

# Populism as a Transgressive Style

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As a consequence of its performative turn, the critical literature on populism has dedicated increasing attention to its socio-cultural and stylistic features. Among the most prominent concepts underpinning this approach is the notion that populism relies on the “flaunting of the low” or the use of “bad manners.” This article engages in an extensive discussion of the way this concept is used in the literature and showcases its main limitations. In replacement, I then suggest the alternative concept of transgression, understood as the violation of a norm, which has the substantial advantages of being more flexible and versatile as well as less reliant on a normative binary. I then develop an associated typology of transgressive performances depending on which type of norms is being disrupted: transgressions of interactional norms, transgressions of rhetoric norms, and transgressions of theatrical norms. Following this, I showcase how this typology contributes to the IR literature by emphasizing the importance of agency and embodied performances in global politics. This article concludes on the potential of considering transgression beyond populism.

En conséquence de son tournant performatif, la littérature critique sur le populisme a accordé une attention croissante à ses caractéristiques socioculturelles et stylistiques. Parmi les concepts les plus importants qui sous-tendent cette approche figure la notion selon laquelle le populisme reposerait sur « l’ostentation du bas » ou sur l’usage de « mauvaises manières ». Cet article offre une analyse approfondie sur la manière dont ce concept est utilisé dans la littérature et présente ses principales limites. Pour le remplacer, je suggère plutôt le concept alternatif de transgression, comprise comme étant la violation d’une norme, ce concept ayant les avantages substantiels d’être plus flexible, plus polyvalent et moins dépendant à une binarité normative. Je développe ensuite une typologie associée de performances transgressives dépendant du type de normes qui est déstabilisé : transgressions des normes interactionnelles, transgressions des normes rhétoriques et transgressions des normes théâtrales. Je montre après cela comment cette typologie contribue à la littérature sur les RI en mettant l’accent sur l’importance de l’agentivité et des performances incarnées en politique mondiale. Cet article se conclut par une réflexion sur le potentiel de la transgression au-delà du populisme.

Como consecuencia de su giro performativo, la literatura crítica sobre el populismo ha estado dedicando cada vez más atención a sus características socioculturales y estilísticas. Entre los conceptos más importantes que sustentan este enfoque está la noción de que el populismo se basa en el “alarde de lo bajo” o la “mala educación.” En este artículo, se presenta un análisis exhaustivo de la forma en la que este concepto se utiliza en la literatura y se exponen sus limitaciones principales. En sustitución, sugiero el concepto alternativo de transgresión, entendido como la violación de una norma, que tiene la considerable ventaja de ser más flexible y versátil y, a la vez, menos dependiente de un binarismo normativo. Luego, establezco una tipología asociada de actuaciones transgresoras en función de qué tipo de normas se alteran: transgresiones de normas de interacción, transgresiones de normas retóricas y transgresiones de normas teatrales. Después de esto, destaco la importancia de la capacidad de acción y de las actuaciones encarnadas en la política mundial para explicar de qué manera esta tipología hace su aporte a la literatura sobre las relaciones internacionales. El artículo concluye con la posibilidad de considerar la transgresión más allá del populismo.

## Introduction

Although populism emerged in the literature as a phenomenon that was only studied on a national scale or in a regional perspective, many scholars have started considering its influence as a global phenomenon (De la Torre 2014; Moffitt 2016), looking for shared features that account for its adaptability across not only political but also social and cultural contexts. Although populism was historically described as “a notoriously vague term” (Canovan 1999, 3), a growing consensus has started to consolidate around the notion that populism is at the very least characterized by an antagonistic opposition between “the people” and “the elite” (Katsambekis 2020). However, if there is broad agree-

ment on this combination between “people-centrism” and “anti-elitism” (Stavrakakis 2017, 529), the two larger debates dividing scholars of populism are, on the one hand, the question of the specific nature of the concept and, on the other hand, whether there are other fundamental characteristics to populism. Although this article modestly engages with the former debate, making the case for a stylistic definition of populism, its main contribution pertains to the latter debate: in opposition with scholars who argue that populism is characterized by its “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy 2017), I argue that a fundamental component of populism lies instead in its strategic use of transgression.

The theoretical context of this argument stems from a growing criticism of the limitations of the dominant perspective on populism, the ideational approach spearheaded by Mudde (2004). Building on the influential morphological conception of ideologies developed by Freedon (1998), Mudde famously argued that populism is a “thin-centered ideology” that gets attached to “thicker” ideologies. Building on the criticism from Freedon (2017, 3) himself for whom

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populism is “simply ideologically too scrawny even to be thin,” this article challenges the idea that populism is an ideology and instead describes it as a style. Conceiving of populism as a way of doing politics characterized by a specific repertoire of performances, this article places itself in the lineage of the “discursive–performative” approach to populism (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021) and most specifically of Moffitt (2016).

Among the most prominent concepts underpinning this approach is the notion that populism relies on the “flaunting of the low,” a concept developed by Ostiguy (2009, 2017) based on his innovative introduction of a “high–low” axis to complement the traditional left–right opposition. Defining this axis as pertaining to “ways of being and acting in politics” (Ostiguy 2009, 5) and being “about private expressions in the public sphere, or if one prefers, the publicization of the private man” (Ostiguy 2017, 77), he made the thought-provoking argument that the specificity of populism had nothing to do with its ideological content but was rather based on its strategic reliance on “flaunting the low,” that is, performing what is culturally referred to as coarse, misbehaved, and vulgar.

Although the argument that populism is characterized by its coarseness and vulgarity is intuitively appealing—especially when considering extreme and archetypical cases of politicians embracing the populist style such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro—I argue that the notion of the “flaunting of the low” suffers from several key limitations, namely its conceptual narrowness and reliance on a normative binary. Instead, I make the case for the alternative concept of transgression, defined as the violation of a norm of political significance, to better capture the intrinsically disruptive nature of populism. Building on the performative turn in populism studies, my argument is that transgressive performances not only encompass the elements that the “flaunting of the low” and “bad manners” capture but also go beyond them. Indeed, transgression is a versatile concept that also considers ways for populist actors to break norms and distinguish themselves from other politicians in a way that either borrows from the high or operates outside this binary altogether. Furthermore, to provide more insights into the multifaceted way transgression works, I also introduce a novel typology of transgressions depending on the type of norms that they break: (1) transgressions of interactional norms, (2) transgressions of rhetoric norms, and (3) transgressions of 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. These categories reflect different yet interconnected facets of the combination of implicit and explicit rules that constrain the way politics functions.

