



**'The European Union has a deficit of populism'
An interview with Professor Simon Critchley**

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‘The European Union has a deficit of populism’ An interview with Professor Simon Critchley

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GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS: *In one of your books¹ you have suggested that what we need today, in the face of the crisis of democracy, could be a leftist populism. Could you please further elaborate on that?*

SIMON CRITCLHEY: One of the things I learnt from Ernesto Laclau is that all political discourse, or all politics, as I understand it, is populist. In the sense in which politics is about the formation of a group that we can identify as ‘the people’ (other words might do) out of an assemblage of individuals and interest groups, who really have, perhaps, nothing in common. So, the task of politics is the creation of commonality and the signifier around which that commonality can be created is something like ‘the people’. To that extent, I agree with the spirit of the POPULISMUS project in so far as when populism is normally discussed it is usually seen as a term of abuse which is restricted to and directed at right-wing parties, like the Golden Dawn in Greece, or the National Front in France. If we leave politics with that identification of populism with the right, then it means that left-wing politics ends up becoming some kind of more or less governmental or constitutional set of arrangements which is meant to diffuse that populist force. This assumption overlooks the fact that there can be a leftist populism too. That was kind of what was in my mind and I guess the theoretical background for that is Gramsci. For Gramsci politics is about the formation of a group, the formation of a common sense, which didn’t exist previously, and the formation of a common sense out of groups with otherwise opposed interests and commitments. So, the genius of politics, the genius of the politician, is the ability to bring those disparate groups and interests together into some kind of transient but powerful formation, which we can call ‘the people’.

Regarding Europe, would you agree with the characterisation of parties like Golden Dawn in Greece or Jobbik in Hungary as populist, or do you find this to be problematic?

The question for me is twofold in the sense in which politics has to be about the formation of something like a ‘people’, therefore it’s populist. But there also has to be a claim to generality or universality and, to add another reference to this, Rousseau’s thought is really whether we can balance the claims of the people, the nation, with claims to generality/universality and his idea of the social contract is the attempt to do precisely that. So on that basis you could make a very clear distinction between forms of populism which are *local*, which are defending the idea of the

¹ Critchley, Simon, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 144.

particular nation, the particular race, and forms of populism which are *universalistic* and are defending ideas of equality or equal participation. So we can make a clear philosophical distinction here between leftist and rightist populism.

Would that be a starting point, a first criterion?

Yes, that would be a first criterion.

Could you think of more criteria helping us to distinguish between left-wing and right-wing populism?

A leftist populism has to be *inclusivist*, not *exclusivist*. So this would be another criterion and then we'd have to think about what the mechanisms for such inclusiveness might be. For example, we can draw a contrast, a very classical contrast, between Germany and France. In the case of National Socialism, their populism was based upon an idea of the people which is identified with a category like the 'race', which was therefore *exclusivist*; a claim to Aryan identity over/against non-Aryans, Jews, whoever they might be. Whereas you can think about, let's say a classical French republican discourse, which can be profoundly attached to a place called France, or maybe just regions of France, but which can be *inclusivist* in the sense in which anyone can become French, can be included within 'French-ness', if they choose to that is. And if they indeed choose to, then this makes them entitled to certain rights... and that also touches on another question about populism which is language. There is obviously a strong correlation between populism and language and this is a delicate issue in so far as, very often, populist movements will be identified with the defence of a particular language. So such a project also requires a politics of language in so far as language itself has to be something particular, something deep, embedded, but also capable of inclusivity as well. Obviously with the English language that's a little bit easier than with, say, Hungarian!

You are touching upon the relation between populism and language here, which brings us to the relation between populism and the nation. What do you think are, more concretely, the prospects for an international populism, and what are the precise limitations language imposes, concerning this possibility?

