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4 March 2015

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/62728/>
MPRA Paper No. 62728, posted 10 Mar 2015 07:17 UTC

Modern Populism in Greece

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Financial crisis has connected Europe with an obvious common pattern which consists the rapidly rise of protest parties that challenge the established political systems. The basic and new feature of these schemes is the intense war rhetoric against the European Union and the vehement rejection of the selected modes of euro rescue.

In this sense, populism appears as a new specter haunting European democracies, as active risk, causing serious concerns. Unfortunately, the growing concern does not coincide with policies aiming at finding viable solutions, as the center-right parties and governments believe that the only solution to the crisis is to adopt austerity measures and Social Democrats have not yet found effective alternatives.

This essay will attempt to shed light on some aspects of current populism phenomenon with particular focus on its modern manifestations. Firstly, it is useful to attempt a classification of the concept of populism. According to Frank Deckerⁱ populism is a strong stand against the status quo, it appeals to lower social groups and it is a phenomenon of social crises of modernization in the sense that there is a systemic review in nearly every form of economic, cultural and political development, using simplified shapes and models of analysis.

In other words, a key feature of populism is the manichean method of addressing the problems and history at a black and white way of thinking. According to that method, diversity, complexity, relativism, uncertainty, doubt, pluralism, rational arguments and rationality should not exist. The speech is sharp and violent, devastating, blatant and addressed to the collective “we”. In particular, stereotypes and views of traditional roles are used in order to achieve the maximum impact on a significant part of population which feel insecure. According to Decker, populism and modernization are nearly the same thing.

A different approach was introduced by Ernesto Laclau identifying “the dichotomy of the social field between privileged and underprivileged as a key feature of populism either from the left or the right of the political spectrum”ⁱⁱ. Populists call the disadvantaged for enlisting even outside the boundaries of institutional normality and claim their support in order to subvert the existing political system. In the concept of “people”, according to this logic, only the non-privileged section of the society which bears the “ultimate virtue” and is not liable for any misfortune, is included. The enemy - friend figure, as once introduced by Carl Schmitt, revives a strange bipolar composition. On the one hand is the nation, the people, the underprivileged, our own, and on the other, the enemies of the nation, emigres, foreigners, the privileged, the moneylenders.

The complexed dipole is followed by a strong willingness of institutional obsolescence, which ultimately legitimizes lawlessness behaviors. According to Laclauⁱⁱⁱ populism historically tends to prevail “when a large number of social and economic demands accumulates, which can not be satisfied within the existing institutional system”. Because populism is always addressed to the disadvantaged, any political program aimed at empowering marginalized social groups contains a certain extent of populism. Furthermore, Laclau believes that “in every political system, two standard political processes exist. In the first, which is defined as populist, there is a widespread mobilization of masses based on the ‘equivalence logic’. In the second, which is defined as institutional, individual demands of specific social groups are dominant, which are implemented selectively by policy practitioners, based on a logic of difference”. In every political system, these two processes coexist, but in different proportions. According to Laclau the first example was expressed in Greece during the widespread redistribution period of Andreas Papandreu (during the 1980s) while the second during the modernization period of Costas Simitis (1996-2004). The first is a populist and the second is an institutional pole but the predominance of one of them do not necessarily eliminate the other.

We could also refer to Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser^{iv} who distinguish three interdependent features of populism. These are primitivism (a weakened form of nationalism), autarchy and popular sovereignty. Right wing populists often invoke the overthrow of popular sovereignty in order to accentuate the catalytic effect of migration while at the same concept, leftist populists emphasize on the dissolution of the national state because of the memorandum (imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission).

In fact, both cultivate a myth, as stated by Michael Ignatieff. According to him “sovereignty is a political concept which means just to be the master of your house. The tragedy of modern state sovereignty is that currently, there is not any country in the world that is absolutely sovereign in this sense. All societies, all sovereign states, face the ultimate rise of globalization and the political importance of the global economic crisis is to be realized how vulnerable are all states, as market forces can destroy the legitimacy of national political systems without exception”^v.

Populism appears in democratic regimes and grow through the existence of a strong denunciation of the implementing policies. In most occasions solutions proposed by the parties that develop populist speech are inapplicable but they are presented as the only alternative, particularly in the impasse posed by the economic crisis. As Margaret Canovan^{vi} proposes “populism in modern democratic societies can be described as an invocation to the ‘people’ versus the existing power structure and the prevailing attitudes and values of society”.

It is obvious that the factors that favor the emergence of populists in Greece have found fertile ground during the last four years due to the economic downturn. Economic disparities that continually expand the decadent political system and frustration for the traditional political forces about their ability to implement effective policies that will offer real solutions to the problems plaguing the middle and lower social groups, cause the rise of populism and political extremism^{vii}.

