



# Populism or pragmatism? Two ways of understanding political articulation\*

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Should we consider the Yellow Vests, the *Indignados* Movement, or the *Movimento delle Sardine* to be purely populist movements? Are there alternative models of explanation that encompass features specific to the emergence and development of these movements? And should we look to left-wing populism as the source of much-needed democratic renewal in times of political and social regression? Or can we find alternatives to populism that represent a more promising base for the future of democracy? This paper aims to address these questions by providing a pragmatist, John Dewey-based answer, as an alternative to Ernesto Laclau's populist approach to the emergence of what the latter calls "popular identities."<sup>1</sup> We base our response on a mutual dialogue made possible by socio-ontological premises common to the two authors—more specifically, by the central role played by the notion of "articulation" in each approach. For both Dewey and Laclau, articulation represents a fundamental dimension of the political that points to the "ontological openness" of the social world. However, their individual conceptions of the notion differ widely. Although Laclau talks of "rhetoric" in reference to the paradigmatic set of linguistic, quasi-automatic mechanisms at the source of the political constitution of popular identities, Dewey understands this process as the enactment of specific forms of "social inquiry." Each approach represents a different understanding of the articulative dimension of politics and thereby of the practices involved in popular struggles.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the discussion of this central difference between the two models, we will also argue that Dewey's understanding of political articulation is superior to Laclau's in two senses. From a normative standpoint, it is a model of political practice that is more adequate to satisfy the democratic ideal self-determination. From a political perspective, it tends to promote democracy and democratization and seems to be better prepared to counteract the risks of authoritarianism and manipulation. Furthermore, a Dewey-based account contains an as-yet unexplored descriptive potential that challenges populism's current aspiration to fully account for the formation of popular identities. Based on these three considerations, we will propose an approach to the emergence of popular identities

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that integrates Laclau's descriptive insights into a larger context in which inquiry has normative and political priority over his notion of rhetoric.

We present our argument in three sections. Section 1 provides a full-fledged comparison between the Laclauian notion of rhetoric and Dewey's notion of collective social inquiry by presenting two differing conceptions of the formation of popular identities. Our aim is to present them as two alternative approaches to understand political articulation, starting with the fact that—to a certain extent—both share similar ontological premises. In Section 2, we further develop the contrast between the respective approaches by focusing on one central aspect: the formation and the articulation of political demands. Although for Laclau this process is based on the spontaneous performative effect of an empty signifier, Dewey identifies reflexive practices that can be described in terms of two simultaneous movements: the progressive expansion of the semantic core of political concepts and the articulated interpretation of concrete situations. Finally, in Section 3, we explore whether (and to what extent) a Deweyan account represents a superior alternative to Laclau's regarding their normative and political dimensions. We also consider the descriptive potential of both models and suggest that a Deweyan approach can account for some political practices that are normally considered populist. Finally, we discuss the question of whether Laclau's vindication of a rhetorical moment in politics must be fully rejected, or if it can in fact be integrated within a Deweyan approach. In our conclusion, we provide a brief summary of our main argument.

## 1 | RHETORIC VERSUS INQUIRY: TWO FUNDAMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF ARTICULATION

Dewey and Laclau propose two analogous theoretical moves with regard to the philosophical and theoretical traditions for which they belong to, that is, respectively, Liberalism and Marxism. To a great extent, their political and social thought should be understood as a reaction to the crisis of these paradigms, a crisis they themselves diagnosed. It is undeniable, however, that their reactions to the two crises display some differences. Although Dewey's reaction to the crisis of American Liberalism (Hook, 1969) explicitly aims at reconstructing a new version of social democracy, or democratic socialism (Westbrook, 1991), Laclau's aim is to save the lasting and valuable Marxist contributions from Marxism itself (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Marchart, 2013, p. 300 et sqq). Despite having different theoretical origins and different historical backgrounds, Dewey's and Laclau's intellectual trajectories meet at a specific point, namely, in their refusal to conceive social and political identities as fixed, finished entities responding to necessary laws—a premise that, in different forms, is common both to reductive versions of Marxism and Liberalism.

Since his 1985 essay on hegemony co-written with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau harshly criticizes Marxist attempts to understand the formation of political identities and of politics in general as the immediate outcome of material economic conditions. In their own words: "If social objectivity, through its internal laws, determined whatever structural arrangement exists [...] there would be no room for contingent hegemonic re-articulations—nor, indeed, for politics as an autonomous activity" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. xii). In *On Populist Reason*, Laclau refers in other terms to this basic post-fundamentalist premise (Marchart, 2013) of a theory of populist movements. He asks: "is not the 'vagueness' of populist discourses the consequence of the social reality itself being, in some situations, vague and undetermined?" and in that case, wouldn't populism be [...] a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own—that is to say, in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings?" (Laclau, 2005, p. 18). For Laclau, both the processes of emergence of collective identities and the social reality from which they arise incorporate a moment of indeterminacy, of vagueness. Laclau's theory of populism represents the theoretical attempt to embrace this vague moment as involving not irrationality, but an alternative form of rationality in line to his own social-ontological premises.

In a similar fashion, Dewey refuses to trace political action—which he interprets to be a phase within social life (Frega, 2015, p. 13)—back to the mere expression and fulfillment of pre-given and indisputable self-interests, either collective or individual, as classical liberals would do. For Dewey both individual and collective social agents are formed in processes that themselves shape the social reality from where they emerge. This process of formation emerges

from specific situations, which Dewey calls “problematic situations” (Dewey, 1938, p. 109). As we will observe in more detail, these problematic situations cannot be reduced to the intellectual definition of a specific problem. Rather, they involve a rupture with established habits, which puts into question and shatters the identities of the individuals and groups involved by these situations of crisis. In short, Dewey holds an open social ontology with a clear consequence: the emergence of collective social or political agents cannot be understood as an automatic process that comes to reflect a pre-established social reality—for example, that of economic classes. On the contrary, we have to understand this process of emergence as one that shapes social reality itself.

