THE EUROPEAN POPULIST CHALLENGE

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Summary In today's Europe, the word 'populism' usually refers to right-wing populism or the populist extreme right. Is, however, the concept of 'populism' the proper theoretico-political instrument through which such identifications should be perceived, categorized and debated? What are the implications (direct and indirect) of such a naming? And what are the risks for critical analysis and for democratic politics in the European context? The hypothesis explored in this essay is that sticking to a restrictive association between 'populism' and the extreme right poses certain dangers that have to be seriously taken into account, especially in times of crisis. For a start, it is often premised on a rather simplistic euro-centrism that reduces the broad conceptual spectrum covered by the category 'populism' in its global use to a very particular European experience and then essentializes the resulting association, over-extending its scope. In addition, the category 'populism' is often used to describe political forces, identities and discourses in which the role of 'the people' is only secondary or peripheral, to the extent that it has to coincide with strongly hierarchical and elitist visions of society. What complicates things even further is that, within the context of the European (economic and political) crisis, whoever questions/resists the austerity agenda – especially on the left – is increasingly discredited and denounced as an *irresponsible populist*. Indeed, it is not by coincidence that doubts are increasingly voiced both in the theoretical and in the political literature regarding the rationale behind such a strong association between populism and the extreme right. A series of points will thus be raised that may help us develop a plausible theoretico-political strategy in the new emerging conditions from a discursive perspective.[*]

Keywords populism, Europe, discourse, extreme right, crisis

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The People and Populism

References to 'the people' are a constant theme in political life. This is especially the case within the context of political modernity, where 'popular sovereignty' and 'representation' have replaced the 'Divine Right of Kings' as founding fictions permitting the suspension of disbelief and the legitimation of political order. Modern democracy, as Lincoln famously put it, entails the promise of 'Government of the People, by the People and for the People'. Yet, already from its inception in the seventeenth century, 'the sovereignty of the people had been filled with surprises for those who invoked it. It was a more dynamic fiction than the one it replaced, more capable of serving as a goal to be sought, never attainable, always receding, but approachable and worth approaching' (Morgan, 1988: 306).

Indeed, one of the sources of this dynamism can be located in the constitutive polysemy or even ambiguity of 'the people' in modern European languages: 'the people' refers to both the totality of a given political community, to the citizenry as a unitary body-politic (hence the numerous constitutional references to 'We, the people...'), and, at the same time, designates 'the poor, the underprivileged and the excluded' (Agamben, 2004); in other words, the underdog marginalised from political participation and the enjoyment of political rights and socio-economic privileges. Simply put, 'the people' is simultaneously *part* and *whole*: 'By immemorial tradition the term (like *populus* and *demos* before it) has meant both the whole political community and some smaller group within it; furthermore, while it has often happened that one group identified as "the

people" was a political elite from which most were excluded, the term "people" has also been regularly used to denote the excluded lower orders' (Canovan, 2005: 5).

Accordingly, 'populism' as a term usually refers to movements, parties and leaders claiming to represent the interests of 'the people' in this second sense of the term. Thus, populism invariably involves some kind of opposition or revolt against the established structure of power as well as established values (Canovan, 1999: 3). However, like 'the people' itself – and although 'populism' has a long history within political theory and analysis – it nevertheless remains an essentially contestable term, to the extent that no consensus exists on the particular operational criteria allowing the categorisation of a particular movement or discourse as populist or on the implications of such a categorisation. The passage from theory to empirical study and back is never easy, especially given the immense proliferation of populist phenomena in contemporary global politics. Indeed, against the background of traditional populist mobilisations (Agrarian populism in the US, Russian *Narodnichestvo* and traditional Latin American populisms in the 1940s and 1950s – see Pedler, 1927; Di Tella, 1965; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Canovan, 1981; Kazin, 1995; Creech, 2006; Luna, 2010), the last decades have signalled a resurgence of populist phenomena, especially in Latin America (Chavismo in Venezuela, Kirchnerismo in Argentina, etc. – see Gratius, 2007; Barrett, Chavez & Rodriguez-Garavito, 2008; Lievesley & Ludlam, 2009; Panizza, 2005, 2009; Sidicaro, 2010) and, more recently, the US (where, ironically, both the *Tea Party* movement and Obama have been branded as po-

pulists – see Ashbee, 2011; Etzioni, 2011; Pease, 2010; Savage, 2011; MacAskill, 2012), not to mention aspects of the so-called *Arab Spring*.