The hope that was incarnated in Esperanto, that abandoned European language, was that this would be a kind of international language of inclusion. That didn't work out and we have a *de facto* international language which is English but obviously that has all sorts of problems, although the one thing that I like about the English language is its endless malleability in relationship to different locations and spaces. In fact, by virtue of colonialism, English became this language or this series of languages which are related to each other but which at their best can allow for different kinds of inclusion and different forms of specificity. But it's usually right-wing populism that turns on questions of defending language and then to an opposition to foreigners because foreigners don't understand 'our' language.

You already mentioned the way in which populism is used in public discourse with all these negative connotations. Would you say that today, and mostly in Western societies, we have the proliferation of some sort of 'anti-populist'?

discourse? To make it more specific, we see very often this argument put forward by the European elites that the main threat for democracy today, the main challenge for the European Union, is populism on both sides of the political spectrum. What do you think of that?

I think that's a mistake! I think that the problem with the European Union is that *there is a deficit of populism*. I think we are in a very particular situation in the sense in which, since the Second World War, we have been told that the nation-state is finished, the language of the nation-state belongs to the past and we have to do something else and that 'something else' in Europe is the European Union. But the European Union has not been able to construct forms of identification which allow people to identify with it as something that they feel they belong to and, as a consequence, they fall back on this very old fashioned, anachronistic, atavistic idea of the nation-state. Which then means that the kind of populism that is being defended in different parts of Europe is crazily nostalgic and backward looking. It's yearning for a nation that really hasn't existed for perhaps a century. So, I think that the nation-state is a largely malevolent force in modern history. I'm not against the idea of the nation, that would be a separate question, but with regards to the nation-state, I'm against.

Let's just say that the impetus behind the European Union was legitimate: 'how do we construct an international force that prevents these nation-states from endlessly returning to war?' However, unless that goes together with the construction of institutions, habits, practices, ways of life, with which people identify at the European level, the whole project remains empty, vacuous. I think that was revealed most starkly in the project of writing up the constitution of the European Union which revealed how abstract and how empty this edifice was; merely something occupying some public buildings in Frankfurt and Strasbourg and Brussels. It is clearly something with which most Europeans do not identify. Even the ones that are pro-European don't identify with it. So what has to be done is to really take seriously the idea of populism and to think about how we can turn the European Union into a post-nation state, an actual living political force with popular appeal. Sadly, we are a long way from that, as the results in the European elections last May revealed, with the exception of Greece. Everywhere else basically, there was a drift to the right. UKIP in the UK, Front National in France, and particularly in places like Denmark. So there's a massive crisis of politics which for me is bound up with issues as classical as the political party. Today, people don't identify with parties in the same way. Or they don't identify with classical parties in the same way. So, parties like in Britain the Conservative and Labour, which used to enjoy widespread popular support have really become technocratic elites which govern more or less effectively in relationship to their own interests. Then, when something arises which challenges those parties, like the United Kingdom Independence Party, this is branded 'populist' and is condemned by those parties. But they are on to something. What those movements are seizing hold of is a massive dissatisfaction with the European Union. So, what we need is a counter-populist populism [laughs]!

So, you would agree that there is a clear link here between the crisis of the European Union and the emergence of populist right-wing, sometimes even extreme right-wing parties?

Yes, there's been a kind of liberal/left-liberal evacuation of the nation-state and that void has been filled up by right-wing populism. What people seem to misunderstand here is what actually the cement of politics is. What is the actual material of politics? And again I go to Rousseau on this. How do you do politics for someone like Rousseau? Well, you need a set of political institutions which are legitimate, and legitimacy would have to be linked to claims to generality, not basing things on a particular will but what Rousseau would call the 'general will'. But the second ingredient in many ways is much more important, and that is what Rousseau called *les mœurs*, or what we used to call in English: *morals*. Not in the sense of contemporary attitudes, but morals in the sense of the ways of life, the practices and ways of life that people take part in, and the genius of politics. And I think the word 'genius' is important because it is an act of creation: of how we can put together legitimate institutions with morals to the extent that those morals have to exist substantively as things in which people believe in, identify with and have to be mobilised for different purposes. So the awful truth is that the right has been much better at mobilising those moral beliefs than the left over the last fifty years. Therefore, the task of a left-wing populism would be a political task, but also a moral task of identifying what those actual practices are that constitute, let's say 'Greekness', or 'Italian-ness', and being able to transform their meaning, in a way that makes them available for a counter-hegemonic project. That's what has to be done and the left is very bad at that!

