



**"The People is an Empty Signifier"  
A Discussion between Yannis  
Stavrakakis and Lorenzo Zamponi**

**POPULISMUS Interventions No. 6**

**Thessaloniki  
January 2020**

## **“THE PEOPLE IS AN EMPTY SIGNIFIER”**

### **INTERVIEW FOR JACOBIN ITALIA, no. 5, 2019**

<https://jacobinitalia.it/il-popolo-e-un-significante-vuoto/>

The discussion between Lorenzo Zamponi and Yannis Stavrakakis took place in Florence, at the Scuola Normale Superiore, in the final months of 2019. Some very minor editorial changes were introduced in January 2020.

**“Populism is simultaneously necessary and impossible. It is necessary because it derives from the ultimately unfulfilled promise of representation (popular sovereignty), and tries repeatedly to fill that void; and it is impossible because it is constrained by the same limits of representative government and its social bases, by the restrictive characteristics of the context itself in which it is bound to emerge”.**

Yannis Stavrakakis, professor of political science at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, is a prominent member of the Essex School of discourse analysis, has studied under the supervision of Ernesto Laclau and has been investigating populism, both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view, for more than two decades. Laclau's theory of populism, strongly influenced by the analysis of Peronism in Argentina, is rooted in an attempt to reinterpret the Gramscian concept of hegemony through, among others, the psychoanalytic lens of Jacques Lacan. The Essex School tends to highlight the role of meaning and of processes of interpellation and identification in the creation of political identities and in the articulation and sedimentation of political discourses and hegemonic orders. In their view, populist projects are processes through which different individuals and groups, through a chain of signification, construct a shared identity as a “people” able to challenge the status quo. This theory has strongly influenced the projects of “left-wing populism”, in particular the case of Podemos in Spain, and has long been discussed and often criticised in the European and Latin-American left. Stavrakakis has long been reflecting on the role of ideology and political discourse in societies of late modernity, focusing in the last few years on the rise of populism in Greek “debt society”. Together we discuss populism, its controversial relations with class and nation, the promises of “left-wing populism” and its current crisis.

***LORENZO ZAMPONI: This issue of Jacobin Italia deals with a million-dollar question: has the populist moment ended?***

**YANNIS STAVRAKAKIS:** In the media there is often the tendency to see things in a linear way: a glorious beginning, an unexpected end... But reality is far more complex. Many phenomena, including populism, have a recurring nature. They come in cycles. And this goes back to the main cause of populism: within modernity, we have regimes and political systems that are founded on this promise of “popular sovereignty”, which is difficult to materialise, especially in systems that are influenced very much by a hierarchical structure and an unequal distribution of resources. People suffer, there are inequalities and injustices, polarizations and cleavages are established, and somebody will emerge, every once in a while, to claim that he or she will be able to redress these problems. In the context of a crisis, for example, when these problems become exacerbated, this creates the potential for populist movements, leaders or parties to emerge and flourish. It is a recurring phenomenon, because it is endemic to representative systems. It is thus bound to return. Consider Latin America: we witnessed the so-called “pink tide” 10-15 years ago, then it

went away, but you see what is happening today in many countries in the region. In Argentina, which signified for many the “beginning of the end” of the previous populist cycle, we see a return of Kirchnerism. Most spectacularly in Chile – after 30 years of enforced neoliberalism – we encounter the re-emergence of popular movements. In Ecuador, as well. In all these cases, aren’t we witnessing, once more, a growing opposition to the system and a return of “the people”?

***When you were describing these different experiences that you consider populist, you mentioned two different elements: popular sovereignty and opposition to the system. Are these the fundamental pillars of your definition of populism? Populism is a word that is thrown around to identify parties, leaders and movements that are very different from each other, from Podemos to Matteo Salvini’s League: do they really have something in common? How can we recognise and identify populism?***