This article is structured as follows. After discussing the main features of the discursive–performative approach to populism, I will provide an outline of a revised understanding of populism as a style informed by performance studies. Following this, I will make a detailed overview of Ostiguy’s “flaunting of the low” and Moffitt’s related concept of “bad manners,” highlighting their limitations. Following this, I introduce the concept of transgression, discussing the way it has been used in the literature and making the case for its suitability as a less-conceptually narrow alternative to the “flaunting of the low.” Building primarily on an analysis of Trump and Le Pen’s presidential campaigns in, respectively, 2016 and 2017, I then develop an original typology

of transgressive practices based on what type of norms they disrupt. Engaging with the literature on populism and IR, the last section of this paper will showcase the relevance of considering transgression on the global stage and how it expands the constructivist literature on norms by considering the concepts of agency and embodiment. Finally, I will consider the wider applications of the concept of transgression beyond populism studies.

### The Discursive–Performative Approach to Populism

Even though the concept has a much longer history,<sup>1</sup> the twin shock in 2016 of the election of Donald Trump and the vote in favor of Brexit (Freeden 2017; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021) has brought populism back in the political and mediatic agenda. Similarly, the academic debate on populism that was already undergoing exponential growth since the 1990s (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) expanded even more dramatically. With the influx of new research produced on the concept, the literature on populism saw the progressive emergence of challenges to the hegemonic position of the ideational definition that Mudde (2004) introduced to great success. In addition to the established alternative offered by Weyland (2001), a new critical scholarship inspired by the influential work of Laclau (2005) has begun to coalesce into a third way described as the “discursive” (Moffitt 2020, 21), the “sociocultural” (Ostiguy 2017), or more accurately the “discursive–performative” (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021) approach to populism. This last iteration acts as the convergence between two complementary strands within the approach: On the one hand, scholars in the lineage of the post-Marxist work of Laclau (2005) and following the Essex tradition of poststructural discourse analysis such as Panizza (2005), Mouffe (2018), or Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2019) and, on the other hand, scholars emphasizing the sociocultural and performative components of populism that Laclau (2005, 103) hinted at but left under-explored.

What unites scholars of this “post-Laclauian approach to populism” (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021, 8) is threefold. First, they share a commitment to avoid normative judgement vis-à-vis populism. Inspired by the growing literature on anti-populism (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019), this means disagreeing with authors such as Müller (2016) or Norris and Inglehart (2019) who embrace the premise that populism is a potential threat to democracy. To do so, they show that populism should not be automatically associated with illiberalism or anti-pluralism (Katsambekis 2020). Second, they challenge the notion that populism is a set of ideas and beliefs or an ideology, regardless of how “thin-centered” they might be, but instead understand it as *a way of doing politics*. This emphasizes the importance to make a distinction between substance and form. More specifically, this means acknowledging that the ideological “content” put forward by a political actor should be analytically separated from the way this content is being articulated (De Cleen 2019). Third, they see populism as a practice and not an attribute, which implies that populism is gradational rather than binary (Moffitt 2020, 24). Unlike scholars from the ideational approach who implicitly assume that a politician is either adopting or rejecting the ideological tenets of populism, that argument is that there are different shades of populism.

<sup>1</sup>For examples of pioneer works on populism, see Ionescu and Gellner (1969) or Canovan (1981).

### Populism As a Political Style

Among the two strands of this approach, this work more specifically belongs to, and challenges scholars from, the performative school. “The performative turn in the study of populism” (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021, 49) stems from the constructionist premise that “the people” is an empty signifier performatively constructed by a political actor framing herself as its representative. Populism is thus conceptualized as a way of framing politics grounded in a “representative claim” (Saward 2010) to represent the people. More than that, it also offers an antagonistic vision of society where this people is opposed to an elite. Finally, the last part of this “triad of populist representation” (Casullo 2021, 77) is the populist leader, the politician performatively making the representative claim. More than her role in articulating these antagonistic collectives, she is also conversely shaped by this articulation, performatively becoming the populist leader through her performance. Such a perspective on populism is thus theoretically grounded in the core concepts of performance studies: performance and performativity. These concepts are typically ill-defined in the literature or left to the intuitive understanding of the reader. However, a thorough interdisciplinary engagement with them can shed a new light on the concept of populism.

Understood as “any action conducted with the intention of being to some degree witnessed by another” (Rowe 2013, 8), performance is characterized by two necessary conditions: relationality, the presence of two people engaging in a social interaction, and reflexivity, awareness that this interaction takes place (Rai and Reinelt 2015, 4). Although this obviously encompasses artistic performances, this definition can be extended to political performances, defined by Rai (2014, 1–2) as “performances that seek to communicate to an audience meaning-making related to state institutions, policies and discourses.” Although there is a consensus around the definition of performance (Schechner 2013, 28), performativity is a much more contentious concept. Beyond its early use in linguistics (Austin 1975), I follow the “thicker” definition highlighted by poststructural scholars such as Butler (1990) by defining performativity as the ontological effects produced through performance. Put differently, “where performance is an act [. . .], performativity is the enactment based on that act” (De Vries et al. 2014, 285). 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.

However, I depart from Butler on one key aspect. Whereas a poststructural understanding of performativity emphasizes the structural determinants shaping the performing subject, a perspective informed by performance studies reverses this stance by showcasing instead the agency of the actor and the strategic dimension of performing (Goffman 1959). However, this does not imply that societal constraints do not exist. Even in an actor-focused perspective, the performer is far from free but rather bound and shaped by the context within which she performs. One of the unique features of this interdisciplinary framework is that it goes beyond language to capture extralinguistic elements in a performance, including for instance scenography, visual elements, body language, theatricality, and so on. Indeed, even with a definition of discourse that goes beyond language, poststructural scholars struggle to capture the nonverbal components of discourse (Hansen 2013, 192). However, starting from the premise that populism has both a discursive and an aesthetic dimension (Kurylo 2020), the concepts of per-

formance and performativity provide a more holistic understanding of populism.

