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**Populism, Anti-populism and Post-truth in Crisis-ridden Greece**

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**Abstract:**

The debate around 'post-truth' dominated the public space following the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's victory. Since then one continuously encounters references that connect 'post-truth' or 'fake news' with populism and present both phenomena as mutually reinforcing pathologies of a supposed political normality. Mainstream politicians and prominent members of the media and the academic establishment seem to claim an epistemic superiority based on the possession of a (single) truth and on incarnating a supreme rationality. The introduction of obsolete debates around truth in the confrontation between political discourses in the public sphere has led to a distinction between populism and post-truth politics, on the one hand, and politics based on facts, rationality, expert knowledge and technocracy, on the other.

In Greece the dominant anti-populist discourse proceeded quickly to employ this polemical notion of 'post-truth'. This paper aims to examine how post-truth politics were conceptualized in Greece, how they became part of the political conflict and how the rubric of post-truth was incorporated into the dominant populism/anti-populism cleavage that marks Greek politics. The Greek case is certainly under-researched as far as the 'post-truth' dimension is concerned. Finally, the paper attempts to highlight, through this examination of Greek politics, the political claims related to the polemical use of the concept of 'post-truth' in political discourses more generally, i.e. the political implications that can be produced by the inter-connection between populism and post-truth. Last but not least, the paper deals with the status of truth itself in politics. What if every truth is a post-truth? What would this mean for the political conflicts marking our era?

## Introduction

The debate around post-truth seems to be dominating the public space internationally, especially following the BREXIT referendum in the UK and the victory of Donald Trump in the US Presidential elections. Focusing on some sort of *politicised epistemology,* this debate is often shaped on the basis of a hierarchical division between the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the worthy and the unworthy, those who have a supposedly privileged access to truth and those who are denied such a privilege. Arguably, the BREXIT referendum and the Trump victory have reactivated 'elite anxiety about the consequences of political ignorance', something far from new to the extent that such fears of democracy degenerating into 'rule by the poor, who will use their power to steal from the rich' or into 'rule by the ignorant, who will use their power to do the dumbest things' have been circulating since Plato, the great enemy of democracy (Runciman 2016). And yet, as Runciman (2016) has argued, to think along these lines may be a big mistake because the emerging educational divide is not really a divide between knowledge and ignorance: 'It is a clash between one worldview and another' with hierarchies being continuously destabilized and redrawn.

Likewise, this is how Bruno Latour has reflexively summarized the lessons from the last American presidential election, where the presumption of a superior

technocratic knowledge seems to have disallowed an effective registering of growing political division and polarization:

> Indeed, our incapacity to foresee has been the main lesson of this cataclysm: how could we have been so wrong? All the polls, all the newspapers, all the commentators, the entire intelligentsia. It is as if we had completely lacked any means of encountering those whom we struggled even to name: the 'uneducated white men', the ones that 'globalization left behind'; some even tried calling them 'deplorables'. There's no question that those people are out there, but we have utterly failed to hear their voices, let alone represent them […] We, the 'intellectuals', live in a bubble (Latour 2016).

Given the disastrous side-effects of such arrogance, it is surprising that, since then, we seem to encounter more and more arguments that connect 'post-truth' and/or 'fake news' with populism and present both phenomena as mutually reinforcing pathologies of a perceived political normality backed with a reified epistemic superiority. Hugo Rifkind, for instance, columnist and lead writer of *The Times,* has, along these lines, equated fake news with populism and presented both phenomena as a two-headed beast (Rifkind 2017).

What is at stake then? Isn't it the case that the status quo, faced with the emergence of a repressed Other, often expressed through obscene and repulsive political forms, seems to radicalize its discourse? Mainstream politicians and prominent members of the media and the academic establishment seem to claim a –neutral, allegedly non-political– *epistemic superiority* based on the possession of a (single) truth and on incarnating a *supreme rationality*. This claim implies the condemnation of the irrationalism and the reliance on 'post-truth' by the opponents (populism) often irrespective of their concrete ideological profile (inclusionary vs. exclusionary). Even when shock is expressed, this is framed in terms dismissive of anything destabilizing the status quo.