Needless to say, Europe itself has not been left untouched, since it has witnessed in its core the development of extreme right-wing populism in countries like France (Le Pen), Austria (Haider) and elsewhere (De Vos, 2002; Bruff, 2003; Mudde, 2007; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Berezin, 2009). Very recently the *Sarrazin incident* has opened a critical debate in Germany about the possible emergence of a German right-wing populist movement; the Netherlands has also witnessed a long discussion on Geert Wilders' extreme anti-Islamist, right-wing populism. Last but not least, Greece has recently been added to this list while still struggling with its own populist legacy (comprising very diverse manifestations, from PASOK's left-wing populism in the 1980s to the religious populism of the late Archbishop Christodoulos located in the turn of the 21st century – see Lyrintzis, 1987; Spourdalakis, 1988; Stavrakakis, 2003; Pantazopoulos, 2007).

Populism: Introducing the European Debate

At any rate, there is no doubt that in today's Europe, the word 'populism' usually refers to right-wing populism or the populist extreme right. We are, of course, entitled – indeed obliged – to deal with this phenomenon, especially given its pan-European manifestations, about which many social scientists have contributed illuminating accounts and theorizations. Clearly, Walter Baier is right when, in a recent article, he points out that the problem should not be approached merely at the national level,

since it seems to 'indicate a profound change in the political geography of Europe as an entity' (Baier, 2011: 128; see also Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2007).

The question is how exactly to deal with this problem conceptually and politically; in particular, is the category of 'populism' the most suitable way? If, that is to say, what we are currently facing is the pan-European rise of a nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionist and, very often, violent extreme right (the cases of France, Hungary and Greece are indicative), is the concept of 'populism' the proper theoretico-political instrument through which the problem should be perceived, categorized and debated? What are the implications (direct and indirect) of such a naming? And what are the risks for critical analysis and for democratic political strategy?

My hypothesis is that sticking to a restrictive association between 'populism' and the extreme right poses certain dangers that have to be seriously taken into account, especially in times of crisis. Indeed, it is not by coincidence that doubts are increasingly voiced both in the theoretical and in the political literature regarding the rationale behind such a strong association. Étienne Balibar is right to point out that today there is a divergence between those theorists and analysts for whom a populist movement is essentially 'reactionary' – this is the case not only in the 'etymological' sense that he mentions, but also in the political sense, which is equally important in our context – and those theorists

> for whom it brings back (even in a mystified, or destructive way) an element of popular contestation of power, and resistance to the 'de-democratization' of neo-liberal 'democracies', a voice of the voiceless without which

politics becomes reduced to the technocratic 'governance' of social tensions which are deemed both unavoidable and inessential (since they do not involve *historical alternatives*) (Balibar, 2011).

This is obviously a reference to the TINA (There Is No Alternative) dogma which is still dominant in many circles, including EU elites. And, of course, Balibar's comments do not emerge out of the blue, since this second camp has been gaining in credibility, theoretical sophistication and analytical rigor in the last few years thanks to the innovative approaches to populism initiated by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Margaret Canovan, Jacques Rancière and others (see, for example, Laclau, 2005; Canovan, 1999; Rancière, 2007).

