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Populism: the success story of an eclectic notion

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Populism: the success story of an eclectic notion

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Abstract

Populism is such a vague, changing and nebulous notion that can only be the alias of a symptom — what it actually points out is the deep crisis that presently affects market democracies in the West and elsewhere. This in particular since perfect fascists come to power in these countries, in the most regular way, on the occasion of general elections. The word “populism” is an emergency dressing on this infected wound: the simple fact that politicians whose affinities with fascism are obvious can make their nest in so-called liberal democratic institutions without making them implode, and make of market democracies war machines against various sorts of “enemies”: migrants, Muslims, poor workers, women, etc. The promotion of the term populism in the media sphere aims at containing a dangerous haemorrhage of sense and legitimacy that is expanding in the realm of so-called liberal democracies. It's not a concept; it's a fig leaf. It has no analytical value; it's just cosmetic.

Eclectic: Not following one style or set of ideas but choosing or using a wide variety. She has very *eclectic* tastes in literature. His house is an *eclectic* mixture of the antique and the modern.

The Oxford Dictionary

I will be dealing with the construction of a political and ideological narrative about or with the words “populism” and “populist” in our present. These are words that have become an integral part of the logomachy of power in present democratic societies: I mean politicians, statesmen and stateswomen, journalists, intellectual elites, etc. These words have become very powerful: key-words, passwords — they are precious tools for those who are presently redeploying and updating the sales pitch of the existing order. These words are very badly needed, in the present conditions, by the storytellers of neoliberal hegemony of market

democracy, in particular in the West.

Market democracies, not only totalitarian regimes as Claude Lefort argued, are *logocracies*. They rely not only on state violence or economic power but also on narrative. This is why “populism” and “populist” have become so indispensable — as expedients intended for slowing down or, if possible, containing a dangerous *haemorrhage (loss) of sense* that is expanding. In what does this haemorrhage that affects the storytelling of market democracy consist? It clearly relies very much on the fact that more and more frequently *politicians who have distinct affinities with fascism* come to power in democracies of variable size and weight. This in the most regular way — on the occasion of general elections: Duterte in the Philippines, Netanyahu-Liberman-Bennett in Israel, Trump in the US, Salvini in Italy, Strache in Austria, Bolsonaro in Brazil — the list remains open.

The superficial (that is journalistic) approach of this epoch-making phenomenon that consists in deriding these characters by calling them bawlers, hotheads, hooligans, cynical opportunists, and basically amateurs and dummies. This approach is just a diversion aimed at making us forget what fascism always is, at its inception: some sort of a *music*, a very repulsive one, but a “music” with as many quotation marks as you like, a music made of words, affects, nauseating intensities, gestures, resonances, stridulations, splinters of memories, and remains of statements that crystallize into discourses, which are arranged together into narratives, always in search of style and rhetoric power effects.

Fascism: it's something that always goes through language, the conquest of language, through keywords and ritornellos — this matters much more than all the grimacing faces of the clowns and vampires that their ambition and skill shoots to the front of the stage — the Duarte, Trump, Bolsonaro, etc. These people, we have to learn to *listen to them* carefully, so that we learn or learn again how to hear the music of fascism and nothing else, fascism in its familiar declensions — racial supremacism, the certitude that force makes law, the cult of the accomplished fact, the passion for bloody purges, for melodramatic boasting and about-faces (turns) — all this sinister and grotesque dramaturgy fascism is made of and that, before all, is engraved in language, hurled, belched, massacred, tweeted — just like the bloody marks of a sordid murder on the crime scene.

What is to be heard in the music of fascism is always, indeed, *promises*, that is advertised or anticipated actions. From this point of view, the fascist logomachy is different from that of the regimes that call themselves democratic. In democracy, those who compete for the leading position enter into *commitments* on the occasion of electoral campaigns and, as everyone knows, in such contexts, commitments only commit those who are naive enough to believe in them (to take them seriously). Promises, uttered with a more or less melodramatic tone by fascist leaders (including those who aspire to govern within the bounds of democratic institutions and come to power by winning elections) are of a different kind — they are *made to be kept* and, in general, they are, this inasmuch as they are *promises of death*, I mean leaning toward death,

looking in this direction.