In short, mainstream political forces in the West seem to claim power by right of their exclusive access to truth. In a provocative essay in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Emmett Rensin discussed how knowledge asymmetries have become not only the root of political conflicts but the basis of policy itself, arguing that the most important development in US politics of recent years is that American liberalism ceased to perceive politics as an ideological conflict but as a struggle against 'idiots unwilling to recognize liberalism's monopoly on empirical reason' (Rensin 2017). The problem with their opponents lies in the fact that they are *objectively* wrong. In this way political claims camouflage themselves as epistemic authority and demand a total extra-political acceptance.

This does not mean, yet, that it is impossible to speak about populism in epistemological terms. In fact, Saurette and Gunster (2011: 199 as quoted in Ylä-Anttila 2018: 358) coined the term 'epistemological populism', naming by this term a political epistemology that is based on the knowledge of 'the common people', which they possess by virtue of their proximity to everyday life. The true question is whether one can speak about *epistemological populism* in a non-arrogant and non-ignorant way, avoiding banal stereotypes and taking into account the political core of epistemological claims, asymmetries and struggles, especially when they enter or shape the public domain. For example, in order to explore the contesting epistemic authorities at stake, Ylä-Anttil (2018: 359) has put forward the concept of *counterknowledge*, defining it as

the knowledge that challenges establishment knowledge, replacing orthodox knowledge authorities with new ones. Hence, populist forces do not simply oppose knowledge, reason and so on, but they may also question the very foundations of established knowledge or elite knowledge, which impose the supposedly one and only rational policy choice. Recognizing that populist forces can establish their own relation with the production of knowledge, instead of treating them merely as irrational political agents, is a big step towards a better understanding of populism and its relation to post-truth and towards a more rigorous and self-reflexive *politicized epistemology*.

This paper hopes to contribute in this effort by tackling the following questions:

• How can we account in an effective and rigorous way with the emerging polarized terrain and the *truth wars* it entails?

• How can we *politically* account for emerging divisions beyond simplistic epistemic stereotypes and associated reductions?

• What is the relationship between the debates on 'post-truth', on the one hand, and that on 'populism', on the other?

Having already described the connection between populism and post-truth politics –both phenomena understood in pejorative terms– that took place in the Western political and media sphere after the double electoral shock of 2016, we will focus on how post-truth politics were conceptualized in Greece and how they were incorporated into the dominant populism/anti-populism cleavage that increasingly marks Greek politics. Despite this being a single-case study, it is anticipated that the conclusions will be more broadly relevant beyond the crisis-ridden South European landscape of the last ten years. In the final section of the paper, we will move again from the specific to the general and more abstract level, namely to the status of truth itself in politics, asking: what if every truth is a post-truth? What would that mean for properly registering the central political conflicts of our era?

## Post-truth and anti-populism in Greece

Obviously, the way in which the Greek financial crisis was managed encouraged division and polarization, since the social dislocations triggered by the implementation of neoliberal austerity measures have caused a radical restructuring of social identities and the whole party landscape. As a result, Greece seems to constitute a fertile ground for illuminating the problems of populism and post-truth. In tandem, the dominant anti-populist discourse proceeded quickly to employ a polemical notion of 'post-truth'. Indeed, the correlation of populism with post-truth has been systematically promoted in Greece as part of a stereotypical anti-populist and normativist discourse that accompanied the implementation of austerity policies in the country since 2010.

In order to provide an adequate framing and legitimization to the strategy of austerity applied in Greece since 2010, the crisis was discursively constructed not only as an economic one but also as indicative of a *moral* and a *cultural* pathology. Within this framework, the implementation of the fiscal program imposed became increasingly associated with discourses around 'normality'. Greece was portrayed as an exception to the norm, as the dysfunctional party deviating from a given European standard of normality. Therefore, the country needed guidance, discipline and even punishment in order to put its house in order and be rehabilitated into the family of 'normal' European states. Austerity policies and 'creative destruction' through the troika-

imposed structural reforms were simply presented as the necessary steps in this necessary process of transforming Greece into a normal European country.[1]

