

## CHAPTER 3

# Understanding Right and Left Populism<sup>1</sup>

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We appear to be living in an age of populism. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed the rise of right-wing populist parties throughout Europe such as Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, Victor Orban's Fidesz Party in Hungary, and the Polish Law and Justice Party. Such an emergence hasn't been confined to Europe but is a global phenomenon as evinced, for example, by the electoral triumphs of Narendra Modi in India in 2014 and that of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey as early as 2003. But no phenomena more clearly supports this thesis than the stunning victory of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 American presidential election and the triumph of the Leave Campaign led by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

But there has also been a populism of the Left. The Arab Spring was widely regarded as a broad-based, if short-lived, popular revolt and therefore as a kind of populism in the streets in 2011. The events of Tahrir Square profoundly inspired the Occupy Movement – sparked by the editor of the Vancouver-based magazine *Ad Busters*' exhortation – to 'Occupy Wall Street!' Radiating out beyond Zuccotti Park, the movement spread through much of the Western world. Arguably, the Occupy Movement's most significant and enduring effect was to be felt five years later in the dramatic grassroots support for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic Party's Presidential nomination, which was – as recent juridical proceedings have revealed – undermined by the actions of the DNC. In the United Kingdom, Jeremy Corbyn could also be said to have

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benefitted from the anti-systematic tendencies that crystallized in the global economic crisis. He also focused opposition to the Blairite politics of what Tariq Ali calls the 'extreme centre,' or the abdication of social democracy (Tony Blair's 'New Labour' in particular), from its role of providing substantive opposition to neoliberalism (See Marcuse 1991, and Ali 2015). Corbyn's leadership contributed to a rather shocking result in the recent UK General Election in June 2017, in which Labour managed to increase its share of the vote by the largest margin since Clement Atlee during the 1945 post-war election (*Independent*, 9 June). Latin America, moreover, has seen a dramatic revival of populism in the Bolivarian model in the Chavez/Maduro regime in Venezuela and in Evo Morales in Bolivia as well as in the Kirchner governments in Argentina. The dramatic global rise of populist parties and movements has resulted in a burgeoning scholarship on this most slippery of political concepts (Abromeit et al. 2015).

We can preliminarily distinguish between what we might call neo-liberal and populist politics, an opposition that has only sharpened as a result of the previous four decades of neo-liberal policies.<sup>2</sup> Neo-liberal politics can be distinguished from liberal politics insofar as, based on the centrality of the rights-bearing citizen; the former is centred on the rate-payer in contrast to the latter. Neo-liberal politics is premised largely on the idea that politics can be modelled on neo-classical economics; that political parties aim to expand market share in the polity in much the same way that firms seek to do so in the market of goods and services. Wendy Brown has called this the 'marketization of democracy' corresponding to the thorough-going transformation of the *citoyen* into *homo economicus*. As Brown suggests, 'neoliberal reason, ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity, is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones.' (Brown 2015, 17). The 'rational choice' of the rate-payer is modelled on that of the consumer looking to maximize utility. The implication is that institutions of economics are analogous to those of politics. In other words, the market is to economics as parliament is to politics. If the market coordinates the free exchange of commodities, parliament coordinates the free exchange of policy ideas from which 'consumers' and 'citizens' respectively may choose. Common to politics and economics understood in such terms is the idea that underlying both sets of institutions is a form of rationality.<sup>3</sup> The untrammelled market produces optimal outcomes, whereas unencumbered parliamentary discussion fosters the best policy outcomes which themselves secure political utility, which is to say, the most efficient 'authoritative allocation of resources.'

Populism challenges the parliamentary model (and occasionally the market model as well) by suggesting that legislative representatives not only fail to adequately represent the interests of their constituents (the *people*) but work to undermine them. That untrammelled parliamentary discussion is one thing, but actual executive decision-making is quite another. Indeed, in place of parliamentarianism, debate and discussion and compromise between opposed

parties and groups, populism suggests that politics hinges upon the existential confrontation between ‘the people’ and the ‘elite’ or the ‘powerful.’ It is not difficult to see that populism isn’t just a different kind of party politics *within* liberal-democratic states, but rather constitutes the ‘crisis of parliamentary democracy’ (Schmitt 1985). While liberal-democracy – through division of powers and checks and balances – seeks to limit sovereignty, populist politics are geared to a direct, unmediated assertion of the sovereignty of the ‘people.’

