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Introduction

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of populism,¹ and, as the famous opening line of Marx and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party* continues: 'All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holly alliance to exorcise this spectre' (2008: 31). Indeed, mainstream public discourse depicts populism as a pathology, or as a 'paranoid style of politics' (Hofstadter 1964) which threatens democracy and the European Union itself. Herman Van Rompuy from the post of the President of the European Council in 2010 declared populism 'the biggest danger to Europe' (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2012: 16). Since then, the majority of the European leaders are united in saying that they have the same enemy: populism. In a similar vein, a federalist initiative in the European Parliament, the Spinelli Group,² highlights the need for 'a European vision which encourages member states to fight against whatever it is that feeds populism' (Cohn-Bendit, Durant and Hirsch 2013: 2). And yet, the verdict is not unanimous. Etienne Balibar, for example, sees in a pan-European populism a chance for the rebirth of Europe's democracy (Balibar 2010). So, what is populism? Is it really the biggest threat to democracy and the future of the European Union?

According to the aforementioned blunt aphorisms, one has to answer in the affirmative. But let us put it another way: is populism *by definition* a threat to democracy and the European project? The answer now can only be negative as not all types of populism are identical. The preceding declaration of populism as the greatest danger to our 'democratic' Europe refers principally to an exclusionary right and far-right populism and Yannis Stavrakakis has rightly questioned this naming by wondering whether or not the concept of populism is the appropriate theoretical tool to characterize the rise of this nationalist and xenophobic far-right (2013: 25-39). These far-right nationalists, such as Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, struggle to tear Europe apart and return to the nationalist phantoms of the past. On the contrary, a left-wing pan-European populist movement would not seek to finish with the European project, but to facilitate its radical democratization. It is possibly this what Etienne Balibar had in mind when he emphasized the need for a European populism. Hence, populism 'can be both a corrective and a threat to democracy' (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2012: 16) and the European project.

* This article is an edited part of my Master of Arts dissertation supervised by Jason Glynos at the University of Essex.

¹ Indeed, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner begin their edited collection on populism, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (1969: 1), by paraphrasing Marx and Engel: 'A spectre is haunting the world-populism'.

² See <http://www.spinelligroup.eu/>

This paper builds upon this view by examining whether or not a populist movement can undertake the project of democratizing the current EU structure. In particular, it purports to investigate whether or not the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), launched by Yanis Varoufakis on 9th February 2016 in Berlin, constitutes such a populist force. Can DiEM25 be perceived as a positive response to Balibar's call? I examine this issue by utilizing the methodology of the so-called Essex School of Discourse Analysis. What we are witnessing, I claim, is a case of transnational populism, surely a paradoxical combination for those who *a priori* identify populism with nationalism. Is a transnational populism possible? Laclau's formal approach, adopted here, conceives populism as a particular logic detached from particular contents, which implies that populism can be many different and even antithetical things, and thus there is no contradiction in envisaging a transnational populism. Yet, what are the possibilities of DiEM's transnational populism reinvigorating Europe's democratic politics? Is DiEM25 a chance for European democracy?

Defining populism

Populism is one of those concepts 'the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users' and therefore are characterized as 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie 1956: 169). In Ernesto Laclau's words '“populism” is a concept both elusive and recurrent. Few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision' (1977: 143). Defining populism is anything but easy due to its 'confrontational' and 'chameleonic' nature (Arter 2010: 490). Despite the difficulties, much has been written about what populism is and what populism is not. Is it a movement or an ideology? Is it a political strategy or a discursive style? In the words of Gellner and Ionescu: 'Does it have any underlying unity? Or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?' (1969: 1).

Some scholars define populism as an ideology or, more accurately, as a 'thin-centered ideology' that separates society into 'two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543-4). By 'thin ideology' Mudde means that populism is not a typical, comprehensive ideology; As Margaret Canovan puts it 'although all these other "isms" range over widely varied phenomena, each gains a degree of coherence from a continuous history, willingness on the part of most adherents to identify themselves by the name, distinctive principles and policies. Populism does not fit this pattern' (2005: 79). In other words, populism does not possess 'the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency' (Mudde 2004: 544) and therefore it can be combined with other -isms, depending on 'the socio-political context within which the populist actors mobilize' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011: 2).

Another widespread approach perceives populism as a political strategy/practice, as a 'certain way of doing politics' (Helstrom cited in Woods 2014: 14). This view emphasizes the role of a charismatic and powerful leader and the connection between him/her and 'the people'. Paul Taggart maintains that the reason for this personalization is 'the empty heart of populism, the lack of key values' (2000: 101). In a similar vein, Steven Levitsky and Kenneth Roberts define populism 'as the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who

challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined *pueblo*, or “the people” ’ (2011: 6). The danger here lies in the complete identification of populism with politics from above, where the leader plays the central role and ‘the people’ is an apathetic multitude that just follows the charismatic leader. Is that populism or another form of elitism? Interestingly, Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas note that populism as an ideology does not necessarily exclude populism as a political strategy and vice versa, but sometimes the two approaches go together (2015: 6).

One can imagine, at this point, Laclau’s response to the aforementioned approaches which perceive populism as an ideology (thin or otherwise), or as a strategy: ‘a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it presents a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are’ (Laclau 2005a: 33). This brings us to the formal approach to populism, which is adopted in this paper. Here populism is a particular form of discourse where discourse or discourses ‘refer to systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3-4). It is ‘a specific mode of articulation – involving the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independent of the actual contents that are articulated’ (Laclau 2005a: 44). In a nutshell, by understanding populism as discourse, we move from contents to form, from the ontic level to the ontological one.