In order to acquire political effectiveness, this discourse about normality has relied on the production and demonization of its Other. Populism emerged as the synecdoche of everything pathological in Greek politics: irresponsibility, demagogy, immorality, corruption, destruction, irrationalism. Not only was it to blame for the crisis itself, but it was also what obstructed the implementation of the required rational solutions, namely austerity. Indicatively, regarding the risks of populism, Elias Papaioannou, Professor of Economics at the London Business School, wrote in the daily *Kathimerini* that 'the deepest reason for the failure of the memoranda policies was the diffuse populism that dominated the country' (Papaioannou 2016), while European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis argued that Greece has been forced to suffer tougher austerity than it would have been necessary because of the populist stance of the Greek government in 2015 (Dombrovskis 2016).

A necessary step, therefore, in achieving normality is the prevalence of responsibility and rationality over populism understood either as the mark of a particular party formation (SYRIZA[2]) or as a generalized political spirit or political culture that has been supposedly dominant in Greece at least since 1974, during the post-authoritarian period. This discursive scheme can be found not only in political discourses but also in journalistic and academic arguments, creating a mutually reinforcing interdependent triangle.

In another characteristic example, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, current Prime Minister of Greece, portrayed himself, especially since 2016 when he ascended to the leadership of New Democracy[3], as a tough opponent of populism to which he opposes pragmatism, rationality, truth and responsibility. In an interview with *Newsweek* in December 2016, Mitsotakis argued that there is a clear distinction between populism and realism, one which the world is gradually discovering but which was always present in Greek politics since democracy was re-established (Mitsotakis 2016a). Speaking in the plenary of the European People's Party, he argued that: 'Greece was the first country to bring a populist government into power. Nevertheless, the pendulum is now shifting in the opposite direction. We will prove that a policy based on truth, rationality and moderation will prevail again' (Mitsotakis 2017a). Finally, at a relatively

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[1]For a more detailed analysis see Stavrakakis & Galanopoulos 2019.

[2] SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) was founded in 2004, as an electoral coalition of radical left political parties and extra-parliamentarian organizations. In July 2013, SYRIZA dissolved its original structure and became a unified party. It became the main opposition party in Greece during the double elections of 2012 and won the elections of January and September 2015. SYRIZA remained in power, as the largest party of the coalition government it had formed with the right-wing populist party of Independent Greeks (ANEL), for four years, till the elections of July 2019, which were won by Mitsotakis' New Democracy.

[3]New Democracy is a center-right party, which was founded in 1974. New Democracy and the center-left Pasok were the main pillars of the Greek two-party system that collapsed in the double elections of May-June 2012. During the 2015-2019 period, it was the main opposition party and returned to power in the recent elections of July 2019.

recent Economist conference in Athens he stated that 'New Democracy's task is to lead the country safely in the post-populist era' (Mitsotakis 2016b). Such formulations continue to mark New Democracy's discourse in power.

It is precisely along these lines that the introduction of the epistemic oppositions between truth and post-truth have reshaped the confrontation between political discourses in the Greek public sphere, associating populism and post-truth politics, on one hand, and an anti-populist politics based on facts, rationality, expert knowledge and technocracy, on the other. The dichotomy 'truth vs. lie/post-truth' became identical to the dichotomy 'modernization vs. populism' that runs through the whole post-authoritarian period in Greece. Here modernization is associated with truth, rationality, responsibility and is perceived as 'the normal', while populism is equated with demagogy, lies, irresponsibility, irrationality and thus is presented as an abnormal, deviant form of politics.

We can observe a very interesting example in another speech by Kyriakos Mitsotakis:

> Power itself in Greece is interwoven with the need to manipulate messages to serve its own political interests. However, the systematic distortion of a series of concepts –the so-called post-truth politics– were introduced in Greece before becoming –as a concept– part of the global vocabulary. We have been at the vanguard in this turn of events. We have perfected the language of populism. We, as New Democracy, have chosen to use the term 'Truth Agreement'. We did it precisely because we wanted to demonstrate, through the employment of the concept of 'truth', how we perceive the political discourse against populism (Mitsotakis 2017b).