Bringing this discussion back to populism, the twin notions of performance and performativity emphasize the centrality of the leader. Indeed, politicians understood as performers constitute the most fundamental unit of performance analysis. Furthermore, given the core dynamic of performativity underpinning populism, the mutual constitution of people, elite, and leader happens through the performances of an individual who becomes the symbolic locus where populism operates. 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 type of “people” and “elite” that they performatively articulate. Expanding on Moffitt’s (2016) definition through this interdisciplinary lens, populism is thus defined as a political style, an open-ended repertoire of political performances characterized primarily by the performative representation of the people, the elite, and the leader. 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—seeing populism as a repertoire shifts the focus on the “presence” of the performer that reproduces and perpetuates the repertoire.

However, in addition to this stylistic interpretation of people-centrism and anti-elitism shared within the discursive–performative approach and beyond, the approach to populism as a style also points at two other fundamental characteristics to populism. The first one is the performative articulation of crisis detailed in-depth by Moffitt (2015). The second one, at the heart of this article, has so far been described as the “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy 2009) or “bad manners” (Moffitt 2016, 59), but I argue that it is better understood as the strategic use of transgression.

### Flaunting of the Low and Bad Manners

Even though the systematic use of the concept of populism as a “flaunting of the low” is a specificity of the discursive–performative approach to populism, it finds echo in the work of many other scholars, regardless of their theoretical perspective. From Canovan (1999, 5) who described the “tabloid style of populism” as characterized by the “use of simple, direct language” to even Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, 64) who argued that “populist leaders in general . . . use simple and even vulgar language, a so-called *Stammtisch* (beer table) discourse,” there is a shared understanding among scholars of populism that a specificity of populist actors is the coarseness and simplicity of their discourse. Even beyond academia, this notion of an inherent vulgarity of populism was widespread in the media coverage of leaders described as populist and even used as a strategy to fight against them by their rivals, as was perhaps best epitomized by Michelle Obama’s iconic motto that “when they go low, we go high” (Obama 2018, 407), in reaction to the outrageous campaign run by Donald Trump in 2016.

Dissatisfied with the current definitions of populism that failed to capture what he described as an “intuitive” as well as an “essential and noncontroversial defining feature of populism” (Ostiguy 2009, 23), Ostiguy was the first scholar to offer a formal conceptualization of this facet of the phenomenon. Starting from the postulate that the traditional left–right axis was not sufficient to grasp the appeal of political actors he analyzed in the Latin American context, he suggested to add another orthogonal axis: the high–low axis.

This new axis broadly refers to a specific cultural dimension and refers generally 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). With the advantage of remaining neutral to one another, these two axes offered in combination a “two-dimensional political space of appeals, in which we can locate actors, parties, and politicians” (Ostiguy 2009, 17), which can in turn be categorized depending on where they are placed in this political space, from extreme positions such as “high–left” and “low–right” to more nuanced positions in the center of either axis.

Just as he divided left and right into two constitutive dimensions, the political and the socioeconomic, Ostiguy’s high and low axis is further subdivided into “two closely related subdimensions” (Ostiguy 2009, 7): the sociocultural and the politicocultural. Inspired notably by Bourdieu’s (1979) work on taste, the sociocultural component refers to “manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public” (Ostiguy 2017, 78), aspects that are expressed through public performances. While the sociocultural high is characterized by being stiff, polished, and educated, the sociocultural low is vulgar, coarse, and culturally popular. The politicocultural, on the other hand, is not cultural in the sense of individual performances of self-expression but rather pertains to a type of political subculture, including “forms of political leadership and preferred modes of decision-making in the polity” (Ostiguy 2017, 81). Appeals in the politicocultural high are procedural, impersonal, and institutionally mediated, whereas the politicocultural low “emphasize very personalistic, strong (generally male) leadership” (Ostiguy 2009, 8). Although he did not entirely fall for the normative pitfall of automatically associating populism and antipluralism, Ostiguy nonetheless warned that the politicocultural low “can undoubtedly undermine liberal democratic principles when personalistic authority entails an aversion or resistance to broadly deliberative and pluralistic modes of decision-making” (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016, 31). Using the Freudian concept of sublimation, Ostiguy summarized that the high axis refers to a more “sublimated type of practice whereas behavior on the low, in terms of both dimensions, is certainly more ‘crass’” (Ostiguy 2009, 10), reframing his high/low axis as an opposition between warmer and colder forms of politics.

Ostiguy went a step further by making the thought-provoking argument that this axis even provided a fitting definition of populism, accounting for its neutrality vis-à-vis the left–right axis and explaining why there were both right-wing and left-wing expressions of populism. Indeed, he argued that the low provided “a crisp and intuitive definition of the highly contested concept of populism” (Ostiguy 2009, 3). Further refining his claim in later conceptualizations by adopting the Laclauian notion of antagonism, Ostiguy eventually argued that “populism is the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting of the ‘low’” (Ostiguy 2017, 84). Although intuitively compelling, one of the major peculiarities of this definition is the complete absence of “people-centrism” and “anti-elitism” (Stavrakakis 2017, 529), which are otherwise central in almost every other definition of populism. Indeed, Ostiguy chose to ignore that fundamental binary by implicitly associating “the people” with the cultural low and conversely “the elite” with the cultural high. Populism for him is grounded in appeals to the low, which allows a pop-

ulist performer to express their proximity by association with the “people.” However, Ostiguy never discussed what kind of “people” is being articulated nor did he account for ways political actors borrowing from the low performatively construct “the elite” outside of the sheer contrast created by their own performances.