Theory: Problems and Solutions

These predominantly discursive/structural approaches have, indeed, changed the landscape as far as the study of populism is concerned. Up to very recently, the dominant trend in most research conducted in this area (Germani, 1978; Hahn, 1983; McMath, 1993; Hayward, 1996; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Hawkins, 2010; Cannon, 2010) has been to study populist mobilisations in different parts of the world separately, in (relative) isolation. The lack of a sufficiently flexible yet rigorous theoretical and conceptual framework has resulted in the production of isolated case-studies employing diverse theoretical perspectives and methodologies, and thus forestalling the emergence of a comprehensive mapping and interpretation of populist politics at the global level. On the other hand, some brave attempts to articulate a more wide-ranging approach with 'global' pretensions have largely remained at a descriptive level, at best producing a variety of typologies of populism(s) on the basis of a checklist of 'symptoms' (Wiles, 1969; Canovan, 1981, 1982; Taguieff, 1997; Taggart, 2000). These symptoms include hostility towards institutions, anti-elitism, an unmediated emphasis on the role of the leader, etc. No matter how useful such classifications can be, they have been unable to integrate the ideal-types formulated on the way into a comprehensive framework with global reach, a framework that would be sensitive both to the historically specific experience of different countries and areas, and to the universal forces that determine identification processes and identity formation. They have thus historically failed to produce operational definitions of populism, to illuminate what is unique to populism as a type of interpellation and an object of collective identification, and to clarify the relation between populism and democracy.[1]

Once more, the lack of a rigorous negotiation of the theory/analysis divide and the difficulty of arriving at a commonly acceptable and sufficiently flexible definition of populism have led to rather poor results. It comes as no surprise that almost all publications on populism, books and articles alike, share a rather pessimistic conclusion, stressing the essential contestability of the concept as well as the stark differences between existing approaches to po-

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[1] What this picture underscores is that a truly comparative study of populist movements in their global manifestations (Sartori, 1991; Rose, 1991) must be guided by a flexible, yet thorough theoretical and conceptual apparatus, something that, as we shall see, a discursive orientation can amply offer.

pulism. As Margaret Canovan points out, although the term is frequently used, it remains exceptionally vague 'and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena' (Canovan, 1981: 3). In fact, she even goes on to admit that it can be 'doubted whether it could be said to mean anything at all' (*ibid*.: 5). And this is not a conclusion confined to the 1980s; it is still the dominant view, as a recent Open University textbook on the concept of populism reveals: 'Populism is a difficult, slippery concept' (Taggart, 2000: 2). Needless to say, passing from academic reflection to public debate, conceptual confusion is further exacerbated by the distance between journalistic and social-scientific uses of the category.

What can a discursive approach contribute here (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 1999; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000; Howarth, 2000; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Howarth & Torfing, 2005)? Initiated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, discourse theory – also known as the Essex School (Townshend, 2003, 2004) – combines a theoretically sophisticated grasping of the processes through which social meaning is articulated with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points and their differentiation from other discourses in a bid to hegemonise the public sphere and to influence decision-making. Here, the term 'discourse' does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all 'systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects' (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000: 3-4) through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers. Interestingly, populism has

been, already from the 1970s, one of the main *foci* of Laclau's discourse analysis (Laclau, 1977), to which he has recently devoted a monograph (Laclau, 2005 – see also his relevant debate with Zizek: Laclau, 2006; Zizek, 2006a, 2006b); it has also been a central priority in debates within the Essex School at large (Panizza, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2004, 2005; Arditi, 2007).

Approaches to populism elaborated within a discursive framework or influenced by it, have indeed contributed a series of operational criteria promising to resolve the aforementioned analytical impasses. In particular, they highlight the importance of ascertaining whether a given discursive practice under examination is (a) articulated around the nodal point 'the people' or other (non-populist or anti-populist) nodal points, and (b) to what extent the representation of society it offers is predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two main blocs: the establishment, the power bloc, vs. the underdog, 'the people' (in opposition to dominant political discourses asserting the continuity and homogeneity of the social fabric and prioritising non-antagonistic technocratic solutions). From this point of view, populism denotes neither a set of particular ideological contents nor a given organisational pattern, but rather a discursive logic, a mode of representing social and political space which, no doubt, influences both these realms. Through the utilisation of such formal criteria, this discursive orientation offers the possibility of developing rigorous typologies of populist movements, identities and discourses. Thus, the articulatory nature of populist discourses and the flexibility of populist ideological articulations, both underlined by discourse theorists,

can illuminate the paradox of antinomic formulations of populist ideology, from socialist-populist hybrids to be found in contemporary Latin America (Lievesley & Ludlam, 2009: 17; Panizza, 2009: 178) to the paradoxical elitist populism characteristic of extreme right-wing movements in Europe (Caiani & Della Porta, 2011: 198), and up to so-called 'media populism' (Mazzoleni *et al.*, 2003; Eco, 2007; Simons, 2011).

