hat even in critical caricatures and parodies, showcasing even further the iconicity of this red baseball cap.

When moving in turn to Le Pen's visual and behavioural idiosyncrasies, it is first important to be reminded that one of her main strategic goals was to appear acceptable, 'de-demonized', and to do so, more than Trump ever had to, she needed to blend in and embrace the standards of French politics. From clothing to vocal range, because most of the non-verbal elements I mentioned are gendered, Le Pen faced the 'double bind' for female politicians (Jamieson 1995): women seeking to adopt the masculine attributes of power and leadership are criticised as being too aggressive, but those who chose to embrace the standards of femininity are seen as lacking ambition and gravity. In order to manage that double bind, Le Pen embraced the archetype of the 'iron lady', which 'entails embodying hegemonic femininity through physical appearance, while embracing personality traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as 'toughness' or 'straight-talking" (Geva 2020: 7). In the light of this factor, one better understands why Le Pen chose to be less transgressive than Trump when it comes to these deeply gendered factors, dressing and behaving conservatively, typically with light make-up and a feminine suit (Jansens 2019), to fit the delicate balance between hegemonic masculinity and femininity.

That being said, there was one major visual element which constituted a noteworthy form of transgression of rhetoric norms: her campaign logo which was a navy blue rose. Contrary to the prior electoral campaigns of her party, Le Pen chose not to use any of the symbols and imagery associated with her party, notably the flame which was too deeply associated with the far right, and even reduced as much as she could the references to her surname which was still largely associated with the scandalous image of her father. By contrast, she chose to disrupt the semiotic norms that restricted a choice of colours and symbols to specific parties by using the logo of a rose, a flower historically associated with the socialist party, coloured in blue, a colour traditionally linked to mainstream right-wing parties. This transgressive violation of norms was acknowledged by Le Pen herself who described her design of the rose as 'transgressive, a lot like [her]self' (Domenach 2016). In addition to being the semiotic embodiment of her rhetoric of going 'beyond left and right', this blue rose, which was visible on her lectern in most of her rallies, was also a way for her to straddle the line between femininity, with a choice of a flower to replace her party's divisive flame, and masculinity, by reclaiming the symbol of the governing socialist power. Furthermore, this aesthetic choice was part of a larger strategy that also saw Le Pen reclaim her first name as a strategic reversal of the stigma faced by female politicians in France (Matonti 2013: 16). Emphasising her first name was thus more than a way for her to perform femininity, it was above all a deliberate part of her *dédiabolisation* agenda and a means to develop her personal image beyond the Le Pen brand. When contextualised with the polysemy of her first name, Marine ('navy'), Le Pen's strategic decision of choosing a *navy* blue rose became even more significant as a transgression of various rhetorical norms, from the semiotic norms of French politics to the established standards of her political family, and even the gender norms of hegemonic masculinity.

Performances disrupting theatrical norms

As was already argued in the theoretical discussion about the difference between artistic and social performances in societies characterised by their antitheatrical prejudice (Grobe 2020), a specificity of an effective political performance is 'that it does not look like a performance at all' (Saward 2010: 69). In the context of this discussion of norms, this means that, although there are definite rules about the way the political game is being played, the most fundamental theatrical norm is naturalism. Starting a political career comes with the tacit understanding that politicians should acknowledge as little as possible this inherent theatricality of politics.

But, as other scholars have suggested, naturalism 'as a necessary condition of effective political performance had little purchase on Trump, for whom the lines between the reality TV star, the celebrity businessman, and the forty-fifth

President of the United States were never clear' (Day and Wedderburn 2022: 7). In an overt challenge to the ahistorical way Alexander (2006, 2010) framed fusion as the defining goal of any social performance, Grobe declared the end of the reign of naturalism in American politics:

> Performance has never been so central to America's political life nor so roundly rejected either. Before Trump, Jeffrey Alexander thought he knew why: people long for naturalism in their leaders, for a performance of power they can really believe. But America's politics has gone Brechtian, its apparatus on full display. (Grobe 2020: 793)

By Brechtian, Grobe refers to the specificities of German playwright Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, a radical form of theatre that does not ask its audience to suspend its disbelief but instead heightens its self-awareness through a distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*). And indeed, parallels have been established between Trump's theatricality and this rupture from the codes of naturalism, as was compellingly developed by Day and Wedderburn (2022) who showcased his use of the excessive and over-the-top codes of pro-wrestling in diplomacy. In this section, I will show the Brechtian aspect of Trump's transgressions, and to a lesser extent that of Le Pen's, by highlighting their use of what I call metapolitical comments: seemingly innocuous interventions which play an instrumental role in breaking the fourth wall of politics, making them appear closer to their audience.

In addition to this radical break with the codes of political theatre, which is salient in the corpus, I also want to showcase the fact that there are other theatrical norms that are more grounded in the sociocultural context of the campaigns. In order to do so, I will discuss the way Le Pen and Trump diverge from political traditions and customs of their respective countries, and I will consider their contingent nature and discuss the transgressive effect of not abiding by them.

1. Metapolitical comments and breaking the fourth wall

As was just discussed, one of the overarching norms of political theatre in our contemporary societies is naturalism. Because a political performance is 'a construction that regularly conceals its genesis' (Butler 1990: 179), it 'succeeds only when it seems natural, it must not betray its own construction' (Alexander 2010: 12). From this rule comes a tacit duty for every political actor to minimise whatever elements could disturb this form of suspension of disbelief of the audience. Taking a step back, such a perspective implies a certain credulity of political audiences, seen as somehow duped by the artificiality of political theatre, a stance that Grobe contests: 'this 'group of dupes' barely exists – and our pretending that it does says more about us than it does about them' (Grobe 2020: 797).

However, whether the audiences fall for the naturalism of political theatre or not, the actors themselves have a heightened self-awareness about the importance of not showing too much of a disconnect between their *persona* and their private life. This reflexivity places political performers on a certain level of abstraction about their own role as actors which I describe as metapolitical.[4] This concept is adapted from the foundational work of Ruesch and Bateson (1968) on metacommunication and metadiscourse, which 'refers to a pragmatic use of signs specifically designed to influence meaning and behaviour by commenting reflexively on some aspect of itself' (Craig 2016: 6). In the context of political performances, transgressive politicians may thus weaponise their self-awareness through metapolitical comments, which I define as overt references to the intrinsic theatricality of politics.[5] This concept is also influenced by Brecht and the literature on metatheatre (Abel 2003; Ringer 1998), which explores the way playwrights 'remind the audience of the duality of the theatre experience, the phenomenological fluctuation between illusion and the audience's appreciation of the mechanics and conventions of illusion' (Ringer 1998: 8). With this category, I thus aim to showcase the transgressive power of laying bare theatrical artifices, and to see how it applies within political performances.

When considering the corpus, metapolitical comments were a common and repeated occurrence in both cases, but particularly so in the case of Trump. These comments were, however, diverse in the norms they were targeted at. Trump for instance showcased the hypocrisy of various tacit rules in a presidential election, making various references to the cynicism of the duty for former rivals during the primaries to unite even after a bitter campaign. As was discussed above, he adapted an attack that Bernie Sanders had leveraged against Clinton during the primaries, saying that she had 'bad judgement' (E: xiii; F: xxviii) to remind the audience of the fundamental disagreements between Sanders and Clinton. Even though Clinton retorted that he 'should ask Bernie Sanders who he's supporting for President' (F: xxix), this did not prevent Trump from developing the metapolitical narrative that Bernie Sanders 'was taken advantage of by your people' (D: xxvi) and that Clinton 'won, but not fair and square in my opinion' (E: vii). Even more perniciously, Trump's implicit insinuation was that Sanders did not rally the Clinton campaign out of genuine conviction, but because he was forced by the rules of the Democratic primaries. Le Pen also made several metapolitical comments during the debate to describe as hollow Macron's claim to represent a renewal in French politics. To do so, she emphasised the wide support he received from most establishment politicians after the first round of the election and reminded the audience that he himself was a former member of the outgoing government. When he defended himself by saying he had quit it because of ideological disagreements, Le Pen disrupted his narrative by reframing it as a cynical electoral ploy: 'You

merely left to prepare your candidacy, that of the system, and to create the conditions to make the French people believe that you were "new"' (C: xli).

Trump even targeted his metapolitical comments at the moderators of the debates, framed as acting unfairly against him despite the equality in treatment that the rules should guarantee. In the second debate, he repeatedly made allegations that the rules were biased against him asking them: 'Why aren't you bringing up the email?' (E: x) or 'Why are you only interrupting me?' (E: xv). Even further than that, he insinuated that the two moderators were siding with Clinton against him by sarcastically commenting that 'It's nice, one on three' (E: x), later going back to this insinuation at the end of the debate: 'You know what's funny? She went over a minute over, and you don't stop her. When I go one second over, it's like a big deal' (E: xxvii). Le Pen on the other hand, avoided directly accusing the moderators of her debate with Macron, but made a multitude of minor quips reminding Macron of the rule of time equity which is rarely if ever acknowledged by the politicians themselves: 'Will you stop cutting me off for two minutes?' (C: xliv); 'You will have time later to respond' (C: lv), 'I just wanted to talk, and you have been interrupting me for ten minutes' (C: lxii). While Le Pen never did, Trump went further by addressing the audience when denouncing Clinton's rhetorical strategy, criticising her for an easy attack by telling them to 'look, it's all words. It's all sound soundbites' (D: xvi) and, even more successfully given the cheerful reaction of the live audience, calling Clinton out on her avoidance of a question by ironically praising it as 'a great pivot' (F: x).

These metapolitical comments are a powerful transgressive strategy since they break the fourth wall of political performances, showing to the audience several strategies and behaviours that are well-known to insiders and savvy observers, but criticising them as hypocritical or artificial. Even though Le Pen and Trump themselves used many of these artifices, the Brechtian move of showing these otherwise hidden aspects of the political spectacle is a way for transgressive performers to share part of their insider knowledge with their audience (Ringer 1998: 8), fostering a form of proximity and complicity while placing themselves in a maverick position. Conversely, metapolitical comments showcase the artificiality of the political norms binding other politicians, making them look constrained and inauthentic.

Although the short-term benefits of weaponising one's self-awareness are clear, the long-term consequences of this move are more complex and go way beyond the scope of this book. On the one hand, the advocates of naturalism may see their use as a means to slowly erode, and ultimately undermine, the very fabric of the political theatre, increasing a generalised distrust of the democratic audience towards the political processes. On the other hand, a more Brechtian perspective may see the radical challenges to these naturalistic norms as a breath of fresh air and an incentive to reconsider political performances

beyond our antitheatrical prejudice. In other words, 'with this sort of *fusion* laid to rest, perhaps we can open our political imaginations' (Grobe 2020: 794). Reconsidering whether audiences in the age of social media genuinely seek to suspend their disbelief or seek another form of authenticity may better account for the success of hyper-theatrical politicians like Trump. To quote Day and Wedderburn one more time:

> Sat in the wreckage left by Trump's metatheatrical iconoclasm, the question to ask is not how we might be able to put performance back in its box but rather how to read, theorize, and reckon with its constitutive presence in the fabric of political life. (Day and Wedderburn 2022: 7)

2. Political traditions and customs

Beyond the more abstract level of metapolitics which was just discussed, there is a myriad of other theatrical norms that are more concrete and contingent to the specific context of where a political performance unfolds. Indeed, politics in each country is characterised by its particular set of traditions and customs, a body of beliefs and practices passed down and reproduced within a society. For this discussion, I adopt Hobsbawm's (1983: 2) influential distinction between traditions, defined by their relative invariance and mandatory nature, and customs, characterised by their flexibility and openness to change. I consider them theatrical norms in the sense that they constitute the pre-existing rules of the game in each society that actors must engage with as they perform. As such, they correspond to the conventions structuring theatrical performances, the explicit or implicit rules that shape them before they even begin. Take for instance the neoclassical ideals in theatre, which imposed rules to playwrights like verisimilitude or the unities of time, place, and action. Although these standards may be framed as timeless and objective, they remain context-specific and thus subject to change and negotiation. In other words, traditions and customs are 'invented' (Hobsbawm 1983) although they are sedimented in a way that makes them look absolute and immutable.

In liberal democracies like France and the United States, political traditions include fundamental elements like the peaceful transition of power and the legally sanctioned holding of elections at a predictable interval. Political customs on the other hand refer to a much looser set of evolving practices associated with politicians like the dress code in a legislative assembly or the way to conduct a political campaign. Although many political traditions are relatively 'set in stone' through their integration into law, they do not necessarily need to be and what was at some point a custom can become a tradition as it becomes mandatory. An example of this for instance in the French case is the televised debate in between the first and second round of the presidential election. Initially introduced as an innovation to political debating borrowed

from the United States in 1974, it quickly became a tradition. Indeed, even though there is no law forcing candidates to attend it, the only time it did not take place in modern French politics was for the 2002 elections where Jacques Chirac refused to even discuss with his rival, Jean-Marie Le Pen, claiming that he embodied an unacceptable ideology.[6]

Ignoring customs and traditions has become something of a signature for Trump throughout his campaign and this is reflected in this corpus. I already touched on the symbolic significance of his choice to diverge from the typical attire of American politicians, but it was far from the only custom that he deliberately ignored during the campaign. One of the most repeated examples of this was Trump's refusal to release his tax returns even when insistently prompted about it (D: xii–xiv; E: xx–xxi; F: xxiii), breaking with a tradition which every major party nominee before him had agreed to follow and thus revealing that this norm was much less binding than expected. Even though he later softened his position to be less transgressive, Trump was also the first presidential nominee to openly admit and even brag about not paying federal taxes, boasting instead that 'taking advantage of the laws of the nation' (D: xxvi) '[made] him smart' (D: xiii).

Another implicit custom Trump broke is the respect of the independence of legal authorities, by weaponising law as a threat against Clinton: 'If I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation because there has never been so many lies, so much deception' (E: vii), an echo to his supporter's chants of 'Lock her up' [B: ii] that Trump legitimised with this attack. Finally, arguably the most chilling of these deviations against tradition was Trump's refusal to respond to Chris Wallace, the moderator of the third debate, who asked him about conceding to his rival if he were to lose, which he even openly called a 'principle' and 'tradition in this country' (F: xxv). Trump's evasive answer that 'I will tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense' (ibid.) was called out by Clinton who described this stance as 'horrifying', adding that Trump was 'denigrating, he's talking down our democracy. And I for one am appalled' (ibid.). This acute reaction from his opponent and the *gravitas* with which the moderator introduced the topic were a testimony to the importance of this tradition and, conversely, of the severity of Trump's transgression. Indeed, more than a refusal to take position, what made this break with tradition so shocking to others was the corollary insinuation that the American democracy was so corrupted that electoral results, and hence the institutions reporting them, could not be trusted.[7]

In contrast to this extreme case, Le Pen was relatively much more respectful of political customs and traditions during her campaign. On the contrary, in contrast with Macron's self-styling of his candidacy as 'disruptive', Le Pen projected the image that she was very much the candidate who would restore democracy. Echoing points made earlier on solemnity and presidentiality, this

is arguably related to her '*dédiabolisation*' strategy to make her marginal position more acceptable to a broader audience, showing that she could abide by the rules without losing her appeal as an anti-establishment politician. That said, Le Pen nevertheless defended a number of transgressive policy stances. For instance, she advocated for changing the legislative elections to a system of proportional representation (A: iv), contrary to the status quo that favours majority results for every important election in France. However, most of her other divergences from mainstream customs in French politics were as much transgressions as they were a move backward, going specifically back to the idealised time of De Gaulle, a self-professed model and inspiration (A: xi; C: liv) which was in itself a disruption of the standards of the French far right for whom he used to be a despised figure (Aromatorio 2020).

