

The populist moment

El momento populista

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Abstract

We are currently witnessing in Western Europe what can be called a “populist moment”, which arises from the multiplication of anti-establishment movements that signal the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. Various movements of resistance have emerged against the post-democratic dismissal of popular sovereignty and the devastating consequences of neoliberal globalization. However, in several European countries those resistances have been captured by right-wing populist parties, which have articulated in a nationalistic and xenophobic vocabulary the demands of the popular sectors. To design a proper political answer, we have to give a progressive answer to these demands, which supposes the articulation of the multifarious demands existing in our societies through a different discourse, towards a democratic direction. This is the political strategy that I call “left populism”.

Keywords: Populism; Democracy; Neo-liberalism; Hegemony; Post-politics.

There is no denying that we are currently witnessing in Western Europe what can be called a “populist moment”. This populist moment arises from the multiplication of anti-establishment movements that signal the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. This crisis might indeed open the way for more authoritarian governments, but it can also provide the opportunity for reclaiming and deepening the democratic institutions that have been weakened by the “post-democratic” condition issuing from thirty years of neoliberalism.

This post-democratic condition is the product of several phenomena. The first one, that I have proposed to call “post-politics”, is the blurring of political frontiers between right and left. It is the result of the consensus established between parties of center-right and center-left on the idea that there was no alternative to neo-liberal globalization. Under the imperative of “modernization”, social-democrats have accepted *diktats* of globalized financial capitalism and the limits it imposes on state intervention and public policies.

Politics has become a mere technical issue of managing the established order, a domain reserved to experts. The sovereignty of the people, notion that is at the heart of the democratic ideal, has been declared obsolete. Post-politics only allows for an alternation in power between the centre-right and the centre-left. The agonistic confrontation between different political projects, crucial for democratic politics, has been eliminated.

This post-political evolution has taken place in a socio-economic context characterized by the dominance of the financial sector with disastrous consequences for the productive economy. The financialization of the economy has been accompanied by privatization and deregulation policies which, jointly with the austerity measures imposed after the 2008 crisis, have provoked an exponential increase in inequality.

This affects particularly the already disadvantaged popular sectors and the working class but also a significant part of the middle classes which have entered into a process of pauperization and precarization. One can truly speak of a phenomenon of “oligarchization” of our societies.

In recent years, various movements of resistance have emerged against the post-democratic dismissal of popular sovereignty and the devastating consequences of neoliberal globalization. They can be interpreted on the mode of what Karl Polanyi presented in *The Great Transformation* as a “countermovement” by which society reacted against the process of marketization and pushed for social protection. This countermovement, he pointed out, could take progressive or regressive forms.

This ambivalence is also true of today's populist moment. In several European countries those resistances have been captured by right-wing populist parties which have articulated in a nationalistic and xenophobic vocabulary the demands of the popular sectors, abandoned by the centre-left since their conversion to neoliberalism.

Right-wing populists proclaim that they will give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated by the "elites". They have understood that politics is always "partisan" and that it requires a we/they confrontation. Furthermore, they recognize the need to mobilize affects to construct collective political identities. Drawing the political frontier in a "populist" way between the "people" and the "establishment", they openly reject the post-political consensus.

Those are precisely the proper political moves that most left-parties are precluded to make by their consensual conception of politics and the rationalistic view that passions have to be excluded from democratic politics. For them only rational arguments and deliberative procedures are acceptable. This explains their hostility to populism which they assimilate to demagoguery and irrationality.

Alas, it is not by stubbornly upholding the post-political consensus and throwing the anathema on the "deplorables" that one can meet the challenge of right-wing populism.

It is vital to realize that in order to fight right-wing populism the strategy of moral condemnation and demonization of their electorate is totally counterproductive because it reinforces the anti-establishment feelings among the popular classes. It is the absence of a political project able to provide a different vocabulary to formulate what are at the origin genuine grievances which explains that right-wing populism has an echo in increasingly numerous social sectors.

Classifying right-wing populist parties as "fascist", presenting them as a kind of moral disease, as the return of "the brown plague", and attributing their appeal to lack of education or atavistic factors, is of course very convenient for the forces of the centre-left. It allows them to dismiss their demands and to avoid acknowledging their own responsibility in their emergence.

To design a properly political answer, we have to realize that the only way to fight right-wing populism is to give a progressive answer to the demands that they are expressing in a xenophobic language. This supposes recognizing the existence of a democratic nucleus in those demands and the possibility, through a different discourse, of articulating in a radical democratic direction the multifarious democratic demands existing in our societies.