My position in this article is closer to that of Moffitt who made a similar critique of Ostiguy’s definition. Arguing that Ostiguy did “not stress the binary between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ as strongly or explicitly” as he did, Moffitt (2016, 59) chose to incorporate the “flaunting of the low” into his stylistic approach to populism, but only as one among three core components of the populist style, along with “an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’” and “performances of crisis, breakdown or threat” (Moffitt 2016, 45). In other words, performances of the low for Moffitt are a necessary but not sufficient component of populism. He furthermore reframed Ostiguy’s concept by focusing more specifically on its sociocultural dimension and referring to it as “bad manners,” defined as “a general disregard for ‘appropriate’ ways of acting on the political stage” (Moffitt 2016, 55). In the context of his broader approach to populism, Moffitt argued that “bad manners” were a central way for populist actors to “perform ordinariness” (Moffitt 2016, 57), that is, presenting themselves as close to “the people” they claim to represent and bridging the symbolic gap between voters and their representative. Furthermore, in a significant departure from the perspective that “populism, as we understand it, is always on ‘the low’” (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016, 26), Moffitt also pointed that “while Ostiguy correctly argues that populists often resort to ‘coarse’ and culturally vulgar appeals, this is not *always* the case” (Moffitt 2016, 59), mentioning Gert Wilders and Ross Perot as examples of populist actors who did not rely on a “flaunting of the low.” However, this budding critique is never further developed as Moffitt exclusively illustrated his concept of “bad manners” through “low” examples of performances, including “swearing, taunts, over-the-top claims, . . . crude and overly offensive remarks” (Moffitt 2016, 60).

### The Limits of the “Flaunting of the Low”

Despite the underdeveloped aspect of this critique, Moffitt raised one of the most glaring weaknesses of Ostiguy’s concept of the “flaunting of the low”: its conceptual narrowness that fails to account for many empirical practices done by the very actors that he would categorize as populist. However, an important element to consider before developing this point any further is the purpose of the strategic mobilization of the low. Moffitt emphasizes 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 a “flaunting of 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 politicians tied to these 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 politics, this implies that every norm of politics belongs to the sociocultural high and, conversely, that the only way to

break them is by “flaunting the low.” However, not only are norms often too complex to place a high–low binary, there are many ways to break them without appealing to the low. Put differently, a politician does not have to be rude or vulgar to appear different from other politicians: they merely have to break a rule that separates them from others. Take, for instance, the case of Bernie Sanders, whose discourse was described as the most populist of the 2016 campaign by [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser \(2018\)](#), and his strategic choice to define himself as a “socialist.” In a country like the United States where anti-communism remains widespread and “socialist” continues to hold an overwhelmingly negative connotation, reclaiming the qualifier for himself broke a taboo in the Democratic Party. It allowed him to differentiate himself from his rivals, showing that he was willing to say things no other mainstream politician would. More interestingly, this violation of customs in American politics did not rely on the low, on the contrary, demonstrating a more “educated” understanding of the concept than his rivals. Fighting against a misleading association between socialism and the USSR, Sanders hence forced his followers to raise their own standards accordingly.

Beyond this anecdotal example, let us consider a frequent extension of the “flaunting of the low” argument: the widespread claim that populism, especially right-wing populism, is characterized by a simpler form of language than their opponents. As was pointed earlier on in this article, even if [Ostiguy](#) never made this point directly, it is common in the literature on populism 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). However, few scholars took the time to systematically verify this claim. In an ambitious cross-national study, [McDonnell and Ondelli](#) used multiple measures to compare the linguistic simplicity of various populist leaders with that of their mainstream counterparts. It offered thought-provoking results based on a more-nuanced perspective on populism and simple language. Indeed, although they do conclude that Trump used simpler language than Clinton, albeit only marginally, results from other countries were more surprising. “In Italy, Salvini is simpler than Renzi and Alfano according to the readability indices but is not the simplest on any of the other three measures. [The] results from France and the UK are clear-cut, but not in the way we anticipated. Farage is generally less simple than Miliband and Cameron, while Le Pen is constantly less simple than Macron on all our measures” ([McDonnell and Ondelli 2020](#), 10). What emerged from this study is the need to adopt a more context-sensitive understanding of political language accounting for the strategic agency of each politician. To compare two politicians in a presidential regime, an interpretation of this result is that Trump arguably embraced simplicity in opposition to the eloquent and sophisticated style of rhetoric embodied by his predecessor, Barack Obama ([Kazemian and Hashemi 2014](#)), which confirms the argument of the “flaunting of the low.” Conversely, Le Pen chose to place herself in opposition with her rival Emmanuel Macron—who 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 former French politicians such as De Gaulle ([Arnold 2019](#)), whom she frequently described as an inspiration. In sum, being linguistically transgressive is very dependent on the specific context of each politician and cannot be summarized 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.

In an extension of this critique, the second key issue with [Ostiguy’s](#) “flaunting of the low” and [Moffitt’s](#) “bad manners” is their reliance on a normative binary. As was discussed above, the discursive–performative approach to populism differentiates itself from the ideational approach through its gradational concept of populism, which moves beyond the binary notion that either one is a populist or they are not. This, however, is not reflected in the notion of high and low, which essentializes practices by making them fall in either the category of “bad manners” or the implicit opposite of “good manners.” To defuse this type of criticism, [Ostiguy](#) was careful to specify that his high–low axis was a “spectrum” ([Ostiguy 2009](#), 6), an “ordinal category” or even a “quantifiable scale” ([Ostiguy 2017](#), 90), while [Moffitt](#) also emphasized that it is “a gradational divide rather than a strict binary” ([Moffitt 2016](#), 60). Unfortunately, when it comes specifically to this dimension of “bad manners,” their use of the concept did not substantiate this claim in a significant way. In practice, neither author engaged with a discussion of the various degrees of low and high, using examples that fell clearly in either category without exploring the inevitable value judgment that an analyst must make when framing a specific practice as “high” or “low.” If most would agree that some practices are undoubtedly part of the “low,” such as the use of profanities and insults, the exact position on this spectrum of other performances is more ambiguous. Take the example of clothing for instance; would the use of an old-fashioned attire such as a tailcoat appear as “high” because it is traditional, formal, and snobby or as “low” because it is “acting or presenting oneself in more ‘colourful’ ways than we usually expect” ([Moffitt 2016](#), 61)? While such a fashion choice undoubtedly breaks the rules of politics as usual, it complicates the high/low binary and forces the analyst to judge where it would fit in this axis.