In their criticism to the static social-ontological premises of their respective traditions, Laclau and Dewey converge into two common ideas: the emergence of collective social agents is an essential aspect of political life, and this process must be conceived of in terms of what we propose to call an “articulative process,” that is, one that responds to the unfixed, partially indeterminate, vague character of the social reality out of which they emerge. The term “articulation” has a long tradition with roots in German Romanticism, and more particularly in what has been called the “expressivist tradition.” In the last decades, the notion of articulation has played a central role in philosophical anthropology as well as in linguistic analysis (Jung, 2009; Joas, 2008; Taylor, 2016; Viola, 2018). By the term “articulation,” we mean the process through which a vague and partially undetermined social entity (e.g., problem, situation, identity) is developed, determined, and made clear. In our view, the notion of articulation can and should play an important role for political theory, specifically with regard to the process of constitution of political identities. This is precisely what a comparison between Laclau’s and Dewey’s view aims at contributing to.

The concept of articulation is explicitly employed by Laclau in order to account for the ontological openness of the social as well as of the articulative nature of the constitution of political identities. Moreover, despite the fact that Dewey did not systematically define the emergence of collective agents in terms of “articulation,” we believe that this can be done by pointing to the role of inquiry as a multidimensional articulative process in the formation of a public or a collective social agent. Although the notion of articulation seems adequate as a starting point for a dialogue between their positions, Laclau and Dewey hold very different understandings of what it means for a political identity to be articulated.

### 1.1 | Laclau’s alternative to Marxism: Political articulation as rhetoric

Laclau (2005) starts his complex analysis of the emergence of popular identities by pointing to what he takes to be the basic unit of any political process: the “social demand.” According to him, we can distinguish between two kinds of political dynamics depending on the relation in which the different social demands raised by social groups stand to each other. On the one hand, Laclau labels those demands as “democratic,” which remain isolated from each other when they are expressed as claims directed to governors, and which can be therefore fulfilled without calling into question the existent institutional order. On the other hand, he defines “popular demands” as “[a] plurality of demands which, through their equivalent articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity” (Laclau, 2005, p. 74). Although the first kind of demands are considered to correspond to what in the Marxian tradition was called the “bourgeois-democratic revolution,” that is, to demands expressed into the framework of a liberal society, Laclau links the second case to the socialist tradition. Although in the first case the satisfaction of demands can be met within the existing institutional framework and distribution of political power, the formation of a popular movement goes hand in hand with a more radical transformation of the status quo. This is the kind of political dynamics Laclau aims to account for in *On Populist Reason*.

For Laclau, in the initial phases of the formation of popular movement, pre-existing “popular” demands are structured in a “chain of equivalence,” this is, as a series of radically heterogeneous demands—for example, demands for better working conditions, for political rights, for better transportation, and so on—which in the context of the formation of a popular political identity become equivalent to each other. The possibility of the emergence of such a chain of equivalence is linked to a unifying element, which remains radically external to their actual content, namely, their systematic nonfulfillment on the side of those who are in power—and which constitute the line of antagonism

that is essential to the formation of any social and political identity. As Laclau (2005) shows, the formation of a popular identity involves not only the formation of an equivalential chain in the above mentioned sense, but also for which he calls the further process of “crystallization,” this is, “the unification of these various demands—whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of solidarity—into a stable system of signification.” (p. 74)

Faithful to his systematic methodological goal of introducing Lacanian categories of the unconscious life to the analysis of social and political phenomena, Laclau uses the term “condensation” in order to explain the central mechanism underlying the process of crystallization of demands. By “condensation,” Laclau points to the “performative operation” by which an equivalential chain of unsatisfied demands is crystallized as a relatively united identity of a popular movement. This was, to give a prominent example, the case in late-communist Poland, where the name “Solidarnoc,” which had primary been the political slogan of worker’s struggles in the city of Gdansk, took the role of signifying the popular struggle against the communist regime *in toto*, that is, beyond the workers’ immediate concerns. According to Laclau, we must understand condensation as the process by which one of the series of unsatisfied social demands, which have become a part of the equivalential chain comes to play as a preeminent role among others. As these demands are plural and heterogeneous—that is, they do not share a common content—this role consists in uniting or—to put it in Laclau’s own terms—in *expressing* all heterogeneous demands under one name. Laclau characterizes this process of unification as “performative,” as it does not consist in “*finding* an abstract common feature underlying all social grievances” (2005, p. 97 italics in original) that would be signified by the uniting signifier, and which pre-exists the process of unification. In other words, we should not understand the crystallization of a popular identity as the act of collective search of the shared elements of the different demands raised, a process for which Laclau uses the notion of “abstraction.” Differently from abstraction, crystallization is a performative process, as it involves the constitution of the equivalential chain as such. To play this performative function, a name cannot be “subordinated either to description or to a preceding designation. To perform this role, the signifier has to become, not only contingent, but empty as well” (2005, p. 104). Through this process, the demand “which the popular identity crystallizes is internally split: on the one hand, it remains a particular demand; on the other, its own particularity comes to signify something quite different from itself: the total chain of equivalential demands” (2005, p. 95).

As it is well known, Laclau attributes the mechanisms of crystallization and condensation to the field of rhetoric. According to him, this field has been unduly consigned to the realm of irrationality. In fact, the process of constitution of political identities appears as rhetoric all the way down for two main reasons: first, this process takes place by means of performative discursive practices; second, the logic of these practices consists exactly of rhetorical processes. For instance, the process of condensation is a metonymical process, as long as it involves a substitution for which is grounded on contiguity—a part (the single demands) plays the role of the whole (the entire chain of equivalence)—rather than on similarity of content—the latter being the logic of metaphorical substitutions. Differently from processes of “discovering” or “abstracting” of the common features that are inherent to popular demands, rhetorical unification of political demands is produced irrespectively from the contents of the single demands. Demands remain in his view radically heterogeneous, while having attributes radically external to them in common: their state of lack of satisfaction by an “unresponsive power” (2005, p. 86).