When Duterte says during his electoral campaign that he will exterminate those he calls drug traffickers and drug addicts, he keeps his word; the death squads made of rogue cops and militias start the job as soon as he has been elected. When Netanyahu promises to the expansionist and supremacist Zionist right that he will speed up the colonization (that is the conquest of Palestinian territories) on the West Bank, he does it. When Trump promises to the impoverished racist white voters (the “white trash”) that he will harass the undocumented Latinos and others and close the borders to migrants from Central America and Mexico, he keeps his promise. When Salvini wins the elections in Italy by proclaiming that he will forbid the humanitarian ships loaded with African (and others) migrants to enter any harbor in Italy, and that he will criminalize the help brought by humanitarian associations to these migrants, he does it, and his allies from the so-called post-neo-anarchist 5 Stelle (Five Stars) Movement just watch this and shut their mouth.

The fascists keep their promises for these are promises of death; and those to whom they are addressed welcome them, for they naively imagine that those who are supposed to be liquidated or just let die always are *the others* — those who intrude, invade “our” vital space, pollute it, who aspire to live among “us” as parasites. What they don’t know, of course, is how all this story will end — something we are very familiar with. In the end, fascist promises always end up the same way — they backfire on those they are addressed to: those who were supposed to benefit from them and enjoy them.

What I want to stress is that the fascists who lately have come to power in strong gusts in countries where solid and ancient democratic traditions often exist are not *fascists for fun*. They are bawlers and poseurs who have won the jackpot as a consequence of a combination of improbable circumstances that are not liable to happen again, wackos under severe watch and surveillance and who exert power on the surface only, the Legal State and the Rule of Law being, in these countries, what they are — solid, impassive, indestructible. For it is exactly the opposite that is true: we have to deal here with people who are in such a hurry to do the job that they begin by putting into effect the most sinister of their promises of death, transforming them into actions that leave blood stains on the surface of the present.

As a consequence, the invention or rather the redeployment and the intensification of the terms “populism” and “populist” are first of all intended to *evade*, to *avoid* the question which has become today the most impassable bridge-to-asses for the promoters of liberal democracy (understood not only as the “lesser evil” in terms of political regimes but as the *only one* conceivable and acceptable): the simple fact that it has become obvious that “democracy”, in its present form, has ceased to be what was, since the end of WWII, one of the main sources of its legitimacy — *the opposite of fascism*. What relentlessly fights it, what has defeated it, and what whose vocation it is to prevent its return — «*Plus jamais ça!*» — as the French slogan says, or: “Fascism, never more!”.

Since it appears that we have entered the era of a form of post-democracy that is *compatible with fascism*; since we are witnessing the trivialization of situations where the compatibility of democratic institutions, of the democratic procedures intended for promoting the ruling elites with the promotion of genuine fascists appears in full light, then it is clear that the engine of modern democracy is seriously damaged.

It would be very tempting at this place to relaunch Bertolt Brecht's good old joke: since it appears that the universal suffrage is a device that is pernicious enough to open the gates of power to pure brand fascists — would it not be time to *suppress it in order to save democracy and its institutions*? Would it not be time, for the least to go back to a voting system based on tax quota (richness) by taking into consideration that those who have a bit more to lose than their chains and don't spend their evening watching trash TV would certainly be more reflective and level-headed voters than the ordinary folks of today who vote maliciously for rogue political adventurers like Trump and Salvini?

The janitors who keep watch at the gate of the dogma of the “irreplaceability” of market democracy are unable to take up seriously, that is as a *theoretical stake*, the challenge they have to face when fascist cuckoos move to their nest. It's a crash-test their scholastic cannot resist. This is why their only escape line is *discursive: it consists in setting up a narrative strategy where the words “populism” and “populist” are destined to replace “fascism” and “fascist”*. This use of euphemization rings a bell: it is basically identical to the way, in the era of Cold War, the leaders of the so-called “Free world” would design bloody dictatorships as “authoritarian regimes” - which made it possible to socialize with them in the name of Realpolitik, and to treat them as political friends *in spite of all* (Pinochet's dictatorship, the Park regime in South Korea, Suharto in Indonesia, etc.). This contrasts with “totalitarian regimes” - the code name of the other camp, of *the enemy* — in Schmittian terms.