In fact, already in 2014, former Prime Minister (2012-2015) Antonis Samaras had declared:

> Populism relies mainly on 'sweet lies', on false promises of 'easy solutions' and 'quick fixes', totally unsubstantiated but very 'attractive', leading, of course, to grave disappointments and to social unrest. Extremism relies on hate and unmasked violence, widespread expectations of disaster and nihilist ideologies, leading to the complete breakdown of public order and democratic legitimacy. Populism often feeds the fire of extremism and vice versa. The underlying crisis is their common breading ground and together they generate a vicious cycle, a devastating process, during which social cohesion and democracy usually fall apart. So what do we do during such crisis to avert those twin evils of populism and extremism? For starters, we fight the lies with the Truth (Samaras 2014).

Not surprisingly, we also meet such arguments in the social democratic camp as well. At an event discussing national-populism, Evangelos Venizelos, former leader of PASOK[4] and former vice-president of the Greek government (2012-2015), stated that the basic dimension of national-populism involves an anti-rational view and therefore a new rational front, a new enlightenment is required (Venizelos 2017a). Presenting the book *Populism. A short introduction* by Mudde and Kaltwasser, he mentioned that 'My approach is that populism is not an ideology. It is a cognitive and cultural model, which

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[4]PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) was founded by Andreas Papandreou in1974. It was the dominant party of the post-junta era but its appeal and electoral power declined massively during the crisis period.

is intersected with holistic character ideologies. In fact, populism is challenging the achievements of modernity' (Venizelos 2017b).

Truth then appears to be an important link within the equivalential chain of normality and seems to be directly related to responsibility and rationality. Populism, on the other hand, is linked to irrationality and lies. Accordingly, anti-populism is now framed within stark dichotomies like the one between the rational and the irrational, the normal and the pathological. In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau had already connected the pejorative depiction of populism in the academic and political fields with the denigration of the masses and the old discussion concerning mass psychology, arguing that populism is often presented as the simple opposite of political forms dignified with the status of full rationality (Laclau 2005: 19).

Indeed, the denouncement of the *abnormal* populism by the proponents of normality often employs pathological metaphors, castigating the 'disease' of populism – which is seen as a virus-like infection– or as a monstrosity, using either zoomorphic metaphors or references to the beast/monster of populism. For example, former Prime Minister Samaras argued in his speech during the proceedings of the European People's Party conference in Madrid in 2015 that populism is not an ideology but a disease connected with extreme parties from both sides of the political spectrum (Samaras 2015). For her part, Anna Diamantopoulou, former education minister of PASOK, has declared that populism is more than a threat, that the monster of populism must be crushed for good, otherwise it will eventually and terminally poison the healthy prospects of the country (Diamantopoulou 2016). The medical metaphor of the 'virus' has been used lately in relation to fake news as well, with arguments calling for the *vaccination* of society against the virus of fake news; at any rate, the latest attempts to understand the spread of post-truth and fake news are often based on the use of epidemiological models for the transmission of infectious diseases (see for example Kucharski 2016), providing another connection with populism, which is treated in similar terms.

## Truth, post-truth and political representation

The stark anti-populism described above simultaneously affects the depiction of the voter in mainstream discourse. Anti-populism creates an image of voters as, essentially, people guided by their emotions and not by documented, evidence-based positions and rational views. This discourse creates an image of cynical populist politicians, of shameless demagogues, who, by using fraudulent means and utilizing fake news, deceive the people of lower social strata and the uneducated. Thus, voters are presented as prone to deception, victims of their addiction to the sweet venom of populism. Arguably, this depiction of voters as an ignorant mass, guided by emotions, passions, stereotypes and superstitions, ultimately serves the purpose of delegitimizing popular sovereignty in favor of market and technocratic sovereignty.

For example, in an article entitled 'The Last Spasms of Reactive Populism', Aristides Hatzis, identified some similarities among those who voted Donald Trump in the US presidential elections, those who voted in favor of Brexit in the British EU

referendum and those who voted 'No' in the Greek referendum[5]. He compares these three different votes on different issues with different stakes and finds that voters in all three cases were characterized by mistrust towards experts and intellectuals, rejection of rational arguments and facts, political ignorance, economic illiteracy and 'the fact that they did not have the tools to interpret the complex world that ultimately scared them' (Hatzis 2016). In fact, the article ends with the sweeping suggestion that what these voters actually reject is the 21st century itself.

