

“...saying what was previously unthinkable”: for an egalitarian version of populism

An Interview with Yannis Stavrakakis

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“...saying what was previously unthinkable”:

Hard Times (HT): *In your work you have repeatedly warned against a demonization of populism and criticized an ‘irresponsible’ anti-populism. This is somewhat counter-intuitive in a climate where populism is mainly associated with hard right-wing demagoguery and xenophobia. Could you explain what you mean when you advocate a responsible and democratic populism?*

Yannis Stavrakakis (YS): It sounds counter-intuitive precisely because of a widespread and largely biased eurocentric identification of populism with the extreme or radical right. This uncritical identification has dominated both academic and public debates in Europe and is wholly

misplaced, leading to serious misconceptions and misunderstandings and creating conceptual confusion. Because it is usually a euphemism to label the radical right ‘populist’; it is also something that they are often happy to accept since it ‘absolves’ them from far worse designations and makes them appear more ‘likeable’. For example, if a neo-nazi is denounced as ‘populist’, he/she is likely to celebrate and cherish this naming, precisely because he/she is given a politically softer and less damaging label. In most of these cases, a peripheral reference to ‘the people’ and ‘popular sovereignty’ is referred back to a nationalist or racist signification, ‘the people’ is reduced to ‘the nation’ or

to ‘race’ and the central



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antagonism marking social and political space is conceived in terms of a horizontal frontier (in/out) modeled along nationalist lines. Indeed, such discourses and movements can be very distant from the global populist canon, from what both a diachronic and a synchronic analysis of international populism(s) reveals. From a historical-genealogical perspective going back to the Russian and American populism(s) of the late 19th century, one realizes that most populist phenomena belong to the left and exhibit a rather egalitarian, 'inclusionary' profile: 'the people' remains an 'empty signifier' able to accommodate and include all the excluded, impoverished and non-privileged sectors of a population (including immigrants) and the central antagonism posited is articulated along vertical lines (bottom/up or top/down): the excluded 'people' vs. the establishment, the elite, the 1%. Debates around populism can greatly benefit from avoiding this eurocentrism and from embracing a genealogical and truly comparative perspective registering the different variants of populism, from rigorously registering and distinguishing what

is predominantly populist and what is not. Besides, political forces like PODEMOS and SYRIZA, born out of the recent European sovereign debt and financial crisis, exhibit precisely such characteristics and re-establish the importance of this egalitarian populist version within contemporary Europe itself, thus effecting a paradigm shift of sorts. If this is the case, then one also has to accept that populism in its inclusionary form can be a corrective to a democracy that has lost its egalitarian, participatory component, does not serve 'popular' but rather 'market sovereignty' and seems to follow a post-democratic direction. All those popular strata resisting this oligarchic course are bound to utilize the emancipatory political grammar of democratic modernity and attempt to articulate their different demands in a unified and thus stronger political subject; this is how 'the people' is discursively and performatively created, a process involving two crucial strategies: (1) people-centrism, a central reference to 'the people'; (2) anti-elitism, an antagonistic understanding of politics in polarized terms, pitting the people against the

power bloc. Under conditions of an increasingly violent neoliberalism (or worse ordoliberalism), inclusionary and egalitarian populism may be the only viable way to resist this trend. This is why it is often demonized in mainstream anti-populist discourses. Obviously this left-wing populism needs to be cultivated and educated in order to avoid excesses and limitations, in order to incorporate a self-critical and reflexive tone.

HT: *In the past ten years or so we have witnessed (and to some extent participated in) many movements that appeared to indicate ‘the return of the people’ – from the Arab Spring to the Gezi Park protests, from Occupy to Podemos and Syriza. Not very much seems to be left from the energies of these movements, while right-wing and authoritarian politics are gaining ground everywhere. What happened to the energies of street and square politics? Is left populism dead?*

YS: The process you describe involves at least two separate moments, let’s call them a ‘pre-populist’ moment and a

proper ‘populist’ moment or stage: movements like the Greek and Spanish ‘indignados’, like Occupy or some movements associated with the so-called Arab Spring, etc. represent a rather loose assertion of heterogeneous demands voiced by different strata and by discrete social sectors and political agents against a common enemy: the establishment, the ruling elite. What follows is a hegemonic intervention that unifies these demands and assumes the task of centrally representing them in the national political sphere: it is here that the horizontalism of social movements and autonomous initiatives, of the ‘multitude’, mutates into the verticalism of political parties like SYRIZA and PODEMOS.

Our recent historical experience demonstrates a twin danger leading to political impotence: when horizontalism fails to transform into a more vertical axis, then social mobilization is bound to eventually die down; this is what happened, more or less, with Occupy. On the other hand, if horizontal mobilization is wholly absorbed by a vertical party representation, then the radical axis can be more easily lost with this party



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form being ultimately incorporated into existing power structures. Radical democratic politics may involve retaining both of them in some sort of dynamic, productive tension.