I think that in order to arrive at a plausible definition, or to have a meaningful discussion at least, there are two fallacies we have to avoid, although they are very widespread both in academia and in journalism. The first one is a Eurocentric fallacy: at some point, in France, when people discussed about Jean-Marie Le Pen, they started calling him a “populist”, which is very strange, to put it mildly. Nobody who had studied the history and the genealogy of this concept can fail to observe that it started as a signifier that identified mainly progressive movements, like the American Populists or the Russian Populists of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even more ambivalent cases, like Peron in Argentina, but still characterised by a strong component of welfarism and a certain egalitarian imaginary. When did we decide to erase this trajectory and start naming the radical right “populist”? Out of the blue, a whole revisionist tradition has been created, within Europe, to retain this concept but shift radically its application merely to very reactionary, far right movements. Of course, the situation in Europe has changed de facto, because now we have many left-wing populist movements like Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece, Mélenchon in France and Corbyn in Great Britain. Hence, today we seem to have very good conceptual as well as empirical reasons to move away from this rather euphemistic Eurocentric identification of populism with the far right and to understand it as something that can acquire a variety of different ideological articulations. Only the far right itself benefits from such an arbitrary, exclusive association.

The second fallacy, which is even more widespread, goes back to the United States; the latter had a much more progressive history of populism, and that is why the concept of “populism” is often used there in a clearly positive sense. But even in the US, in the 1950s, you had a version of modernization theory developed by people like Richard Hofstadter and his collaborators, who, although the history of the populist movement until that time was narrated in quite positive terms, introduced, once more, some sort of a revisionist turn, arguing that in fact populism was a backward-looking, largely irrational phenomenon. They claimed that modernization was to be understood in a unilinear way, as culminating in the typically American blend of capitalism and liberal democracy; against this emerging TINA of that period, populism was understood as a species of a broader genus, that included all types of oppositional radicalism: anybody who disagreed, demonstrated, and entertained the idea of an alternative future, was denounced as irrational, paranoid, problematic, and so on and so forth. This is from where a lot of stereotypes and myths that are still around us and influence a lot the debate about populism, originate.

We need to get beyond these two problematic versions of analysis, and try to encourage reflexive conceptual work, both regarding the history of the concept as well as its relationship with

democracy and representation. We also need to capture the many global varieties of the phenomenon through rigorous comparative research: we often focus only in our own country, our own political system, and this creates a certain distortion. We have to take into account what happens in Latin America, what happens in the United States and so on, in order to arrive at a more reflective and comprehensive account.

Within this context, there is a slow consensus that is gradually emerging, around – at least – two criteria that would define a populist discourse, a populist movement or a populist leader. Let me put these as the two basic questions that should guide our interrogation of a given political force under examination: First, do we encounter a priority given to “the people”, to the construction of a popular collective subject, as the main agent who will push forward social change? Second, is this prioritisation of popular power seen as taking place within an antagonistic, dichotomic representation of the social-political field, within the theatre of a politicised division between “us” and “them”, “us” being the people and “them” being the establishment, the power bloc, the 1%? Obviously, this is not a catch-all concept: there are many technocratic actors who do not believe that “the people” should be prioritised, who think sovereignty should be delegated to the markets or be replaced by the assessments of rating agencies; in fact, isn’t this what most governments do today? When, instead, you have a prioritisation of the popular side, in a way that presupposes that politics is not a mere technocratic enterprise, in which some superior rationality dictates policy; when politics becomes understood as a (potentially) conflictual terrain, and alternative strategies are allowed to develop, then you have the potential for the emergence of populist projects.

***In this idea of “prioritising the people” that you propose as one of the main traits of populism, there are two elements that need to be discussed: first, how do you define the people, where are the borders of this collective subject, both in terms of class and in terms of nation? And second, there is this idea of the popular subject as the construction of a unity, which is at the core of Laclau’s theory, the idea of the discursive construction of a popular unity: how does this unity relate with social conflict, with movements, with the cleavages and ruptures of contemporary society?***