Such a flexible, yet rigorous conception of populism can also illuminate what still remains a major point of contention in the ongoing debate: the ambiguous relation between populism and democracy (Mény & Surel, 2002). On the one hand, the particular ways through which some populist movements articulate their claims to represent 'the people' – relying on charismatic leaders, fuelled by resentment, virtually bypassing the institutional framework of representative democracy and/or often containing an illiberal, anti-rights and nationalist potential (Taggart, 2000) – need to be taken very seriously into account. And yet such a picture cannot exhaust the immense variety of populist articulations. Indeed, by representing excluded groups, by putting forward an egalitarian agenda, other types of populism – combining the formal populist core with the legacy of the radical democratic tradition – can also be seen as an integral part of democratic politics, as a source for the renewal of democratic institutions (Canovan, 1999). From this point of view, the more Western democracies turn to de-politicised forms of governance (to what Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe call *post-democracy* – see Mouffe, 2000; Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2007), the more populism will figure as a suit-able vehicle available for a much-needed re-politicisation (Laclau, 2005).

From Theory to Politics...

Let me now turn from theory to politics. In political discourse, precisely because of the aforementioned dominance of the association between 'populism' and the extreme right in the European context, the shift from a totally 'negative' to a more ambivalent/multiple/nuanced or even potentially 'positive' understanding of populism – a possibility indicated by a discursive approach – can take paradoxical forms. To start with a relatively graphic example, the introductory text in a recent Green European Foundation publication on *Populism in Europe* begins with a depiction of populist movements as a force threatening 'the most fundamental European values', denying 'notions of diversity, open-mindedness, critical (self)reflection and tolerance' (Meijers, 2011: 5). Very quickly, however, on the next page, some elements of contextualization and qualification start to emerge: 'Today, as we have seen, the concept is once again undergoing transformation. The quest in this book is finding out *what populism means today and how to deal with it*. The description mentioned above serves as a starting point' (*ibid.*: 6).

Likewise, in their own text from the same collective volume, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Edouard Caudot start by illustrating the current pan-European strengthening of populist parties and movements in very dark colours: 'An unpleasant wind is blowing over Europe. The air is heavy and for the past few years, black thunderous clouds have been gathering over the continent' (Cohn-Bendit & Caudot, 2011: 15). And

yet, their contribution ends with a positive endorsement of a progressive populism:

> What is lacking in the fight against right-wing populism [...] is indeed a competing fantasy, an alternative culture, a discourse which deals with society's frustrations. And, it is clear that since the end of the communist and socialist utopias, the left has never managed to offer a similar alternative. [...] This is the challenge that the Greens and more broadly all progressive forces face, if they truly desire to respond to the threat of right-wing populist tendencies. It is important to use that resentment and its energy, not directing this towards a specific population, but channelling it in a positive way. [...] This obviously requires fundamental reforms, and perhaps even the recognition, to quote Etienne Balibar, of a form of 'positive populism' that can secure the support of many. The project may well be long and undoubtedly complicated; but without it, reviving hope would be difficult (*ibid.*: 21-23).

To refer once more to Walter Baier, he has also formulated the challenge for the left in somewhat similar terms: 'undoubtedly the question is complicated for the left. It must oppose the austerity policies of governments, the IMF and European institutions at the same time as it opposes *the populisms which try to exploit them to foment nationalisms*' (Baier, 2011: 131, emphasis added).

Three Analytical Propositions

How can we effectively deal with all these challenges, paradoxes and complications (both theoretical and political)? Far from aspiring to resolve them, I would like to conclude with a series of points that may help us develop a plausible theoretico-political strategy in the new emerging conditions, drawing on the discursive orientation briefly discussed.