Yet, as Benjamin De Cleen has argued, populism is not necessarily demagogic while the equation of populism with post-truth politics and the subsequent critique of post-truth populist politics can lead to a rather problematic delegitimization of 'the people' as led by emotions rather than by well-informed opinions. The idea, he continues, that 'objective facts' should shape public opinion loses sight of the unavoidable emotional and affective elements present in all kinds of politics (De Cleen 2018: 270).

Indeed, the debate over populism, post-truth politics and fake news on the one hand, and rationality, truth and politics based on facts and knowledge of experts on the other, essentially presupposes the transformation of political confrontation into a supposedly neutral epistemological debate around truth, thereby causing a series of concerns about the very essence of the political. We no longer have a confrontation between different political alternatives, but between what is true and what is false. The policy that allegedly bears the 'quality' of truth presents itself as self-evident, as one that cannot be challenged, whereas all other proposals are reduced to cheap and even conscious lies, with the sole aim of luring the popular vote. Truth dictates a single policy (TINA-There is no alternative), the rational and responsible one, which, in the case of Greece, will at last make the country a normal European country.

Ultimately, the result of this strategy is not only the elimination of populism from political confrontation and the public sphere but the end of *politics* itself, if politics is indeed regarded as a struggle between alternative political projects. Thus, we are faced with the triumph of the post-political (Mouffe 2005: 7), with the prevalence of meritocratic technocracy, of the responsible rationalist who reveals the one and only truth and can develop the only political project that corresponds to this truth. Whatever falls outside this consensus, whatever challenges even at a very minimal level the dominant doctrine, is immediately rejected as populism or as post-truth and lies. The conflict between radically different political projects is transformed into a conflict between rational, technocratic decisions and absurd, emotional, populist attitudes.

How can critical discourse reflect upon these developments and position itself between two types of claims equally problematic: one that absolutizes the desire of an –admittedly marginalized and forgotten– Other for recognition and identity, investing it with an often obscene and illiberal enjoyment; and another one that absolutizes a truth regime that legitimizes explosive inequalities, functions post-democratically and, ultimately, in a censoring way?

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[5]After its electoral victory of January 2015, SYRIZA started a negotiation process with the international creditors of the country aiming at relaxing austerity. The negotiations went on for five months, when late at night of 27th June 2015 prime minister Tsipras announced his decision to hold a referendum regarding the latest proposal by the European institutions and the IMF.

## What is to be done?

A set of distinct issues, from the more ontological to the more ontic level, are at stake here. For a start, we almost never question the status of 'truth' as the indisputable and taken-for-granted foundation of social life. Yet, is truth the only value upon which a good life can be based? What about desire, enjoyment, etc.? Furthermore, is there only one truth available on each issue? And how can we be sure that we can algorithmically master it? It is perhaps time to start seriously reflecting on such ontological and epistemological issues. What if our different versions of truth are but distinct social constructions over-determined by our social, class and identity positioning? What if, in other words, the very nature of social reality and truth is inherently partial and 'mythical'?

Indeed, in social life, we cannot seem to escape what Roland Barthes calls *myth*: a special type of discourse that becomes naturalized, represses its contingent and historical articulation and presents itself as an obvious and indisputable certainty, as *truth*. At this point, Barthes' critical stance is of great interest to us. As he emphasizes in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France,

> it was a question [...] of understanding (or of describing) how a society produces stereotypes, i.e., triumphs of artifice, which it then consumes as innate meanings, i.e., triumphs of nature. Semiology (my semiology, at least) is generated by an intolerance of this mixture of bad faith and good conscience, which characterizes the general morality [...] *Language worked on by power*: that was the object of this first semiology (Barthes 1979: 11-12).

Truth and knowledge production –both mediated by language and discourse– are always over-determined by processes of articulation that very rarely operate in isolation from power relations. This is why Foucault, always alert to the intricacies of the power/knowledge nexus, coins the paradoxical term 'Regimes of Truth', meaning the frameworks that regulate public discourse and distinguish what can be said from what cannot, what is from what is not given credibility and assigned truth value (Foucault 1991: 73).