This reactionary form of transgression was apparent in her call to 'rehabilitate referendums' (A: iv), one of De Gaulle's signature tools to assert his authority. But it can also be seen in her refusal to acknowledge the violence committed by the French military in Algeria (C: xxxiv) and the government's responsibility in sending thousands of Jewish citizens to concentration camps, notably during the '*Rafle du Vel d'Hiv*' (Vel' d'Hiv Roundup) in 1942. Since Chirac officially recognised it in 1995, it has become normal for French politicians to acknowledge the share of guilt of the government, at the risk of being accused of denialism in case one does not abide by this rule. Sharing the transgressive stance of her father on this issue but without opening herself to similar accusations of historical negationism, she claimed that she had a 'different juridical vision than most on this topic' as, for her, 'France was in London [with] the *Général De Gaulle*' (C: xxxv). Outside of these political issues, Le Pen also broke with the customs of presidential debating: not only did she relentlessly interrupt her adversary during the sacred conclusion of the debate, but she ignored the opportunity for a '*carte blanche*', an open invitation at the end of the debate for each candidate to develop the theme of their choice. In a confession that revealed her lack of preparation (Turchi and Dufresne 2018), she reluctantly conceded that 'well, yes, I do not have a specific theme chosen, it is more of a general statement' (C: lxv).

The first conclusion that emerges from this discussion is that, given the more stringent normative power of traditions, transgressing customs is a much less risky strategy for politicians which is partly why there were very few genuine ruptures with deeply embedded traditions. Even beyond the ones protected by law, transgressing political traditions is a delicate exercise for politicians like Le Pen and Trump who instead chose to disrupt customs much more frequently in this corpus. Moreover, although many of the transgressions developed throughout this chapter, including many interactional and rhetoric norms, can be framed to some extent as breaking or subverting political customs and traditions, the point I want to emphasise here is the theatrical component of

these transgressions. For a transgressive politician, breaking them may have performative effects on their relationship with others or on the way they are perceived, but it also signals that they are not bound to the same rules of the political game as their peers, showing their relative independence towards what is 'politically correct' and depicting these rules as arbitrary.

Conclusion: The Double-edged Sword of Transgressive Performances

In his discussion on taboos, Bataille (1986) discussed the intrinsically symbiotic relationship between norm and transgression. Indeed, while a transgression only makes sense in the context of the norm it breaks, the opposite is also true: a norm only exists because there is a way to transgress it. Without the possibility for it to be broken – the eventuality of an 'anormal' situation – the norm would not even be conceivable. In other words, every norm contains within its very definition the potential for its own transgression: a norm only '[exists] for the purpose to be violated' (Bataille 1986: 64) and transgressive attempts paradoxically reinforce the existence of the norm. That said, repeated transgressions can become 'normalised', thus displacing or even replacing the old norm with a new one. This means that transgressive performers are in a situation in between marginality and avant-garde, at odds with current norms but spearheading the path for a new normality. To use the influential expression of Turner (1969), transgressive performances, more than the two other clusters discussed in this book, put their performer in a 'liminal' position, 'betwixt and between' the rules of politics. This destabilising nature accounts for transgression's key characteristic as a double-edged sword: if met with approval from the audience, a transgressive performance can prove effective in differentiating the political actor from their peers and appear closer to their voters. If met with indifference or disapproval, a transgression can blow back at the performer and ruin their own credentials or make them appear threatening to the orderly conduct of politics. This is perhaps the most important limitation of this analysis focused on the production side of performances, and which can only capture fragments of how these transgressions are being received by voters and the audience at large.

Although I discussed these transgressions in the context of the populist style of two politicians, I want to stress that the use of transgressive performances is *not* a unique feature of populism. Considering the applications of the concept to politics, Braud (2012: 74–5) argued that transgressive performances are a 'strategy for newcomers' ('*stratégie d'entrants*') and for 'marginal actors' ('*acteurs tenus en marge*'). And although I agree that political actors who embrace the populist style are typically characterised by either or both of these features – which correspond surprisingly well to the respective situations of Trump as a newcomer and Le Pen as defending a marginalised party – many other political actors fulfil these criteria without embracing the other two clusters of the populist style. Consider for instance the case of 'joke candidates' like Vermin

Supreme in the United States or Lord Buckethead in the United Kingdom, whose political purpose is to mock the absurdity of electoral politics using satire. Or take the case of activists dissatisfied with the limitations of electoral politics who strategically decide to break political, and sometimes legal, rules to meaningfully move political practices and attitudes through transgression (Tilly 2006). That said, even if transgression is not a specificity that is exclusive to populism, it *is* one of the constitutive elements of the populist style. To put it differently, while being transgressive for a political actor is not *sufficient* to claim that they adopt the populist style, it is a *necessary* component of it.

Although it was less the case for this performative cluster than for the previous case of performances of identity, what repeatedly emerged from this discussion was the importance of ideology in determining the way a political actor will be transgressive. Whether it was the mobilisation of a certain type of affects, the type of traditions disrupted or the prevalence of divisive humour, many of the transgressions highlighted in this chapter only make sense when considering the far-right positioning of Trump and Le Pen. But even though I argue that one needs to carefully consider the ideological content that underpins the choice of a transgressive form, what also emerged from this comparative analysis is that in addition to their similar far-right agenda, the way they performed transgression differed substantially. This highlights that, in addition to considering their ideology and the broad commonalities of the populist style, the idiosyncratic features of Le Pen and Trump's own styles ought to be considered to build a holistic account of the situation.

Considering solely this modestly sized corpus, I highlighted eleven of the most salient types of transgressions among what is an undoubtedly larger pool of transgressive practices. This is a testimony of the versatility and plasticity of the concept of transgression, particularly when contrasted with other alternatives used in the discipline like 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016) or sociocultural 'low' (Ostiguy 2017). Even in their most recent attempt at syncretism by developing the outline of a 'relational performative' approach to populism, Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) started from the premise that populism is specifically characterised by the 'flaunting of the low'. However, the picture that emerges from this chapter is much more nuanced. Even if some transgressions like the use of insults undoubtedly fit in the 'low', a substantial part of this chapter showed the limitations and restrictiveness of such a binary and normative framework. Several transgressive practices like metapolitical comments required a sophisticated level of self-awareness that a value-loaded framework like the 'flaunting of the low' would fail to capture. The discussion on the simplicity of language and linguistic differentiation also showed the importance to reconsider the bias towards the low in our assessment of populism.

Going even beyond this, I argue that understanding the way transgression operates is fundamental if one wants to understand why populism has proven

so multifaceted and adaptable to political and sociocultural context. More than simply questioning the normative consequences of automatically associating populism with the vulgar and the buffoonish, the performative cluster of transgression offers a set of tools to consider the way the populist style operates. Moving beyond the embodied practices of leaders which are the focus of this book, the potential of the concept can even be expended further to capture the unsettling of the political order that is intrinsic to populism. Going back to Rancière's (2004) concept of the 'distribution of the sensible', we develop in an upcoming article (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi Forthcoming) the notion of transgressive aesthetics which shows that the very act of articulating the people and the elite constitutes a break of the aesthetic order. Understood in this light, the very act of rendering present subalternised subjects (Spivak 1988) through the discursive articulation of the people is a transgressive practice, as is the act of making visible underlying modes of domination through the naming of the elite. Although such a claim deserves a much longer elaboration beyond the scope of this book, this shows that the concept of transgression has tremendous potential for the study of populism.

Notes

1. In this very corpus, the centrist Emmanuel Macron used insults a few times during his debate with Le Pen, calling her 'the high priestess of fear' (C: xlvi) and later a 'parasite' (C: lxvi) of the political system. Likewise, Hillary Clinton for instance called Trump a 'puppet' (F: x) of Vladimir Putin in their third debate.
2. Even though I cannot hope to develop all of Trump's prominent rhetorical and dramaturgical strategies in a chapter like this one, I wanted to highlight the importance of repetition which is a key part of his idiolect. For a more elaborate discussion on the topic, see Theye and Melling (2018).
3. Another element to mention is that, because I primarily focused on negatively inflected affects like loss and fear, this section only reflected that this negative aspect was the most salient part in the emotional repertoire of both actors. A more exhaustive discussion on this topic would incorporate other affects, like pride and passion which were for instance strongly mobilised in Le Pen's depiction of France during her political advertisement.
4. Although there are overlaps, this concept differs from other definitions suggested notably by Badiou (2011) and Zienkowski (2019: 132) who respectively framed metapolitics as an alternative to political philosophy and as 'practices that potentially reconfigure existing modes of politics, the associated logics and rationalities'.
5. For a longer discussion on the concept of theatricality in politics, see Peetz (2019) and Gluhovic et al. (2021: 6–7).
6. This was mentioned in the introduction, but the fact that Marine Le Pen did not face similar accusations in 2017 speaks volume about the success of her '*dédiabolisation*'. While her father was a mediatic pariah, she has been progressively embraced by the French media where she is now routinely invited for debates and interviews.

7. Extending this discussion beyond the scope of the book, this ambiguity in 2016 can be retrospectively read as foreshadowing Trump's later refusal to acknowledge his loss in the 2020 election, which undoubtedly constituted one of his most dangerous transgressions as president, threatening a norm that constitutes the very fabric of democratic politics. The denial of defeat was one of the fuels behind the attack on the Capitol by Trump supporters on 6 January 2021 and remains a common belief shared by Trump supporters in 2024, showing the danger of this kind of transgression when used for authoritarian purpose.

6

PERFORMING CRISIS

> '*Crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.*'
>
> Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks* (1971 [1929–1935])

In this chapter, I will tackle the third and final performative cluster of the populist style: performances of crisis. In a decade marked by the unprecedented spread of a global pandemic and the resurgence of armed conflicts, the concept of crisis is ubiquitous in contemporary politics. Sometimes criticised for being a 'vague, promiscuously used, undertheorized concept which defies measurement and lacks explanatory power' (Knight 1998: 227), it is important to take one step back to consider the historical meanings of crisis in law, theology, and medicine (Koselleck 2006). For Ancient Greeks, the juridical meaning of crisis was a moment of decision, in the sense of reaching a verdict and judgement, which was later expanded to theological interpretations of the concept linking it with the apocalypse, the final judgement. In medicine, crisis likewise referred to the momentous juncture in a disease where doctors discover whether the patient lives or dies, combining both 'the observable condition and the judgment about the course of the illness' (Koselleck 2006: 360).

Although they refer to different phenomena, the continuity between these definitions is that they describe both a critical juncture and a moment of choice, which opened the concept of crisis to a wider set of applications. Starting in

the seventeenth century, this metaphorical flexibility hence allowed it to gain traction in other domains, including politics and economics as evoking the idea of 'a crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck 2006: 358). In her discussion on the 'theatre of crisis', Taylor (1991: 20) described crisis as 'a suspension, a rupture between two states' as well as 'the inchoate, confusing, contradictory nature of transition, the turning point between life and death, regeneration and repression'. But if crisis understood this way seems to refer to a generalised issue affecting an entire society, crisis as a signifier is also mobilised to describe more specific areas of life: a familial crisis, an economic crisis, a midlife crisis, an environmental crisis and so on. Populism itself has often been connected with crisis, whether populism constitutes a crisis in itself or whether it appears in reaction to a specific kind of crisis.

Populist Performances of Crisis

Indeed, populism has been associated with many types of crises, from a crisis of political representation (Roberts 2015) to a global economic crisis (Loch and Norocel 2015). As such, while some authors highlight what is typically presented as a causal link between crisis and populism, others remain more sceptical of this causality. Knight (1998: 227) criticised the 'tautological tendency to impute populism (or anything else) to 'crisis', as if 'crisis' were a discernible cause, when, in fact, it is often a loose description of a bundle of phenomena'. More than this, he provocatively turned these causal links on their head, claiming that 'disaggregation sometimes reveals that it was not 'crisis' which generated populism . . . but rather populism . . . which generated crisis' (ibid.). While Knight only made this point in a footnote, Moffitt (2015) took his argument further and systematically analysed the literature on populism, distinguishing 'authors who clearly draw a link between crisis and the emergence of populism, those who are unsure about the causal link and a small few who actually argue that there is little to no link at all between the two phenomena' (Moffitt 2015: 191). Framing all those authors as united by the shared understanding that crisis is *external* to populism, he offered an alternative perspective in which crisis is best seen as an *internal* component of populism, developing the argument that performing crisis is a fundamental aspect of the populist repertoire.

Such a perspective is grounded in the foundational work of Hay (1995, 1999) who, going back to Koselleck's genealogy of the concept, defined crisis as 'a moment of objective contradiction yet subjective intervention' (Hay 1995: 63). Conceptually separating these two components, Hay thus distinguished 'failure' from 'crisis'. On the one hand, a systemic 'failure' is 'an accumulation or condensation of contradictions' that make a system unable to be perpetuated, 'whether perceived or not' (Hay 1999: 324). Failures are 'the structural preconditions for crisis – the necessary but insufficient conditions' (Hay 1995: 64) to its articulation. On the other hand, a crisis is 'a condition in which failure is identified

and widely perceived, a condition in which a systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated' (Hay 1999: 324). More specifically referred to as 'crisis narratives' by Stavrakakis et al. (2018: 11), this component of crisis showcased the strategic role of political actors in making a failure gain salience.