Would you conclude then that the process of mobilising these moral beliefs and producing novel forms of identification also implies some sort of passionate investment in which the right has done a better job? This, of course, brings us to the role of affects and passions more generally, in politics and populism.

Yes, absolutely. There can be no politics without passions, without the affects, and it then becomes a question of how these morals, which are passionate, can be mobilised and transformed. Let me give you a concrete example. I spent a lot of time in the last few years in the Netherlands. Well, what does it mean to be Dutch? On one version, being Dutch means not being Muslim. And that has been the kind of building block for the right-wing populism of Geert Wilders and it's been very successful as a way of opposing immigrants, or people that are described as immigrants. But why wouldn't 'Dutch-ness' mean exactly the opposite? Why couldn't you construct a politics based on the idea that the Netherlands was really great in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that it became great because it was a place of immigration? All these people were welcomed into the Netherlands from other parts of the worlds and that created this incredibly dynamic trading nation of the modern Netherlands. So 'Dutch-ness' could mean politically welcoming foreigners, welcoming immigrants. That's what makes the Dutch Dutch and makes them strong and it seems to me that you could construct a very similar argument in

different European contexts and that could operate at a passionate level. 'This is what it means to be Dutch, we welcome people, we are proud of that and if you try and deny that, we will oppose you!' So, it is at that level of passions that a leftist populism has to operate and that's something which is not difficult to imagine. What does it mean to be English? Does being English mean hating the French, or hating Bulgarians, or Poles or whatever? Or does being English mean being tolerant of other people, of working people? And that's what (on a certain version of 'Englishness') made England an interesting place. So I think that the task of politics is the linking of politics to morals and morals to passions and then having the political skill to re-describe these morals and these passions for different purposes.

Do you think that there are different emotions and passions that are mobilised in right-wing exclusivist discourses and left-wing inclusivist discourses?

Yes and no. Let me put it this way, there is a phrase that I quote somewhere, where I say that 'anger is the first political emotion', and I think that's right. That anger is an anger which the right has been much better than the left at mobilising. It is as if the left or liberal-left wants to make politics as dispassionate as possible and to defuse that anger. The way that anger is usually mobilised in right wing discourses is anger-against. But it seems to me that a left-wing populism also has to mobilise anger in a different form. So, for example, Occupy Wall Street worked largely because of anger. There was an anger particularly addressed against the bailouts that were given to the banks and to large corporations in the US, while at the same time ordinary people were left high and dry. So, at the time, one of the slogans of Occupy was 'banks got bailed out we got sold out', and that was a feeling of anger. This anger, which is directed against an enemy, in this case the banking sector, takes us on to a different issue, a delicate issue. I mean, does anger need the figure of an enemy? And I think it does. Also, does politics need the figure of an enemy? And I think it does. The problem is that the anger and the enemy are things that the right have been much better at mobilising than the left. So I guess in response to your question I'd say that you can have the same emotion but it can have a very different political meaning. Anger would be a good example of that. Anger is anger but how that anger is voiced, towards whom it's directed at can be very different.

Since you mentioned Occupy, there is already a huge discussion and a growing literature on the issue, with several commentators arguing that Occupy was indeed a grassroots populist democratic movement. Do you agree with this position?