Laclau’s approach defines populism as a certain logic, the logic of the political,³ characterized by the discursive construction of a popular subjectivity, that is a ‘we’/‘the people’ and its enemy, that is a ‘they’/the establishment (Laclau 2005a: 39). Francisco Panizza captures this point cogently when he stresses that populism is ‘an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between “the people” and its “other” ’ (2005: 3). Crucial to this construction is the formation of a chain that articulates different demands under a common denominator. The logic of this articulation is what Laclau calls ‘the logic of equivalence’; a logic ‘in which all the demands, in spite of their differential character tend to reaggregate themselves’ (2005a: 37). The logic of equivalence gives birth to an equivalential chain by articulating a ‘we’ that includes particularities which are united as long as they share the same opposition against a ‘they’.⁴ At this point Ernesto Laclau introduces another decisive element in this process, namely the *empty signifier*: ‘the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called *empty signifier*’ (2005a: 44). An empty signifier is ‘a signifier without signified’ (Laclau 1996: 37), a signifier which is partially empty of content. It is the embodiment of an ‘unachievable fullness’ (Laclau 2005b: 71). Simply put, empty

³ Laclau highlights that ‘populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political’ (2005b: xi), it is ‘the Royal road to understanding something about the political as such’ (p. 68).

⁴ By contrast, the logic of difference can be seen as a process of displacement or dislocation of the equivalential chain, by redefining the particularities as differences. This logic is dominant in an institutionalist discourse (Laclau 2005a: 45). As Laclau and Mouffe highlight in their magnum opus, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, ‘the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity’ (2014: 117).

signifiers are terms, concepts, slogans or even names that lose their specific content and can be presented as universal. Therefore, empty signifiers give to 'a particular demand a function of universal representation – that is, [...] give it the value of a horizon giving coherence to the chain of equivalence and, at the same time, keeping it indefinitely open' (Laclau 1996: 57-8). Thus, equivalences, a popular subjectivity, a dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier are 'the structural features to define populism' (Laclau 2005a: 38).

Free from particular contents, populism can be seen as an articulation of equivalence between heterogeneous demands in the name of 'the people' against an oppressive Other. In that sense, one could argue that there are basically two 'minimal criteria' of a populist discourse, as also suggested by the POPULISMUS project: (1) a central reference to 'the people', and, (2) the separation or antagonistic opposition between 'the people' and the system/establishment.⁵ In other words, one can talk about populism whenever the direction of a discourse stigmatizes the establishment as the bad guy or the enemy, while the hero of the story is 'the people'. Drawing upon the so-called Essex School I will then perceive populism as a particular form of discourse which constructs 'the people' through the dichotomization of society into two opposing camps.

Far from the declaration of populism as the biggest threat to democracy, our theoretical framework allows us to think of populism as both a threat and a corrective to democracy (to quote Mudde and Kaltwasser's oft-quoted formulation), as 'the people' that populist discourses construct are not the same. 'The people' can indeed take various shapes and forms, depending on the ideological contents that a populist discourse is attached to. As Paul Taggart aptly points out: 'populism has a chameleonic quality that means it always takes on the hue of the environment it occurs in' (2000: 4). In Margaret Canovan's words, 'populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself' (1999: 3), while Ernesto Laclau emphasizes that 'radical democracy is always populist' (2005: 259), as 'the construction of a "people" is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning' (Laclau 2005b: 169).

What this paper proposes is to perceive populism as a particular logic which can articulate in a radical, progressive way the tension between liberalism and democracy – what Chantal Mouffe calls 'the democratic paradox' (2000: 2-3), that is the tension between the democratic idea of equality and sovereignty of 'the people' and the liberal idea of liberty and the rule of law, and the tension between what Margaret Canovan describes as the pragmatic and the redemptive face of democracy, namely the contradiction between ideal – popular sovereignty – and reality – the way democracy functions as a form of government through a set of institutions (1999: 10-1). Yet this does not mean that populism cannot become a danger for democracy. Whether populism will operate as a threat or a corrective will thus depend on its particular historical articulation.

Transnational populism?

⁵ Laclau proposes this formal approach, made up of two components, in his first attempt to theorize populism, back in 1977 and his text *Towards a Theory of Populism*. Twenty-eight years after that, in *On Populist Reason* (2005), the centrality of the reference to 'the people' is fading and the empty signifier, in general, takes priority.

In his aforementioned article in *Theory and Event*, Etienne Balibar provocatively argues that 'Europe is a dead political project' and that if we want to bring it back to life 'we need something like a European populism' (2010). In a more recent interview (2015) the French philosopher continues by saying that 'we need a radical democratic impulse, opposed to the informal control of the political system by finance and technocrats, and opposed to any post-democratic federalism that people's and leaders can merely hold back [...] we need a strong democratic push [...] that would mean a populism that's different to what is generally called "populism" [...] this would be a "counter-populism" '. In this regard, a transnational, pan-European populism could be translated into more democracy, could be the answer to 'the revolt of the elites', to remind ourselves of Christopher Lasch's book (1996).