In other words, this ontological separation between points of dislocation in the order and their discursive articulation emphasises the inherent performativity of the concept of crisis: a crisis only comes into being through the performance of a political actor with strategic agency who frames a systematic failure as a crisis, and whenever their crisis narrative finds echo with the audience.[1] Theatrically speaking, this means that there is a specific aesthetic associated with crisis which politicians can tap into to bring urgency to their message. Hay's distinction thus offered a strong theoretical grounding upon which Moffitt built his argument that an essential feature of the populist style is its 'spectacularization of failure' (Moffitt 2015: 197). Moffitt's reassessment of the concept of crisis showcased two crucial issues with an external understanding of populism and crisis:

> First, crisis is never experienced as something given, obeying a simple causal explanation. Second, crisis never becomes accessible for us in some 'objective' and 'neutral' manner. The Real of the crisis can only become (partially) accessible through some kind of mediation, through its performative construction by populist discourse. (Stavrakakis et al. 2018: 9)

However, Stavrakakis and his co-authors also argued that the binary opposition between 'objectivist' scholars who see it as external and 'constructionist' scholars who see it as internal was reductive. Instead, they made the case for the need to consider these two poles in dialectic, characterised by a distinct 'political choreography between Real (dislocation) and Symbolic (articulation), between externality and internality' to 'advance a more nuanced account of populist politics' (Stavrakakis et al. 2018: 14). And because the actors performing crisis do not operate in a political vacuum, it is important for this dialectic to contextualise performances of crisis, and highlight the specificity of the populist way of articulating a crisis. Indeed, far from an isolated performance, populist performances of crisis operate within a wider hegemonic contest for political salience in which opposing voices challenge their claims. This point echoes Hay's argument that 'perceived and identified failures thus form the basis for contested and competing constructions and mediations of crisis which attempt to find and construct resonance with individuals' and groups' experiences of the symptoms of failure' (Hay 1995: 68).

Crisis Narrative in Le Pen and Trump's Campaigns

In this chapter, I will outline the way Le Pen and Trump performed crisis in their respective campaigns. The choice to explore performances of crisis through an

analysis of crisis *narratives* stems from a combination of three factors. Firstly, given my focus on the production side of the populist style, I do not seek to assess whether the systemic failures highlighted by the actors have material foundations or how they resonated with the national audience, but instead to detail how they were linked into a cohesive whole. To use Hay's (1995: 63) terminology, my analysis does not engage with the 'objective contradiction' of crisis but rather with the 'subjective intervention' strategically made by the political actors. Secondly, literal uses of the word 'crisis'/'*crise*' were exceedingly rare in the corpus, with only one occurrence by Le Pen in her rally speech (A: vii) and no occurrences at all in Trump's case.[2] However, just as I argued that performing the people goes beyond literal references to 'the people', performing crisis requires analysing more broadly what other components of a politician's discourse are framed as 'a crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck 2006: 358) and how these elements are interconnected into a wider narrative. Thirdly, although the actors make references to a multiplicity of crises affecting society, from the economy to the political institutions and international community, it is a fundamental purpose of the populist style to combine these heterogeneous demands, in Laclau's words, and turn them into an all-encompassing whole. This totalising narrative goes beyond the sum of its parts and challenges the hegemonic narrative of a stable society (Homolar and Scholz 2019). As such, focusing on the larger crisis narrative provides a complementary lens to understand in the cases at hand how far-right actors 'frame "the people" against those responsible for the crisis' (Moffitt 2015: 198) while also shedding light on the excluded 'others' which are silenced in performances of identity but mobilised in their articulation of crisis.

What is most striking with this third and final performative cluster is the very close proximity between the two performers. As was demonstrated in the previous empirical chapters, there was a balance between similarities and differences in the way Le Pen and Trump mobilised the two other clusters of performances of identity and transgression. However, outside of a few exceptions which will be discussed in depth below, the crisis narratives which Le Pen and Trump developed in the corpus were remarkably similar in both structure and type of crises highlighted but also, more surprisingly, in the proportions occupied by the various crises in their narratives. While I do not claim to infer that these two cases illustrate *the* archetypal populist narrative used by far-right actors, these resemblances in themes and structure suggest at the very least a strong performative proximity between the two political actors and invite further research to explore whether this parallel can be extended to other cases.

Even more so than the other performative clusters, performances of crisis are deeply shaped by the ideological content that they convey, and this is especially apparent in the dual structure of the crisis narrative that Trump and Le Pen developed. Indeed, what distinctly emerged from the corpus is the

presence of two combined sub-narratives that interact with each other to form the overarching narrative of crisis of their campaigns. Mirroring the articulation of nationalism and populism (De Cleen 2017), these two complementary narratives were on the one hand the suggestion that a crisis was caused by the excluded 'others' or national out-groups, primarily migrants and/or Muslims as threats to the cohesion of the nation; and on the other hand, the narrative that a crisis was provoked by the elite, national or otherwise, was framed as either ill-intentioned or complacent. This I argue constitutes the specificity of the populist way of performing crisis: it combines the crises at the heart of the ideology of the performers with a distinctively anti-establishment narrative. In the cases at hand, the far-right ideology of both actors leads them to develop what I call an exclusionary crisis narrative which is then associated with the populist narrative of a failing elite.

Based on this division, this chapter is thus structured in the following way: the next section starts with a brief discussion of the visual ways crisis in general was evoked in the corpus. Following, this I move to the first of two sections focusing on the themes developed in their depiction of crisis. This first section develops the details of the exclusionary crisis narrative focused on the national out-groups, highlighting multiple aspects of crisis (immigration, economy, security, identity) as the nostalgic subtext of a fantasised past era devoid of these issues. After this, the following section explores the anti-establishment crisis narrative attributing guilt to the elite for provoking or ignoring the ongoing crisis, showcasing issues of leadership, accountability, and vulnerability. After having outlined the details of this overarching narrative of crisis, I will then conclude the discussion by developing the central purpose of this narrative of crisis: performing urgency and producing a call to action which incites convinced audience members to promptly vote for the populist as a crisis truth-teller.

Visual representations of the crisis

Before discussing the specific content underpinning their crisis narratives, it is important to engage with the non-textual elements shaping the broader performance which are less easily contained with the notion of narrative. Indeed, even though this cluster relies more heavily on the textual component of political performances, it does rely on a specific *mise-en-scène*. Firstly, it is important to note the crucial place of the crisis narrative in the wider script of every performance: performing crisis provides a narrative backbone underpinning the following diagnosis of incompetence or corruption, and more importantly the need to change and act now. This will be further developed in the conclusion, but performances of crisis rely on producing a feeling of urgency in the audience, which means it is fundamental for both politicians to make the crisis narrative impactful in their performances. Le Pen chose to do that in her rally by starting with the crisis narrative (A: i) and concluding with it in her rally

speech (A: xii). Faithful to his more scattered way of developing his script, Trump was less structured, and linear, but he did mention that 'This is our last chance. We're not gonna have another chance' in the first minutes of his speech (B: i) and hammered the idea that the United States was undergoing a critical situation towards the end of the performance (B: viii).

Now that this matter of structure has been addressed, there were key differences in *mise-en-scène* between the two politicians that were particularly prominent in the staging choices behind their advertisement. In his advertisement, Trump was very explicit about his depiction of crisis and used visual shots without any subtlety to illustrate his points. Hence, large groups of migrants and gang footage with blurred faces are shown as he mentioned the alleged threat of 'massive illegal immigration' (H: i). When discussing the economic crisis, the advertisement featured bundles of banknotes and later a map of America filled with banknotes which dramatically faded to black as Trump talked about elites who 'bled our country dry' (ibid.). Even when talking about employment, Trump's communication was very much 'on the nose' as his video showed empty facilities when he mentioned 'the destruction of our factories' (ibid.). That being said, the obvious use of visual cues stood in contrast with the more subdued use of music in the advertisement: Trump's vocals dominated by far the music which furthered the impact of his silences. Simultaneously, the choice to use simple yet efficient instruments, like a piano and guitars, enabled the emergence of a slow crescendo without disrupting the prominence of the vocals.

Conversely, Le Pen's use of visuals related to crisis was virtually nonexistent. Instead, she preferred for her advertisement to let her words speak on her behalf and chose not to depict her crisis narrative directly or explicitly: mentions of 'the act of violence' caused by 'Islamic fundamentalism' (G: i) were thus associated with a shot of her looking at a family album. Likewise, this very same shot over the family album was prolonged as she shared her 'worries' about 'the state of the country and the world that we will leave as a legacy to our children' (ibid.). A similar point applied to every other reference to crisis, whether it is her quote about 'the impunity of criminals' (ibid.) alongside a close-up in a helicopter or her reference to 'insecurity and violence' (ibid.) where she was shown surrounded by journalists. Musically speaking, Le Pen's advertisement also stood in contrast with Trump's as she balanced vocals and instruments much better than he did, thus granting more relative importance to the music in the performances. The songs she used in both advertisement and in the introduction to her rallies were characterised by a form of epic and martial atmosphere, close to that of a movie score with strings and brass accentuating the levity of the moment. Furthermore, as the crisis narrative got introduced, a more powerful crescendo than the one in Trump's advertisement increased in intensity, thus reinforcing the urgent nature of the message.

Beyond the advertisements themselves, what this preliminary discussion showed was that both Trump and Le Pen pursued different ways to grab the audience's attention with their crisis narrative. These reflected deeper differences between them: from Trump's reliance on practical examples to Le Pen's choice to be more evocative, both politicians performed crisis with the same purpose to bring depth to their narrative and foster a feeling of urgency. However, exploring these questions deeper requires engaging more specifically with the themes developed throughout these crisis narratives.

Exclusionary narrative of crisis: A crisis caused by 'others'

Exploring the place of the excluded 'others' in Trump and Le Pen's crisis narrative allows me to go back to the *modus operandi* of nationalism. At its core, nationalism is structured horizontally through 'an in/out opposition between the nation and its out-groups' (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017: 308), between those who are part of the nation and those who are not. What is specific of the exclusionary nationalism of the far right is that this in/out distinction is rigidly defined alongside ethnic and cultural lines. Consequently, those who do not fit those ethnic–cultural criteria, typically religious minorities and immigrants, are de facto excluded from the nation. Performatively speaking, given the overlap between nation and people in Le Pen and Trump's discourse, and the hegemonic dominance of the former signifier over the latter, what that practically means is that this part of the audience is not represented in collective performances of identity, a point that I already tackled when discussing the excluded 'others' in Chapter IV. The purpose of this section is complementary, exploring the way these silenced 'others' are being framed as the root of their crisis narrative.

1. Migratory crisis

The first and main theme that emerged from the corpus is the notion that both France and the United States were facing a migratory crisis, which is a central theme for the far right in general (Mondon 2022). Rhetorically speaking, Le Pen and Trump very simply made their point that immigration was an issue by constantly emphasising its allegedly gigantic scale, systematically associating it with superlatives and adjectives of size and scope. For instance, Le Pen favoured the expressions of 'massive immigration' (A: vi, viii; C: lxiv, lxvii) and 'planetary immigration' (A: i, iv) while Trump talked about 'unlimited migration' (B: iv), 'great migration' (F: xxvii) as well as using the expression of 'massive illegal immigration' (H: i). This emphasis on the illegality of migration was found multiple times in the corpus, as Le Pen also condemned 'the huge problem of clandestine migration' (C: xxi) and Trump used the redundant expression of 'criminal illegal aliens' (E: xvii), bluntly linking it to insecurity by warning of the threat of 'gang' members who are 'illegal immigrants, and they have guns and they shoot people' (D: xviii). This apparent distinction between the 'bad'

illegal migrants and the 'good' legal migrants was used multiple times in the corpus with the purpose of bypassing accusations of xenophobia as the politicians claimed that their real targets were not legal migrants, but illegal ones

Trump for instance argued in the third debate that his opposition to an amnesty of illegal immigrants, described as a 'disaster', was mainly an issue because it would be 'very unfair to all of the people that have been waiting in line for many, many years' (F: vi). Likewise, in an excerpt I previously highlighted, Le Pen said that 'fellow compatriots born abroad and foreigners who live in France with dignity, work and do not cause any problems to anyone, . . . have absolutely nothing to fear from my presidency' (A: x). But these occasional caveats were immediately undermined by the constant conflation of migration with economic problems, Islamic terror and so on. Even in the solutions offered, Le Pen did not merely call for a stronger stance on illegal immigration but an 'immediate moratorium on all legal immigration to stop this folly' (A: v), which demonstrated that the real 'folly' for her was that even legal means of entering the country were too lenient. Trump echoed this statement as he claimed, talking about immigrants in general, that 'we have no idea who they are, where they're from, what their feeling about our country is' (E: xv), describing immigration as a 'Trojan horse' (E: xv; F: xxx). During his rally, Trump ominously warned the crowd: 'You don't even know who's coming in, you have no idea. You'll find out, you'll find out' (B: iv). However, this false mystery was often made explicit as Trump repeatedly framed migrants as 'murderers, drug lords' and generally 'very bad people' (E: xvii), as was also shown in his infamous use of Spanish to describe Mexican immigrants as 'bad hombres' (F: vi).

Framing migration as a mass phenomenon was part of a larger rhetorical strategy for both politicians to dehumanise immigrants by describing them as a faceless and unstoppable threat that would overwhelm the nation. Where this was most evident was in the recurrence of the metaphor of migration as a flow of water, a common symbolic theme for the two political actors.[3] Trump repeatedly used the expression that 'people are pouring into our country' (D: xxxviii; E: iii; F: x) as he made a relentless parallel between immigrants and drugs which can also be seen in this comparison: 'people flow in, and drugs flow in like it's candy, like it's water' (B: v). Le Pen was much more dramatic in her water metaphors as she raised the threat of 'being engulfed by a planetary migration, of being drowned under the inexhaustible stream of great global migrations' (A: iv), of a 'migrant flow' (A: v) and of the 'health system drowning because of clandestine immigration' (C: xxi). This choice of metaphor equated migration with a natural disaster, an unstoppable force of nature which may destroy the country if left unchecked. This notion that migration is out of control was further reinforced by various associations with the semantic field of chaos, particularly for Le Pen who talked about the need to halt

'this uncontrolled situation that sinks us to the bottom', using the example of Calais's 'migratory chaos' (A: vi) to show that immigration was both 'uncontrolled and uncontrollable' (A: xii).

This representation of immigration as an unstoppable disaster holds a central and fundamental place in the crisis narrative developed during both campaigns. Indeed, this 'migratory pressure that is only beginning' (A: v) served as a looming threat of increasing urgency, serving as the backbone of the narrative as well as the source of every other type of crisis, a point which Le Pen explicitly highlighted in an anaphora during her rally that is worth quoting at length:

> Because the truth, my dear friends, is the following: behind massive immigration, there are costs and a social collapse. Behind massive immigration, there is communitarianism. Behind massive immigration, there is Islamism. Behind massive immigration, there is terrorism. There is the immediate unpleasantness, there is the immediate threat, there is the transformation of our country that you can see, and then there is the long-term threat. The challenge to our values, to our model of civilisation, to our mores, to our landscapes, to our clear contributions, the challenge to our identity as a people. (A: viii)

As Le Pen made clear in that quote, the migratory crisis constituted the main foundation of the exclusionary narrative of crisis and every other type of crisis was framed as stemming from this. However, in stark contrast with that foundational salience of the theme, it is worth noting that explicit references to migration only constituted a relatively low proportion of Trump and Le Pen's overall references to crisis, substantially lower than the most prominent themes of economic crisis, political crisis and security crisis which were two to three times more present in the corpus. Although this would require further investigation, my hypothesis for this relatively low proportion of references to migration in the corpus is a strategic choice: both actors may have refrained from excessively focusing on migration to avoid accusations of xenophobia.