But how can we understand populism with more precision? How can we account for its recent pervasiveness? Does populism corrode human rights or does it buttress them? In an effort to answer these questions, I will focus on two exemplary accounts of populism before working toward an alternative theoretical model based on the Frankfurt School’s attempt to come to terms with the emergence of fascism in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century.

The first is a recent widely-cited and discussed empirical study by Norris and Inglehart (2016). The second is a more theoretical account of populism by Ernesto Laclau articulated over several decades (Laclau 1977, Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Laclau 2006).<sup>4</sup> The former seeks to account for the contemporary expression of populism in the rise of Donald Trump as well as in the Brexit vote in the U.K. last summer. The latter is grounded in an understanding of populism in the Latin American southern cone – with a particular emphasis on Laclau’s native Argentina in the post-war period – and tends to understand the logic populism as ultimately coextensive with the logic of politics *per se*. If Norris and Inglehart struggle to come to terms with the populism of the *Left*, then Laclau struggles to come to adequate grips with the populism of the *Right*. The former draw upon a somewhat narrow definition of populism, emphasizing its anti-establishment, authoritarian and nativist dimensions; the latter understands populism as a logic constituted by the establishment of an ‘*equivalential chain*’ of *different* demands and appears to suggest that populism is a democratic, horizontal and egalitarian discourse. To begin assessing the relationship between populism and human rights, it is necessary to grasp populism on both sides of the political spectrum.

### 3.1. Explaining Populism: Economic Insecurity or Cultural Backlash?

A paper widely discussed in the media by Pippa Norris of Harvard University and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan suggests – following Cas Mudde – that populism shares three distinct elements: 1) *anti-establishmentism*, 2) *authoritarianism* and 3) *nativism*. The first contrasts with the established structures of *representative democracy*; the second with the principles of *liberalism* (in particular with the protection of minority rights), and emphasizes the direct expression of popular will via charismatic leadership, referenda and plebiscites that circumvent the typical checks and balances of liberal-democracy;

and the third contrasts with *cosmopolitanism* (Norris and Inglehart 2016, 6–7). Building on Mudde’s conceptualization, the authors develop a heuristic model of populism based upon two distinct axes: economic and cultural. The former has to do with the level of state management of the economy, and the latter has to do with ‘conservative’ versus ‘progressive’ values. The authors suggest three possible analytical types of explanation for the rise of populism: 1) the rules of the game, 2) the ‘supply-side’ of the market of party politics and 3) the ‘demand-side’ of party politics. They gear their explanation to the third dimension and suggest that this can be understood to have two distinct – though not mutually exclusive – causes. The first is that populism emerges in response to *economic insecurity*, and the second is that populism appears as a *backlash* by older white males to the erosion of traditional cultural values.<sup>5</sup> Norris and Inglehart argue that the latter is the most convincing argument.

Overall we conclude that cultural values, combined with several social and demographic factors, provide the most consistent and parsimonious explanation for voting support for populist parties; their contemporary popularity in Europe is largely due to ideological appeals to traditional values which are concentrated among the older generation, men, the religious, ethnic majorities, and less educated sectors of society. We believe that these are the groups most likely to feel that they have become strangers from the predominant values in their own country, left behind by progressive tides of cultural change which they do not share. Older white men with traditional values – who formed the cultural majority in Western societies during the 1950s and 1960s – have seen their predominance and privilege eroded. The silent revolution of the 1970s appears to have spawned an angry and resentful counter-revolutionary backlash today. (2016, 4–5)

While the empirical data the authors cite to support their argument is indeed impressive, it is possible to raise significant objections about the way they *frame* this evidence. First, the separation of ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ explanations seems deeply dubious. In strictly economic terms, demand is often manufactured and managed by the supplier in terms of marketing, advertising, and public relations. And these mechanisms have only become more important in the contemporary period.<sup>6</sup> As Benjamin Moffitt (2016) has recently argued, if one fails to appreciate the role of mass media in politics it is simply not possible to explain figures like Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup>

A second objection follows from the second cause: the study defines populism in exclusively right-wing terms, and therefore the study could be said to be biased towards cultural explanations. Such a definition precludes a populism of the left which Mudde’s account permits. Mudde argues that populism isn’t necessarily characterized by authoritarianism and nativism, but can be combined with them. He also allows for populisms of the left as well as the right. For

Mudde (2017, 10), populism is comprised of the moralistic opposition between a 'pure' people and a 'corrupt elite,' and aims at the direct expression of what Rousseau called the 'general will' (*la volonté générale*). By mischaracterizing Mudde's definition as inherently authoritarian and nativist, Norris and Inglehart bias their conclusion towards culturalist explanations.