Similarly to Laclau, Dewey understands the process of constitution of political identities in terms of articulation. This means that he would agree with Laclau on two main assumptions. First, political identities are not merely pre-given as full entities in the social word, they are rather articulated in a process that shapes them starting from a certain degree of indeterminacy. Second, articulation must be thought of as a kind of shared collective action, which cannot be reduced to the activity of reducing pre-existing demands to their common denominator, even if—contrary to Laclau—a certain degree of commonality is to be *generated* in the very process of collective articulation of political and social demands. In Dewey’s work, the notion that incarnates this ideal form of articulation in the political realm is that of inquiry. Hence, inquiry involves a socially constructive dimension in a sense that makes it able to play the “performative” role—this is, the function of constituting a political identity—that Laclau attributes to the operation of condensation. In the next section, we will demonstrate how Dewey’s idea of inquiry involves something more, which Laclau’s rhetorical approach seems to miss: the individuals and the groups that take part in the process of constitution of

political identities happen to learn more about themselves and about the problematic situation that they share. While Laclau's condensation is reduced to the sole process of unification of heterogeneous demands under one (empty) signifier, a Deweyan inquiry-based approach to this process focuses on a three-dimensional articulative process: that of the collective definition of the situation of dissatisfaction out of which a political identity emerges, that of the transformation of the semantic core of what Laclau considers to work as "empty"—that is, without semantic core—signifiers and, finally, that of the emergence and transformation of the political claims and identities of collective social agents.

## 1.2 | Dewey's alternative: Inquiry as a three-way articulation

The notion of "inquiry" represents one of the most important Deweyan contributions to a theory of political mobilization. This emerges quite clearly as one considers both Dewey's theory of the emergence of a democratic public (Dewey, 1927) as well as his theory of social struggle (Dewey, 1919–1920, Dewey and Tufts, 1932). First, Dewey considers that the emergence of a public depends on a twofold capacity, of those affected by the indirect consequences of social transactions: that of perceiving themselves as affected by these consequences and that of exerting control over these consequences. Here again, becoming aware of indirect consequences is not merely a process of "unveiling" a pre-existing reality, but something that involves an articulative activity. In Dewey's jargon, the formation of the public consists in the process of collective transformation of a shared concern into a common interest. At the beginning of this process, the members of an emerging group and subgroups feel concerned by the consequences of a specific event or situation. At this initial stage, this concern is vague and partially unarticulated. We have a public once this shared concern becomes a common interest, as it is an interest that organizes the shared practices of the members of this group. To exist, a "scattered, mobile and manifold public" has to "recognize itself as to define and express its interests" (Dewey, 1927, p. 327).

This transformation is linked to the capacity of social and political practices and institutions to develop intelligent methods of inquiry. We would then not exaggerate if we consider a public (and its sub-publics) a community (of communities) of inquiry by itself, this is, an inquiring collective of inquiring collectives that is directed toward the identification, definition and resolution of common problems in complex ways. Moreover, in his *Lectures in China* (1973 [1919–1920]; 2015), Dewey characterizes social struggles and the formation of what we are calling in this paper "political identities," as one where collective inquiries also play a central role. According to Dewey, in the first phase of any struggle, some social groups find themselves in a situation of domination that they are not able to understand as such. They are the "comparatively dumb groups" (Dewey, 2015, p. 20). However, due to changes, related to the possibility of the dominated group to develop a collective "sense of powers," such groups would also start to become increasingly intelligent inquirers ([name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]). In doing so, they develop capabilities to challenge established understandings and to construct new "frames of injustice" (Renault, 2004) that promote the transformation of social relations. At the same time, these "frames of injustice" evolve from the normative characterization of the situation of domination in individualistic terms to the development of a sense of contribution to the social world—one that involves taking the social world both as an obstacle and a resource for the pursuit of collective goals—that promotes the intelligent transformation of existing social relations ([name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]).

Dewey's understanding of politics cannot be detached from his epistemological premises—even though he does not reduce politics to epistemology. Dewey draws his basic notion of inquiry starting from a reconstruction of the practices of experimental scientific inquiry. The fact that experimental inquiries approach their subject matter—this is, primary indeterminate situations—by defining problems, reasoning, formulating hypothesis as well as implementing and testing them, however, is not only a feature of natural-scientific inquiry but can (and should) be extended to all forms of inquiry, including what Dewey calls "social inquiry." Concurrently, social inquiry is not a monopoly of social scientists. Rather, it is something that individuals and collectives put in practice in their everyday practices, including, as we just saw, public life and social struggle. For Dewey experimentalism must remain, among other things, the paradigmatic

form of public life and social struggle. This means that in order to be intelligent, political reforms must be approached as a hypothesis to be tested in further inquiry, but also that the very process in the formulation of problems and the generation of political proposals must respond to a logic of maximal inclusion and amelioration of methods of fact-observations, hypothesis formation, implementation, and testing.

Coming back to our central argument, in Dewey's framework the articulation of political identities—for example, the constitution of a public, the emergence of a struggling group—involves experimental social inquiry. More specifically, the genesis and development of political identities can and should be understood as a three-dimensional articulative process. To this extent, we argue, that the inquiry practices of struggling groups can be understood in terms that are faithful, both to the Laclauian post-Marxist premise of the “ontological openness” of the social world and of the “performativity” of the very process in the formation of political identities.