The euphemization of the distinctly fascist features of the newcomers of market democracy turning brown or black, this is what makes it possible for the watchdogs of the democratic storytelling to sell following supposedly realistic fable to public opinions in the West. These new *leaders*, they say, are a *relative (lesser) evil* we have to face with patience and to compromise with — these people are not properly speaking *enemies* (of the democrats, of democracy). Since they “occupy” the spaces of democracy, since they have invested democratic institutions, they, conversely, are supposed to be themselves invested by these. There is, as a consequence, something “democratic” in them — that kind of blatant sophism.

In short, the words “populism” and “populist” are, in this context, not the medical instruments of theory, or *pharmakons*, but more prosaically poor bandages or maybe improvised splints. Fragile props intended for slowing down the erosion, maybe the collapse, of market democracy and post-democracy. What the rise to power of *democracy-compatible fascists* puts in full light is this: the key mechanism of contemporary democracy is not representation or even delegation but *overtaking*, that is *taking the upper hand over the*

competitors and the voters. The electors don't vote for men or women who are doomed to represent them, or whom they trust because of what their qualities and qualifications are supposed to be. They vote for those who have succeeded in taking command over them, having the strongest hold on them, so that they have succeeded in inclining them to vote for them, rather than for their competitors.

“Representation” is no more and less than *the useful fiction*, a fable (or a myth) which is about as true to the real functioning of contemporaries democracies as are the legendary stories on the foundation of Rome spread by the Roman historians to the real conditions of the creation of the glorious city. In a country like France, the all-out *presidentialization of the regime* makes the only electoral competition that matters — the election of the President — some sort of a hazardous plebiscite. People don't vote — if they still vote — for a candidate who is supposed to represent them, or whom they think is experienced, qualified and has the dimension of a statesman — they vote for the shrewd guy, the little monkey, the perfect opportunist who has known how to plunge into the breach that opened up as all the traditional parties began to vacillate and fall into pieces... The clever boy without past who knows how to take the upper hand on his competitors by putting forward his good look and young age. Everybody can see the result today, a year and a half after he was triumphantly elected. It is crystal clear that the general model, the image of democracy as system of representation is here completely blurred — whom does this Bonaparte in short trousers actually *represents* — apart from his own egotist fantasy? — This is something no one could say.

This is what the recent successful campaigns of Trump, Duterte, Salvini and others cast a crude light on: the key role of ascendancy, *the art of gaining ascendancy* over other competitors, by all means, on the occasion of general elections, this in the general condition of post-democratic regimes. Trump was elected as President of the US with some hundreds of thousands votes *less* than his main competitor, the Clinton Lady; in spite of this, his victory was crushing, a real rhetoric *Blitzkrieg* — the impoverished, humiliated, indebted, furious, disoriented whites follow the New York millionaire's lead, captivated by the cheerful lyrics of his march song — *America first!* What this scene shows is how neo-fascists now excel in gaining ascendancy over the public, the population and the voters *more democratico*, in a democratic way, without brutalizing or destroying democratic apparatuses.

It is in this context, on the occasion of this sudden outbreak, that these two magic words have popped up — *populism, populist*. In sum, government populism is *fascism with a human face*, that is the sort of fascism one can come to terms with — after all, there might be something good in the way Trump has disrupted international relations and the way he bullies China, something “we” can make a good use of... — just watch where my eyes rest... This kind of “realism” leads supposedly respectable democratic elites, such as the daily paper *Le Monde* in France, to adapt themselves to Trump and see in him, maybe, a lesser evil, is something that, in a country like France, inevitably rings a bell. It reminds everybody who is familiar with the

history of this country how quickly the French bourgeoisie adapted itself to Nazi occupation after the defeat in June 1940.