Even though [Ostiguy \(2017, 74\)](#) argued that he created a “neutral definition of populism,” it is only neutral vis-à-vis the left/right axis while carrying an inevitable form of normative judgment on populist performances, which are necessarily coarse and vulgar. For [Ostiguy](#), the importance of a binary is crucial in his understanding of populism, and he willingly offered alternative ways “to express that same dichotomy: refined/coarse, proper/improper, well-behaved/transgressively earthy” ([Ostiguy and Roberts 2016](#), 30), quoting as a main influence [Lévi-Strauss’s \(1983\)](#) opposition between “the raw” and “the cooked.” However, as [Derrida](#) demonstrated,<sup>2</sup> binaries are never normatively neutral: “in a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” ([Derrida 1981](#), 41). In the present case, it is obvious from the near-exclusive use of positively connotated words such as “refined” and “proper” for the “high” and negatively connotated words such as “vulgar” and “coarse” for the “low” that it is the “high” that holds the moral high ground over the “low” in this binary, even with the caveats that the “high” may appear overly stiff and rigid. In consequence, because critical approaches cannot be satisfied with pretenses of neutrality, one of the purposes of offering the alternative concept

<sup>2</sup> Ironically, both authors use [Derrida’s](#) deconstruction when they made the convincing case for their thought-provoking concept of an “overflowing signifier” ([Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021](#), 57) but did not apply it to the foundations of their approach.

of transgression is to deconstruct this binary opposition by suggesting a way to bypass it.

### Transgression As a Performative Strategy

In extension of Ostiguy and Moffitt's trailblazing endeavor to design an approach to populism that is sensitive to socio-cultural factors, I offer in this article the concept of transgression as an alternative to both the concepts of "flaunting of the low" and "bad manners." 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.

Although it has yet to be used systematically and is more often than not mentioned in passing, the concept of transgression makes various appearances in the work of scholars from the discursive–performative approach to populism, starting with Laclau who used the term when he claimed that "the emergence of the 'people' as a historical actor is thus always transgressive vis-à-vis the situation preceding it. This transgression is the emergence of a new order" (Laclau 2005, 228). Ostiguy used the term on many occasions, claiming that "populist appeals are transgressive" (Ostiguy 2017, 74), pointing that "the low is often about transgression" (Ostiguy 2017, 77), and describing "populists [as] *enfants terribles*, relishing [. . .] their transgressions" (Ostiguy 2017, 93). In addition to a few mentions in their coauthored chapter (Ostiguy and Moffitt 2021, 51, 61), it is in their collaborative introduction that Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt are most specific about it, saying that the populist "praxis [is] marked not by 'properness' and formality, but rather by informality and transgression" (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021, 6) and pointing that "populists [. . .] use an antagonist populist logic and transgressively perform the politics of the low" (Ostiguy, Panizza, and Moffitt 2021, 8). In the same volume, Casullo (2021) came closest to a systematic use of the concept, although she never properly defined it. Describing populist leaders as "transgressive figures" (Casullo 2021, 77), she argued that "populist performance [is] infuse[d] with transgression, and it is from this transgression that the political energy of the leader-people connection comes from" (Casullo 2021, 80). Another notable use of transgression is also found in Wodak's (2015, 1) work where she associated populism with "transgressing norms and taboos" in her first chapter but scarcely expanded on the concept.

Going beyond the literal use of the term, many scholars of populism expressed a similar idea of a violation of norms through various terminologies implying this idea of disruption and norm-breaking. By far, the most similar concept found in the literature was developed by Sorensen when she coined the notion of "disruptive performances." Defined as a "particular form of political performance that combines strategic narratives of a mythical past with a breach of the formal qualities of establishment politics to challenge dominant representations and effect change" (Sorensen 2020, 10), Sorensen also highlighted the importance of aesthetics in populist politics, arguing that "their use of form not only as a vessel for carrying content but as a symbol that stands for something more abstract, can facilitate sophisticated argument and has complex political functions" (Sorensen 2020, 9). Describing the role of disruption as a way to violate norms, she convincingly argued that they had two major functions: a first one of "symbolic delegitimization of the very norms and procedures they breach" and a second func-

tion of "exposure and truth-telling" (Sorensen 2020, 22). Although the concept of "disruptive performances" is a major theoretical innovation and influence for the way I use transgressions, there are two notable limitations to her work. The first one is her exclusive focus on "counter-performances" (Sorensen 2020, 8), which limit her concept to marginal actors who challenge authoritative power, whereas I argue that transgression is a concept that can apply regardless of the actor's power. The second one is the same critique that I levied against Ostiguy and Moffitt: her disruptive performances exclusively borrow from the low, only making references to "the use of slang or swearing" and "offensive and disrespectful language" (Sorensen 2020, 12).<sup>3</sup>

Transgressions as I understand them are agnostic vis-à-vis the high/low axis because their only point of reference is the norm they breach. Although this leaves open the possibility to categorize the norms themselves on this axis, transgressive performances themselves do not necessarily imply any "flaunting of the low," which is left to the judgment of the analyst depending on the specific context of the transgression. Indeed, even if some political norms can be framed as 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. On the one hand, being forthright can be a norm expected for instance in the rigid context of a political trial while, on the other hand, it can be a transgression when it is framed as candid talk in opposition with the norm of *langue de bois* (political cant), based around indirect answers during public interventions. In sum, transgressions are highly context-sensitive and capture a wide range of disruptive practices that cover a potentially infinite number of norms, whether they are explicitly codified in law like the peaceful transition of power in a democracy, or implicit customs that are in constant flux such as the dress code in a legislative assembly or the level of language used during a rally.

My definition of transgression is inspired by the work of Bataille (1986) on taboos, most specifically his discussion of the symbiotic relationship between norm and transgression. Indeed, while a transgression only makes sense in the context of the norm that 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—a 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 "normalized," thus displacing, or even replacing, the old norm with a new one. This means that transgressive performers are in a situation between marginality and *avant-garde*, at odds with current norms or spearheading the path toward a new normality. To use Turner's (1969) famous expression, transgressive performances place their performer in a "liminal" position, "betwixt and between" the rules of politics. This destabilizing nature accounts for transgression's central 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 audience. If met with indifference or disapproval, a transgression will

<sup>3</sup>At the time of writing, Sorensen had not yet published her forthcoming monograph (Sorensen 2021), which means that these limitations might not apply to her larger work.

blow back at the performer and may ruin their own credentials or make them appear threatening to the orderly conduct of politics.