In a great part of mainstream populism research, references to unity are usually treated as an abomination, because unity is seen as something that involves some sort of moral superiority claim, which can lead to the idealisation of a leader, or of certain parts of the population in relation to others, involving antidemocratic repercussions. But I think it is important to realise that this “unity” is in reality not a state but a process: a unification process, which is never completed, but which is, more or less, unavoidable in strategic terms. If you have a government, or a power bloc, or an establishment, or even a powerful supranational agency like the European Union, that imposes certain policies, and you want to go against these policies, it is very difficult to do this as a single individual or even as one, singular and isolated movement. In fact, this process of unification seems to be a strategic requirement of struggle in general. I don’t think it ever realises or delivers the people in the strongly moralistic or even “religious” version that many liberal researchers denounce and demonise. Besides, this process is never resolved; there is always a continuous negotiation during the ongoing production of “the people”, involving both a horizontal and a vertical axis. If somehow there is a strong prioritisation of the vertical axis, for example when there is a leader who believes very much in her/his own contribution and does not recognise the plurality of the movements sustaining her/him, then this creates problems, and this has been stressed by Laclau as well in his late work: in order to have a movement that really challenges

power structures, you need a continuous negotiation between the horizontal and the vertical axis. If the vertical axis prevails to an extent threatening the horizontal axis, you have a co-optation by hierarchical structures, and this is the end of the populist project; if, on the other hand, the horizontal axis prevails to an extent undermining any type of operational leadership you have the inability to translate the multitude and the demands of the movements involved into a process of strategic unification able to challenge the system in a serious and consistent manner. This is, for example, what seems to have happened with Occupy Wall Street: there was no leader, no representation, not even a minimum amount of vertical organisation, so the mobilisation eventually died out. Then you could say, of course, that the support towards Bernie Sanders is a delayed effect of OWS, that even a strictly horizontal mobilisation creates a favourable proto-populist background against which, eventually, some sort of vertical representation takes place, and that is why many people think Bernie Sanders is a populist, and I agree with them.

Now, moving the discussion to the borders of “the people” and the relationship with “the nation”, I want to stress, first of all, and this also goes back to Laclau’s theory, that “the people” is never a mere sociological category, which some sort of objective scientific analysis attaches to certain characteristics or particularities, like class (or nation) for example. That would, by the way, displace the discussion onto this other big problem that has preoccupied theory and political praxis for decades, that is to say how we can best define class. “The people” here is, first and foremost, an invocation, a call, a cry even; it is an empty signifier that is addressed and can interpellate a multitude of social actors producing the people as a political force out of the populist mobilisation itself, in a performative fashion. In other words, most often the people as a movement in action is not the starting point of the process, it is the endpoint. The people is what is produced out of bringing together all these different claims, these different challenges, these different demands, that come together, in this process of strategic unification, to challenge the status quo: this is the people. Like in Chile: one million people in the streets, where were they before? They were nowhere to be found. Then, there was a process through which these people as a collective subject was produced and made its presence very much felt.

You can have a variety of ways to facilitate this process: the use of symbols, the use of rhetoric, affectivity, and so on. Now, obviously, for the last 200 years, perhaps more, we have been living in nation states; as a result, this nationalist imaginary has influenced many of the ways in which we see our collective identity and in some places it is very difficult to avoid this playing a role. Again, there are many types of populisms, and there are many types of nationalisms as well. For example, in Latin America nationalism does not have this meaning of chauvinism and ethnic differentiation from your neighbour, it has mostly an anti-imperialist connotation, that resonates with many anti-colonial struggles of the past. Hence not all nationalisms are the same. Still, even if not all nationalisms are equally dangerous, national identity can be problematic, especially when it becomes articulated by the far right. Yet, that does not mean that all problems that may be connected with nationalism, affect populism as well: it is superficial to use the two terms interchangeably. For example, if we examine carefully far right discourse, we see many differences from the populist canon. Usually in populism you have a vertical articulation of antagonism: the antagonism is between top and bottom, high and low (both in political, economic and cultural terms). In nationalist discourse you typically have a horizontal antagonism, that is to say a frontier is erected dividing people who could be at the same level from a social or cultural point of view, but belong either to an in-group or to an out-group divided along ethnic lines (in/out). Furthermore, in left-wing or democratic/egalitarian populism, the people remains an empty

signifier, it can accommodate a lot of different groups (even immigrants), whereas in nationalism “the people” does not operate as an empty signifier, it refers back to a mythical signified: if you ask a right-wing populist “what is this people you are talking about?” they will talk about the nation, blood, race. There is a very strict signifying operation, which restricts the openness of this invocation of “the people”. Focusing on this, we can understand whether a movement is really populist, allowing the inclusion of a variety of different subjects in “the people” as an empty signifier, or whether we are dealing with some sort of nationalism, racism, or xenophobia, which camouflages itself using populist rhetoric.