There is no doubt that the way today's fascism "conquers" or "occupies" democratic spaces and institutions is very different from the way fascist regimes came to power in Europe in the 1920s — 1940s and smashed the ruling democracies. This fact is often put forward and believed to be a decisive argument by those who are inclined to evade or downplay the problem democratic regimes today have with the present epidemic of "democratic fascism". Saying that "things, conditions are very different" and that, as a consequence, the history doesn't repeat itself is stating the obvious. There was no need for Salvini to stage a violent march on Rome as Mussolini did — he just took the elevator of general democratic elections and became the master of Italy.

I am not saying, of course, that as soon as people of that kind come to power the democratic regime transforms itself into a fascist regime — nothing of that kind. But what I say, that openly conflicts with the so-called realism of those who say that we just have to learn patience and adapt ourselves to these circumstances, is that *a fascist is a fascist and that a fascist action is a fascist action* — like, actively preventing humanitarian ships from rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. This is pure fascism; and fascism, as such, is something intransitive, absolute and that cannot be converted into something else, more presentable or interpreted in a more lenient way. Everybody knows that Salvini is not the exact copy of Mussolini, *but this is not the problem* — the problem is what he does — and what he does is done and has irremissible effects. This is, I think, how "fascism today" should be envisioned.

It's blatant: what all these new demo-compatible fascists have in common is a passion for cleansing, exclusion, persecution — death, basically. And the "people" that go with them, that fit into them are the white militias that patrol along the Mexican border in the South of the US, in order to catch illegal Latino migrants from Central America and Mexico; they are the Jewish settlers in the West Bank that cut olive trees belong to Palestinian farmers and shoot on them if they resist; they are the thugs that bash and kill isolated Africans in the Northern part of Italy; and, of course, not to forget my own beautiful country, the so-called "identitarian" morons who sometimes stand watch at the Italian border, in the Alps, in order to prevent illegal migrants from crossing it — we don't have yet *a wall à la Trump*, separating France from Italy in this mountainous region... Once again, applied to such people, these categories, "populism", "populist", just help not to call a spade a spade, and, as a consequence, not to declare that some categories of people are political enemies, *hostes*, and not just opponents or adversaries. This is the problem deeply rooted in average democratic discursivity: its grammar of the enemy is intrinsically corrupted by the cult of the State and camp clannishness — for this reason, the Islamic State, a phony State, can be an enemy; Kim Jung-un, too, but not fascists like Duterte and Bolsonaro. Not to mention Marshall Sissi of Egypt and Prince Abdallah in Saudi Arabia who both are, as everyone knows, fervent humanists and, for this reason, reliable friends of

Western democracies.

Let me now take things from another angle: if we look carefully at the terms “populism” and “populist”, we discover that they have two “faces”, two sides. This makes it possible to implement and deploy them in two directions which are not only distinct but, to some extent that conflict with each other. Beyond the *euphemization effect* of these two words “in situation” (Sartre), there is what I call *the scapegoat effect*. The scapegoats are, of course, the frustrated-disoriented citizens and voters who yield to their bad mood, their constant “grumbling” as our journalists say, abandons themselves to the siren song of demagogues, suspicious adventurers, political crooks, the charlatans who take advantage of the general disorientation of the public to despoil traditional parties and short-circuit the established rules of institutional politics. In sum, populism is the voters as *human flock running amok*, having become rabid and as a consequence brutally dismissing legitimized elites and parties. That is: second encounter with Bertolt Brecht — what to do with such an irresponsible, silly, and maniac people — if not *dissolve* it? (Brecht's bitter joke after the worker's revolt in East Berlin, 1956).

In sum, “populism” is the driving belt of the discursive operation consisting in dodging the question of the diagnosis on what market democracy has become as the regime of contemporary politics. It makes it possible to promote the idea that the elites, the politicians, and the rulers are “*betrayed*” by *the people* (voters and public opinion) in today’s liberal democracies. How come that millions of Brazilian underdogs vote for a gorilla openly nostalgic for the times of the military dictatorship and whose program consists in proclaiming that he will trample underfoot public liberties — of course, in the name of the fight against crime?