First of all, Dewey understands inquiry as a multi-phased process in which a situation, that is first presented as partially indeterminate and vague, becomes progressively determinate. Vagueness and partial indetermination characterize Dewey's notion of “problematic situation.” By the term “problematic” Dewey means:

*the existence of something questionable, and hence provocative of investigation, examination, discussion—in short inquiry (...) it covers the features that are designated by such adjectives as confusing, perplexing, unsettled, indecisive; and by such nouns as jars, hitches, breaks, blocks—in short all incidents occasioning an interruption of the smooth, straightforward course of behavior and that deflect it into the kind of behaviour constituting inquiry. (Dewey, 1949, p. 282)*

Inquiry is always prompted by certain specific situations, which affect and concern some individuals and groups because of their problematic nature. Problematic situations are given, and their vagueness requires a process of articulation. As Roberto Frega points out:

*In such an epistemology, the concept of ‘given’ does not refer to immediate simple objects or qualities liable of simple apprehension that could provide a self-standing basis for inferential reasoning. The given denotes rather a complex whole that can only be grasped through a form of apprehension that at first is confused and indeterminate and that consequently needs to be further determined through a reflective process that Dewey calls ‘articulation.’ Objects and conceptual determinations are not the outcome of this transformative process; they are not given as pre-existing and independent entities, and they have no prior existence. (Frega, 2010, p. 496)*

Applied to our context, social reality itself must be seen as presenting partially indeterminate situations that are progressively determined first, as yielding a problem and in the last term, as having a solution that brings the situation to their maximal point of determination<sup>3</sup>. In this general sense, any process of collective inquiry about situations yielding injustice or any form of domination<sup>4</sup>, for example, must be thought as subject to a process that constitutes, at least partially, the very social reality it aims at accounting for. In other words, problems of injustice or domination cannot be fully determined independently of the very processes by which they are articulated. Rather, they must be seen, as Rahel Jaeggi has put in reference to Dewey's understanding of social problems, both as “given and made” (Jaeggi, 2018, Chapter 4.2). But there is also a second sense of articulation that refers to what Dewey calls the “ideological” component of inquiry, and which we might call the conceptual articulation of the situation<sup>5</sup>. Hence, for Dewey, those ideas and categories that represent both the background and the components of inquiry and that are operationalized in the definition of problems as well as in the formulation of hypothesis-solutions must themselves be seen as undergoing a process of articulation. Dewey describes this process of affecting ideas, as involving from the initial stages the emergence of vague “suggestions” that become progressively determined in a double process that includes (1) establishing connections with other, pre-existing ideas through reasoning and (2) being practically operationalized in the different phases of the search for solutions (Dewey, 1938, pp. 113–114). The progressive articulation of ideas at work in inquiry,

must be seen as a creative and revealing process that allows for the introduction of new points of view as well as for new understandings and goals for action, thereby giving to inquiry, an innovative character in its different practical phases<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, inquiry represents an articulative process also in a third sense, which we propose to label as “expressive.” Hence, not only indeterminate situations, suggestions and ideas but also the interests, aims, powers, and identities of the inquirer(s) become progressively articulated and appropriated in the larger and multi-leveled context of inquiry. As the form of intelligent confrontation with worldly conditions, inquiry represents an expressive process by which the inquirer—individual or collective—becomes aware of her own aims and capacities. The idea of “act of expression,” developed in *Art as Experience* (1934) is meant to stress that the reflective determination of the individual’s aims and capacities can only take place in an intelligent interaction with its environment. Intelligent interaction involves the reflectively directed confrontation with the (social) world both as an obstacle and resource for action. Dewey’s analysis shows how failing to take the world as an obstacle makes action “explosive,” that is, without direction or intelligent adjustment to expected consequences. On the other hand, failing to take the world as a resource blocks action and thereby, again, the possibility of articulation one’s goals and identity in action. In both cases, individuals are brought to adopt an alienating relation toward their own aims and identities, failing to see themselves as actors in a full sense. As a form of reflective direction of action, the attitude of inquiry involves confrontation with physical and social conditions (habits, customs, and institutions) in a way that individual realization of one’s own identity and its creative self-appropriation are promoted. This expressive model seems to be at the base of Dewey’s own characterization of social struggles in his *Lectures in China*, taking the intelligent interaction with the environment as formative experience of the collective in its different phases: collective “dumbness,” radical individualism and a sense of collective contribution to the social ([name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]). According to Dewey’s characterization, a particular experience of confrontation with world-conditions and with the given interpretations of other social actors is the source of the developments in collective behavior that in many cases lead to the enhancement of intelligent action, one where collective interests, goals, aims, and capacities have come out of the state of confusion in which they originally were.

## 2 | DEMANDS AND POPULAR IDENTITIES: AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO POPULISM

After this brief characterization of experimental inquiry as an articulative process, the question arises about how such an understanding of inquiry can operationalize into a theory of the emergence of collective social identities that can be critically compared to Laclau’s. However, to provide an answer to this question, we need to make sure that Laclau’s rhetoric and Dewey’s inquiry-based approach to the political can be applied to the same kind of phenomena, namely, the formation of popular identities. Indeed, one might think that, while Laclau is mainly interested in the formation of a certain kind of political identity, namely the populist, the Deweyan approach to the political logic of the formation of political identities applies solely to what Laclau calls “democratic demands.” Let us recall that in Laclau’s view the demands are democratic when they are both formulated and fulfilled in isolation to each other. In this case, there is no need for an equivalential chain among heterogeneous demands to emerge, as no popular identity is necessary and the existing institutional framework is not called into question. This raises the question if we could assert, that Dewey’s theory of articulation as “inquiry” works exclusively in the framework of democratic demands, while Laclau’s rhetorical approach can account for the genesis of popular demands.