I agree, I think it was a form of *anarchist populism*, in the sense in which it was a popular movement, which was non-hierarchical, based on forms of horizontal inclusion and without leaders. The logic of Occupy can be reduced to two concepts for me. The first concept would be the concept of the demand or what I would call an *infinite demand*, which in the case of Occupy would be the various slogans that were at the centre of it: 'we are the 99%' or the idea of 'occupy everything'. So what was the genius of Occupy on the one hand was to not play the conventional political game of making pragmatic finite demands but making infinite demands. Also, those

demands were not articulated by leaders but were articulated by different people at different times in a more horizontal manner.

The second concept is the concept of *location*: Occupy worked because there was a place, namely Zuccotti Park. The logic of Occupy, in many ways, is the infinite demand and the location, the space. Once that space was lost, when Occupy was forcibly dismantled, then you were just left with the demands and things became increasingly abstract. This means that there can be no politics without location. There can be no politics without place and without the occupation of place.

So, what might have happened otherwise? Well the occupation might have continued in that place but maybe that wouldn't have lasted much longer. In order for Occupy to become something else, the chemistry of demands and location would have to be linked up hegemonically, as Laclau would say, with different groups in places like the US. So you would have been able to imagine Occupy spreading out into a wider set of alliances and then the question would have been: could we have imagined a leap between the Occupy movement and normal politics, in this case let's say the politics of the Democratic Party in the US? I guess the old fashioned leftist pragmatist in me wants to say 'yes, you have to finally play the party political game', and therefore I think the problem with Occupy was the problem of a political purity or purism. There was a kind of massive integrity to what was done, the practices that were undertaken, the general assembly and so on, but the price of purity was in many ways extinction. On the contrary, I think politics is about alliances, it's about dirty hands and it's about some level of compromise. So the idea that you can have a political movement like Occupy that is completely separate from the normal political system is effective for a while, but at a certain point difficult choices have to be made. For example we can go back a generation and think about the way in which Occupy-like groups, like the Greens in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s became political parties and then in the late 1990s got political power; a lot of compromises were made then, but I think that's kind of what politics is.

So, what you are actually implying is that what is at stake for movements such as Occupy is to find a way to somehow be articulated with institutional politics?

Absolutely. This goes back again to Rousseau, who was not really concerned with the 'social contract' as it is normally understood, as a contract between individuals in a society. Rousseau's question was very simple: 'Can we imagine a set of legitimate political institutions?', and that's what he tries to sketch theoretically in the *Social Contract*, and it seems to me that that's essential. That the *art* of politics consists in taking the passion, the energy, the collective will of something like Occupy and linking that to the formation of a set of political institutions, which either existed previously or can be newly invented. Now, in a country like the United States it is arguable that there are traditions, institutions like civil disobedience, traditions of direct democracy, of really radical local democracy, which could be inhabited by movements like Occupy for other ends. So there's a spectacular malleability in the American idea of the Republic which *could* be mobilised for ends very different from the ones in favour of which it is mobilised at the moment. Is that likely to happen?

No, it's not likely to happen because of money and big business and the power of corporations and lobby groups, but it is still conceivable; and if that isn't conceivable then we can imagine a new set of political institution that would be able to mobilise that energy. But the theoretical and practical point is that the spectacular collective energy of politics has to be harnessed to institutional forms and these institutional forms have to be imagined. Without that, politics always ends up as an abstraction.

It seems that we have gradually come to the issue of representation and one of the issues put forth by Occupy and similar movements was somehow an opposition to representation per se. 'You don't represent us, you can't represent us,' something we often heard in the squares of the Greek aganaktismenoi as well as of the Spanish indignados. So basically my question is: what kind of representation are we talking about and can we ever do without representation?