What then if, to put it provocatively, every *truth* is a *post-truth*? It is only from the point of view of a mythical, unreflexive attachment to (our) 'regime of truth' that post-truth can be so easily delineated and condemned. Yet, this is precisely what puts in doubt the *epistemic* validity of such distributions. This does not mean that we are condemned to inhabit a relativist –if not solipsistic– universe. From a Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view, for example, it is possible to subscribe to a radical constructionist understanding of social reality without renouncing the primacy of our encounters with the *real*; only this real is not a representationalist real, it is not identical to our symbolic and imaginary constructions, it is what exceeds this reality, what stimulates our desire to represent it but also reveals the inadequacy of our (always partial) representations.[6]

Yet, this is precisely what puts in doubt the *epistemic* validity of such distributions and highlights, instead, their *political* character. In fact, what seems to be

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[6] For a more comprehensive elaboration see Stavrakakis 2007: 5-14.

unfolding before our eyes is the collapse of the politico-symbolic preconditions of sharing a common, constructed truth, a 'truth' that has become hegemonic, politically and discursively establishing a certain consensus. Suddenly the (supposed) One is split into Two. And thus we encounter a division between two antithetical –equally fantasmatic (underpinned by desire and the quest for enjoyment, for different types of enjoyment)– regimes of truth, between the camps of their adherents that increasingly realize that the minimum symbolic bond binding them together is not there anymore, something dissolving the chances to sustain –or reach again in the short-term– an *agonistic* compromise à la Chantal Mouffe (2013). As Bruno Latour has cogently put it:

> We thus find ourselves with our countries split in two, each half becoming ever less capable of grasping its own reality, let alone the other side's. The first half — let us call them the globalized— believe that the horizon of emancipation and modernity (often confused with the reign of finance) can still expand to embrace the whole planet. Meanwhile, the second half has decided to retreat to the Aventine Hill, dreaming of a return to a past world. Thus, two utopias: a utopia of the future confronting a utopia of the past. The opposition between Clinton and Trump illustrated this rather well: both occupied their own bubbles of unrealism. For now, the utopia of the past has won out. But there's little reason to think that the situation would be much better and more sustainable had the utopia of the future triumphed instead (Latour 2016).

We only have to go back to the –partly psychoanalytically inspired– work of Adorno and Horkheimer to realize the grave dangers entailed by such a move. In the *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer shows how, far from being exempt from ideology, an instrumental conception of reason –conceived as a methodical process of coordination focused on means and bracketing ends– is exactly what permits the ideological manipulation of reason. Instrumentalization makes reason itself irrational and can only function as a legitimization of dystopian orders (Horkheimer 1947).

In fact, all major theories of ideology in modernity –from the science of ideology introduced by De Tracy up to the theories of Marx and even Karl Mannheim to a certain extent– have assumed an extreme opposition between what is true and what is false along representationalist lines. This assumption was consistent with the drive of Enlightenment modernity to replace all uncertain beliefs with rational representations of the social, to replace the false with the true, which it claimed to know fully and to master thoroughly. It is precisely this representationalism that led to the crisis and dislocation of all these projects. The intellectual history of 'ideology' reveals a genealogy of failure and puts in question the whole representationalist enterprise (Stavrakakis1997). The crucial issue here is who is able to judge true from false? Whenever one person –be it the scientist or the party leader– or social group – the intelligentsia, the party or technocracy– has claimed to possess a supreme knowledge mirroring reality –crystallized in ideas such as class consciousness, racial purity, or TINA and the like– and giving it the right to impose it on those suffering from 'false consciousness,' the result has been disastrous. What dominates here is the fantasy of 'a direct and unmediated access to reality' (Fink 2007: 222). Who can seriously claim today to embody such a power?