As could be seen in their modest attempts at paying lip service to inclusivity and avoiding amalgams, both politicians sought to distance themselves from earlier examples of openly xenophobic far-right politics to gain wider appeal through the populist style. For this purpose, the strategy that was most apparent in the corpus consisted in making implicit references to the migratory crisis without referring to it directly. Put differently, while there were mentions of other facets to the crisis – economic, security and so on – they were always implicitly associated with immigration to still maintain the core message that the crisis they highlighted was first and foremost a migratory one. This becomes even more evident when considering how the themes differed in

themes depending on the audience for whom they were performed. On the one hand, in both advertisements, aimed at convincing undecided voters, migration was particularly downplayed. For instance, Le Pen never made any overt reference to migration in her advertisement but focused primarily on sending the message that her campaign was about defending French values and fighting against insecurity. Similarly, Trump made a brief reference to migration but framed his message as being primarily about restoring wealth and prosperity to the United States. On the other hand, migration was most openly visible and proportionally important during rallies where the audience primarily included sympathisers, with debates acting as a middle point between these two poles.

2. Economic crisis

Out of all the aspects of the crisis that were present in the corpus, the narrative of an economic crisis was the most quantitatively salient aspect for both Trump and Le Pen. Even though most economic indicators like growth and unemployment were not supporting a crisis narrative in the United States in 2016 and France in 2017, as they might have in the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008, performing the idea that the national economy was in dire straits was central in their respective campaigns. In both cases, this narrative of an economic crisis was grounded in a combination of factors including national outgroups, whether it was migrants or foreigners that 'stole' jobs from Americans, and the elite that either benefited from it or actively created the conditions for it. In this section, focusing on the exclusionary narrative of crisis, I will showcase this first component. However, I want to insist that both of these aspects of the narrative were complementarily contributing to its articulation, showcasing once more the specificity of populist performances of crisis which intertwine an ideologically rooted crisis with an anti-establishment narrative.

The dominance of a narrative focused on economic factors was particularly expected in the case of Trump, whose *persona* revolved on his alleged expertise as a 'deal-maker' and a shrewd businessman, and it was not surprising that the performance of an economic crisis dominated his rhetoric. What was perhaps more unexpected, however, was the centrality of the semantic field of loss in his description of the American economy which contrasts with his relentless presentation of self as a 'winner' (D: xxxi). With his typical use of hyperbole, Trump dramatically described the current economic situation of the United States in his rally by claiming that 'We are living through the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world. No country has ever lost jobs like we've lost jobs' (B: iii). Similar expressions appeared across all performances as Trump notably began his first intervention in the first debate with a statement that 'Our jobs are fleeing the country. They're going to Mexico. They're going to many other countries.' (D: ii). In the second debate, he pointed at the gravity of the economic situation with a simple repetition: 'We lost our jobs. We lost our money. We lost our

plants. It is a disaster' (E: xxvii). Likewise, in order to show that this economic crisis was a national one, Trump listed in the third debate places where 'our jobs are being sucked out of our economy. You look at all the places that I just left. You go to Pennsylvania, you go to Ohio, you go to Florida, you go to any of them. You go upstate New York. Our jobs have fled to Mexico and other places' (F: xiv). As was mentioned above, this narrative of loss was even central in his political advertisement where a video montage of empty factories in the United States illustrated his point about 'the destruction of our factories and our jobs as they flee to Mexico, China and other countries all around the world' (H: i).

Unlike Le Pen, who relied more frequently on abstract economic concepts, a notable element in Trump's discourse was his use of concrete and relatable signifiers to represent the economy, like jobs, factories, and plants. But while his narrative of economic crisis implied an out-group playing an active part in the crisis, he very rarely framed immigrants in this role, choosing instead to depict foreign workers of other countries as an unfair competition to the American working class. Furthermore, in Trump's narrative, immigrants were not the ones who stole the jobs of American workers, but instead entire countries like China and Mexico, essentialised as a holistic construct in which workers, business owners and local politicians were conflated, regardless of their ownership of the means of production or political power. This specificity, which granted strong prominence to the idea that foreign countries were abusing a form of weakness from the United States, was one of the few major differences in narrative between Trump and Le Pen, and I will further elaborate on that when discussing the role of the elites in this process.

The repeated occurrences of the theme of loss in Trump's narrative also served to foster a propitious contrast to frame himself as the providential saviour and only remedy to this crisis: in his own words, 'a job creator like we haven't seen since Ronald Reagan, it's going to be a beautiful thing to watch' (D: ii). Developing a binary opposition that let him connect this economic crisis caused by an out-group with a narrative that framed himself in a positive light, Trump repeatedly claimed that he was the only one who could 'start the engine rolling again' (F: xv). Showcasing once more his experience as well as his 'winning personality', he said 'my strongest asset, maybe by far, is my temperament. I have a winning temperament. I know how to win. She does not' (D: xxxi). Using his *persona* of a business leader, Trump portrayed himself as a patient but increasingly worried observer of politics, depicting this aspect of the crisis as the trigger for his 'selfless' political involvement: 'you know I love this country and I saw what was happening. Not only in the wrong direction, our country was going to hell' (B: i); 'I've been waiting for years. Nobody does it right, and frankly, now we're going to do it right' (F: xxxiii).

Given her position as a career politician whose specialty was migration and identity, the prominence of the economic crisis in Le Pen's narrative was more

surprising than it was for Trump. However, looking more closely at the various performances examined in the corpus, the only format where economic crisis was dominant over other forms of crisis was her presidential debate with Macron. There were arguably two main reasons for that, one that was specific to the context of the debate, and one that applied more broadly to Le Pen's general discursive strategy. The first reason was that the pre-established structure of the debate already began with economic discussions and granted it a major place. Macron, for whom this was his main area of political expertise as a former minister of the economy, tactically extended as much as he could the time dedicated to these themes, to the point that they covered more than a third of the length of the whole debate. Consequently, Le Pen's main response while the economy was being debated was to articulate her crisis narrative to counter Macron's own liberal narrative, explaining why the country was undergoing an economic crisis.

The second, more general, reason was the choice for Le Pen to showcase her partial adoption of leftist themes to appeal to a wider audience and demonstrate her claim to go beyond both left and right. Indeed, and this equally applied to her other performances in the corpus, the diagnosis of an economic crisis she raised was grounded in a radical-left rhetoric, following the similar pattern of 'leftism' (Alduy and Wahnich 2015: 54–5) already observed in her populist performances of collective identity. This rhetoric was most articulate in her rally, where Le Pen notably condemned the 'never-ending increase of inequalities and precarity' (A: i), the 'increasingly harsh and blind austerity politics' that 'attack the weakest' (A: vii), 'the total *laissez-faire* of an ultraliberal logic' (A: v) and even the 'fiscal evasion of large companies who make a profit here but prefer to pay their taxes elsewhere' (A: iv). Speaking about the rules of the market, she even coined several snappy one-liners that would have perfectly fit in the discourse of her leftist rivals: 'They created a perfect world, perfectly inhuman, where slaves make products sold to unemployed people' (A: iv), criticising rising inequalities in a society where 'more and more poor people get less and less rich while there are more and more rich people' (A: iv). As such, and in stark contrast with Trump's focus on 'jobs' and 'factories' being stolen, Le Pen mobilised more abstract concepts like wealth inequality, austerity politics and ultraliberalism to develop her crisis narrative, heavily borrowing from the repertoire of socialism and even surprisingly to that of Marxism to do so.

But while Le Pen's diagnosis of an economic crisis bore superficial resemblance with a left-wing narrative, the 'cure' she suggested to solve the crisis was distinctively nationalist, leading every issue not to an overarching class struggle against the oligarchy but back to questions of national sovereignty and protectionism. Voluntarily minimising the role of the economic elite in producing the crisis she highlighted, she repeatedly suggested that the most important part of the crisis was caused by two out-groups. Firstly, she primarily blamed workers

from poorer European countries that could be sent to work in France as 'posted workers' (*'travailleurs détachés'*) because of EU regulations. Secondly, in addition to 'unfair international competition' (C: i, iv, vii), Le Pen claimed that maintaining the current levels of immigration would constitute an even more devastating 'unfair national competition' (C: vii) with the arrival of foreigners challenging French workers for their own jobs. Adding left-wing tonalities to her far-right argument, she argued that 'immigration is only a chance for the capitalist class (*'grand patronat'*) which benefits from an imported working force to lower the wages and leave the French people responsible for paying the social cost of immigration' (A: vi). Le Pen's solution to this economic crisis was hence a form of return to protectionism and a reinstatement of the national border which she described as inexistent in the current European Union. But to challenge Macron's counter-narrative that his liberalism made him the 'candidate of openness' ('*candidat de l'ouverture')* while she would conversely be the 'candidate of closedness' ('*candidate de la fermeture*'), she returned the argument against him arguing that his ultraliberalism made *him* the 'candidate of closedness: of closing factories, of closing maternity wards, of closing police stations, of closing hospitals' (C: lxvii).

3. Security crisis

Although Trump and Le Pen differed in how they framed the economic crisis and who they blamed for such a crisis, their narratives crossed paths again when it came to articulating the idea that their respective countries were facing a security crisis, going back to one of the fundamentals of far-right ideology. In this case, the crisis narrative as well as its culprits were extremely straightforward: immigration, particularly from Muslim countries, was creating spikes of terrorist violence as well as general insecurity in the country, and the only way to solve it was through a stricter stance on crime ('law and order') and by halting immigration. Consequently, this insecurity narrative focused not only on the general out-group of immigrants among whom ill-intentioned terrorists, 'soldiers of hatred within the migrant flow' (A: v), and 'drug lords'. (E: xvii) may hide, but more specifically on Muslims, whether they were formally citizens of the nation or not. When directly prompted by a Muslim voter to discuss the consequences of rising Islamophobia during the town hall debate, Trump quickly dismissed the issue as 'a shame', and then proceeded to place the burden of responsibility for terrorist actions on the wider Muslim community: 'whether we like it or not, there is a problem. We have to be sure that Muslims come in and report when they see something going on. When they see hatred going on, they have to report it' (E: xiv). Le Pen was generally more careful to avoid amalgams by only condemning explicitly Salafism and Islamic fundamentalism[4] and avoiding general references to Islam or the Muslim community to short-circuit accusations of Islamophobia.

The most explicit way for both Le Pen and Trump to support their crisis narrative of insecurity lay in their choice to make recurring references to terrorism, turning these punctual tragedies into banal events whose frequency demonstrated an incontestable security crisis. On this topic, Le Pen was most prone to exaggeration and emphasis, arguing for instance that 'not a day goes by without a terror attack' (A: viii) and claiming that 'laxism has become the rule in our country' (A: v). And while immigrants were dehumanised and turned into an amorphous yet threatening group in their narrative, the two politicians chose to conversely emphasise the individuality not only of the victims of terror but also of their perpetrators (A: viii; B: iv, v; C: xxxvi). For those victims, Le Pen claimed that naming them was an act of resistance against those who 'would want us to forget their names, their suffering, their martyrdom'[5] (A: viii), but it more pragmatically served as a way to turn their deaths into the incontestable proof that their crisis narrative was legitimate.

Conversely, explicitly naming the terrorists for Le Pen allowed her to associate individuals with the threat she raised, giving a face to terror and Islamic fundamentalism to make the danger more palatable, and hence memorable. As was highlighted in Chapter 4's discussion of affective discourse, these rhetorical strategies were further reinforced by the choice to showcase the brutal details of terror and crimes, emphasising that victims were 'beheaded', 'had their throat slit' (A: viii), were 'brutally beaten . . . and left to bleed to death in his home' or even 'found with his hands bound behind his back duct tape on his mouth, and blunt-force injuries all over his head' (B: v). Associated with the individualisation of victims and perpetrators, which made the audience feel empathy with the former and disgust towards the latter, the choice to be explicit in describing acts of violence is a powerful discursive way to trigger a strong emotional response and offer less room for critically contextualising these isolated events. Finally, it is worth pointing out that Trump and Le Pen's description of crimes was not exhaustive but instead carefully curated to support their crisis narrative. Indeed, none of the terror attacks and murders caused by extreme-right groups and terrorists were included in their narrative. Neither were daily acts of violence against women in the domestic sphere or police brutality against ethnic minorities, whose systematic nature made them substantially more frequent than terror attacks, albeit less tragically 'spectacular' and ideologically close to their agenda.

As a way to bypass criticism that many of the terrorists she mentioned were not immigrants but national citizens, Le Pen suggested the controversial measure of stripping them of their citizenship (C: xxvi) as a legal recourse, but she first and foremost emphasised the 'porosity between terrorism and delinquency' which 'begs for the return of the republican order in prisons' (A: ix). This 'republican order' was synonymous with embodying 'authority' (A: ix) and a tough 'law and order' sentence which framed Le Pen as the only politician who took this security crisis seriously. As such, in addition to tackling terrorism,

Le Pen's narrative of insecurity was extended to the wider French society, focusing on an alleged 'judiciary laxism' which caused an 'explosion of insecurity' (C: xxviii), the 'the impunity of criminals' (G: i) and the emergence of 'no-go zones' (C: xxxviii) where French law did not apply anymore.

Trump conducted a similar narrative slippage, extending the diagnosis of insecurity beyond terrorism and immigrants as the only responsible out-group. Equally claiming to be the candidate of 'law and order', Trump argued that insecurity was also affecting 'the inner cities' (D: xviii; E: ii; F: xxxv), a vague set of locations systematically associated with the African American and Hispanic communities which were 'decimated by crime' (D: xviii) because shootings were systematic. Faithful to his defence of the 'second amendment which is under siege' (B: vi; F: ii), he thus minimised gun violence by shifting the blame not on their widespread availability and use but instead on what he saw as excessively strict gun laws (F: iii) and on the repeal of the controversial policy of 'stop and frisk' (D: xix). All in all, both Le Pen and Trump developed a sustained and holistic crisis narrative of insecurity that went beyond exceptional terror events and immigrant threat. Indeed, they extended it more widely to a generalised security crisis that framed members of ethnic and religious minorities as dangerous for the nation. In doing so, it also allowed them to depict themselves as the only politicians willing to acknowledge these issues and able to stop them through a decisive and tough stance on crime and delinquency.