### A Typology of Transgressive Performances

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: (1) performances disrupting interactional norms, (2) performances disrupting rhetoric norms, and (3) 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. Consequently, a transgression like interrupting a rival during a public debate can be interpreted as a simultaneous breach of all three types of norm: a disrespect to one's partner on the interactional level, an aggressive display of behavior on the rhetoric level, and a disdain for the rules of debating on the theatrical level. However, I would argue that such a distinction remains analytically helpful for a typological endeavor like this one to separate transgressive performances from one another depending on the main type of norm that they break. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate these concepts by making references to the performances of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen during their respective 2016 and 2017 presidential campaigns. These cases were chosen for their relevance as prominent examples of nationalist politicians adopting the populist style (Ostiguy and Roberts 2016; McDonnell and Ondelli 2020). Each of the examples used is an excerpt from a larger comparative project beyond the scope of this article.

#### *Performances Disrupting Interactional Norms*

I define interactional norms as norms referring to the way an actor acts in relationship with others, the rules determining how a politician ought to behave toward their peers. In the case of democratic elections, they first and foremost include the norm of respect toward others as well as several other norms such as attentively listening to differing perspectives, treating others as equals to oneself as well as the fundamental, and often legal, rule forbidding physical aggression in politics. Conversely, transgressions disrupting these norms can take many forms. Violations of an interactional rule can be straightforward and direct, as in the case of insults and profanities that are well documented in the cases of Donald Trump's campaign (Quealy 2021). However, that can also be more subtle, flirting with transgressing the rule without committing to it. Consider the famous town hall debate in 2016 between him and Hillary Clinton, where his movements on the stage made him a very imposing and at times intimidating presence. Although Trump never directly invaded 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 more importantly to the cameras capturing the debate. As such, this transgressive 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 commanding the stage.

Even focusing exclusively on verbal attacks, there are many subtler ways for political performers to disrupt a norm. Outside of insults, which are a linguistically straightforward way to breach the norm of respect, several transgressions rely on conveying this disrespect not through the literal meaning of discourse but through a hidden layer of meaning that one can only understand contextually.<sup>4</sup> Through an underlying expression of superiority, transgressive performers can use condescension to simultaneously break the norms of respect and the corollary norm of equality between the speakers. By hiding a veiled or ambiguous attack in their words, transgressive speakers can also use what Bell (1997) described as "venomous innuendo." In one of the most commented quotes of the 2017 presidential debate in France, Marine Le Pen used that kind of transgression against Macron, 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." This brief attack could be read at the first glance as a criticism to Macron's professorial tone who was schooling Le Pen on economic issues. However, the innuendo here was obvious to most of the French audience who, after it had been heavily publicized, knew that Macron was married to his former French teacher in high school, Brigitte Macron, with an unusual age gap of nearly twenty-five years. 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, more importantly, to his masculinity and romantic preferences, topics that norms of courtesy forbid from levying against a rival.

#### *Performances Disrupting Rhetoric Norms*

Rhetoric norms are rules that frame the way political actors ought to express themselves. Indeed, being a politician in any country comes with its own set of expectations, from the type of language to be used to the type of attire appropriate for specific occasions. In the way they are conceptualized here, the main difference between interactional and rhetoric norms is that interactional norms preside over the relationship between several actors while rhetoric norms are self-contained for the actor and do not imply others beyond the actor and its audience. Furthermore, as opposed to interactional norms that can only be found in a confrontational context, rhetoric norms can also be found in a monologic context, like a rally where there are no other politicians to interact with.

Resuming the earlier discussion based on McDonnell and Ondelli's (2020) work, rather than starting from the uncritical premise that the only way for populist actors to discursively distinguish themselves is to use simple language, I suggest the more productive concept of linguistic differentiation. While the adoption of a simpler language can be part of such a strategy in Trump's case, it may take the form of embracing a more traditional way of talking as the case of Le Pen illustrated. Indeed, politicians embracing the populist style still seek to differentiate themselves linguistically

<sup>4</sup>To use the taxonomy developed by Austin (1975), these two aspects of language are, respectively, called the illocution and the perlocution.

from mainstream politicians; it is just fundamental to be open to the variety of ways this could be done.

Another common norm in political rhetoric is the standard of rationality, which finds its expression into politics through emotionally neutral discourse. Eklundh (2019, 21) traces the skepticism for affects in political theory back to Descartes'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*. Even if, in practice, most politicians mobilize a combination of rational and emotional arguments, the related transgressive strategy hence consists in granting a more prominent, or even dominant, role to affective discourse. Following in the footsteps of other scholars such as Cossarini and Vallespín (2019), I argue that it is important to consider the affective dimension of populism, which is a central part of the transgressive repertoire to disrupt the rationalist bias of mainstream politics. But while I argue that the populist style is characterized by a greater use of *pathos* in political performances, the type of emotions and affects they choose to emphasize is however determined by their ideology, relying for instance on nostalgia and humiliation as was the case for Trump's campaign (Homolar and Löfflman 2021) as it was for other examples of nationalist politicians.

Considering political performances more holistically, rhetoric norms also go beyond textual speech, as these rules apply to nonverbal components such as ways of dressing and behaving on stage as well as the gestural repertoire of the performer. This is notably the case for the expression of gender, as was discussed by Casullo (2021, 86) when she pointed at the "sense of transgression" conveyed by performances of hegemonic femininity in the cases of Evita Peron and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina. One of the most thought-provoking parts of her argument describes their use of *haute couture* as a way not to "mirror the physical characteristics of the downtrodden" but instead to "mirror their aspirations and showing them they, too, can partake of the 'high' culture to which they feel entitled" (Casullo 2021, 86). This argument that also applies to Trump's campaign in which he was described as "a poor person's idea of a rich person" (Fox 2016). This showcases the continued relevance of the high/low scale while accounting for the complex way high signifiers, such as expensive clothes, can be used to perform transgression.

#### *Performances Disrupting Theatrical Norms*

Last but not least, theatrical norms refer to the more abstract level of rules, which constrain political performances in their essence as performances. This notion is grounded in a distinction between artistic and social performances. At a very fundamental level, artistic performances—such as plays at the theater—are based on the premise of a distinction between an artificial fiction and an authentic reality. More specifically, they are based on the acknowledgment that 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. By contrast, "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" (Saward 2010, 176). Indeed, because a political performance is "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler 1990, 179), this implies a tacit duty from the political actor to minimize

whatever elements could disturb this suspension of disbelief from the audience. Put differently, since "a defining feature of a good [. . .] performance may be that it does not look like a performance at all" (Saward 2010, 69), the success of a political performance lies in hiding its devices, its mechanics, in other words, in making the premediated and carefully crafted dramaturgy appear as spontaneous and authentic moments.