The imposition of a singular rationality is usually done by virtue of a representationalist/cognitive conceptualization of science and, by extension, of

evidence-based politics, as the eliminator of 'false knowledge' through reality-testing. Lacan's critique of reality-testing is revealing here to the extent that such an imaginary had also plagued psychoanalysis: 'the analyst's ego, which must be said to be autonomous at the very least, is the measure of reality and, for the analysand, his own analysis constitutes the testing of reality. Nothing of the kind could possibly be at stake within the confines of analysis' (Lacan 1966: 365). Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the authoritarianism and didacticism implicit in such a view: 'For contemporary psychoanalysis this relationship to reality is self-evident. They gauge the patient's defections from it using the authoritarian principle that has been employed by educators since time immemorial' (p. 493). The same authoritarianism characterized the critique of ideology within modernity and led to its theoretical and operational discrediting (Bourdieu 1992).

Hence the theory of ideology and contemporary political discourse need to abandon such discredited representationalist conceptions of truth and reality; they need to move beyond objectivism and rationalism. The 'myth of reality' as an objective whole can only be an effect of signification and discursive articulation (Lacan 1955–1956: 199, 249): 'On reflection do we need psychoanalysis to tell us that? Aren't we astounded that philosophers didn't emphasize ages ago that human reality is irreducibly structured as signifying?' (p. 199). Moreover, it is an articulation rooted in fantasy (Lacan 1972–1973: 95). What Lacan formulated from his 1955–1956 seminar is today a commonplace in social theory, epistemology, and the study of ideology. Within such a framework, 'reality' becomes the ideological representation *par excellence*, a point forcefully made by Slavoj Žižek (1989) in his *Sublime Object of Ideology*, arguably the most important contribution of psychoanalysis to the theory of ideology in the last two decades: Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself. In vain do we try to break out of the ideological dream by 'opening our eyes and trying to see reality as it is', by throwing away the ideological spectacles. (Žižek 1989: 45, 48).

And reality-testing is, once more, of no use here:

An ideology is really 'holding us' only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself. How then would our poor German, if he were a good anti-Semite, react to this gap between the ideological figure of the Jew (schemer, wire-puller, exploiting our brave men and so on) and the common everyday experience of his good neighbor, Mr Stern? His answer would be to turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism: 'You see how dangerous they are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind the mask of everyday appearance – and it is exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of their Jewish nature'. An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor (Žižek 1989: 49).

Ideology, then, would connote all our attempts to manage subjective lack and the 'lack in the Other' through (discursive and fantasmatic) articulations of reality promising fullness, integration, harmony, and guaranteed by an unmediated access to epistemic truth. Traversing such simplistic truth claims, the critique of ideology would then be recast as an effort to deconstruct ideological discourse, traverse fantasy and – at the ethico-political level – symbolically register ontological lack.

## Conclusion

This paper focused on the correlation between populism and post-truth and the polemical uses of the notion of 'post-truth' within mainstream political discourses in the West. We started by describing the emerging terrain: Brexit and Trump were the inaugural events of the ongoing truth wars. Specific political forces, usually of an elitist and liberal background, claimed an epistemic superiority against their 'irrational' opponents and the 'ignorant' masses that support them. Yet, the issue is not of an epistemic order, because the rationality that is supposedly prioritized is often of an instrumental, political nature. The epistemic authority, the access to the one and only truth, is often understood as the foundation of political authority in our post-political era. This stance is not solely an epistemic issue but a deeply political matter, and this very political essence we attempted to register and restore in the first section of this paper.

Trying to understand more thoroughly the relationship between the debates on post-truth and the ones on populism we moved towards crisis-ridden Greece. On the basis of an analysis of the Greek case, we examined how Greek mainstream anti-populist discourse employed the polemical notion of 'post-truth'. The Greek case helped us highlight the political claims and narratives involved in this debate. Finally, and on the basis of that case-specific analysis, we tried to challenge the very notion of truth at a broader level, in its rather simplistic, mythical renderings. We argue that we need to discuss the political implications that can be produced by the connection of populism and post-truth, but what is also needed at the same time is to dig even deeper and explore the *political* implications of our constant appeals to truth. In this way, we may not only discover the 'truth in the heart of heresy' but also 'death in the heart of truth', quoting a very intriguing dialogue from the British TV series *Doctor Who*.

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

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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.