Laclau's formal approach where the whole point is to think of populism as a logic leads itself to the idea of transnationalism, due to its disconnection from particular site-specific contents. The idea of a transnational populism could thus be seen as an immediate consequence of the formal character of Laclau's theorization of the phenomenon in question. As Laclau puts it 'we can have a populism of the national state, following the Jacobin model, a regional populism [the regional could also be envisaged as a form of the transnational], an ethnopopulism, and so on' (2005b: 191). From this point of view transnational populism is not a paradox, even though some scholars view it as a contradiction in terms. Andreas Pantazopoulos, for instance, argues that populism can only be 'national-populism' (2001: 62; 2011: 45-55). He sees the nationalist dimension as an inherent part of every populist party or movement, as according to him the signified of 'the people' is always identified with the nation. Apparently, there are various cases in which populism is linked to the nation, but if we move from contents to form as the formal approach adopted in this paper suggests, if we move from the logic of reduction to the logic of articulation, this is not the conclusion that one necessarily needs to draw. Besides, there are many different ways to understand the nation. Take, for example, the contrast between the ethnic nation and the political nation: on the first occasion 'the people' is considered as *ἔθνος* (ethnos)/nation or 'communal identity', while on the second occasion 'the people' is predominantly taken as *δῆμος* (demos) or 'constituent political power' (Balibar 2004: 157).

Latin America's third wave of populism, that is the radical leftist populism in the late 1990s and 2000s (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2012: 156), is a shining example of transnationalism. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador were united under their shared anti-neoliberal agenda (Ellner 2012: 96-114). The former called in 2009 for a 'Fifth International' that would lay the ground for a transnational movement (Ellner 2012: 97). The achievements of this coalition are not to be neglected and comprise, among others, the Bolivarian Alliance for the People's of Our America (ALBA) in 2004, the formation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2008 in cooperation with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay and the creation of a virtual regional currency in 2010, the SUCRE, which intended to replace the US dollar (Ellner 2012: 104). Moreover, the Latin America's populist 'pink tide' reduced poverty, promoted social participation, demanded social justice and integrated the masses in decision making (Ellner 2012; de la Torre 2013 27-48). Yet, George Souvlis and Samuele Mazzolini aptly observe that the Latin American transnational populist projects were speaking 'the language of the nation and its people' and were 'first and foremost a collection of national phenomena' (2016). This is why Benjamin De Cleen prefers to analyze Latin

America's populism as a case of *inter-national* and not properly *transnational* populism. As he points out 'it is more about the *inter-national* ties *between* nationally organized populisms (that revolve around nationally defined people-as-underdogs) than about a truly *trans-national* politics *across* national contexts' (De Cleen 2017).⁶ In any case, both international and transnational populism seem to attempt the construction of a transnational people by bringing together 'nationally organized political actors and nationally defined people-as-underdogs' (ibid).

Moving now from Latin America to the current European crisis condition, what are the possibilities of a transnational populism? A populist force that goes beyond the national boundaries and aims to unite and construct a people at a pan-European level may be able to transform the very anti-democratic structure of the current supranational European institutions. To return to Etienne Balibar's influential article in *Theory and Event* (2010): 'we need something like a European populism, a simultaneous movement or a peaceful insurrection of popular masses who will be voicing their anger as victims of the crisis against its authors and beneficiaries, and calling for a control "from below" over the secret bargainings and occult deals made by markets, banks, and States' (Balibar 2010: 70-71).

Quite obviously, the powerful elites respond to that challenge by declaring populism as the biggest threat to democracy and the European project. They attempt to identify populism with the rise of a xenophobic, racist, exclusionary and anti-European far-right. At this point, Yannis Stavrakakis warns that this identification strengthens 'the ability of dominant discourses to demonize popular resistance to the austerity avalanche', as anyone who fulminates against the oligarchy and its austerity policies is denounced as a ' "populist" who plays the game of the extreme right' (Halimi cited in Stavrakakis 2013: 34). This identification needs to be challenged by a left-wing populist force willing to undertake the project of democratizing the EU and to stand against the desert of neoliberalism. In this context, can the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) be perceived as a positive response to Balibar's call for a European populism?

The Greek context: Post-democracy or post-political biopower?

Contemporary literature has persistently highlighted the notorious democratic deficit in the European Union; but what exactly is it that one means by this 'deficit'?⁷ One can summarize what is labeled as the 'democratic deficit' of the EU in the following clear-cut statement by Wolfgang Schäuble: 'Elections cannot be allowed to change an economic programme of a member state' (Varoufakis 2016). This astonishingly honest and straightforward confession indicates that Europe has become a too low-oxygen environment for democracy to breathe. It is in this

⁶ I would like to thank Benjamin De Cleen for sharing with me his unpublished text 'Populism and Nationalism', a chapter for the *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

⁷ Interestingly enough, Yanis Varoufakis emphasizes that 'there is no democratic deficit in the European Union. If you were on the moon and you tried to remove your helmet from the spacesuit and suddenly you were crying "oh my god there is an oxygen deficit", you would have been an idiot. There is no oxygen deficit on the moon. There is no oxygen' (Varoufakis 2016h).

asphyxiating framework that Yanis Varoufakis launched the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 at Volksbühne Theatre in Berlin on 9 February 2016.