This solution requires endorsing Laclau’s opposition between democratic and popular demands. But this opposition is debatable for two main reasons. First, Laclau’s basic premise according to which “demands” are to be taken as the basic and minimal elements of social reality is particularly problematic. As deliberative democrats have convincingly shown in their critique to political liberalism, their demands in public life cannot be taken as fixed but rather to experience the important changes themselves, involving processes such as the formalization, generalization and the

inclusion of perspectives, and so on (see Habermas, 1998). To this respect, Dewey provides an even more interesting and radical view: even though he does not employ exactly this vocabulary, he would maintain that singular social demands are the contingent and temporary outcome of a process of articulation that takes the form of inquiry in social struggle. This is precisely what we can find in his account of the genesis of groups in terms of common interests in his *Lectures in China* as well as in *Democracy and Education* (1934).

According to Dewey, organized social groups emerge through the articulation of a shared common interest. This interest—which plays a functional role similar to the role played by democratic demands in Laclau's framework—is not simply given: it is not something that already exists, and that has to be simply represented by a social group and its members. Rather, it is the outcome of the process of articulation, of a vague underlying dimension of needs, impulses and emotions. This Deweyan conception of interest is well exemplified by the definition of the public, proposed in *The Public and its Problems* (1927). As we have already anticipated, in his essay, Dewey defines the public as a social group constituting itself around the process of articulation of a common concern about the shared consequences of a social process into a common interest. This interest has a subjective, vague side that Dewey calls *concern*. Some individuals and some groups are moved, touched, called into question, concerned by a specific event or situation. The public articulates this concern into a new interest through a threefold process of inquiry—see the previous section. Therefore, according to Dewey, the dynamic interplay between indeterminacy and determination, vagueness and articulation characterizes social life. In contrast to Laclau, who takes social demands as the basic element of his social ontology, Dewey understands that social demands themselves are the outcome of a process of articulation that can redefine and reconstruct social identities.

The second point to be stressed based on the idea of the articulative nature of demands is that Dewey's model allows for a better understanding not only of the single demands but also of the integration of the various demands under one sole name (or a few of them) through social struggle. In Laclau's jargon: Dewey's model can also account for the unification of popular demands. The example of words such as "justice" or "freedom" under which groups pursue their political struggles is particularly well suited for showing the essential difference lying between both approaches. For Laclau, "justice" or "freedom" typically plays the role of an empty signifier for many popular movements. According to him, it would be wrong to conceive the mobilization of this notion in social struggle as involving the description of an "unjust" situation laying at the root of the formation of a political subject. As Laclau puts it, the semantic role of terms like "justice" "is not to express any positive content but [...] to function as the names of a fullness which is constitutively absent [...] Since it names an undifferentiated fullness, it has no conceptual content whatsoever: it is not an *abstract* term, but in the strictest sense, *empty*" (2005, p. 96). Finally, as the case of the Russian Revolution shows "[i]t should be clear that we are dealing with 'emptiness' and not with 'abstraction': peace, bread and land were not the *conceptual* common denominator of all Russian social demands in 1917. As in all processes of over-determination, grievances that had nothing to do with those three demands nevertheless expressed themselves through them" (2005, p. 98, italics in original).

In contrast to this view, a Deweyan inquiry-based strategy would not consider "justice" or "freedom" or any other names as *empty* notions but only as *partially indeterminate*, or vague. Hence, inquiry would involve the progressive articulation of a—more or less broad, but always particular—situation as unjust or involving a lack of freedom. This process would go hand in hand with the progressive articulation of the identity of the group and of its values, aims, and needs. This involves the three dimensions of the process of progressive determination involved by articulation as inquiry: that of the very indeterminate situation through the process of the identification, definition and resolution of the problematic situation and that of the notion of justice that is mobilized in the constitution of a popular subject, through the determination of the indeterminate situation. According to this view, notions such as "justice" or "freedom" contain a very general meaning that is subsequently specified through the progressive determination of the particular situation as unjust. In the context of a popular movement, the meanings of terms such as "solidarity," "justice," "freedom," "peace," or "bread and land" depends on the very specification of their general meaning that would take place through collective inquiry. Within a Deweyan framework, then, the political mobilization of such notions that crystallizes a popular identity cannot be seen necessarily in terms of condensation but in terms of articulative inquiry.



According to this model, some important questions must be raised, implicitly or explicitly, by those participating in political mobilization. For example, can a particular demand be articulated in such a form that falls under the notion of “justice” or “freedom”? And how much can notions of justice or freedom be hermeneutically expanded or adjusted to fit further demands by remaining faithful to its semantic core? How compatible are the different specific understandings of these notions with each other and to what extent can our own interpretation be innovative and compatible with pre-given notions? Finally, what strategical relations should be maintained with those groups whose demands cannot be integrated, even after collective efforts of semantic-normative integration? According to this view, the process of unification of demands that characterizes the emergence of a popular identity does not take place through a spontaneous and totally pre-reflexive process of condensation but through a complex collective activity of inquiry where claims are mutually transformed and progressively formulated. Notions such as “justice” or “freedom” then play a crystallizing function, not in virtue of their capacity to capture something that is common to previously given and fixed demands—on this point Dewey would surely agree with Laclau—but something whose exact meaning develops in the very context of collective inquiry.

Before delving deeper into its normative, political, and descriptive potential, it behoves us to acknowledge at least one clear advantage to the conception of political articulation as inquiry. By stressing the cognitive role of the progressive determination of situation, an inquiry-based model stresses the link between the everyday experiences of those who are part of a popular movement and the general ideas guiding their social struggles. Hence, to the extent that they behave as inquirers, guiding notions such as “injustice” or “freedom” must be able to account for the way individuals experience the social world, to articulate their social suffering as well as to point to proposed reforms. It follows from this that any disconnection between guiding notions and everyday social experiences must be then experienced for inquirers as a form of alienation, generating new forms of subjective discomfort that can be mobilized in the internal struggle for the hermeneutical expansion of those notions, or for their rejection and subsequent adoption of new ones. This mobilization plays an essential role within popular movements, as certain groups might be willing to instrumentalize social struggle—and its guiding notions—for their own particular aims. For Laclau, empty signifiers are able to organize and guide political action only in virtue of their capacity to condense heterogeneous demands. As this means that politically mobilized individuals do not necessarily need to see these categories as articulating their everyday experiences, his model seems unable to account for this possibility of alienation and discomfort, and therefore, for their potential to counteract attempts of monopolization or instrumentalization for the particular interests of certain groups.