The culturalist explanations cannot convincingly account for the political orientation of a figure like the gay, former Marxist Pim Fortuyn, who defined his version of populism in progressive terms – as a defense of liberal Dutch values against the traditionalism of Islam. Moreover, it is not uncommon for social democrats in Nordic countries (notably Denmark) to favour more restrictive immigration policies as a means of defending the welfare state.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, if populism is a backlash generated by the cultural anxieties of *older white males*, how do we account for the fact that 53% of white women voters opted for Trump despite the aggressive misogyny he exhibited throughout the 2016 American Presidential Election campaign?<sup>9</sup> And how do we account for the growing support for right-populism among young people – in Europe under the guise of '*Génération Identitaire*' and in the U.S. under that of the Alt-Right (Nagle 2017)?

A third objection is that it is debatable that we've been witnessing the steady triumph of 'progressive values.' Indeed, today it is far from clear what comprises 'progressive values,' as we saw in the recent Democratic Presidential Nomination pitting Hillary Rodham Clinton against Bernie Sanders. The former emphasized identity questions; for example, she highlighted the prospectively historic nature of her presidency as the first female president, following the first African American president. The latter highlighted problems of social inequality; he emphasized the growing gap between the 1% and 99%, the imperative of breaking up large financial institutions, making post-secondary education affordable, and so on. This opposition has been echoed in debates between political theorists in terms of the relative priority between politics of *recognition* versus *redistribution* (Fraser and Honneth 2004).<sup>10</sup>

If 'progressive' values are understood in terms of the former, we have arguably witnessed a greater societal recognition of a multiplicity of ethnic, sexual, linguistic and other identities. Yet from the standpoint of the latter, the past three decades have seen a dramatic *reversal* in 'progressive values' insofar as redistribution has occurred in an upward rather than downward direction, as Thomas Piketty (2013) has convincingly shown (see also Ben Michaels 2006; Reed Jr. 2001).<sup>11</sup> The reversal in progressive values arguably has to do with, amongst other things, the demise of a competing social system, the corresponding decline of the organized left, a drastic softening of union membership and a rightward shift of social democracy. A precipitous decline in union membership, of course, has profound implications for the active exercise of citizenship insofar as declining union membership means that fewer individuals have experienced at least a semblance of direct democracy within the workplace; and this contributes to the creation of a more depoliticized citizenry overall. All of these

factors could be taken to amount to exactly a reversal in 'progressive values' if we define 'progressive values' in terms of not just negative but positive liberty, or a deepening of the capacity for reasoned self-determination.

Norris and Inglehart take Green parties as epitomizing 'progressivism.' However, in many cases, including Canada and Germany, this seems questionable according to their own definition of 'progressive' as meaning greater recognition of difference. In the Canadian case, the Green Party has championed market-based solutions to environmental problems, which puts it directly at odds with the Indigenous view of the land as inherently non-commodifiable and inalienable. As for the German Green Party, while it emerged as a social movement rooted in the anti-nuclear weapons campaigns and the Peace movement, it quickly morphed into a coalition partner and held the Foreign Ministry of the first German government to take the country to war in the post-World War period. This cannot be viewed as unequivocally 'progressive.'<sup>12</sup>

Whether populism can be understood exclusively in terms of traditionalist backlash is also debatable. If this was the predominant measure of populist politics, one could expect recent immigrants – who themselves hold traditional values – to the U.S., the U.K. and other parts of Europe to join in these movements.<sup>13</sup> However, far from this being the case, they are often the targets of the backlash.

Finally, one wonders whether the authors don't seriously underestimate the threat right-wing populism poses to the institutions of liberal-democracy in the United States. A worrying inference that the authors explicitly draw from their study is that, insofar as populism is a type of politics favoured by a generation of older white men, its days are numbered; this demographic, with the mere passing of time, will eventually die out. The authors argue that:

In the longer-term, the generation gap is expected to fade over time, as older cohorts with...traditional attitudes are gradually replaced in the population by their children and grand-children, adhering to more progressive values. In the short-term, however, the heated culture wars dividing young and old have the capacity to heighten generational conflict, to challenge the legitimacy of liberal democracy, and to disrupt long-established patterns of party competition. (4)

