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## A Gramscian Way to Understanding Populism

### Abstract

This is the Abstract of the English-language version of the review by Miguel Mellino of the volume *Gramsci e il populismo* (ed. Guido Liguori), Milano, Unicopli, 2019, containing the proceedings of the 2018 International Gramsci Seminar on Gramsci and populism.

### Keywords

Gramsci, Laclau-Mouffe, populism, left populism, IGS Seminar, people-nation

## *A Gramscian Way to Understanding Populism*

Miguel Mellino

I. In the rise of populism as a political phenomenon Gramsci's name always insinuates itself into any debate or attempt at a definition, commonly appearing on both sides of the barricade: in the trenches of those who foster populist policies in the name of some presumed 'people', as much as on the other side, of those seeking to criticize these policies or unmask their ideological mystifications. The new selection (Liguori (ed.) 2019<sup>1</sup>), published under the auspices of the Italian section of the International Gramsci Society as the outcome of a seminar held in Rome in 2018, finds its place in the current lively debate on populism, in its attempt to introduce some element of clarification – a word chosen not merely by chance given the aim of the volume – of a Gramscian type.

Populism as a concept and a social phenomenon certainly has a long and complex history, a long-standing one impossible to limit to any one unambiguous political meaning. And this constitutes the first problem to be faced in trying to give an interpretation or definition of the concept. On this point Fabio Frosini is precise when he states that 'populism is a slippery and theoretically controversial term [...] since it is affected by an ambiguity constituted by the modern notion itself of "people", at one and the same time a part and the whole, the dispossessed classes and the totality of the population' (p. 58). This is a premise that, rightly, runs through the entire group of essays. And yet the difficulty of the undertaking may be reduced, in our view, by fixing as the starting point a genealogy of shorter duration for the return of this concept: more precisely this would be the last quarter of the twentieth century or the dawn of this century. The world-wide return of populism is without doubt one of the most important new political factors that the new century has brought. In our opinion to give pride of place to this nexus of time, in order then to go back in time, allows not only an enrichment of the debate, making it less fleeting, less

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<sup>1</sup> *Gramsci e il populismo*, G. Liguori (ed.), 2019; page numbers of authors cited in the text refer to this volume.

baroque, less scholastic; above all it allows us to find new historical connections, different narratives of the present and hence also of the past. In the renewed relevance of the debate on populism, it comes across without doubt that there is a watershed event. It is not difficult to identify the return of this old concept to the centre of the political arena as the result of the advent to power of the centre-left governments in Latin America at the turn of the twenty-first century. These are governments that, as had not happened for decades, defined themselves as ‘populist’ in a positive and affirmative sense, in order to legitimize both their origin and their insurgent identity, in so much as they were expressions of great popular insurrections, and their consequent political positioning.

Following on in this line came the book that more than any other changed the face of the debate: Ernesto Laclau’s *La razón populista* (2005). The great success of this volume created renewed attention for the term in the political science community. This ‘Latin American’ choice of populism as signifying not only its field of action and of government, but also of an identitarian belonging and a subaltern historical memory, had the effect of re-politicizing a term that, most of all in the North of the world, in the wake of the irresistible rise of neoliberalism as the only ‘social and cultural rationale of government (Dardot and Laval, 2014), had become a simple stigma, a sign of barbarism, backwardness, demagoguery, incompleteness, in other words a sort of excommunication that a priori marked the exclusion or the non-belonging to the civil-liberal-western and implicitly ‘white’ tradition of the political movements welcome to the centres of command of global capitalism. The crisis of neo-liberalism as a global mode of accumulation, with the concomitant re-emergence of populist and national sovereignty movements, on the right and on the left, even in the United States and in Europe, only gave further impetus to the return of the ‘populist moment’. And more recently, adding fuel to the debate, has been the exhaustion of the Latin American ‘neo-populist’ experiences, worn down by their political contradictions. To call Benjamin to our aid, here lies the pre-history of the return of populism to the global scene. We are dealing with something that must always be held in consideration before tacking the argument in terms of abstract and age-old historical reconstructions.