Well this is a very difficult question, and I don't have a settled view on this. When people like Alain Badiou claim that the duty of everyone in France is not to vote, I'm inclined to say that's bullshit, because it's offensive to the memory of those people who struggled in order that there might be representation. On the one hand, I feel that Occupy was a *politics of presentation* and not a politics of representation. It was about presentation of the people in the form of the general assembly to itself declaring the law or manifesting its wishes. But does that mean that we can eliminate representation from politics? Well Rousseau thought you could, Rousseau thought that you could have a politics of presentation based upon the general will and then you could imagine a set of political institutions that wouldn't represent the general will but which would be the executive branch. So his idea was that the legislative power didn't lie with parliament, but that it lay with the people and that the executive branch was the institutions that put the law into effect. Such a state of affairs is only practicable in very small geographical areas and Rousseau was very clear about that. That was what he thought could be effective somewhere like Geneva, or somewhere like Corsica; but in a state the size of France it's just not conceivable. So one path to follow, if we go back to what we were saying before about Europe, well the European Union is premised upon the death of the nation-state and within that framework we could imagine forms of a radically federalist picture of politics where politics could be organised town by town, city by city. In such a radical federalist picture perhaps we could do politics by presentation rather than representation or politics could be done, for example, through referenda, the way it is done in certain cantons of Switzerland. But is that likely? No, it's not likely that we'll be able to go all the way with that federalist picture but that was one of the promises of Europe at a certain point within the last twenty-thirty years. Given that we seem to be stuck with nation-states, we're stuck therefore with representation and it then becomes a question of how representation can best be organised.

You mentioned several times the distinction between presentation and representation, which brings to mind the discussion between immediacy and mediation in politics. If I can take a leap here, I would like your comment on

the discussion about ‘the people’ as represented subject and the ‘multitude’ as a subject that is somehow present to itself. This is, of course, the debate between hegemonic and post-hegemonic conceptions of the collective subject, between, let’s say, Laclau and Mouffe on the one hand and Hardt and Negri on the other.

I’ve never seen the multitude. It’s like Fernando Pessoa, this poem, where he says ‘I’ve never seen humanity, I’ve seen human beings, sure, I see them all the time, but I’ve never seen humanity’. I feel that about the ‘multitude’. I’ve seen people, different groups of people in different locations, but the multitude is a philosophical concept that flows from a Spinozist ontology that is there in Negri and some people find that very convincing. I’ve always found it deeply unconvincing. It’s premised on the idea that politics is some kind of expression of ontological substance. This ontological substance is the multitude. I don’t buy that for a second. I think politics is fiction, its mediation, its construction, its inventions. There’s no substance that is expressed in politics. Politics is about mediation all the way down, and it is an artistic activity rather than the expression of some ontological substance. I can see why people got excited about multitude talk, particularly in that brief moment before 9/11 with the anti-globalisation movement when it looked like the multitude was in the streets. But I think that’s just a way of talking. These are discreet, distinct mediated groups which are finding articulation and voice in particular ways and you might want to call that the multitude but that’s just a way of talking.

Let me pass to my last question, a more general question. What do you think the prospects of Europe are today?

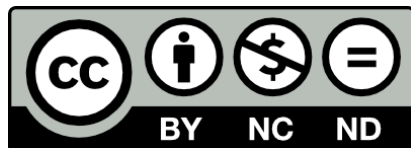
Pretty disastrous. I’m really happy I left Europe. Not that I love America. It feels good to be free of all of that, at least for a while, and when I go back to Britain I’m kind of nauseated by the vacuity of the traditional political parties. It horrifies me and I’m really disturbed by the rise of right-wing populism in places like Britain. So the prospects in Europe are really pretty grim. The one good thing about the US is that this is a nation of immigrants. A nation of immigrants where people are proud of being immigrants and where immigration is still a good thing. It enriches and deepens and it’s a way of bringing people in and making what is inside richer and more interesting. So I find the European debate on immigration just so spectacularly stupid and inward looking and that really depresses me. The great thing about New York is there are no natives. This city doesn’t belong to anybody, this city belongs to whoever is here and most people that are here are from somewhere else and they come here. Behind that there’s a kind of raw, monetary level of life which is brutal. But there’s something nice about that, there’s something nice about the fact that there’s no native culture to deal with.

Thank you very much!

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Transcription: **WILL HORNER**



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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismiss the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.



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