As a result, the most important theatrical norm for political performances is the tacit agreement between all parties not to highlight the theatrical nature of a performance as artificial. This means for instance not acknowledging that the public persona of a politician may differ from their private behavior. Other norms include concealing or minimizing the professional dimension of being a politician and appearing on stage, from the use of ghostwriters and teleprompters to the makeup applied prior to televised appearances. Based on this dimension, because politicians tacitly know that they should acknowledge as little as possible of this inherent theatricality of politics, their self-awareness and reflexivity place political performers on a higher level of abstraction about their own role as actor that I describe as metapolitical,<sup>5</sup> a concept adapted from the foundational work of Ruesch and Bateson (1968) on metacommunication. Although these theatrical norms are for the most part tacit, they also include more "concrete" elements that are public information. Because political performances are also rituals (Turner 1969), they are structured around norms that delimitate the time and space for doing and experiencing politics like the formal rules of a debate, the laws that preside over an election and determine who can participate and so on.

To bring it back to the context of this discussion, this self-awareness of political performer can be weaponized to transgress this theatrical norm through the form of metapolitical comments, understood as overt references to the intrinsic theatricality of politics. While I agree with Ostiguy and Roberts (2016, 41–46) in their assessment that Donald Trump made "flaunting of the low" one of his trademark transgressive strategies for his presidential campaigns, metapolitical comments are arguably another of his signature transgressions, and one that does not "flaunt the low," showing that Trump's range and appeal go beyond mere vulgarity and coarseness. In his 2016 campaign, Trump used metapolitical comments more than any other transgressive performance, using them to reveal the predictability and hollowness of the rhetoric attacks of his opponent. For instance, addressing the audience directly during the town hall debate, Trump denounced Clinton's rhetorical strategy as shallow and predictable by telling them: "look, it's all words. It's all sound soundbites." Another similar example happened during the third presidential debate, where Trump sarcastically praised Clinton's avoidance of a difficult question on open borders by saying "that was a great pivot," provoking a cheerful reaction from the live audience, which was told to refrain from making any reaction. These metapolitical comments are a powerful transgressive strategy since they break the fourth wall of political performances, showing to the audience several strategies and behaviors that are well known to insiders but criticizing them as hypocritical, cynical, or artificial. Even though they may themselves use many of these artifices, showing these otherwise hidden aspects of the political spectacle is a way for transgressive

<sup>5</sup> 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."

performers to share part of their insider knowledge with their audience, fostering a form of proximity and complicity with them and placing themselves in a maverick position.<sup>6</sup>

### Populism and International Relations: Transgressions on the Global Stage

Due to its theoretical inspirations from interactionist sociology (Goffman 1959) and performance studies (Taylor 2003), this article stands out from the standard of structuralist approaches that dominate the field of international relations (IR) theory, such as realism, liberalism, or constructivism. However, the approach it develops on populism as a transgressive style makes a substantial contribution to the study of global politics in two notable ways. First, its dramaturgical conceptualization of politics encourages a strategic and embodied perspective on agency. Second, through the lens of transgression, it offers a conceptual tool to grasp the way populism affects the stage of global politics.

The question of agency in IR has long remained underdeveloped (Wight 2006, 178) as rationalist scholars, which includes the mainstream approaches of realism and liberalism, treated “international agency—that is, the capacity to act in international politics—as analytically given” (Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019, 788). For them, anarchy implied that actors of global politics, typically states, acted according to a logic of instrumentality, behaving selfishly and strategically in a material environment. Through their engagement with sociology, constructivist scholars instead argued that global politics was ruled by a logic of appropriateness. Actors were instead culturally socialized to the norms of global politics and would follow the rules associated with their role (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). These mutually exclusive positions exhibit major limitations: the materialist focus of the rationalist perspective completely overlooks the importance of ideational factors while the constructivist orthodoxy depicts actors as “cultural dupes” (Barnett 1999, 7) mechanically conditioned by oversocializing norms. The dramaturgical frame to politics developed above solves both problems as it “conceptualize actors in a cultural environment as performers engaged in manipulative presentations of self and framing who are, at the same time, constrained by the script and the consistency requirement of their roles” (Schimmelfennig 2002, 417). This sophisticated logic of strategic interaction is at the heart of the stylistic approach to populism but could be applied to many other phenomena of global politics. Following the impetus set by Ringmar (2016), this article thus offers a modest contribution to a wider understanding of IR as “embodied” politics. Beyond the example of populism, it shows the importance of considering collective actors such as states and international organizations as more than reified constructs, through the perspective of individuals that performatively give them life.

In addition to this theoretical positioning within the wider field of IR, the main contributions of this article for the literature on global politics lie in its critical approach to populism and the conceptual novelty of transgression. The intersection of populism and IR has so far remained relatively limited (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, 2).

<sup>6</sup>Although I only focus on metapolitical comments in this section, there are many ways to appear more authentic through a disruption of theatrical norms. A well-researched transgression is the choice by actors using the populist style to bypass norms of mediation using alternative media. By choosing personalistic outlets such as social media instead of the more traditional forms of political performances, many actors associated with populism found success in pushing the theatrical boundaries of politics beyond the physical stage (Moffitt 2016, 81; Ott 2017; Nadler 2019).

On the one hand, research on populism has primarily focused on case studies and on comparative politics, which is accounted by the dominance of the national frame for populist articulations of the people (De Cleen 2019). On the other hand, scholars in IR tend to “treat populism as a monolith” or a “catch-all term,” which “makes it virtually useless for any differentiated analysis” (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, 4). In opposition with the latter, I have offered a critical approach to populism, joining a growing trend of scholars applying the discursive–performative approach to IR topics such as securitization (Kurylo 2020) or foreign policy (Wojczewski 2020). More specifically, my concept of populist transgression complements the aforementioned constructivist literature on norms and particularly scholarship on norm-breaking.