II. It is not that this genealogy is not implicitly present throughout the collection. Rather, it even may be argued that it forms its silent *trait d'union*, the nodal point of the collective interrogation proposed by the text, the departure point for the Gramscian clarification offered there. And yet this genealogy is never made wholly explicit to the reader, not certainly by omission but by choice. This 'saying and not saying' seems to the present reviewer an important aspect on which to question ourselves. And it is the title itself – *Gramsci and populism* – that is presented to us symptomatically. The title, judged from the outside, is clear and authoritative but, as Barthes would say, it also one that stammers.<sup>2</sup> It stammers in its continual reference to a 'populism' *sans-phrase*, to a concept that leaves one to presuppose, like any self-respecting concept, a historical abstraction, in other words a social and political phenomenon that, while maintaining its ambiguity, is in some way is continuous, formal, atemporal: the populism of the past and today's populism. If we allow ourselves to be transported by this pre-understanding implicit in the title, we might be induced to seek something that the text, as suggested at the start, says and does not say, something over which the text – on purpose – stammers, and which it proposes only as a second move: an analysis of contemporary populism in the light of Gramsci.

It seems to us that the direction taken by the text ends up by going elsewhere, taking us along a very useful, but parallel, path: not so much that of *Gramsci and populism* (including contemporary populism) but *Gramsci on populism*, and it is the structure of the text itself that suggests this pre-comprehension. Much space – of great clarity and philological rigour (as often is the case in the *International Gramsci Society* publications) – is therefore devoted to what Gramsci considered to be the populist movements of his time, but also to his concept of the 'people' and of the 'national-popular'. On these subjects the volume contains contributions that are very useful and rich in their implications (Cingari, Mordenti, Frosini, Meta), not at all to be taken for granted given a certain vulgate of Gramsci as a presumed populist. Less space is devoted to the figures of contemporary populism. On the one hand, there are generic mentions, often connoted by 'value judgments' not far from the dominant liberal common sense (Anselmi) and, on the other, some small yet

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1976.

interesting incursions (Cortéz, Campolongo, Durante, Forenza), small in the sense of only a few pages conceded as compared with other, more strictly philological topics. At the same time what prevails in a number of contributions having reference to the present, is a ‘hand-to-hand combat’ with today’s great enemy of Italian Gramsci studies: the ‘apostate’ Laclau (Voza, Prospero, Anselmi). Yesterday it was cultural studies, post-colonial theory, subaltern studies, the neo-con right, today the artillery fire is directed against Laclau (and Mouffe). This is measured, justly impartial and contained, in some of the essays (in Liguori’s *Introduction* for example), but decidedly excessive in those of Voza and Prospero, and even presumptuous in others (the case of Anselmi). The lesson that the text offers us is clear, most of all in the light of the debate and the current conjuncture, not only as regards populism in itself, so much as the ‘populist’ uses to which Gramscian thought is put. Gramsci was certainly no populist even though he looked with interest at the populism of his time, but always from the inside of what he considered the overall process of the emancipation of the popular classes in Italy and not as a mere acritical celebration popular culture. Gramsci’s ‘going to the people’, his conception of the ‘people-nation’ or of the ‘national-popular’ (*nazionale-popolare* and not *nazional-popolare* as a number of contributors are at pains to point out) is there to signify the opposite to populism, namely the people leaving behind their subaltern nature, ‘which albeit not hegemonic, is at least on the road to a new hegemony’ (Mordenti, p. 44).

Very rich in its implications, especially for the present, and in some ways problematic, is the complement to this interpretation offered in the essay by Frosini, from which a different sensitivity of Gramsci’s towards populism emerges, a conception which in Gramsci’s assessment in itself is neither positive nor negative, but rather something that was inevitable because of the exceptionally deep crisis that the Italian nation-State was going through in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to the text, Gramsci’s method vis-à-vis populism urges us to descend to the analytical level of the concrete contents of the various populist movements in order to make a political assessment of them, and not to remain on the external plane of mere formal definitions and hence of one’s own reassuring good bourgeois *civil* consciousness.