This is the political strategy that I call “left populism”. Its purpose is the construction of a “collective will”, a “people” whose adversary is constituted by the “oligarchy”, the forces that sustain the neoliberal order.

The current populist moment is the expression of very heterogeneous demands, which cannot be formulated through the left/right cleavage as traditionally configured. Unlike the struggles characteristic of the era of fordist capitalism, when there was a working class defending its specific interests, in post-fordist neoliberal capitalism, resistances have developed at many points outside the productive process. These demands no longer correspond to social sectors defined in sociological terms and by their location in the social structure. Many are claims that touch on questions related to quality of life and have a transversal character.

The demands linked to the struggles against sexism, racism, and other forms of domination have also become increasingly central. In order to articulate such diversity in a collective will, the traditional left/right frontier no longer works.

To federate these diverse struggles requires establishing a synergy between social movements and party forms with the objective of constructing a “people”, mobilizing common affects towards equality and social justice.

It is such a political strategy that we find in movements like Podemos in Spain La France Insoumise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon or Bernie Sanders in the US. It also informs the politics of Jeremy Corbyn whose endeavour to transform the Labour party in a great popular movement, working “For the Many not the Few”, has already succeeded in making it the greatest left party in Europe.

Those movements seek to come to power through elections, but not in order to establish a “populist regime”. Their goal is to lay the basis of a new hegemonic formation that will create the socio-economic conditions to recover and deepen democratic institutions.

This hegemonic formation will take different shapes according to the specific trajectories involved. It could be called “democratic socialism”, “eco-socialism”, “liberal socialism” or “participatory democracy”, depending on the different national contexts and specific traditions. There is no blueprint to follow or final destination.

What is important, whatever the name, is that “democracy” is the hegemonic signifier around which the diverse struggles are articulated and that political liberal institutions are not discarded.

The process of radicalizing democratic institutions will no doubt include moments of rupture and a confrontation with the dominant economic interests. It is a “radical reformist” strategy that comports an anti-capitalist dimension but that does not require relinquishing liberal-democratic institutions.

I am convinced that in the next few years the central axis of the political conflict will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism, and it is imperative that progressive sectors understand the importance of involving themselves in that struggle.

Conceived around radical democratic objectives, populism, far from being a perversion of democracy, a view that the forces defending the status-quo are trying to impose by disqualifying as “extremists” and “enemies of pluralism”, all those who oppose the post-political consensus, constitutes in today’s Europe the most adequate political strategy for reviving and expanding the democratic ideals.

Resumen

Actualmente, estamos siendo testigos en Europa Occidental de lo que puede ser llamado como un “momento populista”, emergente de la proliferación de movimientos anti-establishment que señalan la crisis de la hegemonía neoliberal. Varios movimientos de resistencia han surgido contra la negación post-democrática de la soberanía popular y las consecuencias devastadoras de la globalización neoliberal. Sin embargo, en varios países europeos estas resistencias han sido capturadas por los partidos populistas de derecha, que han articulado las demandas de los sectores populares dentro de un vocabulario nacionalista y xenófobo. Para diseñar una correcta contestación política, nosotros tenemos que brindar una respuesta progresista a esas demandas, lo cual supone la articulación, en una dirección democrática, de una serie de múltiples demandas existentes en nuestras sociedades a través de un discurso diferente. Esta es la estrategia política que denomino como “populismo de izquierda”.

Palabras claves: Populismo; Democracia; Neoliberalismo; Hegemonía; Post-política.

Resumo

Estamos testemunhando na Europa Ocidental o que pode ser chamado de um “momento populista”, que emerge da proliferação de movimentos anti-establishment e sinaliza a crise da hegemonia neoliberal. Vários movimentos de resistência se ergueram contra a rejeição pós-democrática da soberania popular e as devastadoras consequências da globalização neoliberal. Porém, em vários países europeus, essas resistências foram capturadas por partidos de direita, que articularam em um vocabulário nacionalista e xenofóbico as demandas dos setores populares. Para formular uma resposta política adequada, precisamos dar uma resposta progressista para essas demandas, o que deve ser feito através de um discurso que articule em uma direção democrática as multifacetadas demandas existentes em nossas sociedades. Uma estratégia política que eu chamo de “populismo de esquerda”.

Palavras-chave: Populismo; Democracia; Neoliberalismo; Hegemonia; Pós-política.