The problem is that, in order to understand how in a country like Brazil, the ordinary man passes from Lula to a skunk who promises him death squads rather than decent life conditions. By way of consolation, one has to understand this simple thing: how the collective hope of millions of people has been betrayed and ridiculed by those who embodied the perspective of a radical bifurcation and change in the government of the living and in everyday life the masses — I mean Lula's party the PT (Worker's party). As it became clear for the man in the street that *the PT too* had become corrupt just like other parties, that it was peopled with opportunists and new rich parvenus, that Lula himself was one of them — the time for a complete collective disorientation had come. When, in a country like Brazil, the plebeian collective hope of a people is so completely deceived, the price to pay for that has to be very high; and this is what we had to witness on the occasion of the election of Bolsonaro, a staunch fascist – a collective nihilistic gesture consisting for the underdogs in shooting deliberately in their foot.

What has happened in Brazil cannot be reduced to the dimension of special, local conditions or circumstances. *It has a paradigmatic value*, for it was a full-scale crash-test for those who advocate the so-called “left populism” which consists in betting on the setting of a “hegemonic bloc” or coalition so that the conditions for a *radicalization of democracy* would appear, a process that should go through the conquest of power (the occupation of the State) by

leftist and progressive parties. What happened in Brazil was not only the most recent crash-test for this strategy. It was, after Greece and some others, the final one and the swansong of “left populism” as the heirs of Ernesto Laclau are promoting in Spain, France, Great Britain, etc.

Let me try to shed briefly a light on the collapse of this so-called “left populism” by making a critical reading of a book that presents itself as a manifesto in favor of this political strategy, but not only that — whose ambition is to be some sort of a theoretical guidebook for the leaders of parties that follow this path — Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise in France, Die Linke in Germany, Labour under Corbyn in Britain, maybe... I mean Chantal Mouffe’s *For a Left Populism*. What inspires this book are Ernesto Laclau’s essay on populism *The Populist Reason* (2005) and other works Mouffe and Laclau wrote in common. It is a popularization of these researches in a European context where Mouffe thinks that things are ripe for a “(left) populist moment”. Laclau unfortunately died in 2014.

In *The Populist Reason*, Laclau based his analysis of populism on various historical experiences, notably Peronism in Argentina. He was Argentinian, though he made most his career in Great Britain. Mouffe's perspective in her book is different. She sees herself, as a philosopher, a specialist of political philosophy, as some sort of a reflexive and consciousness of what social movements, political parties, co-operatives experience or experiment, practically, but without having at their disposition the concept(s) or the theory of their action. All these people “make” left populism, but without knowing it, because they ignore what the theory of left populism is (it's in the book written by Laclau and Mouffe); so the philosopher's job is to write down the theory of all that and be the reflexive consciousness of these movements.

It rings a bell, of course, for it is a caricature of the traditional posture of philosophy that sees itself as the reflexive duplication and crowning achievement of all human activities and knowledges. In practice, this is the old temptation of the philosopher to assert himself as the “adviser of the prince”. It is well-known that Mouffe belongs to the first circle around people like Melenchon in France, Pablo Iglesias in Spain, the diaspora of Syriza in Greece, etc. It is a contemporary and, as Deleuze would say, *comic* re-enactment of Plato’s adventures in Sicily, as he unsuccessfully acted as an advisor of the tyrant of Syracuse — see on that his famous *Letter VII*.

What Mouffe does with that book is just the contemporary democratic version of Plato’s misadventure in Sicily. For her book arrived at the worst moment, that is as the course of things in European politics has repeatedly belied her prophecies: Syriza doing the job for the European Commission in Athens, Podemos tailing the Socialist Party as ruling party in Spain, LFI making the puppet show at the Chamber of Deputies' platform in France, etc.

There is no matter for being astonished by this failure. For it is obvious that, in fact, Mouffe’s perspective has very much in common with the neoliberal *doxa* she is trying to take a distance with. The first thing that strikes any reader is that her “left populism” shares, in terms of presuppositions, the essential of what she is supposed to conflict with: the cult of the State,

the acceptance without any discussion of insubstantial notions like “left” and “right” (in the realm of politics, I mean), the cult of leadership and a partiality for “leaders”, the horror of the so-called “extremes”, the somnambulistic attachment to parties, the fetishist cult of “representative democracy”, a deep aversion for direct democracy, the mantra or “progressiveness”, etc.