4. Identity crisis and the 'heartland'

Finally, the last component of the nationalist crisis narrative performed by the two politicians was a crisis in national identity, a crisis affecting both the immaterial legacy and the values of the nation. In the corpus, what was most specific about this component of the crisis narrative was that it was fully fledged in Le Pen's case but barely more than budding in Trump's. Indeed, although Trump hinted at the existence of a wider crisis of American identity, for instance in his claims that the country was going 'not only in the wrong direction' but 'to hell' (B: i), as well as 'suffering' (D: xii) and 'deeply troubled' (D: xxxviii), he never expanded on the specifics of this bad direction or the consequences of these troubles, asserting them without strategically developing them. Le Pen, on the other hand, articulated this crisis of identity with a dramatic flair, particularly in the following anaphora in the beginning of her rally:

> Give us France back! This call, my friends, I have heard it everywhere I went. This call, my friends, is a message from your heart. This call coming from your chest is that of an entire people, of our people. A cry of love, a cry of common sense that means that France is ours and that we are all responsible for our home. And of course, if the French people does not care about France, who will do it in its stead? This call

> also expresses this legitimate anguish that grips us as we no longer feel at home in France. This call, I hear it as a cry of suffering from patriots inconsolable to see their country going astray. (A: i–ii)

In this quote, Le Pen clearly highlighted her perception – which she depicted as representative of that of her followers – of a crisis that affected the heart of the French nation, a change so deep in France's identity that she and those she claimed to represent 'no longer felt at home' in their own country. This simultaneously implied the nostalgic conviction that there used to be a France that was once whole and 'theirs' but needs to be restored. A similar feeling was intuitively conveyed by Trump's slogan of 'Make America Great Again', but he barely developed it in the corpus. This construct is what Taggart (2004) described when he coined the concept of the heartland:[6]

> a construction of an ideal world but unlike utopian conceptions, it is constructed retrospectively from the past – it is in essence a past-derived vision projected onto the present as that which has been lost. . . . It is a diffuse vision, blurred around the edges but no less powerful for that. It is no doubt romanticised and a profoundly ahistorical conception but, again, no less powerful for that. (Taggart 2004: 274)

As Taggart argued, this component of the crisis narrative is blurry, romanticised, and ahistorical but its emotional power resides precisely in its vagueness which allows audience members to project their own version of the heartland, and thus their own reasons why this heartland is currently threatened. While Trump constructed his political advertisement around the combination of an anti-establishment narrative and that of an economic crisis, Le Pen chose to embrace the productive ambiguity and the wide appeal of the crisis of the heartland for her own advertisement. Building on a combination of evocative landscapes and mythical symbols of France, she accompanied these images with a narrative of crisis, claiming that she worried 'each day about the state of the country and the world that we will leave as a legacy to our children' (G: i). After having raised these doubts, she then imbued her message with *gravitas* and claimed that this was indeed 'a crucial point that would tip the scales' (Koselleck 2006: 358):

> Your choice for the upcoming presidential election is crucial, fundamental. It is a genuine choice of civilisation. Either you continue with those who have lied, failed, and betrayed, who have misled the people and lost France, or you decide to restore order to France. (G: i)

Throughout the corpus, Le Pen repeatedly made references to this crisis of identity, attributing to France's heartland several fluctuating characteristics

like its 'independence' (C: liv), 'our traditions, our beautiful language, our culture, our way of life' (A: i), its 'secularism' (*'laïcité'*) (C: lviii), the 'equality between men and women' (A: i), and so on. However, this idealised heartland always came hand in hand with the looming threat of the 'others' which might disrupt, and sometimes have already destroyed, this fragile equilibrium. In the case of this campaign, more than the amorphous concept of immigrants, Le Pen implicitly referenced Islam as the main opposition with this nostalgic construct, framing Islam as inherently incompatible with the mythical heartland without ever having to openly say it and leaving herself vulnerable to accusations of Islamophobia.

In sum, the performative mobilisation of the heartland through a narrative of identity crisis was a noteworthy component of the wider crisis narrative which furthered the moment of decision and Le Pen's argument that the election was not only about her personal and political gain, but rather 'a challenge of civilisation' (A: i). This imbued her campaign with a symbolic authority that solidified the other aspects of the crisis. In many ways, even if Trump was not as explicit in his mobilisation of the heartland, forcing his sympathisers to read between the lines to understand which 'great' America he was referring to, this ambiguity also contributed to widening his appeal. In allowing his audience to project themselves onto a blank slate, he also gave more prominence to the other complementary narrative of crisis, which focused more explicitly on the role of the elite.

Anti-establishment narrative of crisis: A crisis caused by 'the elite'

While the aforementioned crisis narrative was deeply shaped by the exclusionary nationalism underpinning Trump and Le Pen's political projects, both of them also developed a secondary narrative of crisis which was not ideologically rooted in the far right, and thus more distinctively populist. Theoretically speaking, this part of the populist repertoire consists of an anti-establishment narrative of crisis which extends the performative articulation of the elite by placing it in the wider crisis narrative. Indeed, the elite in populism is not merely an empty signifier that idly stands in opposition with the people, it is framed as actively failing the people. This goes back to the characteristics of the populist crisis narrative: 'the primary aim of populist performances of crisis is to divide "the people" from those ostensibly responsible for the crisis – whether that is the elite, some dangerous other or a combination of both' (Moffitt 2015: 208). But, while framing the elite inside a crisis narrative seems to constitute the ideologically agnostic part of performing crisis, ideology nevertheless plays a similar role as it did in performances of identity. Indeed, the question of which elite is to be blamed for the crisis is a deeply political one and its answers to it are shaped by one's ideological tenets. In the cases of Le Pen and Trump, I isolated three complementary narratives of crisis for which

various elites were being blamed: a crisis of leadership, a crisis of accountability and a crisis of vulnerability.

1. Crisis of leadership

The most prominent way Trump and Le Pen connected the elite with their crisis narrative was through the argument that the current political elites, particularly those in power, were failing in their duties and this was associated with a demand for a change in leadership. The flaws in this leadership were demonstrated by showing bad or inefficient policy decisions, their incompetence and negligence, and finally a point that diverged between them: Le Pen criticised the loss of authority in political leadership while Trump more openly accused his opponents of corruption.

Among the policies that both politicians criticised the political elite for, a common topic was condemning current taxes as excessive. Trump generally emphasised a classic stance of fiscal conservatism in his hyperbolic way, criticising all taxes equally and describing the United States as 'the highest tax nation in the world' and his proposals as 'the biggest tax cut since Ronald Reagan' (B: vi). Le Pen on the other hand, showed once more her superficial embrace of left-wing discourse by focusing on the middle class 'crushed' by the previous governments and promised to 'alleviate its burden' (A: vii) by taxing instead the goods of companies who left France (C: ix). Although many specific policies were criticised in the corpus, the most recurring target for Le Pen was the El Khomri law or '*loi travail*' (C: vii, xxii, xxxiv) which Macron supported when he was in the government and that she accused of encouraging unfair competition. As for Trump, his pet peeve was Obamacare (B: ii, E: xi–xiii, F: xxxiv) which he associated with Clinton and turned into a symbol of everything going wrong with the previous administration. Capitalising on his position as a late critic to the war in Iraq, Trump was also particularly vocal about the costs of the various wars to the Middle East, whether it was Libya (D: xxvii), Syria or Iraq (E: xxi), arguing that 'our failed Establishment have spent $6 trillion dollars on wars in the Middle East, that we never win, and now the Middle East is in worse shape than it's ever been before' (B: v).

More than bad policymaking, the two politicians chastised members of the political elite for their alleged incompetence, which translated into negligence of what they considered more important issues. Trump crudely lamented 'the stupidity of our government, the stupidity of our leaders, the decisions that are made' (B: viii), describing Clinton as 'a disaster as a senator' (E: xxiii) and Obama as 'an incompetent president' (B: viii). Le Pen primarily focused on the complacency of 'our leaders that embrace capitulation and submission' (A: ii), particularly regarding EU directives, Islam, and immigration. She, however, indirectly challenged their intelligence on occasions, calling Mélenchon, her most vocal rival and radical-left candidate, the 'useful idiot of the wildest

capitalism' adding that he 'did not even realise he contributes to the lowering of wages and the ruin of social security' (A: viii) by not condemning immigration. Speaking of politicians more generally, Le Pen argued that 'through their negligence ('*incurie*'), our leaders create a terrible mistake as much a dreadful tragedy' (A: vi). While Le Pen made references to the neglect of public services 'that progressively disappear from our countryside' (A: vii), Trump argued that this negligence particularly affected the army as the country did not 'take care of our veterans' (F: xxxv) and left the country with a 'badly depleted military' (B: v).

To anchor the depth of this crisis in leadership of the political elite, each of the two politicians used one different final argument. Le Pen argued that this leadership crisis was also a crisis of authority. Speaking about socialist president Hollande, she denounced 'an irresolute and incompetent president who imposed the spectacle of a presidential office turned to ridicule' (A: xii). From this lack of authority at the head of the state, she inferred that authority was waning in every other part of society, including justice, which had become so lax (C: xxxvi) that it fostered criminal impunity (G: i), and the education system, which was so 'ransacked by the socialists' that they 'collapsed the authority of the teacher' (C: lviii). In response to that, Le Pen forcefully promised that her election would signal the 'return of authority and the republican order everywhere, in some suburbs, in the streets and in public transports, in the schools and in hospitals' (A: ix).

Trump on the other hand based his most severe accusation around the theme of corruption. The main target of these attacks was of course Clinton. In his usual hyperbolic style, he claimed during the rally that 'she is protected by a rigged system. She shouldn't even be able to run for president, I'll tell you right now. She is the most corrupt person ever to seek the Presidency of the United States' (B: ii). This conspiratorial accusation – echoed in his punchline that 'you'd be in jail' (E: viii) – was furthermore applied more generally to the entire political class, as could be seen in the very first sentence of his advertisement: 'Our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt political establishment with a new government controlled by you, the American people' H: i). Also metaphorically applied to his promise to 'drain the swamp' (B: ii), this transgressive accusation of corruption from the political leadership, although crude and unsubstantiated, allowed Trump to enhance his status as an outsider untainted by this systematic corruption.

Particularly in the context of a national election, Le Pen and Trump's narrative of a crisis of political leadership was not only instrumental in discrediting the rest of the political class, but it also practically framed them as the only viable recourse in the election. Because every other politician was either categorised as incompetent, complacent or, worse, corrupted, the core performative effect on audience members who endorsed their narrative was the natural

conclusion that each of them was the only redeeming figure in the entire landscape of their respective countries.

2. Crisis of accountability

Although they were its primary targets, national politicians were not the only ones who were included in the larger anti-establishment narrative of crisis conveyed by Trump and Le Pen. The second facet of the narrative was the performance of a crisis of accountability which aimed at criticising the excessive power of those members of the elite who were either beyond national boundaries, like European technocrats, beyond democratic elections, like journalists and judges, or both, like lobbies and large corporations. Denouncing their excessive influence on the politics of the nation and their disregard for the people, the two political actors also accentuated the connections and connivence between this elusive elite and local politicians.

Connecting this criticism with his previous accusations of corruption, Trump bluntly accused the government, and more generally 'our politicians' of being 'controlled by special interests, donors and others' (B: iii). Speaking about 'the global special interests', a conspiratorial expression whose actual contours remained vague, he pointed out in his advertisement that 'the political establishment . . . partner with these people who don't have your good in mind'. Although Trump remained discursively vague, looking into the semiotics of the video provided hints to figure out who these global special interests were. In the advertisement, accusations of corruption included brief shots portraying Wall Street, the G20 and G8 summits, the World Economic Forum and, last but not least, the Clinton Foundation, which acted as both the intermediary between political establishment and special interests and the proof of their collusion. Although many of the shots featured national politicians, supposedly accountable to their constituency, the advertisement provided viewers with some illustrations of these unaccountable elites, particularly from the private sector from which Trump himself came.

In contrast with Trump, Le Pen was rarely as vague when denouncing the unaccountability of global elites, choosing instead to be specific in her accusations. During the debate, she for instance attacked Macron for not having the 'political will' to oppose the 'big laboratories' because a member of his staff used to work for Servier, a pharmaceutical company (C: xx). To highlight the collusion between the political establishment and the economic elites, she often referred to them as 'friends' or 'mates' ('*copains*') of other politicians. During the debate, she insistently accused Macron of this, telling him that he wanted to 'open France to massive immigration because large company owners ('*les grands patrons*'), who are your friends, are looking forward to being able to lower wages' (C: lxvii), that 'large corporations' are the 'friends . . . with whom you have a nip ('*buvez des coups*')' (C: iv), and finally interrogated him on his

'friends from the financial interests' (C: xvii). In the rally, she used a similar strategy to show a dangerous collusion, criticising the '*copains assureurs*' and '*copains grands patrons*' ('mates from insurance companies and company owners') of his main political rival (A: x).

As can be seen from these excerpts, the main unaccountable types of elites mentioned in the corpus came from the economic sector. What is particularly notable in the way both Trump and Le Pen framed this relationship between private interests and public representatives lay in the ambiguity which resided in making politicians appear simultaneously on equal grounds, as 'friends' of the economic elite, and in an asymmetric power relationship, with politicians being 'controlled' (B: iii) by, and hence serving the interests of, these companies. This second interpretation was particularly clear when Le Pen claimed that 'France does not decide anything but submits itself to the logic of the market' (A: iv), pointing at the allegedly submissive stance of the political establishment vis-à-vis the unaccountable economic elites. Because of France's position as a member state of the European Union, Le Pen introduced another layer of unaccountable hierarchy in the form of the EU bureaucrats. On the bottom of the hierarchy were French politicians who 'transferred' the sovereignty of the nation to these unaccountable 'bureaucrats whose name we barely know and that we did not elect' (A: ii). Higher up the ladder, the European elites were located at an intermediate level of power, but they were themselves controlled by the higher power of corporate interests. Le Pen described the situation by saying that 'these technocrats work every day to undermine nations, under the influence of lobbies and of a global finance which has every argument, including buying them with hard cash *('y compris sonnants et trébuchants*'), to convince them of any choice' (A: ii).

Finally, Le Pen and Trump included in their narrative of a crisis of accountability a variety of unelected political actors. For Le Pen, it included several judges as well as the institution in charge of controlling conflicts of interests, the 'High Authority for the Transparency of Public Life', which were accused of being politically motivated and failing their duty of neutrality in their treatment of her party (C: lx–lxii). Most prominently, both Trump and Le Pen described the media as systematically in collusion with their opponents. Le Pen for example told Macron that 'I know that you can choose [which journalist to talk to], but this never happens to me' (C: xxxvi). Coined in his infamous expression of the 'fake news media', Trump rejected one of Clinton's accusations as 'mainstream media nonsense put out by her, because, frankly, I think the best person in her campaign is the mainstream media' (D: xxx).

