

di João Mineiro[*] – Dal convegno “La sinistra al tempo dei populismi”

A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of populism. It is a specter because it has a mythical dimension. And it is populism, because this political idea, despite of his ambiguity, reflects a set of political, social, cultural and communicational transformations that we have been seeing all over the world. But what do we talk about when we talk about populism? What characterizes it from a social, cultural and political point of view?

In Portugal, the debate is divided. Many people – starting with the President of the Republic – say that we are a blessed country, where populists don't want to live. I don't know if it is the diet or the weather, but the fact is that many people ensure that this “political species” cannot survive in our beautiful land. On the other hand, many other people, especially some conservative intellectuals, have warned us that Portugal not only has populism, but populism is now in the power, with the Portuguese Communist Party and Left Bloc supporting the government.

In most of the published opinion, populism is a rhetorical construction that intends to include those who, on the left, fight against neoliberal orthodoxy. Of course, in this point of view, populism is an instrumental concept, an adversarial designation, that usually clarifies more about who appoints than about who is appointed.

Despite this, the populist moment reflects a set of social, cultural and political changes. It is necessary to reflect on these factors to realize if populism can grow in Portugal.

First, contemporary populism expresses a new relationship with the idea of the future, which seems less appealing today than the idea of a return to the past. Utopia has been replaced by retrotopia, as Bauman wrote[1]. And if we want a better picture of how the future is designed in our collective imagination, we just have to watch every episode of Black Mirror[2] or Disney's success Wall-E[3]. The end of the world as we know it seems actually more likely than the end of capitalism.

But populism also reflects a set of transformations in the relationship between information, truth, and communication. Media system has become fertile for the practice of a certain type of journalism, where a class of opinion makers monopolizes the means of a symbolic economy of the profusion of ideological dogmas disguised as “technical knowledge”. As sure as the sun rises every morning, is their ability to occupy all the media channels to reproduce an arsenal of ideology.

At the same time, millions of people are now virtually connected from social media. They are an instrument of the profusion of fake news, in a context of radicalization and tribalization. But in recent years, they have also been a vital instrument of all social

demonstrations, which had faced the economic and financial order that populism feeds on.

Finally, populism is the “spectacularization” of the political field in its greatest expression. A process that externalizes the politics of those who do not participate in the monopoly of the means of production of the institutional political phenomenon. Institutional closure is one of the clearest forms of political domination, who turns politics in sectoral and specialized social practice with ultra-regulated participation.

For most citizens, there are only two political alternatives left: either the dismissal of the political process, through abstention; or dispossession, through the unconditional delegation. This is the most fertile social ground for the arrival of a savior, a messiah, a hero or an anti-hero, ready to embody, like no other, the spirits of the nation, the people and the mistreated country.

What does this have to do with Portugal? In fact, all these ingredients exist in Portugal. No one should think that Portugal will be an exception. But in fact, although there is a populist far right in Portugal, it still doesn't have political-institutional expression. Why is that so?

There are several factors that can explain it. Many of them are historical ones. Unlike other countries in southern Europe, Portugal overthrew fascism through a revolutionary process, where one million hectares of land were occupied; where we had thousands of self-managed factories; where the banking and the strategic sectors of the economy were nationalized. It is still very difficult for the far right to win votes when this memory is still very much present.

Other factors have an institutional nature. The main Portuguese parties did not sink. The Socialist Party remains the hegemonic party on the left, and we have two right-wing parties with a large parliamentary representation, which makes the emergence of a third force on the right more difficult. Portugal has a system that has plurality and stability: at this time, for example, there are seven parties represented, no one has the majority, and yet there is political stability.

But there are also some conjuncture factors such as the absence of a “migratory crisis” – Portugal has only 4% of immigrant population, and has only received 1,500 refugees since 2015... Moreover, of course, there have been no terrorist attacks.

Finally, the current political context has also proven anti-populist. If during the crisis period, we were resisting against the government and troika, since 2015 the political situation has changed. The new government, with the parliamentary support from the left, created new expectations and new social struggles to achieve them. Social movements are fighting for real achievements and that changes everything.

I posit that these are some factors that explain the inability of the far-right organizations to have an expression in the political field. But we need to be careful because the populist right-wing discourses are growing up.

How is it possible to control the emergence of populist forces? As I stated, first, we need to re-establishing an idea of the future as an open horizon and made of multiple possibilities. There are no social struggles without collective imaginaries. Besides that, we need to think about how to face technological threats and create a digital self-defense strategy. In this context, we also need to think about how to rescue journalism as a critical practice. Furthermore, we must face the "crisis policy" by responding to the "crisis of politics" as well. We need to break the spectacularization of the political field. More political work in society, and fewer holograms.

Finally, the political and social left organizations should create an ambitious and radical program to the political, economic and ecological change, and also new organizational methods in the society that can change the social perception of what politics is, and how we can appropriate it collectively. It is in society - and just in society - that we can win or lose everything we fight for.

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[1] Bauman, Zygmunt (2018), *Retrotopia*, Polity Press.

[2] *Black Mirror* it's an series of science fiction who explores several near future distopias where humanity's greatest technological innovations collide with its darkest instincts.

[3] *WALL-E* (2008) is a successful animation film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and directed by Andrew Stanton, who films the story of a cute robot called WALL-E, created in the year 2100, which have the responsibility to clean up the all garbage that human produced during their passage through this planet.