### 3 | LACLAU OR DEWEY? OUTLINING AN INTEGRATIVE STRATEGY

So far we have shown the extent to which Laclau’s and Dewey’s strategies differ in their accounts of the processes underlying the formation of popular identities. We have also briefly mentioned one advantage held by Dewey with respect to Laclau. At this stage, two central questions arise: should we prefer one or the other model and on what grounds? And, are we dealing with two mutually incompatible models or can we somehow combine or integrate them? Here, we propose to answer these questions by mobilizing normative, political and descriptive arguments.

From a normative point of view, Dewey’s inquiry-based approach provides an account of political practice that is more adequate to the normative core of our modern understanding of democratic politics, namely, that of political self-determination (see Lafont, 2020). Indeed, as we have shown in Section 2, inquiry represents an intelligent form of action that promotes a relation of reflective appropriation of one’s own goals, aims, and identity. Hence, self-appropriation can be achieved only when goals, aims and identities are articulated through an intelligent relation to the world, taking it both as a resource and an obstacle for action. Self-appropriation is the fundamental condition for individuals to see themselves as actors of their own collective struggles, and hence, a fundamental condition of their (collective) self-determination. In contrast, Laclau’s idea of populist articulation seems incapable of explaining how popular struggles can promote relations of reflexive self-appropriation. Hence, as we saw, the populist logic by which

existing demands are actually articulated in the formation of political identity around an empty signifier is fully disconnected from the reflexive control individuals and collectives exert over their surrounding conditions. Articulation remains a process of condensation in which confrontation with social conditions has no impact on the formation of guiding notions and views of political struggle. In this context, individuals have no access to a self-appropriative relation to their goals and aims: they cannot fully see themselves as agents in their own struggles. Seen as merely populist, popular struggles can hardly be considered practices of collective self-determination.

Let us now consider in more detail the value of both approaches from a political point of view. Both populism and pragmatism represent two different understandings of the nature of political and social life. When reflectively appropriated by political agents, these understandings influence the ways in which political practices are enacted (Fassin, 2017). There is no better way to promote the presence of populist logic than to bring citizens to believe that collective inquiry is not “real” politics, and that politics in fact consists of an antagonistic relationship driven by empty signifiers. In this sense, a perspective from which we can judge the relative value of each of both approaches must consider the political consequences related to the adoption of each of these approaches as descriptive models. Here, we propose to mobilize one central political criterion, one that is inherent to both as models of (radical) democracy, namely: their respective democratic and democratizing potential. The question here takes into regard their capacity to sustain, promote, and deepen the ideal of democracy when reflectively appropriated as self-describing models for political practice (Fassin, 2017; Errejón & Mouffe, 2015).

On the one hand, Dewey’s model has been criticized for its tendency to promote epistocratic forms of government that include or exclude some citizens in political decision-making in virtue of their knowledge on political issues. However, Dewey’s epistemic understanding of democracy and democratic practice provides valid arguments against this critique. One of them is that inquiry in politics must be thought of as a maximally inclusive process. It is only through maximal inclusion, that situations can be properly identified and described, creative solutions can be implemented, and their effects can be tested and evaluated (see Anderson, 2006). To this extent, an inquiry-based account not only reinforces existing democratic institutions and practices, it also contributes to deepening democratic forms. It is only through political innovations that maximize inclusion that the problem-solving capacity of democratic decision-making can be enhanced.

In contrast to this, Laclau’s model is in a place of serious disadvantage. Populism sets the conditions of what it explicitly rejects, namely, anti-democratic and authoritarian developments. Hence, by making rhetorical processes such as metaphorical and metonymical mechanisms fully independent of the reflective activity of agents, it facilitates manipulation by economic or political elites—particularly, if we consider that those “spontaneous” moments of crystallization, of heterogeneous claims, can be designed and planned by a political party (Errejón & Mouffe, 2015). In this sense, the practical implementation of a purely populist understanding of politics can go hand in hand with authoritarian developments related to the lack of habitual exercise of reflexive control of social conditions and developments with political import (see also Cohen, 2019). Certainly, no form of practicing democracy is fully immunized against authoritarian developments. This surely includes collective inquiries, which are not free from attempts at manipulation. However, as practitioners of an intelligent form of practice aimed at effective problem-solving, inquirers are especially concerned with correcting their own practices in processes of collective learning. This concern shapes their habits into instances of reflexive control of their own activity, which makes attempts of manipulation substantially more difficult. Furthermore, inquirers quickly develop a sense of subjective discomfort and alienation when they are being manipulated, since, as we mentioned before, they hold the cognitive expectation that the guiding notions of their struggles are able to account for their everyday experiences. These subjective feelings arising from an induced misalignment between experiences and guiding notions can potentially motivate second-order inquiries about the quality of first order inquiries, and can therefore become a motivational source of struggle against manipulation and authoritarianism.