Working in conjunction with the previous narrative of a crisis of leadership, which sought to set the populist actors up as the only viable electoral recourse, this narrative of a crisis of accountability undermines the legitimacy of other political actors by pointing at their position outside of democratic

control. Theatrically speaking, its effectiveness lies in the Brechtian technique of raising the awareness of the audience to expose the artificiality of electoral politics. Here, that means showing the audience that there is a wider political field beyond the politicians they can vote for, and pointing at the impossibility to hold these non-traditional actors, from European bureaucrats and business leaders to journalists, accountable. Furthermore, such a narrative connects this wider network of unaccountable actors to the mainstream politicians in front of them, arguing that voting them out will also bring more accountability and transparency to politics as a whole. However, pushed to the extreme, this narrative would undermine every political actor other than the one who performed it, including the checks and balances which liberal democracies are built around like the media and justice, as later became apparent when considering Trump's fraught relationship with judges during and after his term as president.

3. Crisis of vulnerability

The last component of the anti-establishment crisis narrative found in the corpus was a crisis of vulnerability. For Le Pen and Trump, this narrative took the form of accentuating the weakness of their respective country to show how others were taking advantage of it to fulfil their own agenda. In a similar way as the crisis of accountability, this crisis narrative pushed the audience beyond the national sphere to consider the relative positionality of their own country. However, it was underpinned by a form of zero-sum game thinking, a realpolitik perspective in which countries were in competition with one another and where another country's gain always implied one's loss. Furthermore, instead of addressing a specific form of elite, this narrative's frame of reference was that of realism in international relations (Jervis 1999), considering nation-states and international organisations as monolithic constructs, with little consideration for their internal composition and power-balance. With the heavier reliance for Le Pen on a crisis of the heartland than Trump, the prominence of this crisis of vulnerability was the second major difference between the two politicians: it held a major importance in Trump's wider narrative but a relatively minor one for Le Pen.

Indeed, Le Pen only used this narrative of France's vulnerability as a support to the other forms of crises she performed. Among the political entities that she framed as abusing the weakness of France's political elite, three stood out from the rest: the European Union, Germany, and the United States. In her rally, she for instance condemned 'those pretentious moralisers that introduce themselves as 'the elite' and want us to believe that France is nothing, that it cannot achieve anything without the European Union, without Germany, without the United States' (A: iii). She insisted on several occasions that the rest of the political establishment had in effect made this a political reality. She notably condemned Macron for 'lying prostrate' ('*à plat ventre*') in front

of Germany' (C: lxii). In an earlier part of the debate, she argued that 'the imbalance between Germany and France . . . constitutes the seeds of war. . . . War was started by this submission, Mister Macron, the very submission you are reproducing because you are the France that bows to Germany and that is extremely problematic' (C: lvii). Another element supported the idea that Le Pen had partly subscribed to the type of realist perspective of international relations, that considered international institutions as nothing more than the tools of the great powers which control them: her repeated conflation between the EU and Germany. This was particularly salient as she caricatured Macron's pro-EU positions as '*Europe à la schlague*' (C: lxvi), an untranslatable expression referring to a form of whipping used in the German army and blatantly implying that the EU was merely a puppet of Germany. But outside of these occurrences which were mostly passing mentions, particularly for the USA, Le Pen did not particularly accentuate the narrative of France as vulnerable to other countries.

In contrast, the narrative of other countries abusing the USA's weakness was particularly salient in Trump's performances. This prominence can be partly understood when considering Trump's 'transactional' approach to politics (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 289), that is a vision of politics as business, where each actor is only guided by their self-interest and where bilateral 'deals' are more valuable than multilateral agreements. This vision constituted an ideal terrain for the development of a narrative of weakness grounded in a zero-sum vision of the economy and sheds new light on Trump's thematic insistence on 'job losses': if a job or factory left US territory, this inevitably implied that another country gained it. Fully endorsing this narrative, Trump thus emphasised the gains made by other countries to demonstrate the weakness of America which was allegedly being 'ripped off by everybody' (B: xii): India (B: iii, F: xvi), Vietnam (F: xvi), and of course Mexico (B: iii; D: ii; F: xiv; H: i) and China (B: viii; D: ii; E: xxxiv; F: xvi; H: i), which were the most frequently cited beneficiaries of the USA's alleged weakness. Trump ceaselessly argued that the main cause for the USA's problems were the trade agreements signed by the political elite in the last decades.[7] In his words, 'we've become very, very sloppy. We've had people that are political hacks making the biggest deals in the world, bigger than companies' (F: xxxii). Among these 'deals', Trump held particular grudges against two of them: the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal. He most vehemently articulated his criticism against these during the third debate where he described 'the NAFTA deal signed by [Clinton's] husband [as] one of the worst deals ever made of any kind signed by anybody. It's a disaster' (F: vii). Using another hyperbole, he furthermore criticised 'the Iran deal' as 'the stupidest deal of all time' (F: xxvii), arguing that, because of it, the USA reinforced their political

enemy: 'we made [Iran] very powerful. We gave them $150 billion back. We gave them $1.7 billion in cash. I mean, cash. Bundles of cash as big as this stage. We gave them $1.7 billion' (F: xxx).

Extending this narrative of crisis beyond economic matters, Trump applied a similarly transactional logic to military issues and security agreements. Transgressively breaking with decades of military cooperation, Trump notably criticised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [D: xxix] and other American allies by depicting the USA as a victim of its own partners, which abuse its generosity by not paying their fair share of the cost of protection:

> As far as Japan and other countries, we are being ripped off by everybody. We're defending other countries. We are spending a fortune doing it. They have the bargain of the century. All I said is we have to renegotiate these agreements because our country cannot afford to defend Saudi Arabia, Japan, Germany, South Korea, and many other places we cannot continue to afford. (F: xii–xiii)

Lastly, Trump applied this narrative of weakness to demonstrate how the current political elite was constantly being 'outplayed' (F: xxxi) and 'outsmarted' (F: xi) by their own enemies, including Iran, but also Putin's Russia (E: xxiv) and Assad's Syria (F: xxx). Worse than that, he condemned the political establishment's 'weak foreign policy' (E: xxv) which 'created a vacuum' (D: xxvii), holding them responsible for the creation of the Islamic State (D: xxix) and having reinforced the power of its enemies. Overall, Trump's strong reliance on a narrative of crisis of vulnerability illustrated his transactional approach to politics, while also highlighting a fundamental component of how he convinced his audience of the relevance of his business experience to tackle political issues. Exploiting the idea that traditional politics only led the USA to become vulnerable, this narrative thus provided him with enhanced legitimacy as an outsider and a strongman whose transactional mindset would solve political dilemmas.

Conclusion: From Urgency to a Call to Action

Although crisis is typically referred to in the singular form, this chapter has demonstrated that, in practice, performing crisis is less about 'spectacularising' *one* specific failure than it is about incorporating a multiplicity of apparently disjointed failures into a wider narrative. Even within this overarching crisis narrative, I argued that two complementary sub-narratives were themselves aggregating a number of smaller narratives of crisis. In the case of Le Pen and Trump, two far-right politicians who connected the populist style to develop their brand of reactionary nationalism, these sub-narratives mirrored the articulation between exclusionary nationalism and populism, placing the cause for the crisis respectively on the excluded 'others' and on the elite.

However, it is worth noting that, despite their extreme diversity, the various facets of these crisis narratives did not contradict one another. Instead, they interacted with and built on one another, each one adding a supplementary layer to an increasingly complex narrative of unified crisis. Regardless of how outlandish and removed from any materiality some of these narratives might have been, none of them threatened the internal coherence of the crisis. This tension between the plurality of failures and the totalising result is perhaps best accounted for by considering the dual purpose of performances of crisis: producing a feeling of urgency in the audience and turning this urgency into political capital.

Koselleck (2006: 360) showed that crisis consists of two fundamental elements: 'the observable condition and the judgement'. However, a crisis narrative only fulfils its purpose when it prompts a judgement from the person who is convinced by it, that is shifting from an external situation to an internal choice. As such, more than showing what is not going well in a given context – 'spectacularising failure' in Moffitt's words – performing crisis is also about presenting the audience with a simple but urgent choice. This is partly why I chose to include performances of crisis as the final cluster in my analysis of the populist repertoire: their *dénouement* is where the production side of populism ends, pushing the audience itself to shift from reception to action.

This urgency produced by the performance is well acknowledged by the two politicians which I analysed, as they repeatedly emphasised this notion of living at a decisive tipping point. Le Pen particularly made this case explicitly in her advertisement, saying that 'the choice you will make for this upcoming presidential election is crucial, fundamental, it is a genuine choice of civilisation' (G: i). She did it even more evocatively in her rally, telling the audience that 'we are no longer really in the campaign, but at the hour where fate solidifies. We are at the hour of choice' (A: i). Less poetic, Trump chose to be darker in his own performance of urgency: 'This is our last chance. We're not gonna have another chance. . . . Four years, you can forget it, you'll never have another shot. This is it' (B: i). In every debate, he included at the end a similarly ominous message: 'this country cannot take another four years' (D: xxxvi; E: xxx; F: xxxv) of this crisis.

One could object that elections are always framed as a decisive moment of choice by every candidate involved, regardless of their involvement with the populist style. But just like performances of transgression, I do not claim that performing a moment of decisive choice, or even that using a crisis narrative, is exclusively limited to populist actors.[8] The populist style only comes into being when all three performative clusters are mobilised simultaneously. However, what is specific about populist performances of crisis is not just this specific articulation between an ideologically rooted crisis with the failures of the elite, it is also their extreme intensity. More than just a decisive choice, populist actors mobilise the concept of crisis to convince their audience that this is a

'situation that necessitates a vital decision that is seen as so significant and all-encompassing as to both change and delineate the course of history' (Moffitt 2016: 119). In consequence, a specificity of populist performances of crisis is that they combine a high intensity and direness in their depiction of crisis with a dramatic call to act in their performance of urgency.

In addition to rushing the audience to act without pausing to consider the accuracy or veracity of their crisis narrative, the final benefit of performing crisis in a political context is that it frames the messenger, in this case the populist leader, in the position of an oracle, a transgressive crisis truth-teller willing to put into words the problems that others in a similar position either ignore, minimise, or contribute to. Even without actively offering feasible solutions to the crisis, the mere fact of telling the 'truth' provides legitimacy to the actor that stepped in to point it out and turn them into a redeeming figure. But just like the other two performative clusters, these political benefits are conditional to the validation of the crisis narrative by the audience. If the performance of crisis is unconvincing, the messenger might instead get stuck in the role of Cassandra, warning others of impending doom without ever being taken seriously. This is why a careful contextualisation of these crisis narratives remains important for both the performer of crisis and the analyst: at times, the material preconditions, a dislocation in Laclauian term, will provide a propitious ground for the crisis narrative to flourish while it would not have in different circumstances. It is equally as important to understand why a performance of crisis resonated with the audience as it is to understand why it did not.

Notes

1. This performative mediation of crisis bears strong resemblance with the cognate concept of securitisation, which emphasises the performative construction of security. I have chosen in this chapter to exclusively focus on crisis but for a longer discussion on the nexus between the populist style, crisis, and security, see Kurylo (2020) who shares many tenants of this approach as she defines populism as a 'securitisation style'.
2. The most common alternative that Trump used instead was that of 'disaster', which he used forty times in the corpus.
3. The use of water metaphors to talk about migration is a much wider phenomenon, that spread from far-right discourse and is becoming increasingly naturalised in the public discourse. For more on this topic, see Porto (2022).
4. In her rally, there were, however, two exceptions where Le Pen conflated 'Islamism' with 'Islamic fundamentalism' (A: viii, ix). Whether the conflation was a mistake or purposefully left as a dog-whistling signal aimed at her sympathisers is up for discussion.
5. This apparently surprising reversal and re-appropriation of the terrorist notion of martyrdom reflects the increasing popularity of self-sacrifice in extreme-right circles. For a longer discussion on this, see Koehler (2020).

6. To be more specific, I would amend Taggart's concept by saying that what he referred to was not a 'populist heartland' but more accurately a 'nationalist heartland' performatively articulated through the populist style. While this may seem like a minor point of dissension, it is precisely an example of why it is so fundamental to clearly disentangle populism from far-right ideology.
7. Le Pen also voiced her opposition to free trade agreements, particularly the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada, describing them as agreements 'imposed on us but not decided by us' (C: xli). However, this opposition was barely mentioned, unlike Trump who made it a key part of his crisis narrative.
8. Hay (1995) for instance used the example of Thatcher's New Right to illustrate his point on the mediation of failure.

CONCLUSION: COMPARING THE PERFORMANCES OF LE PEN AND TRUMP

This book started as a comparative investigation into the appeal of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen as political actors and the role of populism during their 2016 and 2017 presidential campaigns. How could these two politicians from the same ideological family both be called 'populist' when their campaigns *felt* so different to me as an observer of the politics of these two countries? Indeed, from a distance, it looked like there was not much in common between Trump's brash divisiveness and Le Pen's softening of her image. In a way, both had become hegemonic forces in their respective camps, blowing away their rivals and establishing uncontested control over their parties, but the processes to reach these results looked very different. In their discourse, both articulated a type of opposition between people and elite, but this element alone did not sufficiently account for their characterisation as populist leaders.

Throughout the last three empirical chapters, I have showcased various similarities between the two politicians, whether it is the uniquely populist way in which they set up their political battles and identities, the transgressive dimension of their political communication, or the similar narratives of crisis they performatively articulated. And while I hope to have convincingly demonstrated the centrality of the populist style in their presidential campaigns, I also want to provide in this conclusion an overview of the major differences between the two actors I analysed.

Comparing Le Pen and Trump: A Summary

Ideological differences

I chose to engage with these two specific politicians not only because of their relative prominence as two of the most electorally successful leaders associated with the populist style, but also because of their shared characteristics. First and foremost, their ideological agenda and proposed policies appeared very similar, a point which was confirmed throughout the corpus. I have for instance shown the centrality of xenophobia in both of their discourses, but it was far from the only ideological commonality between them as the corpus showcased all the hallmarks of far-right ideology which I discussed in Chapter 1: the central role of an excluded out-group underpinning a xenophobic agenda; a focus on (in)security in order to ascertain their strict 'law and order' stance; a conservative, and occasionally reactionary, stance on social issues despite superficial pretences of defending progressive ideals; and of course the exclusionary nationalism that is paramount in the ideology of the far right.

However, even at that level of ideology, two notable differences between my two case studies emerged through the analysis. The first one was the somewhat surprising recurrence of left-wing themes in Le Pen's performances, which were completely absent from Trump's case. With references to concepts like economic inequality, poverty and precarity, Le Pen's discourse incorporated many central themes of the left. However, as demonstrated above, this remained superficial instrumentalisation rather than an ideological shift or a genuine hybridisation. This signature of Le Pen's discourse, that differentiated her from other far-right actors in France, is what Alduy and Wahnich (2015: 54–5) called '*gauchisme*' ('leftism'): borrowing left-wing rhetoric to add a social tonality to the issues she raised while presenting the ideological policies of the far right – halting immigration, closing borders – as the only solutions to fix those problems. It has been a central component of Le Pen's personal strategy of '*dédiabolisation*', and her way to substantiate claims that the qualifier of 'extreme right' was not accurate for her platform, presenting it as 'both right and left' (Prat de Seabra 2016).