The reorientation of politics she defines as “another way of making politics” reduces itself at the dimension of what she calls “radical reformism” or, as the outmoded disciple of Jean Jaurès she is, some brand of a “revolutionary reformism” — a perfect oxymoron. In sum, behind the magic of words, what is left is the relentless passion for the State, that is a strategy based on its “occupation”, its “colonization” — that is more than a century of bitter experience of the colonization of European reformist parties by the state, rather than the opposite. Mouffe sweeps them under the carpet in the most casual way...

My diagnosis is that what Mouffe calls “radicalization of democracy” is nothing but a new brand of reformism. The old European reformism revamped rather than “resignified” (a term I borrow from her inflated vocabulary). *Reformism boosted with the hormones of “populism”*, in an era where the collapse of the Keynesian paradigm into the deeps waters of neoliberalism has swallowed up all the reserves (stocks) of classic reformism. On *Populism Reason* was a good book of political philosophy, debatable, of course, as it’s the rule, but challenging, stimulating. What Mouffe makes out of it in her manifesto for “left populism” is just a memory jogger for the use of the hurried left oriented European politicians she is the philosophical fellow-traveller of. For me, this use of political philosophy abases the dignity of philosophy, it does not only ridicule those who play that foolish game. Chantal Mouffe should have kept in mind Anthony Giddens' mortification as an advisor of Tony Blair — but Giddens is not a philosopher, so our honor is safe...

If you refer Mouffe's book to the present political situation in countries like France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, etc., the first think that will strike you is how off-target and off-ground it is. It banks entirely on electoral dynamics and just sees mass movements and protests as a lever or a crowbar in the hands of authorized leaders, that is politicians who have grown gray in service. In her book, there is nothing on the most contentious issues such as migrants, neo-imperial politics in Europe, the rise of the authoritarian police states everywhere in Europe, the fight against “democratic fascists”, etc. The recent events in France, marked by the rise of a mass movement based on the mistrust for all political parties and State politics in general provides a biting denial of her strategic perspective based on an opportunist use of the keyword (password) “populism”.

The “yellow vests” movement that has shaken France for weeks is a deeply egalitarian, anti-elites, anti-authoritarian movement. It was set in motion and animated by ordinary people who feel that there is an abyssal gap between their living conditions, everyday life, as they are constantly worsening, their shared modest aspirations and the arrogance of the elites,

politicians, media people and capitalists who treat them in a way that has a distinct whiff of “*Ancien regime*” — a very sensitive issue in France.

What these people have in common is that they feel despised, humiliated, downgraded. They are not a plebs but just normal people, most of them from “the periphery” rather than big cities, who refuse to be looked upon from above by the Parisian elites and to be disregarded as just underdogs. They are vehemently opposed to a general system that constantly increases the inequalities and, as a consequence opposed to the State and market democracy that at are the service of this system. This movement, which has been, as May 1968 was, a real volcanic eruption from the base to the top of French society (Henri Lefebvre), is, of course, crossed through by conflicting impulses and fluxes, passions tending to emancipation and equality and others tending to vindication, cleansing – fascist affects.

This is, in brief, the picture and it has not much in common with “left populism” and “right populism”. The use of the term “populism”, in such a context, just aims at discrediting the movement and downplaying it as what it was — a turbulent, lively but not bloody popular outburst. The most violent actor during all these day, and by far, was *the police* — not the people who took to the streets for the first time in their life, for most of them — thousands of arrests, hundreds of expeditious trials and convictions, justice on assembly line, dozens of injured people, some of them very badly by smoke-grenades, tear-gas grenades, flash-ball, etc.

It's the most terrible thing that can happen to a book as ambitious as *For a Left Populism* — that an event or a situation occurs that puts it merciless to test. This is exactly what has happened on the occasion of the “yellow vests” mobilization. The people, by thousands, were busy in blocking the traffic on roundabouts and other strategic places. They improvised a new form of animated democracy and nobody cared about leaders and “left” parliamentary combinations. The philosopher-adviser of the people would just stand on the side of the road and watch.

¹ This paper is derived from a lecture note prepared for the seminar “Populism — reflections on the success story of an eclectic notion” at International Center for Cultural Studies and Graduate Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies, NCTU in December 2018.