***This idea of the construction of a popular unity, with the specific processual understanding you were proposing, somehow hints towards the construction of a cross-class unity. This has been strongly criticised from a Marxist point of view: what is the role of class, in a populist movement? This is not only a theoretical matter anymore: the most peculiar case of populism we have been witnessing in Italy, is perhaps the 5 Star Movement, which has been considered the purest case of “neither left nor right” populism in Europe – as soon as they got into the government, the relationship with social subjects, with intermediate bodies, with class-based organisations, has been one of the most difficult issues to face for them. They have this idea that “we are the people, and thus we do not negotiate with unions, because we represent directly the people as a whole, we do not need the mediation of class organisations”. This is obviously very problematic for those that look at populist movements from a leftist point in view.***

I do not know enough about the 5 Star Movement, but there are some points I can try to make in general on the relationship between populism and class. First of all, in most cases, like in the American example, populist movements incorporated policies and demands that came from the working class and were addressing the working class. There were sectors of the working class that reciprocated this opening, while others remained confined within a very orthodox Marxist view that only the working class stood at the vanguard of the struggle, and they could not really engage with a movement that was not clearly adopting a class-based strategy and, in fact, threatened the priority of the working class. But at the same time, these orthodox class movements that developed between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, themselves realised that it is not enough to invoke the working class in order to be able to mobilise a sufficiently strong force in order to challenge the status quo. Thus, there was a certain “populist excess”, if I can put it like that, in the communist movement itself, visible in “popular front” strategy and in other examples. And this is due to the fact that the centrality of class in Marxism is largely based on the idea of an objective (scientific) understanding of society, economy and politics, which has an implicitly “elitist” character, because it asks everyone to recognise the centrality of class as the true doctrine; yet, in practice, only a small part of the working class is consciously identifying with this class identity. Most often a different strategy is needed to ensure that a majority of workers is mobilised and to address, at the same time, broader strata of society. As a result, leftist movements have felt from very early on the need to “supplement” their purist class message, to address “the people” as something broader than the working class as produced by the science of political economy. Interestingly enough, it seems that Marx himself had increasingly become very much aware of this problem, especially in the last years of his life, and this is why in the last say 30 years there has been a lot of challenging research on Marx’s interest in Russian populism, his correspondence with Vera Zasulič, and so on. On this issue there is an older book edited by Teodor Shanin and reprinted recently (*Late Marx and the Russian Road. Marx and the*



*Peripheries of Capitalism*, Verso, 2018) and another, more recent one, by Ettore Cinnella (*L'altro Marx*, Della Porta, 2014), which deserve some attention.

***It is undeniable that the socialist and communist rhetoric in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has vastly used the concept of “the people” as something broader than the working class, but still at the same time almost as a metonymy for the working class itself, because the working class was considered the leading part of it, and, in the last instance, the really significant part of it because of its centrality in production. And definitely the strategy of “popular fronts”, or the “Italian way to socialism” proposed by the PCI go beyond a strictly class-based conception of the workers’ and democratic movement. Still, if we think about Europe in the last 25 years, we do not see many occurrences of populist processes on the left. Why?***

On the contrary, I think that especially in Europe the last two decades have been a period that has witnessed a resurgence of the left precisely through a variety of populist projects. In an age when more traditional left-wing formations have stagnated or even disappeared and social democracy suffered a substantive dislocation on account of its blissful acceptance of neoliberalism and its inability to construct an alternative direction within the context of the 2008 financial crisis, a populist strategy was what allowed new formations like PODEMOS or previously fringe parties like SYRIZA to magnify their appeal and also, as far as Greece is concerned, to enter into government. At the same time, in the Greek case, for example, the social-democratic PASOK has “managed” to shrink from the 48% it would get in the 1980s (during its left-wing populist phase) to less than 10% in terms of electoral support, while the traditionalist Communist party has failed to increase its appeal and the extra-parliamentarian left is shrinking to the point of insignificance. And this is not limited only to Southern Europe. How did the British Labour party manage to get beyond the catastrophic Blair era? Through Corbyn’s articulation of a predominantly populist discourse putting forward the demands of “the many” against “the few”, even if Corbyn seems to have later on committed a “mortal sin” for anybody employing a populist discourse: to be seen as ignoring a referendum.