Putting this asphyxiation in a slightly more formal way, one can list a whole set of symptoms of the so-called deficit; the eclipse of the political, that is the loss of the dimension of the political and the neoliberal reign of the T.I.N.A. doctrine ('There Is No Alternative'), the consensus in the centre, the idea of a world without antagonisms, without alternatives, a world beyond left and right, more generally, the post-political perspective (Mouffe 2005). All these are symptoms of what theorists like Colin Crouch, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Ranciere, among others, call 'post-democracy'.⁸ In short, post-democracy is 'a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests' (Ranciere 1999: 102). The reign of the supranational markets and bankers, the decline and collapse of trade unions, the marginalization of 'the people' (as the underdogs) and alienation from politics are included in the wide range of symptoms associated with the notion in question (Crouch 2004).

Specifically with regard to the era of austerity, Colin Crouch maintains that 'austerity is not by itself evidence of post-democracy [...] However, the entire way in which the crisis has been managed has been evidence of a further drift towards post-democracy' (Cardigan 2013). Following Alexandros Kioupkiolis (2013), this paper argues that in the epoch of austerity, of memoranda and bailouts, there is a shift towards a regime of post-political biopower rather than merely post-democracy. The main difference lies in the lack of citizen consensus; 'in the post-democratic condition, the confluence of the mainstream center-right and center-left parties on a liberal-modernizing agenda enjoyed the consensus of the middle-class individuals' (Kioupkiolis 2013: 145). In other words, the post-democratic regime gained legitimacy by creating (the delusion of) prosperity for the middle and, to some extent, for the lower class. The advent of the global financial crisis brought about the loss of the previous material basis of consensus and legitimacy. During the crisis the regime appeared more ruthless and authoritarian than before and Greece became the new neoliberal laboratory, which has witnessed first this transition from post-democracy to post-political biopower.

Technocratic pragmatism, a state of exception, 'a biopower which exerts itself directly on the naked body and soul of society and the construction of a "society of control" ' are the core components of the aforesaid transformation (Kioupkiolis 2013: 146). Thus, in the name of an undeclared state of exception,⁹

⁸ It is important to note that all these theorists do not claim that before this passage we had a thriving democracy with full enjoyment of liberty and equality – the basic principles of liberal democracy (Mouffe 2000: 102-104) – for all. Nevertheless, what we had was a democratic moment during the first 25 years after the World War II. This democratic moment lies in the development of the welfare state, mass participation in political parties and trade unions and a healthier representative democracy (Crouch 2004:6-11). Additionally, this paper adopts the Derridean idea that 'democracy is always something to come' (1994: 81) and the argument put forward is that this direction has been brutally blocked.

⁹ Traditionally the state of exception or state of emergency is understood as a condition in which the State suspends articles of the Constitution to defend the regime which is under threat. See Schmitt 2005 and Agamben 2006.

Greek governments from 2010 onwards have been placed under the close protectorate-like supervision of the so-called troika, that is the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

SYRIZA's rise to power presented a chance for the return of the political in European politics. Alexis Tsipras promised to end austerity, to bring back democracy, dignity and justice. For the very first time many people protested in favor of their government showing their support and asking for 'a breath of dignity' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014). Top European officials, by contrast, made themselves clear from the very beginning; Jeroen Dijsselbloem pointed out that 'taking unilateral steps or ignoring previous arrangements is not the way forward' (Kathimerini 2015); Jean-Claude Juncker revealed that 'there can be no democratic choice against the European treaties' (Redwood 2015), and of course the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, emphasized that 'elections change nothing. There are rules' (Ambrose 2015). Within this anti-democratic context, the country moved from the so-called 'Bridge Agreement' of February, which was the first step in SYRIZA's defeat to the take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum in June 2015, which led to the July referendum.

The European elites were, yet again, unpleasantly surprised and the way that the whole establishment reacted to the referendum is unlikely to be recorded favorably in Europe's democratic history. Despite a campaign of terrorization¹⁰ the Greek people voted loudly and clearly in favor of 'Oxi' (No), which, however, Alexis Tsipras translated into a Yes. A few days after the referendum, on 13th July 2015, 17 hours of negotiations led to a third bailout agreement. As Green (UK) MP Caroline Lucas aptly observed, 'The dark forces of the EU have subjected Greece to a coup' (Dathan 2015). The third memorandum was here and this time it included SYRIZA's signature.¹¹ Alexis Tsipras, after passing the new memorandum, resigned and called an early election. SYRIZA won again but this time it had to apply the failed austerity policies it has been fighting for years. People felt once more that they had no role to play, that they were unable to influence the decisions affecting their lives. After a year in power, SYRIZA's hopes have been increasingly crushed, recalling in a peculiar way Franz Kafka's phrase that 'there is [...] an infinite amount of hope, but not for us'.¹²

The defeat of SYRIZA's attempt to 'give voice to those without a voice', to put the people on stage again, amply revealed the need for a transnational movement aiming to change the very anti-democratic structure of the European Union. It is within this critical context that Yanis Varoufakis, the former finance minister of Greece, who resigned immediately after realizing that the people's No would be translated into a Yes (Lascaris 2016), founded DiEM25 on 9th February 2016: 'DiEM is an attempt to harness the energy unleashed by what we call "the Athens Spring", our experiment in democracy in Greece that was crushed by the banks [...] DiEM is

¹⁰ The European Central Bank closed the Greek banks by deciding not to raise the liquidity limit. Furthermore, the way that Greek mainstream media covered the referendum has been, to say the least, far from impeccable.

¹¹ That led to the split of the party and the formation of Popular Unity (LAE) by 25 SYRIZA MPs.