As was developed above, transgression can capture the oft-overlooked micropolitical dimensions of politics, from clothing to repartee. However, it can also illuminate underdeveloped aspects of the macropolitical level of global politics. The concept of transgression of norms in IR has been most notably explored by Adler-Nissen (2014) and Evers (2017), who both adopted a Goffmanian approach to expand their constructivist outlook. My typology of transgressive performances is complementary to theirs but differs in its focus, going beyond their state-centric lens and analyzing embodied performances. However, I argue that populist transgressive performances correspond to what they respectively called a strategy of “counter-stigmatization” (Adler-Nissen 2014, 155) or “norm rejection” (Evers 2017, 790). Described as a tool for outsiders, these transgressions consist in imbuing the stigma of breaking a norm with positive meaning, turning it into “an emblem of pride, identifying with the group of stigmatized” (Adler-Nissen 2014, 153).

Given his term as head of state from 2016 to 2020, Trump makes a particularly prominent case to exemplify how these transgressions may take shape on the global stage. Indeed, even after his campaign and as his political choices gained international relevance, Trump remained a transgressive actor, breaking every type of norms. Looking at foreign policy, Trump’s choice to reject multilateralism was accompanied by the transgression of various interactional norms like his “harsh economic critique of NATO allies [and] his denigration of long-standing trading arrangements like the North American Free Trade Agreement” (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019, 2), which created tension with allied countries. Conversely, his repeated praise of illiberal leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Viktor Orban was in rupture with expected standards of diplomacy. To give but one example of a rhetoric transgression, Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord altered the image of the United States by framing it as openly removed from the efforts against climate change. Finally, when considering theatrical norms, Trump broke the theatrical illusion of the United Nations as a community of states willing to establish common rules by successively leaving the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2017, the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2018, and starting the process to leave the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020.

### Conclusion

In the light of this discussion of the various facets of transgression at both national and global levels, I want to further discuss my choice of this specific typology of transgressive performances. First, it is important to stress that the difference between disruption of interactional, rhetoric, and

theatrical norms is only an ideal-typical one, designed to allow for a more concrete discussion of the various types of transgression. Second, it is also important to highlight once more how much of an overlap there may be between these different categories and how often one transgressive practice operates across two or all dimensions of this typology. Overall, my argument is that all three categories of transgressions are not competing with one another, but rather complementary in function, showcasing various facets of the same *praxis* of transgression to highlight its versatility as a concept.

Another major element to highlight is that the use of transgressive performances is *not* a unique feature of populism. Considering the applications of the concept to politics more generally, Braud (2012, 74) argued that transgression is a “strategy for newcomers” and for “marginal actors.” Although I agree that political actors who use the populist style are typically characterized by either (or both) of these two features, many other outsider political actors fulfilling these criteria would not be categorized as populist. Consider for instance the case of “joke candidates” such as Vermin Supreme in the United States or Lord Buckethead in the United Kingdom, whose political goal is to mock the absurdity of elections through satire and for whom transgression constitutes their most powerful performative tool. Or take the example of activists dissatisfied with the limitations of electoral politics. They might strategically decide to break political, and sometimes legal, rules to meaningfully move political practices and attitudes through transgression (Tilly 2006), but they are not populist. That said, even if transgression is not an exclusive specificity of populism, my argument remains that it *is* one of the constitutive elements of the populist style. Even though mainstream politicians may also occasionally be transgressive, transgressions do not constitute a central and systematic part of their repertoire as they do in the performances of populist actors. 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, which is why I concur with Moffitt (2016) when he described two other necessary components to the populist style: on the one hand, the representation of an opposition between people and elite and, on the other hand, the performative articulation of crisis.

The last argument that I wanted to make is that although this discussion tackled questions of political form, it is important to keep in mind the symbiotic nature of form and substance. This means that the specific ideology of political actors has an impact in determining the way they use transgression. Whether it is the mobilization of a certain type of affects (Homolar and Löffman 2021) or the breach of a specific custom instead of another, a holistic understanding of transgression needs to consider the ideological agenda of the politician using it. Furthermore, even with a similar agenda, there are substantial differences in the way two performers will be transgressive, as was eloquently demonstrated by McDonnell and Ondelli (2020). This highlights that, in addition to considering their ideology and the broad commonalities of the populist style, a myriad of other factors ought to be taken into consideration to understand the important nuances in the way different populist actors may perform transgression on the global stage. Habitus, institutional context, gender, personal history, political competition, and many more elements also shape their transgressive practices, which raises the need to also take into consideration contextual variations before making any generalization to populism as a global phenomenon. Furthermore, as opposed

to the passive and disembodied vision of norm-breaking of mainstream constructivist scholarship, I showcased the importance of considering politics through the lens of the relative agency of its individual actors in complement to more structural understandings of IR.

In conclusion, this article does not seek to prove that Ostiguy’s high–low axis is irrelevant to the study of populism, whether nationally or globally. Undoubtedly, the “flaunting of the low” remains the most common transgressive strategy used by many populist actors and has even become something of a trademark for many politicians who shaped their entire *persona* around it, like Trump did. More than this, the use of “bad manners” is an incredibly effective performative strategy to differentiate oneself from other politicians and it is fundamental to consider this prominent part of the transgressive toolbox. However, as was demonstrated on multiple occasions throughout this article, there are many other ways for political actors to differentiate themselves from others, which highlights the importance to move beyond any simplistic reading to capture the complexity and diversity of populist practices. Indeed, by forcefully putting populist actors into the box of the cultural low, one fails to understand the more nuanced ways they develop their transgressive appeal.

In empirical illustration of this claim, one only needs to consider examples developed above that would not fit the category of “bad manners,” like the use of high signifiers of wealth to appeal to an audience that aspires to become richer, the choice of a more sophisticated language to appear more in touch with traditional authority figures, or even self-aware breaches of the fourth wall as a means to foster proximity with one’s audience. In short, the concept of transgression offers a flexible and malleable alternative to prior concepts without needing to place itself on a normatively loaded binary. 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 multiple political and sociocultural context. More than simply questioning the normative consequences of automatically associating populism with the vulgar and the buffoonish, the concept of transgression offers a set of tools to consider the way the populist style redefines global politics by taking shape in a chameleonic manner.

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