

di Cecilia Honório – dal convegno “le sinistre al tempo dei populismi –

In Portugal, we’ve joined together people from different areas of the social sciences and written *O Espectro dos Populismos*. I am here to give an account of a revised part of my work.

The approach I chose makes a distinction between the two lines of inquiry for a leftist analysis: one which positions populism as an instrument of the political center to clean out its margins, to the left and to the right, as a designation of the field of adversaries, and the other focused on understanding populisms across history, triumphant via fascism and which, in the capitalistic west, connects to the affirmation of the right and far right from the 80s-90s onwards, coinciding with social-democracy giving up on its program and the hegemony of neo-liberalism.

In my opinion, it is important to know the ideological resources of populism, so as to understand how threatening they can be for the Left, and that for the Left there is no such thing as a “good” populism.

I find that populist advances within the context of neo-liberalism have not only *not* affected an inflection of its hegemony, as they have favored the success of the right and the reconfiguration of the classical right under the influence of the far right.

1. The use of “populism” for the political center

Populism is such a parasitic term that it risks devouring that which it intends to represent. Polysemic and normalized, it is in that “jelly” that populism is preserved, legitimated by the *media*. If you think and proposition outside the “centrist box”, you risk being labeled as a “populist”. In Portugal, when the Left Bloc (BE) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) supported the Socialist Party’s (PS) government solution, they were described as “populist”, both in mainstream commentary, and by right-wing academics ^{1 2}.

To consider the exclusionary power of this word is to consider the “vital center” and its resources for longevity: anti-revolutionary, opposed both to the far-right and the far-left, capable of simultaneously rooting out communism and fascism. The Cold War set the vital center as the natural space of post-war liberal democracies and the liberal consensus incremented it with its demands, from the 1980s onwards. The end result of its hegemony was not the clarification of choices made between the Left and the Right, but the imposition of the dilution of the frontiers between left and right, a sort of “end of politics”.

The political cleansing of the “center”, by which it rids itself of risks to the left and to the right, can be easily attested to in the work of Madeleine Albright, Clinton’s secretary of state. She nostalgically appeals to the “vital center”, when confronted with the threat represented by Trump: the “vital center” protected the country from “divisions”, and must be reborn through a frontal compromise between Democrats and Republicans, rather than, as she writes, Republicans protecting their right-wing and Democrats protecting their left-wing, “emptying the only space within the ideological specter where long-lasting agreements can be created in favor of the common good”.³

The “only space” as self-evident, and “right-wing” and “left-wing” as archaic concepts – it

was like this for decades. Yet, it was within this consensus that populisms colonized the representational crisis of oligarchic demo-liberalism, parasitically taking on the motto: beyond the left and the right, so as to overcome the “tainted” binary of “traditional politics”.

The center cannot shake off its responsibility regarding the advances of the far-right and the “crisis”. This crisis is made of many components, such as the loss of political subjects due to the center’s hegemony; the unmaking of the Soviet bloc; Maastricht and the web of transnational powers which threatened national sovereignty, and “neoliberal reason” and its ability to “depopulate”, removing people from history and politics⁴ and feeding abstention.

The “people”, that utmost equivocation of liberal democracy – because it was popular sovereignty which challenged liberalism – may, therefore, be captured by populisms. “We the people”, in the words of Marine Le Pen, or “We are the people, who are you?”, as Erdogan replied to protest rallies.

The problem here is that this definition of “the people” is not sociological, and as such cannot be confused with the “popular classes” as such, neither constituted by individuals/citizens according to the liberal matrix, nor referring back to class struggle according to Marxist perspectives.

The “people” of right-wing populisms is an organic entity which may and must be interpreted by a redeeming leader, who will protect it from the “others” – enemies, immigrants, refugees, women, LGBTIQ folk, etc.

Does this instrument smell moldy? It certainly does, barring that neither military mobilization nor the mechanisms of mass organization are replicated. In fact, the 20th century has reconfigured “the people’s spirit” through fascism, distancing it from its Romantic legacy. This was the framework implemented by the elites regarding the organization of the masses. The expressions embodied by fascism and corporatism swallowed up the masses so as to domesticate and militarize them.

History and the opportunism of the supposed end of the left-right divide, as useful for the center as it is for the populist far-right, make it impossible to consider left-leaning populist essays as a field of possibilities for the recreation of the Left.

Laclau abandoned the concepts of “class” and “ideology” in his book, *On Populist Reason*. In it, via the works of Freud, Saussure and Lacan, Laclau paved the way for the synonymity between *populism* and *politics*. In my opinion, the proposal of populism as the ontology of politics – the “political logic” which would articulate the social through diverse “demands” – effects a narrative beyond politics, by which protagonists and their struggles are rendered null. Chantal Mouffe’s dissemination of this work clarifies the risk of this option: by rejecting the left/right division, politics would be a sort of “language game”.

Current times speak of the disadvantages of this approach, demonstrating further divisions, rather than the capacity to unite and reestablish the left. One does not easily understand how radical democracy may disregard class struggle and the workers’ exploitation, nor how the left would face the present times by rejecting the left/right divide. To claim, as Marine Le Pen does, that “it’s time to free the people from the arrogant elites”, is not enough.