¹² That was Kafka's statement in a conversation with Max Brond: 'There is in the universe something like hope, an infinite amount of hope, but not for us' (Lambert 2002: 88).

an attempt [...] to take that spirit and to make sure that it is not lost, [...] that it gathers momentum and becomes the foundation on which we can build a surge of democracy throughout the Continent' (Barnett and Varoufakis 2016). *One could perhaps make sense of this passage from the so-called 'Athens Spring' to DiEM25 as a transition from a failed national populism to a promising transnational populism.*

Another aspect that we have to take into account is the migrant and refugee crisis. One can find the figure of Agamben's *homo sacer*¹³ in those refugees that seek an escape into Europe. The logic of closed borders produces numerous refugee camps and walls. It is precisely in those camps that people become *homines sacri*. The rise of a racist and xenophobic far right in Europe is another symptom, or more accurately, the aftereffect of the post-political era that we live in (Mouffe 2005: 64-69). The way then that the European Union as a whole responded to that crisis is another sign of its escalating anti-democratic turn.

To conclude, DiEM25 seems to be the product of a set of rapid dislocations related to the economic and migrant/refugee crisis which uncover a deep crack in European democratic politics. These conditions in Europe created favorable conditions for a transnational populist force to emerge. In the next chapter I will try to show that DiEM indeed constitutes such a transnational populist movement that aims to reactivate democracy in a so-called post-political age and 'save the European Union from itself' (Katsidou 2016). As DiEM's slogan emphasizes, 'The European Union will be democratized. Or it will disintegrate'.

Towards a transnational populism: The discourse of DiEM25

Having drawn the attention to the anti-democratic context within which DiEM was launched in the previous section, we need now to focus on the question of its transnational populism and the role of populist practices in reinvigorating European democracy. Is the discourse articulated by DiEM25 and its founder Yanis Varoufakis a populist discourse? Referring back to the first part we indicated that populism is a political logic that dichotomizes the social field into two opposing camps, 'us', namely 'the people' against 'them', that is the establishment. Does DiEM follow such a populist logic?

Let us begin with the very moment and especially the place of DiEM's launch event on 9 February 2016. Not coincidentally, DiEM25 came into being at Berlin's Volksbühne Theatre located at the Roza-Luxemburg-Platz. Now, first, of all, *Volksbühne* means 'Theatre of The People'. As we learn from the theatre's webpage: 'It opened on December 30, 1914 and has its origin in an organization known as the "Freie Volksbühne" (Free People's Theatre) which sketched out the vision for a theatre "of the people" in 1892'. Secondly, less than four kilometers away is the Federal Ministry of Finance, the working home of the 'architect of austerity' (Fichtner and Smolczyk 2016), Wolfgang Schäuble. So Yanis Varoufakis introduced DiEM25 from the central stage of 'The People's Theatre' in response to Schäuble's declaration that 'elections change nothing'. An antithetical axis is thus established by the semiology of the place itself.

¹³ In short, a person deprived of social and political rights.

DiEM's discourse clearly builds upon such an antithetical/antagonistic line. Its *Manifesto* states boldly: 'We, the people of Europe, have a duty to regain control over our Europe from unaccountable "technocrats", complicit politicians and shadowy institutions. We come from every part of the continent and are united by different cultures, languages, accents, political party affiliations, ideologies, skin colors, gender identities, faiths and conceptions of the good society. We are forming DiEM25 intent on moving from a Europe of "We the Governments" and "We the technocrats", to a Europe of "We, the peoples of Europe"' (DiEM25 2016: 6). In the same divisive vein DiEM's introductory video highlights: 'They pretend to worry about competitiveness, migration, terrorism. But only one prospect truly terrifies them: Democracy! They portray their political decision as "technical" to deny European democratic sovereignty over power and money! The more they succeed... the deeper the economic crisis... and the more authoritarian they become. Their legacy: Authoritarianism - Austerity - Recession. We come from every part of Europe. We are united by different cultures. We reject today's democracy-free EU. We refuse to retreat into our nation-states. Our radical agenda? To democratize the European Union!'.¹⁴ This is quite obviously a populist framework; an attempt to form a chain of equivalence between a 'we' that includes many particularities which are united to fight against a common enemy. Furthermore, DiEM's discourse seems to be articulated around three key signifiers or 'nodal points', to use Laclau and Mouffe's vocabulary: Europe, democracy and 'the people' – in fact, here the signifier 'Europeans', which occupies a central position in DiEM's discourse, also operates as a synecdoche of 'the people'. Hence we have everything one needs to characterize a discourse as populist, that is the centrality of "the people" and the creation of a frontier between its chain of equivalence and the establishment.

Who are the 'we' and the 'they' that DiEM constructs? Apparently the 'we' that DiEM calls upon is not restricted to the national level. On the contrary, it goes beyond the nation-states and refers to 'the people' at a pan-European level. In other words, what we have in this case is a transnational people. More specifically, DiEM's 'we' are 'the majority suffering in quite desperation' through austerity; all of those who 'doubt that their rulers know what they're doing but don't know where to turn'; all of those who have lost their faith in politics; 'the EU's greatest, harshest critics [who believe that] the return to fortress Germany, to fortress France, to fortress Britain, to fortress everywhere in Europe, is going to make life [...] nastier, more brutish, and shorter' and 'every genuine democrat' (Varoufakis 2016a). Yanis Varoufakis emphasizes that DiEM is about 'a broad coalition of democrats: radical democrats; left-wing democrats; social democrats; green democrats; liberal democrats; the purpose of whom is to put the "demos" back to democracy against the EU establishment that sees people power as a threat to its authority' (2016a). This brings us to 'them', the European elites and the European establishment. Who are these elites? There is a whole list in DiEM's *Manifesto* that describes in detail who these elites are and evidently we are dealing with (a) transnational elite(s) comprising:

- The Brussels bureaucracy (and its more than 10,000 lobbyists)

¹⁴ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJyju_tHS8k

- Its hit-squad inspectorates and the Troika they formed together with unelected 'technocrats' from other international and European institutions
- The powerful Eurogroup that has no standing in law or treaty
- Bailed out bankers, fund managers and resurgent oligarchies perpetually contemptuous of the multitudes and their organised expression
- Political parties appealing to liberalism, democracy, freedom and solidarity to betray their most basic principles when in government
- Governments that fuel cruel inequality by implementing self-defeating austerity
- Media moguls who have turned fear-mongering into an art form, and a magnificent source of power and profit
- Corporations in cahoots with secretive public agencies investing in the same fear to promote secrecy and a culture of surveillance that bend public opinion to their will (DiEM 2016: 1).

Overall then, DiEM's discourse is formulated through an antagonistic schema pitting us/the people against them/the establishment. In this context 'democracy' and Yanis Varoufakis himself¹⁵ play the role of the empty signifiers representing various unsatisfied demands expressed by particularities in the process of forming a chain of equivalence, in which 'the equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all, and this requires the identification of the source of social negativity' (Laclau 2005a: 38). In the words of Varoufakis: 'The idea is that anyone can join independently of political party affiliation or ideology because democracy can be a unifying theme' (2016b). And it can be 'a unifying theme' because it is partially empty of content and thus it can be presented as universal and provide coherence to the chain itself (Laclau 2005a). It is on the basis of this chain of equivalence that a new popular subject is produced. A new popular subject that demands a radical change, namely the democratization of the EU, the end of austerity and the stabilization of European capitalism as a first stage in a process of even more radical changes.¹⁶

It is also worth noting, at this point, that the chain of equivalence structured by DiEM25 does not follow an exclusionary logic. Quite the contrary, what we have in the case of DiEM is, without a doubt, an inclusionary transnational populism which complexifies Kaltwasser and Mudde's clearcut picture identifying Europe with exclusionary right-wing populism, while associating Latin American populism with an inclusionary character (2013: 147-174). One could thus speak of a 'Latin-Americanization of Europe' (Cely and Mantilla 2016). Two levels of inclusionary practices can be observed here: the first lies precisely on the transnational aspect

¹⁵ This version of this paper does not examine the role of Varoufakis in DiEM25, even though in the original text a whole chapter is devoted to this issue.

¹⁶ DiEM attempts to build 'an alliance of democrats throughout the European Union. Not to make the EU the ideal society. We cannot do that. You know what my ambition would be? To stabilize European capitalism; because this constant downward spiral is terrible for the left, is terrible for working people everywhere. It is a complete gift to the ultranationalists, to the bigots, to the misanthropes, to the racists. Let's do that. Let's stabilize things first. And then we can start a class war again, the class conflict and the left versus right thing' (Varoufakis 2016c).

that aims to bring together diverse European national identifications into a common chain; the second one has to do with DiEM's proposed 'duty to the refugees': a duty to 'let them in' (Varoufakis 2016d). In a speech in Vienna on 5 May 2016, Yanis Varoufakis explicitly stressed that it is Europe's duty to the refugees and to itself to let the refugees in: 'instead of building walls to keep them out, we should build bridges between their anxieties, the anxieties of the refugees, and the anxieties of the locals'. DiEM25 thus envisages 'an open Europe that is alive to ideas, people and inspiration from all over the world, recognizing fences and borders as signs of weakness spreading insecurity in the name of security' (DiEM 2016: 8). One could, in fact, perceive DiEM's inclusionary populism as a radical reaction to what Etienne Balibar portrays as the 'European Apartheid' which, according to him, constitutes 'the other face of the development of the European Union and its quest for identity' (Balibar 2004: 65). It is this nascent 'European Apartheid', produced by the very construction of the EU which 'generates discriminations on the basis of national origin by radically separating nationals of member countries from those of non-member countries' (Balibar 2004: 44), that DiEM calls into question.

To clarify things further, DiEM25 constructs a political popular subject tightly associated with collective action and emancipatory politics through a broader alliance formed on the basis of a common enemy. Yanis Varoufakis has thus emphasized in Rome that DiEM is 'a political infrastructure that we can use as European democrats to join together to have the conversation that we have not had in Europe about what are the common threats, and the common problems and the common crises and how can we deliver a common response to these threats' (Varoufakis 2016b). It is DiEM's strong belief that to pave the way to begin returning 'the people' into democracy it has to act at a transnational level. And yet, George Souvlis and Samuele Mazzolini have found this strategy problematic; they argue that 'it seems that DiEM has put all its bets on the European dimension, entirely bypassing the national one [...] Is it really necessary to delete the state from the map as a locus of progressive democratic reforms and to consider it as outdated and old-fashioned obsession? We do not think so! We consider the radical reestablishment of democracy within the various nation-states as equally important as action at a European level' (Souvlis and Mazzolini 2016). Varoufakis reply has been that 'more democracy at the centre would reinvigorate the nation-state and return more sovereignty to the national parliaments' (2016e). According to its *Manifesto*, DiEM's aspiration is not to 'delete the state from the map' but to strengthen the fight for democracy through a pan-European chain of equivalence: 'While the fight for democracy from below (at the local, regional or national levels) is necessary, it is insufficient if it is conducted without an internationalist strategy toward a pan-European coalition for democratizing Europe. European democrats must come together first, forge a common agenda, and then find ways of connecting it with local communities and at the regional and national level' (DiEM25 2016: 5).