From a descriptive point of view,—that is, regarding the potential of Dewey’s model to describe political practices actually taking place in popular movements such as the Yellow Vests or the *Indignados*—we argue that Laclau’s attempt to explain the emergence of popular identities should be corrected by introducing practices of inquiry in the picture. These practices are as essential to the constitution of a popular identity as those of Laclauian rhetoric, even if they

operate in a very different way. Empirical studies on the formation of social movements (including popular movements) reveal the presence of practices that can be described in terms of “inquiry” ([name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]) or “knowledge” practices (Della Porta and Pavan, 2017; Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, & Powell, 2008). These are practices such as working out counter-hegemonic accounts and alternative frames of injustice (Renault, 2004) that challenge current interpretations of social reality and its normative assessment, experimenting with new forms of organization, and so on. Social movements enact “epistemic practices” ([name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]) in which they make efforts to “get it right,” both with respect to the situation they are experiencing, as well as regarding the proper form of internal organization. Epistemic practices in political mobilization do not only inquire into mere “facts” but are mostly concerned with normatively “charged” social realities: They consider the injustice of a situation or the norms that should rule internal organization. This is precisely the sense in which notions such as “freedom” or “solidarity” can come to be representative of a popular movement. In their epistemic activity, mobilized individuals explore the capacity of a notion to articulate—which does not merely mean ‘to reflect’—the different demands in a way that is both creative and germane to the social experiences of those who see themselves as part of the movement<sup>7</sup>.

Observable practices of accounting for and articulating experiences and worldviews, for defining collective problems, for organizing mobilization and protest, and for organizing cooperation cannot be reduced to mere rhetorical mechanisms, but are indeed real epistemic efforts. Moreover, as we have shown in the previous sections, these kinds of practice all play a role in the constitution of a popular identity, as they involve articulative activities that contribute to the emergence of view and notions guiding political struggle. In short, they cannot be brushed off as mere rhetorical mechanisms or separated from “true” political practice. Surely, when we consider what sort of practices are at stake in a particular movement, rhetoric or inquiry, and how we should describe them, the last word must be left to empirical analysis<sup>8</sup>. However, from a normative and political point of view, we should not overlook the pervasiveness of inquiry in popular movements because much depends on the way political actors (and the way parties, political analysts or social scientists) understand their own activities.

These reflections aim at grounding our attempt to provide a pragmatist alternative to populism as a model able to explain and represent the guiding conceptual source for current phenomena of democratic deepening and, more generally speaking, as a tool for understanding the genesis of political identities. However, we do not propose to fully reject Laclau’s model and its value as a conceptual source for the understanding of the basic political dynamics actually taking place in current political life. Indeed, populism is alive and well: the search for truth becomes many times a cynical struggle for power (Brown 2019), hyper-leaders appear, resentment, and revenge become widespread political affects (Rosanvallon 2020). Many of these phenomena can be (at least partially) explained by assuming the presence of a populist logic in social mobilization. However, as we saw, populism cannot be given the monopoly on explanation, nor should we concede it priority for the task of democratization in times of political regression. In conclusion, even if the epistemic nature of many of the practices leading to the formation of a collective identity cannot be denied and should be normatively prioritized, the preference for a Deweyan approach does not entail the full rejection of a rhetorical approach in Laclau’s sense of the term.

So, the question is: how can we integrate Laclau’s insights in a larger, Dewey-based model? Before coming to this question, however, we need clarify a previous question: Is it really necessary to resort to Laclau to integrate rhetoric into Dewey’s theory of inquiry? Or is it possible to find a sufficiently articulated conception of rhetoric within Dewey’s own thought? The role played by rhetoric in Dewey’s thought has been highlighted by several authors. According to Crick (2012), Dewey seriously considers the creative potential of rhetoric. In a more detailed way, Danish claims that, while “Dewey’s own intellectual aspirations were guided by the attempt to make philosophy more rhetorical” (Danish, 2007, p. 2), pragmatism lacks a solid theory of rhetoric, and goes on to claim that this shortcomings undermines its political effectiveness. Therefore, “classical rhetoric can suggest ways to improve pragmatism” (Danish, 2007, p. 2). This requires a reconstruction and development of Dewey’s scattered reflections on rhetorical processes, which we find in works such as *The Public and its Problems* and *Art as Experience*—see, for instance, his definition of the presentation of the results of scientific inquiry as “an art” (LW2: 349). In any case, political practices of collective inquiry

cannot be detached from rhetorical elements that can play a fundamental role in the organization and production of knowledge about the social world. Iris Marion Young has shown how rhetoric has an epistemic import in the everyday exercise of political communication (Young, 2001). Hence, the mobilization of rhetorical mechanisms makes this possible. Rhetoric represents a source of new ideas, it opens the space for imagination and promotes a disclosive relation to the world, something of which Dewey was certainly aware.

However, these elements refer to a classical understanding of rhetoric based on concepts such as persuasion, eloquence and deliberation. This understanding is quite different from Laclau's, which focuses instead on rhetorical processes understood as processes of production of collective identities by means of unconscious linguistic mechanisms. Laclau's "tropo-logical conception of rhetoric derived from structuralist poetics" (Kaplan, 2010, p. 255) has been criticized as limited and inadequate for the central political function Laclau gives to it (Kaplan, 2010). But it is exactly Laclau's idiosyncratic use of rhetoric that we have in mind when we claim that the pragmatist understanding of articulation as inquiry here proposed does not deny the importance of rhetorical unconscious mechanisms. An inquiry-based model need not reject the presence of nonreflexive, "spontaneous" moments involved in the formation of collective identities as described by Laclau's notion of rhetoric. Indeed, the way in which collective social agents are touched and concerned by problematic situations involves deep and powerful pre-reflexive processes.