To express this with Sartre's words, Gramsci – despite his 'theoretical anti-populism' (Prospero, p. 100) – invited us to 'dirty our hands'. Populism can be read not only as a symptom, but also as a point of no return, of the crisis of the modern bourgeois nation-State. It is here that we find the core of his approach: to seek to understand the (popular) rationality within populism, rather than denouncing it in a classist and elitist fashion, as a mere blinding deception of power exercised over the subaltern masses (Cingari, Mordenti). Yet once more it is an indication of basic method, in the light of the present and the attitude of a good part of the global left towards this phenomenon. And still, *Gramsci and Populism* – here making a constructive point in its favour – finishes by knowingly pausing over the point where much of the contemporary debate has stopped: in dealing with the question of populism solely on the discursive plane, without going really into depth into real politics of the different contemporary populist movements, and therefore of their eventual (popular) rationality inside the relation among today's popular classes (here the short but telling essay by Cortés is the exception). It is, then, more the illustration of Gramsci's method of reading populism that is the prevailing element in the volume and not its real putting into practice.

*III.* It is therefore in this philological return to Gramsci in the light of the present that we find the best and most stimulating part of the volume. Less in the other respect, and here above all as regards the recurrent, and also to put it bluntly repetitive, criticisms of Laclau. This is not because at times they are not (philologically) correct, but because the challenge represented by the political theory of Laclau almost never foresees an in-depth passage through economic processes, social transformations and concrete political movements against which Laclau has in any case attempted to measure himself. It is certainly legitimate and even useful to show philologically the irreducibility of Gramsci to the reasoning of Laclau, but it seems, to bring Benjamin once more into play, a one-way street, constituting additionally a blind alley. Perhaps it is worthwhile to recall that Laclau's writing on populism, like moreover the rest of his work, puts itself forward as a political response to the transformations that have taken place in global capitalism and in the social conflict processes from the 60s of the

last century onward, in particular with the rise of social movements (those of feminism, anti-racism, peace, ecology, counter-culture etc.) and the politics of identity, but also of post-Fordism, of neo-liberalism (while hardly ever calling it by its proper name) and, not least, Latin American populism. Laclau's perspective tries to come to terms with phenomena such as the decline of the industrial working class as the central figure of labour and political recomposition, and with the transformations of the modern State and political and cultural subjectivities in the light of the ever greater interconnections dynamics of global capitalism. At the same time, he attempts to deal with the ever more heterogeneous future of labour and ever more multicultural future of nations, and finally, though hardly ever mentioned, with the legacy of colonialism in the South of the world (cf. his early publications).

Another important aspect to recall, for understanding more from within the logic of its structure, is that his work saw the light in a historical conjuncture in which a good part of the European working classes, most of all but not solely in Great Britain, were beginning to express an explicit and determinate consensus towards socially regressive, anti-classist, nationalistic, racist and patriarchal policies. From this point of view his work, while different in its orientation, could well be placed alongside that, very predictably, of authors such as Stuart Hall, but also Nikos Poulantzas, André Gorz and many others. For better or worse this is his starting point and it is here that we see the sense of his theoretical-political operation. Laclau thus does not propose an abstract theory, so to speak, of populism. And as regards his idea of 'populist reason' perhaps it is something more than a simple 'impartial' or 'formal' theory of the 'political' in itself, as is often suggested in the text, even though it is sometimes Laclau himself who fuels this idea. *On Populist Reason* may, we are here suggesting, be read as a sort of philosophy of history, so to speak, of the losers or of the subalterns, in other words of the 'difference' of all those groups, classes and subjects that the long march of western capitalist modernity has thrown into the shadows, into death, into oblivion. The sans culottes, communards, decamisados, the indigenous, slaves, proletarians: the masses on whom modern western capitalism has constructed its dominion. Laclau's 'people' in this sense may also be conceived as the fruit of the historical and cultural sedimentation of an identity and of a