The increase in poverty and inequality rates is the factor that influence the populist political discourse, leading to the rise of the percentages of left and right populist parties such as “Golden Dawn” and SYRIZA (Radical Left Party). Their political discourse aims at passing to people the reliance that they are the only solution that can change the difficult economic situation and even more, by using arguments (Golden Dawn) such as that of migration (expulsion of immigrants as a solution to several problems) they are trying to attract votes.

For modern populists, a key supranational issue of political mobilization is European integration as an absolute perpetrator of abstract globalization. In this crucial matter, amazing coincidences between left and right tend to appear. In Greece, for example, left and right populist approaches suggest the return to drachma despite the fact that its current value is only 0.00293 Euros. Anti-European left parties such as “Drachma” of Theodoros Katsanevas and “Plan B” of Alekos Alavanos have already been established together with the neo-Naziist “Golden Dawn”, which record rising percentages in recent polls, and inclusive right wing “Independent Greeks”, which try to collect votes from all poles of the political spectrum purely by using policy attractiveness through populist political discourse. Specifically, Golden Dawn has realised that nazist views are not popular and uses “Hellenophile” as a favorable public propaganda.

There are also some constituents of SYRIZA such as “Internationalist Labor Left”, which propose that the Greek government should not pay any more the local and international loaners, the banks should be nationalized under public-democratic-labor control and heavy taxation to businesses and to higher income groups should be imposed. Furthermore, it proposes “insubordination on European Guidelines, decisive escalation of social unrest, systematic cultivation of relations with the Left and resistance movements throughout Europe, seeking the way for the overthrow of capitalism on a national and European scale”^{viii}. Slightly softer is “Communist Organization of Greece” which supports that the country should exit the Eurozone. SYRIZA generally prevails a strange upheaval and uncertainty around the European approach. The ostensible commitment of its leadership in the European vision is accompanied by views like “the euro is not fetish”, while on the other hand, the internal opposition of the left constituent calls for the creation of a left government together with the Greek Communist Party (K.K.E.) and “Anti-capitalist Left Cooperation for Overthrow” which do not agree with the creation of an institutionally unified Europe under capitalist conditions. It is clearly observed, that a contrast between the populist and institutional policy template as pointed out by Laclau appear in SYRIZA as it existed in PASOK (Panhellenic Socialistic Movement) during the mid ‘70s and ‘80s.

The anti-Europeanism is gradually spreading throughout Europe as it demonstrated by U.S. research institute Pew Research Center. The percentage of Europeans who have a positive view of the European Union is now at a record low of 45%. The research, which was conducted in eight countries, including Greece, also shows that economic crisis is now systemic and made a serious blow to the credibility of the European Union. As stated in the report “The European Union is the new sick man of Europe”, the effort, during the last half century, to create a more unified Europe is now the main victim of the euro crisis^{ix}.

Beyond the democratic deficit and the lack of political representation that has brought serious problems to the image of the European Union, an even stronger negative opinion increases as a result of the endless economic crisis in Europe. Despite the fact that a large part of the European population is opposed to the applied budget cuts in order to balance the deficits and to tight monetary policy in fear of hyperinflation, it has not the ability to change it. Unfortunately, there is a lack of the necessary democratic and civic tools^x.

Thus, a developmental shift in countercyclical policy against longer - generalized - recession and rising unemployment will take more time in order to be implemented. This fact is immediately perceived by individuals who know that any choice in European elections will not change Eurozone's macroeconomic policies and the existing political management of the crisis because the European Parliament, as the only EU institution that has direct popular legitimacy, has not even the slightest power to modify or challenge the implementing austerity measures. The effect of current implementing policies, which reject a clear social majority both in the South and the North of the EU, is the rise of euroscepticism even in countries that traditionally were considered as too pro-EU, such as Greece. Due to the pervasive dissatisfaction because of austerity measures, the political correlations in the new composition of the European Parliament are expected to change. It is estimated that the number of anti-Europeans and eurosceptics will increase from 100 to around 200 MEPs in a total of 751 seats. There is a threat that the changing composition of the European Parliament with reinforced radical parties, will reduce the number of European Social Democrats and People's Party MEPs below the psychological threshold of 400 seats^{xi}.

The anti-EU parties both in Greece and in other European countries already record very fast growth. The anti-European "UKIP" (United Kingdom Independence Party) in United Kingdom has become a big problem for British Prime Minister David Cameron. In Finland the party of "Finns" and in Austria the party "Stronach" record significant increase in their percentages. In particular, the latter warns for the decline of Europe and as a solution it proposes the introduction of national euros for each country with German as a euro currency guide.