***You seem to think that populism is more or less always there, reflecting the unfulfilled promise of representation that is structural to liberal democracy. Could it be that, in times of centrality of the workers’ movement, it ended up being mainly oriented to the left, while in times of neoliberal hegemony, it tends to go in a different direction?***

Populism itself is not always there, but a representative democratic system operating against the background of increasing inequality and periodic quasi-authoritarianism creates the ground for the continuous re-emergence of populist movements. Obviously, factors like the increase or decrease of union membership and militancy, or the overall economic dynamics, are bound to influence their development and ideological profile. But I think that, in general, we should keep in mind that the impact is never unidirectional. At any rate, your suggestion is definitely a hypothesis that could be explored further. It may be the case, for example, that a strong workers’ movement can produce a stronger “populist excess”; but it could also work the other way around: by creating fatigue in certain sectors, which may eventually opt for a (very rare) centrist or apolitical type of populism... The case with neoliberalism is similar; it may trigger an indignation that can fuel (populist) movements and facilitate the creation and dissemination of populist discourses; but, at the same time, by overdetermining the limits of what is thinkable – and desirable – it may impose certain limits to the types of mobilization that can acquire a broader appeal or to the types of

demands and policies that are, in each context, considered feasible. Unfortunately, one cannot choose or create ex nihilo the background against which she/he has to act politically...

***You were mentioning before that “not all nationalisms are the same”, and this is true. Nationalisms are particularly problematic in the Europe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because of the heritage of colonialism, because of the legacies of two world wars, and because of its relationship with contemporary immigration. It is not the same thing to invoke an anti-colonial national identity and to invoke the symbols of bloody empires. Does this mean that left-wing or democratic populism is impossible in Europe? In that process of articulation of popular unity we were discussing before, in the context of nation states, is it possible to find other unifying elements? Or is there a special relationship between populism and nationalism, or populism and national identity? Which makes the invocation of the nation unavoidable?***

First of all, let me just mention that some important research has been already conducted on the relationship between colonialism and populism by Dani Filc and it suggests that very often right-wing populism emerges in countries with some imperial history, while left-wing populism most often emerges in countries that were colonies themselves – or belonged to the capitalist periphery and have thus developed strong anti-imperialist movements. Now, to move to your central question, I don't think it is a necessary relationship simply because signification within society allows at best for long-term linkages and crystallisations but not for supposedly necessary and eternal reductions. At any rate, the articulation of “the people” can be thought in many different ways, it does not need to be based on national identity. At the same time, we should not hypostatise any of these identities a priori. What is the nation? It is one form of collective identity, which incorporates a strong symbolic and imaginary element, but is not purely symbolic, it relies on and prioritises certain experiences of enjoyment we share with other people. These were constructed inside a historical context, they change, they can obviously take different forms. We can then prioritise certain forms and try to avoid others; sometimes we are successful, sometimes we are not, but the game goes on.

Furthermore, the problem of dealing with national identity applies to all ideologies, precisely because national identity became a very widespread “imaginary horizon” within modernity. Even if you have a purist communist project, or a classic left-wing project, again you have to take into account national identity, even if only to be able to move beyond, because the chances are that the identities of your addressees must have been influenced by it at some point of their socialisation. I do not see this issue then as exclusive to populism. So, if populism needs to take into account, minimally in certain contexts, some sort of national belonging, this also applies to other political projects. Yet, somehow, it is only populism, which is considered compromised by this contingent articulation. Consider, for a moment, neoliberalism. Historically, it has been strongly associated with chauvinism: Thatcher with the Falklands' war, Reagan with his antagonism with the “axis of evil”, and so on; yet nearly nobody highlights the nationalist nature of neoliberalism or talks about “national-neoliberalism”. Social democracy as well has been, in many cases, conditioned by nationalist imaginaries. But nobody talks about the unredeemably nationalist nature of social democracy. Yet, everybody talks about “national-populism” as if it was a mortal sin, collapsing the two types of identity. I think we should apply the same standards to everybody. All political projects have to come to terms with national identity because it forms a substantial part of



modernity's legacy, which is still very much present. But this does not pre-determine what the future will bring.