Ernesto Laclau has formulated it in a very cogent manner:

the horizontal dimension of autonomy will be incapable, left to itself, of bringing about long-term historical change if it is not complemented by the vertical dimension of ‘hegemony’ – that is, a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy left to itself leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and the dispersion of the movements of protest. But hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that

will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...].¹

If or when these two moments are combined then left populism arguably stands a better chance to successfully question and confront a very organized neoliberal camp that operates effectively on a transnational institutional level within the EU and the Eurozone and internationally. In the Greek case, this did not materialize and the left-wing populism of SYRIZA quickly felt the violent institutional pressure of the EU and other international institutions, but also the limitations of the

Greek electorate that insisted on an ultimately untenable and impossible position: yes to the EU and the euro (seen not only as a currency, but also as a clear sign of European identity and acceptance from the crypto-colonial European gaze), but no to austerity. In this sense, SYRIZA failed to change the course of Europe, but more or less stayed loyal to a rather contradictory crypto-colonial Greek popular sentiment. Nevertheless, even when these forces fail to counteract neoliberal hegemony, they often manage to change the functioning of party systems and media debates. For example, even if Occupy Wall Street failed to transform into a political agent able to effect large-scale change, it did manage to function as an agenda-setting mechanism putting forward ‘inequality’ as a central topic of concern.

HT: *In the British context, populism is mostly associated with Ukip and the anti-EU propagandists who succeeded in gaining the majority in the Brexit referendum. In principle, a referendum is surely a democratic means to express the people’s will. And still most of us*

would agree that, unlike in Greece in July 2015, something went terribly wrong in Britain. Does this not confirm the conservative’s wariness of a ‘populist revolution’ that, as The Economist prophesies, will ultimately replace orderly parliamentary sovereignty with the rule of the mob?

YS: The mob is neither a concept I use nor a concept I accept, because it tends to downgrade a priori popular participation in decision-making processes. I am not sure something went terribly wrong anywhere, and this has nothing to do with particular outcomes: we cannot judge a certain institution (in this case, referenda) on the basis of whether we like the result of a particular vote or not. Ultimately, everything boils down to whether one opts for an elitist theory of democracy, which restricts popular participation to periodic voting, suspects and sets restrictions to popular participation, or whether one opts for a radical democratic position that enhances popular participation and passionate commitment in all levels of political life. The overall trend today is in favour of the elitist

camp either in its plutocratic or its technocratic guise or both, and, what is worse, when resistances mount and get invested in egalitarian, inclusionary types of populism they

death. She writes that, “the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party has brought me hope that things could be different in Britain. And the recent announcement that Corbyn



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get discredited and violently crushed, leaving only a xenophobic radical right to camouflage and sell itself as the only alternative political force in town.

HT: *In an interview with The Guardian (29. 12. 2016), Chantal Mouffe speculates that the Labour Party might turn out to be an exception to the rule which seems to condemn social democracy to*

is going to adopt a left-populist approach indicates that he has understood that this is the only way to renew radical politics.” A good year and a pretty successful snap election later, would you say that Mouffe’s optimism has proven well grounded?

YS: I do think Chantal has a point here! Social democracy has been so neoliberalized

that it often does not realize the mortal danger it faces: what you call ‘death’, its reduction to insignificance in many European and global party systems, what goes by the Greek-inspired name pasokification. PASOK, which was a strong centre-left populist party polling nearly 50% in the 1980s, is now reduced, as an incarnation of the so-called ‘extreme centre’, to almost 6-7% of the vote. Corbyn seems to represent an exception to this rule within the European context. His platform seems largely populist, clearly pitting ‘the many’ against ‘the few’, thus managing to change the terms of public debate, bypassing an extremely hostile media system, inspiring the grassroots and starting to change the tide of British politics. This is certainly a very interesting case to follow.

HT: *For your analysis of left democratic populism you have developed a very specific definition of the term ‘charisma’. I am thinking of your idea of the ‘charismatic bond’ between the electorate (with their numerous grievances) and the political agent – party and/or individual – that publicly voices the hidden,*

unsayable demands of that electorate. Could Corbyn and his Labour Party perform such a ‘charismatic act’, too?

YS: This is a discursive understanding of ‘charisma’, which does not draw so much on Max Weber, but rather utilizes the very challenging work of the social and political anthropologist, James Scott. In this perspective, every social setting, every power structure, involves the operation of both what Scott calls a ‘public transcript’ and a ‘hidden transcript’. The public transcript reproduces established hierarchies and power relations and regulates accordingly social interaction(s). When, however, something goes wrong and ‘business as usual’ cannot go on – when, for example, a crisis interrupts the smooth functioning of the system –, then it may happen that someone will voice publicly a grievance or a demand that, up to that time, was only whispered in private. The person who voices this, for the first time publicly, is invested with a certain aura, a certain charisma. This is how, during Syriza’s first few months in power, Varoufakis and Tsipras enjoyed an amazing approval

rating in Greece without delivering any hard economic improvement: just on the basis of breaking the omerta that dominated the Eurogroup and the European public sphere (that Greece is a ‘success story’, that the Greek debt is sustainable, etc.). Something similar is happening today with Corbyn: saying what was previously unthinkable, as it breaks the previously established hegemony in Britain and beyond. As I already said, a crucial case to follow.

*Interview conducted by Dirk Wiemann
(Potsdam)*

Endnotes

1: Laclau, Ernesto, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London: Verso, 2014, p. 9