On the other side, there is the example of the left Social Democrat Oskar Lafontaine, who proposes, for the exit from the European crisis, the return to the European Monetary System (EMS), ie the return to national currencies and their coupling. His proposals have caused much debate related to the left populism. Other left movements emerge with the promise to radically consolidate the existing political system such as the Italian party of Beppe Grillo "Five Star", which had significant electoral success in previous Italian elections. On the other side, right populist parties emerge such as AfD (Alternative for Germany)^{xii} which requests an orderly breakup of the euro, arguing that Germany needs the euro, while other countries - especially in the South - harmed by this. Also this party requires the return to national currencies or create smaller and more stable monetary unions and considers that the reintroduction of mark should no longer be a taboo. This view is not the mainstream right-wing populist view in Europe. For example, the "Austrian Freedom Party" (FPÖ), which since 1986 relentlessly attacks the Austrian Republic, is not seeking a return to the Austrian currency. Instead, it requires the removal of heavily indebted southern countries from the euro, whatever negative effects this option can have. According to the FPÖ, the

rising unemployment in southern Europe is the direct result of the refusal of the eurocrats to reject unsuitable countries from the euro.

Despite the differences in populist right-wing arguments with the objections of Lafontaine there is a common reference point in the sense that an explicit and rigorous opposition to the direction of national government and the European Union is formulated. Lafontaine is explicitly against German associations of businessmen and industrialists and cooperates with the neoliberal bloc party consisting of CDU / CSU, SPD, FDP and Greens. The “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) believes that the old parties are “eroded and fossilized” because they refuse to “admit mistakes and omissions and indulge in corrections”. For the “Austrian Freedom Party”, responsible for the crisis are the “eurocrats of Brussels”, along with the incompetent Austrian politicians. Frontal statements and acute rhetorical confrontation operate as an appeal to the people to stop supporting the current government schemes and make another political option out of the range of incumbent management solutions. This would mean a shift to the left, or alternatively, to the populist right as expressed by AfD or the FPÖ. This kind of populism is an effective political “ploy” to irrigate votes at least to the extent that large sections of the population accept similar narratives.

Populists are however required to pay a price for this kind of mobilization. The price is that they are necessarily apply to a more or less unified national collectivity. Lafontaine for example repeats phrases that bring to focus the “Germans” as a national entity with specific interests, while AfD admits forthrightly that “Euro is no necessary for Germany”. The FPÖ requests “Austria to be the first choice”. Populists argue that they are able to better represent the collectivity than the existing governments. Peoples’ “will” and the political “will” of populists are identical. Accordingly, they usually use the phrase: “we are here for you”.

Therefore, populism works as an ideology which is subject to a quasi-schizophrenic perception of equality with the romantic notion of “homogeneous people”. “Homogeneous people” is not only against the “capital of foreign imperialist interests” of “foreign agents” of “Merkelists”, but overall, against the emigre, foreign and unknown. This is essentially a stand against equality and subsequently, against progress. In its modern trend, populism is characterized by a national logic embedded in a Western European identity. This is a reason why European right-wing parties that are members of the European Parliament are in closely collaboration. It is obvious that there is no single collective “will” of the people as modern democracies are characterized by plurality and diversity which attempt to be organized, especially on the side of the left, but not collectivized.

Additional features of populist movements are: the presence of a charismatic leader, the use of special techniques of propaganda (conspiracy theories, viewing images of the enemy, the preference for radical solutions, challenges and lacerations to taboo). Even if we accept the left populism as a necessary form of demagoguery, mobilization and stimulation of the masses, at a time when media play an important role in public discourse, we can not overlook the fact that the populist discourse is a vigorous and active line of “exclusion”. This acts as a systematic appeal to the category of “we”. “We” the Greeks, “we” the Austrians “we” the French, that we have common interests, opinions and culture.

Populist narratives produce and form imagined communities that usually are against a foreign rival. This raises the question whether it is worthwhile for any left to pay the price to sacrifice the “foreigners”, the “new” and finally, the totality of the world and of difference, for the sake of left populist mobilization.

However, populism has some positive effects such as the increased pressures on the established parties to find solutions to key problems and channeling emotions and defuse discontent in safe political fields. The potential danger of populist movements is that they affect gradually as a poison the official political discourse making it trivial and legitimizing anti-ploural trends. The best way to deal with populism is to deprive the ground for protest through solving problems, which requires tolerance and not one-way views as that of austerity imposed by the Troika in Greece. If someone expects positive results from the current Greek political elite, including opposition, then we can only wish patience.

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