***Even though you were advising us against the risk of a Euro-centric understanding of populisms, we have to talk about what has been happening in Europe in the last decade, with the emergence of many populist projects, both on the left and on the right. The only such left-wing project that got to win an election and govern was Syriza in Greece. You have written a lot on Syriza as a case of left-wing populism. Do you think that the Greek case can tell us something about what happens to populism when it takes power?***

First of all, there was in the past an implicit assumption in a big part of the literature, that populism cannot operate in government, that it only constitutes some sort of oppositional strategy. I think this is wrong: there are, both in Latin America and in Europe, many cases of populism in government. So, what happens to populism in power? I will focus on left-wing populism, because, as I told you, I think that, historically, the populist canon is much more progressive than reactionary. First of all, the experience is not uniform. Besides, each time, we have to determine, when we see a problem, whether this is due to following a populist strategy, or to not following it through or maybe to some other factor. There are always "external" conditions that influence various settings. In Greece, why did Syriza ultimately fail to push forward an alternative course regarding the Eurozone, why did it have to accept the terms of the Eurozone? There are obviously many reasons: lack of preparation compensated by excessive voluntarism, isolation and lack of support from other international actors, strategic mistakes, etc. But I think we should not underestimate also a certain cryptocolonial overdetermination of contemporary Greek identity which marked the last couple of centuries, and is very visible in the way the economy is structured, the way intellectuals operate, and so on. According to this framework, Europe must always operate as model and observer and Greeks must always require the approval of the European gaze and accept the occasional punishment, otherwise everything will collapse. This is not something you can change within a few years. Maybe Syriza realised that they cannot change this and that they lacked sufficient ammunition to start a war with the Eurozone – especially in a conjuncture in which Greece had to be punished at all cost in order to discredit Podemos in Spain as well. Unfortunately, no real debate has started in Greece for the exact reasons of this failure; neither from Syriza itself nor from the people who left Syriza – and this experience is likely to remain a trauma for the Greek left and beyond.

Still, even if I do not think that Syriza's failure reveals anything about the limits of populism, this does not mean that there are, generally speaking, no such limits. These limits of populism are much more clearly visible if we study Argentina, that represents a slightly more successful example than the Greek one: for systemic and historical reasons Argentina has managed to follow a more independent policy, that Greece was not allowed to follow. For once, Argentina restructured its debt, which Greece should also have done. But even in the case of Argentina, in which the policies of left-wing populism managed to impact on the economy and other sectors in a much more pronounced way, what happened after 10-15 years? The impoverished middle classes that were returned roughly to their pre-crisis level were again desiring in the same way they were desiring before, they wanted imported goods, they wanted freedom in capital movements because they wanted to send money abroad, they were still psychosocially indebted to some form of neoliberal consumerism. Populism, even when it is most successful, by a variety of standards, fails to change the intersubjective outlook in terms of the mode of production and the mode of consumption of a

certain society. The limits of populism are set by the same representative system, which gives birth to populist demands in the first place – and its social bases. Populism itself as a mode of strategic unification to push forward popular demands, is often unable to re-structure these demands in a radical way. It is a recipe that strongly depends on the quality of its ingredients even if it re-shapes them to some extent. If the original demands were structured or even partly conditioned by capitalism, it is unlikely that you will have a radically and/or credible/sustainable anti-capitalist outcome. But is not this a problem for all leftist projects today?

***Well, I think that populism is peculiar, from this point of view. First, it is a discursive strategy, that focuses at aggregating demands through the chain of equivalence – but maybe not that well equipped to address the tensions and conflicts that emerge between these demands facing the materiality of the economy. Second, populism takes very seriously popular demands as they are, refusing to impose on them anything in the name of transformation: does not this inherently limit its potential for transformation? Populism does not carry the messianic promise of redemption of socialism... Might it be that populism works better in quick temporalities? For example, Podemos has been the archetype of left-wing populism in Europe, but it has been in a visible decline in the last couple of years. It looks like, from a Gramscian point of view, as if it was very well equipped for a war of movement and it was not able to face a war of position. Does this mean that populist projects need to win quick, otherwise they fail, because they are unable to face the tasks of movement-construction and last in time?***