1. Beyond Euro-centrism – Simply put, my main fear is that many of our analyses suffer from a certain euro-centrism that reduces the conceptual spectrum covered by the category 'populism' in its global use to a very particular European experience – extreme right-wing xenophobic movements and parties – and then essentializes the resulting association, over-extending the application of this contingent European meaning and elevating it into a universal and trans-historical criterion. It is, perhaps, time to take seriously into account the complexity and historical/political variability of populism(s) as well as its progressive potential, a potential most visibly present in contemporary Latin American experience (see, in this respect, Gratius, 2007; Barrett, Chavez & Rodriguez-Garavito, 2008; Lievesley & Ludlam, 2009; Panizza, 2005, 2009).

Indeed, as Ernesto Laclau has put it, populism 'is not a fixed constellation but a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses' (Laclau, 2005: 176). Citing Yves Surel, he concludes that: 'Against the idea according to which populism would represent a stable and coherent trend typical of the new radical Right, we want to defend the idea that it is less of a political family than a dimension of the discursive and normative register adopted by political actors' (Surel in: Laclau, 2005: 176). Hence the immense plurality of populist hybrids in the global environment:

democratic/anti-democratic, institutional/anti-institutional, refined/vulgar, agonistic/antagonistic, in the streets/in power, top-down/bottom-up, etc.

2. Euphemism versus Accuracy – I also think that, falling victims to the aforementioned over-extension, we often use the category 'populism' to describe political forces, actors and discourses in which the role of 'the people' is only secondary or peripheral and where, in many cases, the reference is simply opportunistic. For example, isn't it a euphemism – obeying a certain type of pro-European political correctness – to use 'populist' to refer to forces that are outright racist, chauvinist or even fascist or neo-Nazi? What seems to be needed is a willingness to move beyond such undue 'politeness' and apply a rigorous framework for the analysis and evaluation of such political discourses. After all, this is the *Dark Continent*, as Mark Mazower has put it, and it should come as no surprise that such phenomena still flourish around us.

Once more, a crucial test to help us in this exploration is offered by the discursive approach outlined above. Thus, we should always ask where reference to 'the people' is located within a given discourse: does it function as the nodal point, as a central point of reference? Or is it located at the periphery of the discursive structure under examination? If, to refer once more to Baier's previously cited formulation, the aim of European right-wing populisms is '*to foment nationalisms*', then maybe we are dealing with primarily 'nationalist' discourses where references to 'the people' are only peripheral and/or secondary.[2]

In fact, in addition to being of peripheral importance, 'the people' of the extreme right is often of a very particular type that creates considerable distance from the global populist canon. This is because it has to coincide with strongly hierarchical and elitist visions of society. In a recent extensive survey of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany, Caiani and Della Porta have indeed observed that 'the people' are very often referred to: 'They are defined as suffering from the misdeeds of the elite, and in need of protection by the extreme right itself'. However, the prognosis here 'is not to return the power to the people, but to advocate it to an exclusive (more or less heroic) elite', something often missed in the mainstream euro-centric analyses of populism (Caiani & Della Porta, 2011: 197). This clearly points to 'some tensions in the conceptualization of populism when applied to the extreme right' (*ibid*.: 198).

At best, then, references to 'the people' constitute a secondary moment in the extreme right discursive articulation – but it can also be an opportunistic rhetorical strategy definitely inadequate to provide these movements with a proper name. Ironically, mainstream parties know that already; they are already aware that the extreme right is generally not very serious about 'the people'. This is why, for example, when such po-

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[2] It would be a mistake here to take 'nation' and 'people' as merely synonymous or always articulated in the same way. This is most clearly shown in the many instances where political antagonism leads to their ideological articulation in opposite camps or radically transforms their meaning; recent examples include Mélenchon's populism against Le Pen's nationalism (Papadatos, 2012), as well as the new inclusive definition of the 'people of Israel' in recent social protests in Israel (Warschawski, 2011: 117).

litical forces are needed to form a coalition government, mainstream parties approach them by offering concessions on other aspects of their agenda (usually the xenophobic ones), and not on their alleged populism. This is also why, when such offers are made, extreme right-wing forces are often more than happy to 'betray' their 'people' in the first opportunity.