Here, the normative and political prioritization of inquiry means, on one hand, that reflexivity should be promoted in these processes; on the other hand, that these mechanisms—even if they present themselves as the "Other" of social life (Castoriadis, 1975)—can be appropriated by the reflexive, inquiring activity of individuals. In other words, while the rhetorical mechanisms proposed by Laclau may be able to correctly describe some developments in political life, an inquiry based account points toward the adoption of a maximally reflexive stance toward those developments, thereby promoting what Cornelius Castoriadis calls "collective autonomy" (Castoriadis, 1975, p. 155). "Collective autonomy" is Castoriadis' term for the reflective appropriation of what first comes to be experienced as one's own alterity, in this case, rhetorical mechanisms in their pre-reflexive character. In the practice of inquiry, one could say in a Castoridian–Deweyan language, society's own alterity comes to be the object of a reflexive and relatively structured practice of self-appropriation in which collective inquiries are made regarding the meaning and value of social developments and their consequences. Collective inquiry thereby represents a way of collectively deliberating, evaluating and taking control—even if never fully—of pre-reflexive developments such as the rhetorical mechanism described by Laclau.

Ultimately, an inquiry-based approach does not deny the political relevance of rhetoric, neither in its traditional nor in its Laclauian sense. Rather, it integrates them as necessary parts of a larger dynamic of collective inquiry: one that mobilizes rhetorical mechanisms as a part of any political–epistemic activity, on the one hand, and one that, in line with Castoriadis, conceives of politics as the process through which the society achieves a collective and deliberative self-appropriation of its own alterity, on the other hand.

## 4 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have developed a critical comparison between Laclau's and Dewey's account of the process of constitution of what Laclau calls "political identities." In their parallel attempt to overcome the shortcomings of the theoretical and political tradition to which their intellectual history belongs—respectively, Marxism and Liberalism—Dewey and Laclau endorse a dynamic understanding of the genesis and the formation of political identities that we have understood in terms of "articulation." Both understandings differ in many important aspects, such as the role played by emotions in political articulation, which have remained unexplored in this paper. Here, we have focused in what we take to be a central theoretical difference between both authors: namely, the possibility of understanding the processes and mechanisms conducing to the formation of a popular identity in terms of "inquiry," even if one rejects the idea that these processes are not to be understood as reflecting some previous reality—so for example, the common traits of pre-existing social demands. Inquiring does not mean "discovering" a previous reality, it is rather

an articulative and expressive process where a creative back and forth of pre-existing experiences and their (re-)interpretations take place.

In our view, a Deweyan model that is able to explain political phenomena—such as the popular struggles that have been captured by Laclau as paradigm of populism—is preferable to Laclau’s model in at least three different senses. The first, a strictly normative sense, which regards the possibility of understanding political practices as practices of self-determination. Hence, in contrast to Laclau, a Deweyan model understands the formation of a popular identity as a reflexive practice where actors can see themselves as having some influence on the developments taking place, which is essential for self-determination. Second, a Deweyan model seems better prepared to account for the capacity of sustaining and even deepening democracy without running the risk of political manipulation, as inquiry involves the emergence of reflexive habits and the possibility of social unease when guiding notions of struggle are unable to account for everyday experiences. Third, the Laclauian model fails to account for some empirically observable practices in popular movements, which are essential to the constitution of their popular identity. Hence, empirical studies show how the formation of political identities goes hand in hand with those collective practices in which agents try to make sense of their situation and the social world surrounding them. Even if the last question about what kind of practices are at stake in a social mobilization, analysts should be suspicious about identifying a populist logic instead of collective inquiry. Certainly, inquires might also go wrong: they may follow wrong methods, they may be based on false facts or may fail to reflect on the values that undergo them. Starting to take them as inquiries in the first instance is, however, necessary if they are to be collectively improved.

Finally, an inquiry-based model is not “purified” of rhetorical elements. On the contrary, it includes the elements of classical rhetoric as essential to inquiry. It also takes the existing populist-rhetorical mechanisms and their effects as a reality to be deliberatively rejected or appropriated. It sees in this possibility, but also in many of the other inquires struggling groups carry about the promise of a more democratic future.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In general, Laclau uses the term “political identities” to refer any social group struggling for the satisfaction of collective demands. “Popular identities” are the particular kind of political struggles that bring together heterogeneous claims and struggles under one sole name. As we will see, for Laclau, these movements respond to a populist logic. Popular identities include historical movements like Peronism, the Russian Revolution, or the People’s Party in the United States, but also the anti-austerity protests in several countries in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 or the *Gilets Jaunes* in France, only to mention two recent examples.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be noted from the outset that in this paper we do not aim at opposing rhetoric and inquiry as dimensions of politics. In fact we adhere to a long tradition of thought that shows that both are essentially interrelated (see Ginzburg, 1999; Young, 2001). This said, Laclau’s own notion of rhetoric is so far from the cognitive dimension involved in the notion of inquiry that, from his own perspective, both notions must be thought of as fully incompatible.
- <sup>3</sup> It is a precarious moment, like in Laclau’s case.
- <sup>4</sup> That for Dewey many social problems involve a relation of domination, which can come to be articulated as unjust is developed in the *Ethics, Democracy and Education* and the *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, among others. For Dewey, a relation of domination is one in which one group is able to realize some of its interests and powers at expenses of other groups. Relations of domination are very often institutionally mediated. In many cases, what comes to be a conflict between institutions can be articulated in terms of the relation of domination between groups that lies behind that conflict (see Dewey and Tufts, 1932, p. 324).
- <sup>5</sup> Dewey distinguishes two basic poles of inquiry: facts (the factual) and ideas (the ideological, including suggestions, concepts, and theories). According to the basic pattern of inquiry, both poles should be in a fluid relation of each other, that is, one in which operations involving facts influence those involving ideas and the other way around (see Dewey, 1938).
- <sup>6</sup> This creative process, as always in Dewey and in pragmatism, is situated, embodied, and reconstructive, rather than an act of pure individual creation (Joas, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Again, we have to think of this articulative process as a double one: the articulation of a situation as failing to realize a certain norm goes hand in hand with the articulation of this norm in light of the new situations it can be applied to.

<sup>8</sup> How our Deweyan model can be operationalized for empirical analysis must be here left aside for space reasons.

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