popular and subaltern memory that has been negated and suppressed, as a political subject that in today's world will always manifest itself ex-post (in an anti-essentialist and anti-chauvinist sense), i.e. through the 'hegemonic articulation' of various 'chains of equivalence' and the unforeseen emergence of different 'empty signifiers'. Expressions of a 'people' that is more a (subaltern) part than a (sovereign) whole, ever to be (re-)constructed according to the positionings and the various historical moments, Laclau's populism cannot but be a plebeian, conflictual, agonistic expression, but above all, one that is different from the populisms of the North of the world, one of a progressive and inclusive nature: this is what is transmitted by the historical genealogy of populist reason outlined in his work. It is not so much 'hegemony as the struggle for the appearance' (Voza, p. 91) as the struggle for the cultural and political hegemony of the subalterns, understood here certainly not as following class fractures in a merely economic sense: populism divides, denies any pretence at a rational consensus of universality à la Habermas, of mere technocratic administration of the existent, in order to assert the positions of one side: or better, using the language of Laclau, the irreconcilability of the people and the anti-people. The problem does not therefore seem to be one of a presumed 'culturalist' perspective of Laclau as much – as is shown by his debates with authors such as Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière and others, as well as with those on the Latin American left – as the relation of relative autonomy between each single instance in the chain. The chain itself and the empty signifier, in other words the question of what, to use the expression of Mezzadra and Neilson (2019), we may call the 'dualism of power' among the difference political movements, the 'hegemonic articulation' in which there form part the institutions (the State) and the leadership. It is difficult here not to see the influence of Peronism in Argentina on Laclau's positive, affirmative and antagonistic (and also anti-colonial) characterization of populism: not an 'idealization of Peronism' of his (Anselmi, p. 109) – quite frankly we do not understand how to take such a disparaging judgment – but its interpretation of the historical, political and cultural experience of the real struggle of that movement in its role as a main political signifier not only of the Argentinian working class but of the rural and urban sub-

proletariat, the excluded and the marginalized: in other words of a nation fighting for its liberation from centuries-old colonial-imperial domination over a period of at least three decades from 1945 to 1975. At times one has the impression that Laclau is doing nothing other than project his own concept of populism, not only the characteristics of Peronism as a national-popular movement, but also the effects of its irruption (as the political expression of a great proletarian revolt) within the oligarchic and racist framework of Argentinian liberal-colonial democracy of the beginning of the twentieth century. On not a few occasions Laclau, a former militant of the Partido Socialista de la Izquierda Nacional (Socialist Party of the National Left) in Argentina, declared that his work is a sort of final and personal settling of accounts with the legacy of Peronism. In any case, we are dealing with a conception of populism that, in referring to the history of the oppressed peoples of Latin America, could show itself to be of great use for a decolonization of European philosophy and political sciences, that is to say of their 'Eurocentric geopolitics of knowledge' (Lander, 2001).

IV. It is of no importance whether our reading is shared by others, but in any case we believe that Laclau's reinterpretation of Gramsci's thought must be assessed in the light of a reflection on all these considerations. Moreover, at the moment of assessing Laclau's reinterpretation of Gramsci's thought, it is necessary to take into account another important point: Gramsci is only one of the elements – and perhaps not the central one – of this complex and composite theoretical machine. It is not, then, a matter of reducing the juxtaposition to a merely epistemological question – materialism as against culturalism, primacy of class against primacy of discourse, and so on – but of dealing with it in virtue of an examination and an adoption of position vis-à-vis the material constitution of one's own present. One should subject Laclau more to the measure of the interpretation of social conflictuality and analysis of the productive processes in the different historico-geographical conjunctures, even from a Gramscian point of view, than to the measure of a mere philological comparison with the *Notebooks*. Moreover, it is Liguori himself who reminds us that the reading of Gramsci promoted by Laclau is 'on purpose unfaithful, rhapsodic and permeated by other philosophies'. It is therefore of use to

follow the journey in the reverse direction: not Laclau in the light of Gramsci, but the opposite – that is to take Laclau seriously, always in the idea that it is worth the trouble of so doing. This could be a way of arriving at something different from what is known at the start. In our opinion, it seems that if the ‘Gramscian’ juxtaposition with the populism of Laclau started precisely from this point, rather than from facile invective, it would certainly be more stimulating, but above all more constructive from the political point of view.

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