These hypotheses are not without value. Obviously a populist strategy can give to a variety of different demands a particular shape (enforcing anti-elitism and people-centrism), but not to transform them in a messianic way... but anybody who is nostalgic of a strongly messianic politics should better discover the real thing and re-enter a church (my guess is that at some point in her/his own or in her/his family's trajectory religion must have played a major role or if it hasn't played a significant role then its absence must have somehow created a traumatic lack that triggered this desire for a quasi-religious imaginary displaced onto political theology). But, of course, everything should be judged against its background. If the background is a post-democratic universe in which the technocratic, pragmatic dimension of the representative system prevails, then populism – the return of “the people” signalling also a return of “the political” – suddenly does acquire a certain “redemptive” character, something cogently highlighted many years ago by Margaret Canovan, a very perceptive but often forgotten analyst of populism.

The same applies to the performance of Podemos. What you say is a hypothesis that clearly deserves to be examined carefully. However, those who dispute the populist strategy that Podemos has adopted initially should not forget that without this strategy the chances are that we wouldn't have heard of Podemos at all, in the first place! So the real question is whether populism is sufficient as a strategy in the long run. But did anybody argue that this is indeed the case? That is to say that populism is some sort of panacea, the solution to all the problems of humanity? I don't think so...

In addition, we can never examine a populist project in isolation from the broader framework of political antagonism including the activity of anti-populist forces. For example, in the Spanish situation, there are many such things we have to take into account. Let me indicate some: 1. The fact the PSOE moved slightly to the left of the neoliberal consensus, competing for the same votes Podemos is trying to lure is one such consideration. 2. Also, recently there was a shift in Podemos'

strategy: it is not clear to me whether they are still following a populist strategy or not. For example, initially Podemos was more or less saying “we are neither left nor right, we just want to protect and represent the people, la patria, la gente” and then they ended up in an electoral coalition with Izquierda Unida. I am not judging whether this was correct or not; I am just saying that it must have had some impact, which has to be accounted for. We always have to take into account, in other words, the continuously shifting profile of political antagonism. We can never study populism in isolation: we also have to study anti-populism and the broader political terrain. What are the others doing? All these things are bound to influence a populist or a non-populist outcome and the impact it acquires in the long run.

***There is a main merit that populism had in the last decade: in the midst of the worst economic crisis of the last decades, it has reopened the space for politics. It has broken the limits of the consensus. If we look at the polarisation between Trump and Sanders in US politics, we can think that probably both sides would not fit in the political space of the 1990s: now the political space is much broader. This is very exciting and very appealing, from a leftist point of view, because our side, left of liberalism, once marginal, is now present and competing. It is also scary, because also the other side, right of liberalism, is also present and competing. And it seems they are winning. It seems that, in the last few years, the right has been much more successful in articulating populism, and we have to reflect on the reasons for this. Is it the inherent connection between populism and nationalism, that necessarily brings populism towards the right? Is it because we are in a society that has been structured by neoliberalism, and thus it is bound to go in a certain direction? Whichever the reason, the right, at least in Europe, is winning the populist struggle. Why do you think this is the case?***

There are very different trajectories at work globally and I doubt we can explain this in purely abstract, theoretical terms, but in some countries you are certainly right: they are winning. At any rate, I think this has to be addressed taking into account the different contingencies at play: different political cultures and polarizations, social structures, economic dynamics and so on. Obviously, populism presents both a way forward for an alternative understanding of politics and democracy, but it also presents potential obstacles, particular problems. Very often, as we have seen above, it remains parasitic to other ideologies, political projects and structures of desire. It seems to be a strategy that can be driven in a variety of different directions. But this is the challenge. We should try to feed this project the right fuel, in order to get something that is worth fighting for. It is usually a reluctance to engage in such a process on account of the (class) impurity of populism that allows far right forces to cover this gap camouflaging themselves as the real anti-systemic defenders of “the people”.

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**POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**  
**POPULISMUS**



## **POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismissed 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 resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis, the Tea Party movement and the Trump presidency 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.