Resentment is *not* indignation, nor can resentment be transformed into indignation by means of such “language games”.

On the Left, we will struggle with our society project, and we will not evade the need to create, in the words of Éric Fassin, a “substantial program for a substantive left”⁵. We must state out loud what we are and what we have come for and retrieve the due agenda, which is that of the working classes and of labor rights. In that sense, I follow Marc Lazar⁶ when he asserts that populism, to the left, is only residual, given both the role of class struggle (and the party as its tool), and the stipulation of the party as an identity for the people, which thus accepts entering the precepts of democracy.

2. Populisms – right and far-right

We are well aware that, from the 80s onwards, the far-right has had a degree of electoral success which surprised many. Since the 1990s, Europe has witnessed a dislocation towards the right and the far-right (the latter one being residual since the second post-war). Its “waves” have set timeframes: the 80s and 90s with the Thatcher/Reagan temporal axis of neo-liberalism and globalization; the 2008 crash, which renewed the space of populism with austerity, and the 2015 refugee crisis with its renewal of the debate on national identities.

Populism is the ideological device by which parties practice their management, as gelatinous as convenient, placing themselves “beyond” the left and the right. Its people is organic; salvation is within the reach of devotion and rage; morality is the root of the Manichaeism which parts the “good” from the “bad” and which identifies enemies to be excluded and by criticizing the delegation of power and politicians themselves, its path consists in the direct interpretation of the “will of the people” by the leader.

The populism which has gained terrain in the capitalist and neoliberal west is a nationalist one, which leads some authors to describe it as national-populism⁷ or identity-based populism, associated to a new figure: the foreigner/the invader. However, these far-right configurations are stuck on their national expression and have difficulty organizing on a European-wide scale as a cohesive political family. Their political agents are well aware of this, and that is why figures such as Matteo Salvini or Steve Bannon manifested their intention to create a populist/nationalist International in 2019.

The economic program is secondary for the radical right-wing parties and their electoral basis, which accept the rules of capitalism and of the market, rarely moving beyond protectionist measures regarding specific sectors, such as small-scale property holders. There are those who highlight that their electoral basis is constituted by the “native” working class⁸, threatened by globalization and neglected by social-democracy. But the belief that it is the poor who vote in favor of the populist right is quite debatable, as Trump’s election has made evident. What most weighed in Trump’s election was the “white”, religious (evangelical) and less literate vote, yet we cannot state conclusively that the working classes voted for him⁹.

The anti-systemic enunciate is quite distant from reality. None of these parties is a military

force aiming for hegemony. None of them evaded the individuation of power, such as Haider or Salvini. All of these formations aim to enter the system and play by its rules. None of them set themselves apart from neo-liberalism as economic program. Apart from discussions regarding the Euro in the European Parliament campaigns, the appeal to “nativism” (providence-state for “those of us”), or the defense of farmers, there is no economic alternative in sight.

As for us, if we are asked whether Portugal will maintain an insignificant far-right, reduced to the Nationalist Renovating Party (PNR), we will say that this seems likely, though it is also in our hands.

The signs sent by the far-right on social media are of increasing “ostentation”. But the 25th of April Revolution is the limit which has kept the Portuguese right-wing from reorganizing itself with the past as foundational basis. It has organized itself by cleaning up the past and challenging the political center. Designating oneself as “right-wing” was a taboo, even for the far-right. The right has been able to capture the fringes further to its right, and to this day, it has maintained space in parliament, without significant variations.

Portugal does not have a refugee crisis, nor is it facing migration from former colonies, as it was in the 80s and 90s, and there is no such thing as a debate on national identity being at risk. For the last four years, we have lived in a preventive political situation, which has recovered labor income and generated positive expectations for workers. But we also know that Portugal and Spain, across all their profound differences, are secular cousins in their political history, and we must not ignore processes of contagion, as well as the affirmation of new right-wing populist formations in the upcoming European elections.

1[□] On semantic emptying, see Pierre-André Taguieff, “Le Populisme et la science politique. Du mirage conceptuel aux vrais problèmes”, *Vingtième-Siècle*, n° 56, *Les Populismes*, Paris, 1997, Presses de Sciences PO, pp. 4-5.

2[□] For instance, José Filipe Pinto, *Populismo e Democracia – Dinâmicas Populistas na União Europeia*, Lisboa, 2017, Edições Sílabo

3[□] Madeleine Albright, *Fascismo. Um Alerta*, 2018, p. 283.

4[□] Éric Fassin, *Populisme: le grand ressentiment*, Textuel 2017, p. 29.

5[□] *Idem*, p. 85.

6[□] Marc Lazar, “Du populisme à gauche: le cas français et italien”, *Les Populismes, Vingtième Siècle*, n°. 56, Paris, 1997, p. 122.

7[□] Cf. Pierre-André Taguieff, “Le Populisme comme style politique”, in *Le Retour du Populism*, dir. Pierre-André Taguieff, Universali, 2004.

8[□] Cas Mudde e Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populismo – Uma brevíssima introdução*, Lisboa, Gradiva, 2017, p. 124.

9[□] Fassin, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-55.