The second major difference that emerged in terms of ideology pertained to the relationship with exclusionary nationalism in the discourse of each politician. While Le Pen placed the (French) nation at the heart of her performances, explicitly granting the concept a central place in her rhetoric, Trump spoke more generally of 'America' as he made his nationalism much less explicit than hers. My interpretation of this difference is that Le Pen's nationalism was much more deeply embedded in her ideological core than it was for Trump. Because of her career in a dynastic party where patriotism was *the* cardinal value, it was not surprising that nationalism stood out as a primary referential which she had the most experience performing. Conversely, Trump's commitment to conservatism has been relatively recent, favouring instead a 'transactional' approach

to politics (Kranish and Fisher 2017: 289) which consisted in opportunistically supporting whatever party or candidate favoured his personal interests the most. Although he actively tried to demonstrate the depth of his commitment to nationalism in a programmatic book (Trump 2015), the corpus I analysed revealed that this relatively shallower commitment to nationalism had performative impacts as Trump did not demonstrate the same ease which Le Pen had when explicitly articulating collective constructs like the nation and the people. Instead, building on his extensive experience as a public figure and furthering the *ethos* he had honed on reality television, Trump played to his strengths and compensated for this ideological limitation by heavily relying on performances of self as the heart of his political communication.

Personal and contextual differences

Moving beyond ideological differences and expanding the former point on personal image, one of the main stylistic differences between the two political actors consisted precisely in the way they performed their *persona*. On the one hand, Trump's performances were particularly personalistic and self-centred. On the other hand, Le Pen mobilised her *persona* in a relatively more subdued way. To be more specific, Trump primarily focused on performing his own exceptionality, bragging about his wealth, success as a businessman and skill as a 'dealmaker'. Conversely, Le Pen chose to emphasise her normality, presenting herself as an ordinary French woman and a hardworking mother. Although both trod the line between ordinariness and extraordinariness (Moffitt 2016: 152) in their own ways, the main tendency in the corpus was that Le Pen leaned more towards the former, while Trump relied more on the latter.

Two main elements account for such a difference, but they require considering individual and contextual factors. The first factor to consider is what I described as the 'underscore' (Pavis 2003: 99) or 'the performative labour' (Rai 2014a: 7) of the political actors, that is the work of training and political acculturation that took place over their lives. In that regard, despite her claims to be different from the French political establishment, Le Pen's rise has altogether been very similar to that of most career politicians in France, studying law and becoming a lawyer before pivoting towards politics. Although her family name and the controversial image of her father left her in the position of pariah for years, a central leitmotif of her autobiography (Le Pen 2006) was the aspiration to gain credibility as a serious politician, which partly explains her choice during the campaign to project ordinariness. Conversely, Trump's path to politics was much more exceptional and chaotic, standing out from the lifelong commitment to either dominant party that most other American politicians follow. Raised as the heir of a real estate company, Trump became famous as a businessman who had mastered the 'art of the deal' (Trump and Schwartz 1987) and, despite disastrous commercial ventures, sustained that reputation

through his lead role in *The Apprentice*. Given that underscore built around the exceptional narrative of a self-made billionaire embodying the 'American dream', Trump's choice to emphasise his extraordinariness helped him translate his fame into political capital.

Another important individual factor which I showcased on multiple occasions, but which would have warranted much longer exploration, is gender. Just like other areas of political power and regardless of one's gender, performing leadership requires engaging with the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Trump fully embraced these standards, imbuing his self-portrayal as a leader with stereotypically masculine traits like aggressivity and toughness, characteristics which he notably exacerbated in his performances of transgression. By contrast, given that Le Pen was constrained by the 'double bind' (Jamieson 1995) which forces female politicians to find a balance between the codes of masculinity and femininity, her *persona* embodied this hybrid gender expression through the archetype of the 'iron lady' (Geva 2020: 7).

In addition to the personal journey of these two performers, the second factor accounting for major differences in the style of Trump and Le Pen lies in the political context of the countries in which they rose to prominence. In that regard, the strategy they adopted to tackle the institutional constraints they faced mirrored and contrasted each other. Although both challenged the established line of the party within which they campaigned, they did so through completely opposite strategies. In short, and in a remarkable echo of each other's journey: while Le Pen pushed her extreme party into the mainstream, Trump dragged a mainstream party into the extreme. These contingent factors account for many of the differences highlighted throughout the corpus. Beyond the aforementioned inclination for either ordinariness or extraordinariness, Le Pen favoured the use of *gravitas* and solemnity in her rhetoric, as well as more covert forms of transgressive performances like insinuations and sarcasm. These choices can be understood as an extension of her '*dédiabolisation*' strategy: allowing her to stand out from her fellow politicians while maintaining a veneer of respectability. By contrast, Trump's transgressions were more openly aggressive and straightforward than Le Pen's, following the lineage of the witty quips of his television *persona* on *The Apprentice*.

Rhetorical differences

The last type of differences between Trump and Le Pen which I want to highlight lies in the idiosyncratic ways they expressed themselves. Indeed, although the blueprint provided by populism was a common denominator during their performances, three correlated differences were particularly salient.

To resume the discussion on linguistic differentiation, Trump and Le Pen each found a way to create a contrast with their main rivals by using a different kind of

language. Across all sources, one of the central features of Trump's style was the accessibility and repetitiveness of his language, which was particularly marked in semi-improvised performances like debates where Trump used an even simpler language, as other authors have quantitatively demonstrated (Wang and Liu 2018; Savoy 2018). Simplicity did not necessarily equate to clarity in Trump's case as his unbridled way of speaking often led him towards long and incoherent digressions. These digressions, which were filled with specific anecdotes, not only relied on the audience's pre-performative knowledge about who and what the candidate was referring to, but often led him to *non sequitur* by abruptly stopping before moving to a drastically different point. As McDonnell and Ondelli (2020) confirmed, Le Pen used a much richer and more focused language, particularly in her rally speech, whose script she followed much more faithfully than Trump did in his speeches. Although her language register noticeably lowered in the debate (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2019: 47), her performances particularly stood out when compared to Trump's for her use of a much more varied vocabulary and for the increased complexity of the sentence structures she used.[1]

Beyond the differences in their vocabulary, grammar and syntax, another difference between Le Pen and Trump's discourse can be found in their level of language abstraction (Menegatti and Rubini 2013). Indeed, I have illustrated on multiple occasions that, when making an argument, Trump preferred the use of tangible examples to more abstract concepts like nation or sovereignty. Another important feature of Trump's discourse which I did not have the time to properly develop is the use of constructed dialogue, or direct reported speech. In her analysis of Trump's 'idiolects', the specificities of his discourse, Sclafani (2017: 48–58) was one of the first to point that he commonly re-enacted the conversations of multiple actors with himself. Although he was an unreliable narrator, this allowed him to portray himself as a relatable character in his own discourse. It also helped him concretely attribute his arguments to others in position of authority or depict a fictitious interlocutor as a strawman to embody opposite positions.

Conversely, a characteristic of Le Pen's discourse was the higher level of abstraction she used. This was particularly obvious when comparing their uses of metaphors and other literary devices: not only were they more common in Le Pen's case, they were overall more complex. Trump's signature rhetorical device was the hyperbole (Trump and Schwartz 1987: 58), with metaphors and comparisons coming in a distant second place. By contrast, Le Pen's repertoire of rhetorical devices was much richer. In addition to anaphora, which is her figure of speech of predilection (Khattab 2017), Le Pen favoured long rhetorical devices like extended metaphors and enumerations, as well as devices relying on a subtext like innuendos and euphemisms.

Last but not least, Trump and Le Pen's vision of politics sharply differed. In a nutshell, the importance for Le Pen of this value-driven vision of politics

stood firmly in stark contrast with Trump's transactional perspective on politics. Le Pen grounded her political discourse on principles and symbolism, which meant that her performances granted a prevalent role to what Alexander (2006) called background symbols: the shared imaginary uniting a community. These symbols allowed her to implicitly project exceptionality by implicitly framing herself as a defender of French values, while also fuelling her narrative of crisis focusing on the French heartland. By contrast, Trump demonstrated a much more volatile and down-to-earth conception of politics, focusing first and foremost on economic interests within a zero-sum game.

Looking Backward and Forward: Evolutions in the Use of the Populist Style

The analysis conducted in this book covered a very specific time frame: Donald Trump's first presidential campaign in 2016 and Le Pen's second presidential campaign in 2017. Since then, each of the two politicians ran another time in their respective presidential elections: Trump in 2020 and Le Pen in 2022. Although I do not claim to be comprehensive about these two events, whose detailed analysis goes beyond the scope of this research project, I would like to offer some thoughts about the evolutions in both style and ideology of the two political actors since the campaigns examined in this book. What role did the populist style play in their evolution? Did either actor move away from it? What can we expect from their potential future campaigns of 2024 and 2027 respectively? Without aspiring to predict the future, a goal far removed from any serious academic research, the exercise in looking backwards and forwards is the opportunity to discuss the relevance of this book's insights beyond the specific context of these particular campaigns.

Charting Trump's evolution since 2016

Let us start with the case of Trump, for whom the biggest difference in the two campaigns might lie in his status. From a maverick candidate claiming he would 'drain the swamp' to the 45th president of the United States defending his term in the office, the position in which Trump entered the 2020 campaign could not have been more different. This leads us towards a growing area of the literature in populism studies: populism in power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Venizelos 2023), which questions whether the practice of power affects the political actors who mobilised a political style centred on subverting norms and contesting the hegemonic status quo. In one of the most thorough contributions to that literature, Venizelos (2023: 37) discussed the divides in the scholarship between (1) authors who see populism and power as fundamentally incompatible, (2) others who predict an inevitable moderation or softening, (3) those claiming populist politicians are simply incapable of ruling a country and (4) those who

think populism may genuinely contribute to meaningful change to the power structure.

Indeed, many commentators of US politics expected the responsibility of the presidential office and the resilience of the American institutions to moderate Trump's excesses, and thus his reliance on the populist style. In a way, this is partly what happened as he surrounded himself with a mix of advisers from his campaign team and more established members of the Washington elite. More than this, many of the policies he enacted during his term followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, albeit with a clearly conservative outlook, which led Potter et al. (2019) to cheekily argue that 'continuity trumps change'. But this is only a partial analysis of the situation, as demonstrated by Venizelos (2023: 184) who developed a thorough comparison of Trump's use of populism during both his campaign and his presidential term, concluding that 'during his presidency, Trump maintained a high degree of populist discourse'. Whether it is his unfiltered use of Twitter until his eventual ban, his 'metatheatrical iconoclasm' (Day and Wedderburn 2022: 7) during diplomatic summits or his repeated disavowals of US allies and even internationally binding obligations, there was no major shift away from the populist style for Trump.

However, there was a much clearer evolution for Trump on the level of ideology. Where I insisted in this book that Trump's transactional perspective on politics made him more ideologically opportunistic and less rooted than Le Pen was in the far-right playbook, the situation has changed as the devotion he elicited in his supporters gave him a central position in the Republican Party. Particularly during his 2020 campaign, and equally so in the first months of his 2024 campaign, Trump has doubled down on his reactionary discourse, fully embracing the authoritarian and reactionary tropes of the far right and codifying them into what is now referred to as 'Trumpism' (Cremer 2023). And although he was contested on multiple occasions by more traditional Republican politicians, most notably Liz Cheney, Trump's grasp over the Republican electorate seems tighter than ever in 2024 as he stood practically unopposed during the primary campaigns. The rise of a new generation of radical Republicans following in his footsteps, from Ron DeSantis to Marjorie Taylor Greene, emphasises this ideological shift which contributes to the increasing phenomenon of party polarisation in American politics.

Trump's ideological radicalisation is also accompanied by stylistic changes which increasingly seem to see him push his style in more extreme directions, notably in his performance of crisis and of transgression. While these claims would require a more thorough substantiation, the clearest example of this can be seen in his denial of the results of the 2020 elections which he unambiguously lost. I discussed in Chapter 5 the possibility that undermining some of the norms of politics could potentially erode the very foundations of

democracy and Trump's refusal to accept defeat – a point which was already latent during the 2016 campaign and salient in this corpus – did precisely this. Not only did it reduce the trust in the institutions that his supporters may feel towards US politics and their own country's institutions, it also fed into conspiratorial discourse which culminated in the violent assault on the Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Of course, this was but a brief overview of an evolution that could be (and undoubtedly will be) the topic of multiple books. However, what I want to stress in relationship with this monograph's ambitions is that, even in power, Trump never abandoned the fundamentals of the populist style. On the contrary, he even pushed its use to new extremes since his defeat in 2020, which was made that much easier by his return to a status of an outsider and his performance of self as a perseverant leader standing against corruption. Trump's populism now not only serves a radical-right programme, he uses it to advance an increasingly authoritarian agenda.

Charting Le Pen's evolution since 2017

Given that Le Pen lost to the second round of the election in 2017, her evolution follows a very different path from Trump's. Her crushing defeat against Macron during the second turn, with 34% of the votes and thus 66% for him, initially put Le Pen in a difficult position within her own camp as her modernist strategy and professionalism were contested. Although Le Pen's 2017 results were a record performance for her party, the end of her campaign was tainted by her catastrophic performance in the debate with Macron during the runoff in which, as illustrated in this book, Le Pen ended up looking unprepared and out of her depth. In a rare candid admission of failure, Le Pen even acknowledged that this was a 'failed *rendez-vous* with the French people'. Beyond the personal accusations of lacking presidential stature, her attempts at bypassing the left–right divide and particularly her use of a leftist rhetoric opened her to a criticism of having excessively diluted her message to the point of lacking ideological backbone and radicality (Mestre and Faye 2017).

To reassert her far-right credentials, she fired her closest and increasingly ambitious adviser during the 2017 campaign, Florian Philippot, who was most closely associated with the FN's 'populist turn' and replaced him with the current leader of the party, Jordan Bardella, who combined a youthful and consensual *persona* with much clearer conservative credentials and a loyalty to Le Pen's line. However, outside of these changes to her personal circles, Le Pen held on to her '*dédiabolisation*' strategy and even leaned further into it. One of the most noteworthy examples of that evolution was her decision to change the name of the party in June 2018, abandoning the divisive and combative connotations of '*Front*' for the much more inclusive and consensual '*Rassemblement National*' (National Rally, RN), which was also a nod to her earlier attempts

at gathering the far right beyond her party in the personalistic '*Rassemblement Bleu Marine*' (Navy Blue Rally). Another stylistic change can be found in her increased focus on her personal life, something which I described as less common in her performances of self in 2017. Indeed, her personal storytelling has become increasingly prominent in her rallies and beyond, as she accepted more intimate interviews and very overtly showcased her passion for cat breeding (Calvi 2021) in a public communication campaign aimed at further humanising her *persona*.