It is obviously important to note that extreme right parties often manage 'to force their agenda onto other political parties, including the social-democratic parties, but also conquer key positions in terms of government formation' (Baier, 2011: 130). But why is it the case that this agenda very rarely includes the populist aspect of their ideology/rhetoric? We have recently witnessed a very revealing example of that process in Greece, with the participation of LAOS – an extreme right populist party – in the formation of the so-called 'national unity' coalition government encouraged by the European Union and the IMF to implement austerity measures (November 2011). As a result, this party gained mainstream status; however, it lost almost overnight its populist appeal and, within a few months, both its electoral basis and its parliamentary representation (elections of May & June 2012). Doesn't that reveal something about the nature of its populism? At the same time, of course, it also reveals something about the nature of the despotic transformation of the EU itself – just compare the reactions to Haider's participation in the Austrian government a few years ago with the absence of any reaction to this particular incident.

3. Populism, Anti-populism and Crisis – I just mentioned the implementation of austerity policies in Greece

within the context of the European (economic and political) crisis, and this brings me to my last and final point.

I think it is obvious – at least from the perspective of certain countries of the European South or the EU periphery like Greece – that the crisis increasingly puts in doubt the central ideological narrative according to which the main struggle is one between a primarily 'good' Europe and a series of 'bad' extreme right-wing populisms. As we have also seen in the discussion of the collective volume published by the Greens earlier on, populism is primarily depicted as threatening 'the most fundamental European values'. I am very much wondering whether this schema is still capable of capturing the unfolding of political and ideological struggles in times of crisis, especially in the EU periphery. In other words, what if Europe, and I mean dominant European institutions, is no longer guided by these European values, values like democracy and popular sovereignty? Here, the ill-fated initiative by ex-prime minister of Greece George Papandreou to hold a referendum, which was instantly and rather brutally suppressed by Merkel, Sarkozy and the EU leadership during the Cannes G-20 summit (3-4 November 2011), is quite revealing, as Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck were quick to point out (see Habermas, 2011a; Beck, 2011).[3] It signalled, in their view, a despotic, post-democratic mutation of the EU. What if, within the framework of what Christopher Lasch has famously phrased as 'the revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy' (Lasch, 1995), post-democratic Europe is more than willing to

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[3] This is the case irrespective of Papandreou's own political motives behind this move.

embrace the inclusion of extreme right parties in governments provided they help in the 'dirty job' of pushing through austerity? My fear is that, increasingly, to quote Balibar, instead of being part of the solution, this particular version of 'Europe, as it stands, has become "part of the problem"' (Balibar, 2011).

What complicates things even further, and should be taken into account urgently, is that, at the same time, whoever resists the austerity agenda – especially on the left – is discredited and denounced as an *irresponsible populist*. The Greek experience is, once more, illuminating in this respect: without any exaggeration, what has lately emerged as the central discursive/ideological cleavage in Greek politics is the opposition between populist and anti-populist tendencies, where the accusation of 'populism' is used to discredit any political forces resisting austerity measures and defending democratic and social rights.[4] In this sense, our age is marked by a new twist in the complex language games developed around 'the people' and 'populism', something partly due to the global financial crisis. This is especially the case in Europe, where the crisis has so far failed to produce institutional alternatives in mainstream political arenas (in contrast to what happened, for example, in Latin America, irrespective of how one is to evaluate this difference). What it has produced, nevertheless, is the proliferation of new types of 'anti-populist' discourses aiming at the discursive po-