More provocatively, in a wide-ranging interview Varoufakis highlights that 'the nation-state is dead' (Buxton and Varoufakis 2016: 18) and he continues arguing that 'instead of going from the nation-state level to the European level, [...] we should do it the other way around' (p. 33). Similarly, but in a different context, Alain Badiou in a dialogue with Marcel Gauchet on 'Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy' (Badiou and Gauchet 2014), stresses that 'turning inward is a dead end, we now know that it ultimately serves what we want to combat. The isolationist or protectionist flag [...] gets us nowhere. Suppose a state decides to withdraw from

the international consensus: it will almost immediately be subjected to ostracism, to a boycott such that the cost of the initiative will be devastating within a very short time. No one can really believe in the soundness and effectiveness of a project like that [...] Only the far right relishes this identitarian fantasy that would drive us into powerlessness' (Badiou and Gauchet: 103-4). So, as the French philosopher concludes, 'the communist hypothesis must prove itself locally while at the same time taking over the world stage' (ibid). One can rephrase Badiou's expression: a movement for democracy in the EU must prove itself locally while at the same time taking over the world/European stage. Because 'when you have an adversary, you need to try to measure up to it' (Badiou and Gauchet 2014: 103), and the European Union's anti-democratic institutions are pan-European, supranational, forces. Hence, to oppose them one needs to act, first and foremost, at a transnational level.

Another aspect of DiEM's transnationalism has to do with its anti-fascist character (Kazamias 2016) in order to prevent a 'post-modern version of the 1930s' (Varoufakis 2016f). No doubt, the rise of a xenophobic, racist far-right awakens memories of Europe's abhorrent past. Interestingly, in his book *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?* (2016f), Varoufakis sees 2008 as a version of 1929: 'In 1929 protectionism took the form of devaluing one's currency vis-a-vis others. [...] in 2010 it took the form of devaluing one's labour vis-a-vis others. In a depressingly similar chain of events, it was not long before underpaid German workers hated the Greeks and underemployed Greek workers hated the Germans' (Varoufakis 2016: 9). In his speech in an event organized by Die Linke, the founder of DiEM25 was clear about that: 'In the 1930s when we [the leftists] were very strong, much stronger than we are now, we still failed to stop the Nazis and the fascists. This is why we started DiEM. In an attempt to do that which we should have done in 1930; to create a broad coalition between liberal democrats, Marxists, Greens, the movements against the disintegration of Europe' (Varoufakis 2016c).

So far in this section we have focused on the examination of the hypothesis that DiEM25 is a positive response to Balibar's call for a pan-European populism, or, put differently, of the assumption that DiEM constitutes a case of transnational populism; we have also explored some of the political implications that its transnationalism opens. It is now time to turn our attention to DiEM's goals, to investigate, in other words, its plan to democratize the European Union. The immediate aim, as stated in the *Manifesto*, is 'full transparency in decision-making', namely the live-streaming of the EU Council, Ecofin, FTT and Eurogroup meetings, the publication of the minutes of European Central Bank deliberations, the uploading on the web of all important documents related to crucial negotiations and the monitoring of lobbying activities (DiEM25 2016: 5). One can find here the populist dichotomic axis again: we, the people of Europe against them, the powerful elites that decide for us without us 'behind closed doors': 'In a democratic union, it is outrageous that decisions that dramatically affect the many are being made behind closed doors by the powerful few.'¹⁷ Then, within twelve months DiEM proposes to resolve the European economic crisis by energizing the existing institutions and

¹⁷ Petition 'Transparency in Europe now! Newsletter campaign', <https://diem25.org/petition-transparency-in-europe-now-newsletter-campaign/>

applying the existing EU Treaties.¹⁸ In the opinion of DiEM25 there are five dimensions in Europe's crisis: public debt, banking, inadequate investment, migration and rising poverty. In defense of its transnationalism DiEM connotes that the reason why all five aspects remain unresolved is because all of them 'are currently left in the hands of national governments powerless to act upon them' (DiEM25 2016: 5). Finally, within two years DiEM intends to establish a new Constitutional Assembly 'consisting of representatives elected on a trans-national ticket' (DiEM25 2016: 6). The purpose of this Constitutional Assembly will be 'to draft a Democratic European Constitution' (Varoufakis 2016g).