These efforts towards '*dédiabolisation*' were also reflected ideologically through a softening of several emblematic measures of her previous campaign for her 2022 presidential bid. Perhaps wary of the messy and unsatisfying way 'Brexit' was delivered in the neighbouring country of the United Kingdom, Le Pen notably removed divisive promises like departing from the European Union, exiting the Schengen Area or returning to a national currency. Instead, she continued the superficial hybridisation of her nationalist and conservative agenda with exogenous elements from left-wing ideologies, taking cues in the case of this campaign from political ecology. Among the most noteworthy additions in 2022, she granted a prominent importance to the new concept of 'localism,' theorised by Hervé Juvin, which consisted in favouring local food over exports in the name of the lower carbon footprint of French-sourced food. This provided a 'local' twist, and a much more politically correct frame to the far-right notion of 'national preference' while introducing a green lens to her programme, showing once more her ideological plasticity on any issue beyond the fundamentals of immigration and security.

When it comes more specifically to her use of the populist repertoire, there was, however, a major stylistic change which primarily owes much to the emergence of French polemical pundit Éric Zemmour in the 2022 campaign. Echoing an old divide in the French far right between a modernist line and a traditional line, Zemmour embodied a return to the ideological fundamentals of the far right, defending a much more reactionary programme with the intent of challenging Le Pen's hegemony over her political camp. What this meant in practice was that although both of them mobilised the three performative clusters of the populist style, they did it in a very different way. Faithful to her strategy to bypass the left–right cleavage, Le Pen maintained the discursive centrality of the antagonism between the people and the elite, although in a less dominant way than in 2017. Indeed, while she used populist undertones for some of her slogans, for instance 'If the people vote, the people win' or 'For all the French people', she also did not make them as central as her 2017 motto of 'In the name of the people'.[2]

Zemmour, on the other hand, had built his entire career around his subversive radicality and his polemical statements. It was thus not surprising that he prioritised transgression as his signature strategy for 2022, making Le Pen

appear mild and moderate as he made his xenophobia and Islamophobia much more explicit than she ever dared. However, although Zemmour's controversial claims made Le Pen's own transgressions look tame in comparison, she remained transgressive in more subtle ways. Relying on Zemmour to do the transgressive heavy lifting, she thus further accentuated her efforts to appear authentic and closer to the French audience, using more informal expressions than in 2017 and being more open about her personal life. Another noteworthy change can be found in her increased emphasis on the role of *pathos* in her political communication, depicting herself as a victim of political bullying during her youth and showing her resilience to personal betrayal, even as her niece Marion Maréchal left to join Zemmour's campaign.

Just as in the case of Trump, this prospective section does not claim depth or exhaustivity, but it showcased the continuity for Le Pen in her mobilisation of the populist style. While this calls for more attention to contingency and the relevance of studying the phenomenon in the long term, it also demonstrates that 'populism is not necessarily a strategy consciously employed or abandoned, but often a performative mode deeply embedded in the ontological identity of the political actor' (Venizelos 2023: 190). In other words, although the populist style is accessible to every politician, committing to it does performatively transform the actor in return, a topic which would deserve more examination.

Research Agenda

No academic work is ever complete or perfect, nor should it aspire to be. The beauty of research lies in its uncertainty rather than in its stability, in the question it raises rather than the answers it provides. Here, I showcase four of the most prominent avenues for research opened by this book.

The first avenue of research lies in engaging with the other half of performance production: its reception by the audience. In other words, after having examined populism from the perspective of the actors, it is fundamental to consider populism from the perspective of the audience. Such research could take many forms, like interrogating the target audience of populist performances and discussing with them what they found most appealing or effective. Another crucial issue that an analysis focused on reception could tackle would be that of the authentication and validation of populist performances. As the last section demonstrated, not every political actor can merely embrace the template of populism to become more successful. Exploring the factors which play a role in increasing audience validation would help understand why the populist style fits so well with specific politicians under specific circumstances. Furthermore, considering audience approval for a single politician at different stages of their political life would be a productive avenue to explore variations in the way populism is expressed. A politician may prefer to strategically use the populist style during a specific election and not as much in the following one. Engaging with

style across a longer timespan could provide invaluable insights into the interaction between populism and other components of political appeal, as well as substantiate the underexplored question of the gradational nature of populism.

The second part of the research agenda set by this book is an empirical expansion of the analysis of the populist style to other political actors and circumstances. Because there are many other politicians who defend a far-right agenda with the populist style, producing a similarly 'thick' analysis of their performances would offer key insights into the way populism is used by the far right across drastically different national contexts. Future research could explore more at length the way specific facets of the performer's identity, like gender, race and so on, affect their style and the relationship between populism and these important markers of identity. To expand research further, it would also be necessary to move beyond far-right politicians. Even if the interplay between nationalism and populism has proven empirically rich, one of the central premises of the stylistic approach is that populism can be adapted to any type of ideological content. As such, it would be interesting to complement the current literature on socialist forms of populism by interrogating its stylistic specificities and the different forms populism takes when it gives shape to radical-left projects. Outside of radical politics, it would also be fascinating to explore the relationship between mainstream politicians and the populist style, discussing for instance whether the three performative clusters are present in the performances of other political actors. Finally, even if I chose to locate my research within the context of liberal democracy, using the stage provided by elections to examine performances of 'the people', a thought-provoking way to extend this research could be to examine other political systems. Indeed, even authoritarian regimes rely on a form of public performance of their popular legitimacy, which means that the populist style could even be applied in dictatorships as a way for leaders in power to perform their popular appeal, or conversely by actors in the opposition who seek to destabilise the legitimacy of their leaders.

Thirdly, another way to expand the research agenda set by this book would consist in further developing the applications of the PPAP. Indeed, the protocol was designed with the aspiration to be used beyond the specific case of populism, with a general set of questions that could apply to a wide variety of political performances. The PPAP represents a modest attempt at developing a new way to approach politics through the lens of performance studies, providing a concrete tool to develop original insights which other methodologies fail to engage with. It does fill a gap in the interdisciplinary literature on politics and performance which, in this relatively early stage of its growth, has either remained theoretical or seen scholars apply the standard methods of either discipline without systematically providing new tools to be applied beyond their home discipline. While I am very satisfied with the insights provided by the

PPAP for this research project, I am aware that one of its limitations is that it has been designed with my comparative analysis in mind. As such, a genuine test for the validity and applicability of this tool would be to see it applied to completely different cases and contexts. For instance, the performances examined in this book have all been 'traditional' political performances, that is performances developed in the codified context of electoral politics. It would be stimulating to see the PPAP being used to analyse the theatricality of other political events beyond the narrow scope of elections, from internal party politics and corporate events to local activism. The protocol would also provide stimulating insights to the study of political performances on an international scale, bypassing the national context that served as a backdrop of this work. International organisations like the United Nations or the European Union are often seen as abstract entities but engaging with the embodied performances of individual representatives of countries and civil servants would capture the symbolic and aesthetic power at play beyond the nation-state. Furthermore, outside of the leader-centric perspective of my book, applying the PPAP to large-scale political performances like protests or national ceremonies would prove insightful in assessing whether it needs to be adapted to apply to collective political actors like a crowd. All in all, I am sincerely convinced that this tool has potential, and I would be thrilled to see it mature and develop beyond this work.

Finally, the fourth avenue for research opened by my book would consist in reassessing the theoretical prominence of populism. As I discussed many times across the empirical chapters, another stimulating yet puzzling issue for this work was the realisation that there was much more to style than just populism. Indeed, even though I sought to engage with populism as a collective and open-ended set of performances which would neatly contrast with a specific set of ideas, I quickly realised that the style of a political actor went beyond populism and was shaped by a myriad of other factors, from language to socio-political culture. In consequence, the task to dissociate what was specifically populist from what were idiosyncratic or contextual characteristics was a massive analytical challenge for this research project. Taking a step back from my analysis, the paradoxical conclusion I reached was that populism was not as central as I initially assumed it to be. As was argued throughout the book, the ideological tenets of Trump and Le Pen played a tremendous role in shaping their performances, but so did other factors beyond populism. Put differently, even though I have demonstrated that the populist style has been key for the performances of these politicians, it was only one among many other elements that characterised their styles. To consider seriously this humbling conclusion opens numerous avenues for future research. First and foremost, it notably encourages an exploration of style beyond populism. One way to do that would be to identify more thoroughly and exhaustively the various

components of the style of a political actor and analyse the specific role and influence of each of these dimensions of style. Another possibility could be to examine open-ended repertoires of performance other than populism to chart the countless performative tools at the disposal of political actors to not only convey their ideas, but also build their identity and embody their power and legitimacy. Many authors have searched for one or several opposites to populism, whether it is 'elitism and pluralism' (Mudde 2004: 543), 'anti-populism' (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2013) or 'high' forms of politics (Ostiguy 2017). Likewise, Moffitt (2016: 46) argued that the opposite of the populist style was the 'technocratic style'. In consequence, a rich avenue for future research would be to examine the stylistic features of these alleged opposites to populism and critically evaluate whether populism can be placed on a spectrum and if so, what its opposite would precisely consist of. Lastly, outside of populism itself, this book has provided tools to examine all forms of political styles and – just like Hariman (1995) who distinguished realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic style – another way for future work to illuminate the intersection of politics and performance could take the form of a typological endeavour. Even beyond any form of categorisation, opening political scholarship to the dialectic between ideology and style remains one of the most important goals of this book. Further research in that direction could consider the wider applications of this performative and interdisciplinary turn: examining the relationship between power and representation, considering the performative dimensions of political communication, or exploring the importance of aesthetics in politics.

Final Thoughts

The main question that drove this research project stemmed from my aspiration to better understand the way form and content interact in politics. While politics may be seen as an abstract realm guided by ideas and principles, this does not reflect the way it is actually *perceived* by its observers and *lived* by its actors. This book was hence the opportunity to develop a vision of politics as alive and dynamic, a vision of politics as vibrant, constantly in flux and embodied through flesh-and-bones actors. It was with this purpose that I engaged with performance studies, a discipline whose core aspiration has always been to understand society in movement. Although it was humbling to realise how much further the literature in performance studies was on these questions than what my modest intuitions had led me to, it also gave me a fresh perspective to re-discover concepts which I thought I was familiar with. In this book, I endeavoured to apply this performative lens to the concepts of populism and political style, which particularly resonated with these interdisciplinary explorations and with my own interests for contemporary politics in France, the United States, and the world more generally.

Indeed, this book was also born from a curiosity to better grasp the appeal of Le Pen and Trump, two politicians about whom much ink had already been spilled. Too often dismissed as mere demagogues, I wanted to understand what it was about their way of doing politics that resonated so intensely with their audience, looking for insights into the increasing popularity of far-right ideas and seeking to learn how to counter what still looks like an inexorable rise. What was different in their performances that helped them succeed electorally where generations of far-right leaders before them had failed to exit marginality? As with anything in politics, the causes behind their electoral successes are extremely complex and include many conjunctural as well as structural factors beyond their control. However, seeing Trump and Le Pen as nothing but the pawns of greater forces would critically underestimate their agency as political actors and their craft as skilled performers which undeniably played a role in their rise to mainstream politics.

The overarching argument of my book is that an important piece of this puzzle lies in the populist style. As the popularity of populism continues to grow both in and out of academia, it is more important than ever to critically engage with the concept to better understand its potential. More than a modernised name for demagoguery or personalistic leadership, populism strikes a chord that resonates with many of the most complex themes of modern politics like representation, radicality, authenticity, identification, popular legitimacy, transgression and antagonism to name just a few. My book did not have the ambition to offer definitive answers about all of these. However, I hope that it provided avenues for reflection.

By moving beyond the moralistic connotations that populism too often holds, I wanted to challenge its automatic association with illiberalism and anti-pluralism and thus its depiction as a threat to democracy, condemning it as nothing more than a prelude to authoritarianism. At the same time, I also sought to chart with as much clarity as I could the intricate ways this style worked when mobilised by far-right politicians, showing its relevance as a tool to challenge a failing status quo and unresponsive political elites. Populism as I defined it provides a formula, a blueprint which taken in isolation does not say anything specific about the situation or how to fix it. Stripped to its very core, the populist style performatively articulates a society in crisis where an elite is failing in its duty to represent and act on behalf of its people, and where radical change is embodied through the salutary intervention of transgressive political actors, typically a leader. What I endeavoured to show in this book was that *this populist narrative should be the starting point for analysis, not its end*. Discussing what type of crisis is being presented, what kind of elite is being criticised, which people are being represented, what solutions are being offered, which norms are being broken and what type of political actor makes these claims are the questions that scholars of populism should ask.

Populism in itself is not a problem, it can on the contrary revitalise democracy by offering a radically popular alternative to a problematic status quo, provided that the message it defends serves the interests of the entire community and that it highlights genuine failures of the system. However, as my case studies have illustrated, the populist style can be – and has been – instrumentalised when the ideological content to which it gives shape serves to further a reactionary and exclusionary political agenda. However, condemning populism for its far-right interpretation is a very unsatisfying simplification. On the contrary, it is precisely because the populist style has been very successfully appropriated by the far right that it needs to be disentangled from its exclusionary content and that the academic community needs to be more cautious about how we define the concept. It is not my place as a scholar to reclaim populism to advance what I would consider a progressive agenda. However, I am sincerely convinced that we academics have an important role to play in offering clarity to this concept. Actively fighting against the moralistic judgement and instrumentalisation of populism does not mean endorsing it as the ultimate panacea to solve all of society's problems. On the contrary, we ought to remain critical about all the ways the populist style can be used because the antagonism and simplification at its core can easily be misused. But letting it conceptually turn into an exclusive tool of the far right means stripping it of any redeeming and democratic potential, thus depriving progressive political actors from ever tapping into its performative power. In consequence, I hope that this book has demonstrated the importance of taking the populist style seriously as a concept whose power lies in its unique combination of politics and performance. Analysing it with rigour and criticality can shed light on some of the most important issues in our democracies.

Notes

1. An important *caveat* is that because the two politicians expressed themselves in different languages, direct linguistic comparisons are inherently limited given the specificities of French and English.
2. In a noteworthy parallel, her radical-left rival Jean-Luc Mélenchon was also less overt in his use of populist tropes in 2022 than in 2017, preferring the word 'popular' to that of 'populist', which would deserve a much longer elaboration but which I interpret as a reaction to the increasing dominance of anti-populism in the French media leading to the very word 'populist' becoming discredited.

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