licing and the political marginalisation of emerging protest movements against the politics of austerity (for example, the so-called *Indignant* movement), especially in countries such as Greece, Spain, Portugal, etc. As Serge Halimi has recently pointed out, '[a]nyone who criticizes the privileges of the oligarchy, the growing speculation of the leading classes, the gifts to the banks, market liberalization, cuts on wages with the pretext of competitiveness, is denounced as "populist" who "plays the game of extreme right"' (Halimi, 2011). As Rancière had already highlighted, here populism seems to be the 'convenient name' under which the denunciation and discrediting of alternatives legitimizes the claim of economic and political elites to 'govern without the people', 'to govern without politics' (Rancière, 2007: 80). What it also means is that we should, perhaps, always keep in mind that whenever the term 'populist' is used in a fortuitous way, in a non-rigorous way, associating it with something by definition extremist, racist or even fascist, a collateral damage is taking place: we are indirectly and unwillingly strengthening the ability of dominant discourses to demonize popular resistance to the austerity avalanche.[5] Thus political analysis becomes an Ideological State Apparatus *par excellence*, to remember Louis Althusser.

This strategy of demonization, which is dominating mainstream political and media discourse, does not target 'populism' – and I now mean left-wing populism – by coincidence. It is

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[4] See, in this respect, the presentations and debates during the two-day conference on 'Populism, anti-populism and democracy' organized by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki on 27-28 January 2012: http://www.anti-pop.gr

[5] This has also been increasingly the case with mainstream reactions to Mélenchon's appealing discourse in France (see, for example, *El Pais* editorial, 2012; Buffery & Taylor, 2012).

out there for everyone to see that if an alternative agenda is to hegemonise the political field at the national and European levels, if it is to attract the middle-class strata currently experiencing a violent spiral of downward social mobility, it can only do so by investing on empty signifiers like 'the people' – it is this potent alternative which is currently demonized. Hence, the task ahead, at least in my view, would be to cautiously welcome the development of a real debate around progressive/positive/inclusive populisms, reclaiming 'the people' from extreme right-wing associations and re-activating its constitutive ambiguity marking the democratic legacy of political modernity. If the last, the highest stage of economic/neoliberal Europeanization is some sort of enforced neocolonial Europeanization by 'shock and awe', then it is no coincidence that this process produces new popular/populist identities of resistance and consolidates a new cleavage between populist and anti-populist forces in crisis-ridden Europe. European political science should urgently and properly register this unfolding dialectic without loosing sight of its complexity, simultaneously avoiding the Eurocentric and euphemistic traps and engaging with cutting-edge discursive/structural approaches to both populism and anti-populism.

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Europski populistički izazov

SAŽETAK U današnjoj Europi riječ "populizam" obično povezujemo s desnim populizmom i populističkom ekstremnom desnicom. No je li koncept populizma ispravan političko-teorijski koncept na temelju kojeg se takve identifikacije trebaju percipirati, kategorizirati te o njima raspravljati? Koje su (izravne i neizravne) implikacije takve identifikacije? Hipoteza koju ovaj rad istražuje glasi da restriktivno povezivanje koncepta populizma s ekstremnom desnicom vodi do određenih teškoća koje treba ozbiljno uzeti u obzir, posebno u kontekstu postojeće ekonomske krize. Prvo, takvo povezivanje počiva na eurocentrizmu koji širok konceptualni spektar što ga koncept populizma pokriva u svojoj globalnoj primjeni svodi na veoma specifično europsko iskustvo. Uz to, koncept populizma često se rabi da bi se opisale političke sile, identiteti i diskursi u kojima je uloga "naroda" sekundarna ili periferna, što vodi prema izuzetno hijerarhijskoj i elitističkoj slici društva. Stvari dodatno komplicira to što se u kontekstu europske ekonomske i političke krize svakoga tko se protivi ili dovodi u pitanje politiku štednje – posebno na ljevici – proglašava i diskreditira kao *neodgovornog populista*. Nije slučajno što se u teorijskoj, ali i političkoj literaturi sve više javlja sumnja u opravdanost povezivanja populizma i ekstremne desnice. Bit će ponuđeno nekoliko argumenata koji nam mogu pomoći da iz perspektive teorije diskursa razvijemo plauzibilnu teorijsko-političku strategiju koja može odgovoriti na te izazove.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI populizam, Europa, diskurs, ekstremna desnica, kriza