There is, however, a major hazard affiliated with this vision for a new Constitutional Assembly of representatives. This hazard has to do with the unavoidable tensions between (radical) democracy and representation. Hence the question that arises now is the following: how can a representative system promote the logic of autonomy or, in other words, how can a vertical system promote horizontality? Only, perhaps, through a dynamic interactive and iterative participation, a direct and effective connection between representatives and represented; through an always open negotiation between verticality and horizontality, one might argue. Does DiEM move in this direction? Yanis Varoufakis would answer in the affirmative. In his article 'What makes DiEM25 a more effective movement? What is it doing differently?' on DiEM's webpage, the 'emerging rock star of Europe's anti-austerity uprising' (Daily Telegraph) asserts that DiEM 'will call upon its members to convene locally, and in the spirit of self-organization, in order to propose to the rest of DiEM particular solutions and policies. We envisage Town Hall meetings, meetings in theatres, cinemas, cultural centres etc.' (Varoufakis 2016g). Furthermore, 'all policy recommendations, concerns and suggestions will be compiled by a dedicated DiEM committee [...] with a view to putting together a Policy Paper Proposal that will be submitted to a DiEM Assembly' (ibid). Consequently, this Policy Paper Proposal(s) 'will be debated and the DiEM Paper [...] will be finalized' and "will be put to a vote of all members using DiEM's digital platform' (ibid). George Souvlis and Samuele Mazzolini, however, express wariness about DiEM's democratic structure: to what extent is this pan-European movement 'a one-man show' or 'an elitist leader-centered top-down forum? (Souvlis and Mazzolini 2016).¹⁹

To conclude, DiEM's discourse does constitute a populist discourse, structured on the basis of a populist logic which establishes an antagonistic frontier between two conflicting agencies: us/the people and them/the establishment. It forms an inclusive and pluralist populism that aims to put the people on stage again and stands up against the very anti-democratic structure of the European Union and the

¹⁸The proposed policies will be aimed at re-deploying existing institutions (through a creative re-interpretation of existing treaties and charters) in order to stabilize the crises of public debt, inadequate investment, and rising poverty' (DiEM 2016: 5).

¹⁹'Is DiEM a top-down organization?'; Varoufakis raised the aforementioned question in his speech in Rome only to answer that 'it is not', and he continued by saying that "We have the minimal amount of vertical coordination in physical meetings like this, but at the same time we are putting a huge amount of effort into creating what we call "Spontaneous Collectives" of Europeans that spontaneously and without any kind of control or coordination form groups throughout Europe to pursue the aims of the Manifesto' (2016b).

austerity policies imposed by the powers of neoliberalism. The idea put forward is that we need to go beyond the fetishism of national boundaries and thus DiEM attempts to construct a transnational people in the name of democracy. In the era of post-political biopower 'the heart of the crisis of sovereignty is *the disappearance of the people*, both as an instance of symbolic legitimation and as an instance of real control' (Balibar 2004: 160). In such an epoch a populist force can undertake the project of bringing back democracy and returning 'the people' and the political. Moreover, a populist force could provide an answer to the TINA doctrine by mobilizing passions in a democratic and progressive direction in order to produce an alternative (see Mouffe 2002 and 2005). As Yanis Varoufakis puts it, we have to replace the insisting 'There Is No Alternative', TINA, with TATIANA, 'That Astonishingly, There Is An Alternative' (2016f: 228). The transnational aspect could be the key in this context. A transnational people could fight against supranational anti-democratic institutions, the transnational market and transnational elites (Robinson 2010).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine whether or not the pan-European movement DiEM25 constitutes a populist force, or, in other words, to test the assumption that DiEM could be perceived as a response to Balibar's call for a European populism. By utilizing the tools of the so-called Essex School of Discourse Analysis, I argued that DiEM's discourse is indeed a populist one. It adopts the populist logic, namely, it is articulated around an antagonistic schema: we, the people against them/the elites; it also constructs a transnational people, a people that goes beyond national boundaries, a pan-European people. Expanding beyond the nation-states, moving from the national to the transnational level, may be the key in contesting the European establishment and the very anti-democratic structure of the current European Union. SYRIZA's failure revealed that constructing a national people is not enough. This construction should go hand in hand with a transnational people and DiEM aspires to establish this infrastructure by uniting many particularities into a chain of equivalence under the banner of Europe's democratization.

Laclau's formal approach to populism can help us escape from deterministic impasses that attach the phenomenon in question to certain contents and allows us to perceive populism as a particular logic, the logic of the political (Laclau 2005a; 2005b). This leads us to the conclusion that populism is not by necessity a threat to democracy; likewise, it is not by necessity nationalist. To put it bluntly, populism itself is, by definition, neither a negative nor a positive phenomenon. Populism is a neutral term. What is of interest to us is that this detachment from particular contents, suggested by this formal approach, opens the possibility of envisaging a transnational populism. Taking that as a starting point, I focused on the analysis of DiEM's discourse. I first examined the context within which DiEM has emerged. One can make sense of DiEM as the result of a twofold dislocation connected to the economic and immigration crisis, both of which exposed an anti-democratic turn in European politics. Consequently, I tried to examine DiEM's discourse to ascertain whether we are indeed dealing with a typical populist force. 'The people' that DiEM constructs is an inclusive, active, democratic and transnational one, which can stand against transnational European elites, the supranational structures of the EU and the international markets to take back democracy.

Hence, does DiEM offer a chance for European democratic politics? To put it in more general terms, can populism be a corrective to the strangulation of European democracy? Concerning the more general question, there is no reason why a left-wing, inclusive, pluralist and transnational populism could not present such an option. Coming now to the first question, only time will tell if DiEM and its people will manage to fulfill this daunting task. And what if DiEM fails? Well, to quote Samuel Beckett, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Beckett 1983: 7).

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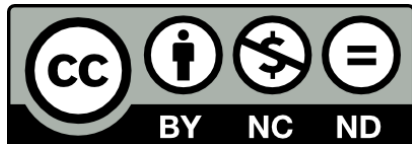
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Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project involved a 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 endorses 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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