In other words, history is on the side of the forces of 'progress.'<sup>14</sup> Without wanting to sound alarmist, what is worrying about this perspective is that this was – as the German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin noted (1986) – the kind of thinking in certain quarters of German Social Democracy that facilitated the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. The study fails to sufficiently appreciate the ways in which populist governments seek to *institutionalize* their agendas, thereby changing the rules of the game. This has become most drastically evident in the case of Poland in which Andrzej Duda (leader of the right-populist Law and Justice party) has significantly limited the autonomy

of the judicial branch of government. In the U.S., one witnesses a whole of host of measures such a gerrymandering, voter suppression or what Michelle Alexander (2012) calls the ‘New Jim Crow,’<sup>15</sup> the dismantling of the EPA, the gutting of public education, the recent Department of Justice claim that the Civil Rights Act does not apply to members of the LGBTQ community and the disabled, the attempt to de-legitimize the judicial branch of government, and (of course) attacks on the fourth estate as purveyors of ‘fake news.’ The developments mentioned above amount to nothing less than the long-term institutional transformation of the structure of U.S. liberal-democracy, and this has dire consequences for human and civil rights. But this is hardly registered, if at all, in this study. These developments accelerated under Trump. They have roots in the Tea Party-wing of the GOP, and also have roots in the policies of President Bill Clinton (in particular, the disenfranchisement of inmates of state and federal penitentiaries). Such a transformation of the rules of the game would be especially dramatic in the case of a major socio-economic or political crisis – such as a major terror attack, which could constitute something like a Reichstag fire scenario (see Klein 2017).

### 3.2. Understanding the Logic of Populism

If Norris and Inglehart’s conception of populism is underdeveloped, and their argument that the rise of populism has to do with a cultural backlash fails to convince, Ernesto Laclau’s theorization of populism is the most sophisticated and ambitious. Laclau’s work has the added interest of being informed by the historical experiences of populism in the form of Peronism in his native Argentina, and directly influencing the ‘neo-Peronism’ of the Kirchner regimes that came into being after the economic catastrophe of the late 1990s (2003–2015). Laclau’s post-Gramscian approach to populism as a leftist political strategy has also profoundly influenced political parties such as Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece before its capitulation to the Troika.

Laclau’s initial theorization of populism arises out of a structuralist – or Althusserian – reading of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (See Mouffe 2014). Gramsci is best known for his understanding of the Russian Revolution as a ‘revolution against *Capital*’ (1994, 39–42) and for his cutting against the grain of the Third International to address the problem of the ‘national-popular’ forms of political mobilization in social formations like Italy that were marked by a profound and enduring ‘combined but uneven development’ leading to the split – one which is still very much reflected in the politics of the Italian Northern League – between an industrialized north and a largely agrarian south (See Gramsci 1978, 441–462). As an attempt to address both problems, Gramsci seized upon Lenin’s idea that in the context of the particular agrarian conditions of Russia the working class was not the sole agent of political transformation, but rather had to play a leading or ‘hegemonic’ role. Gramsci’s

signal contribution is the 'elaboration of the Bolshevik thesis of *gegemoniya* into the qualitatively new theory of *egemonia* (Thomas 2009, 137). The Revolution's slogan 'Peace, bread and land' was not exclusively proletarian in content. It included the demands of other social classes, namely the peasantry – a class that Marx once argued was objectively reactionary because its members were isolated from one another, working in small groups on lord's *demesne*, rather than in large numbers in urban industrial factories. As we shall see, the capacity of populism to incorporate heterogeneous demands within the constitution of 'the people' will form the core of Laclau's conception. The logical unfolding of this conception entails a progressive decentring of the working class, to the point where social structure dissolves in a radically contingent play of signification that can only be provisionally and incompletely arrested to yield fixity and stability. For Laclau it becomes the very essence of the hegemonic logic of the political.

For Gramsci, the working class in Italy could play a hegemonic role by virtue of its claim of addressing the condition of unequal development by assuming a leadership or what he called an 'ethico-political' role within the nation. In other words, while in other countries – paradigmatically France – it was the bourgeoisie that unified the country under the auspices of the nation-state, for Gramsci, in Italy it would be the working class that would assume the mantle of 'national-popular' leadership. The Communist Party, specifically, would play the role of what Gramsci called the 'Modern Prince,' and echo Machiavelli's call at the very end of *The Prince* (2003, 82–85) for Lorenzo de Medici to unify Italy. For Gramsci, hegemony represents the 'cathartic moment' whereby the working class transcends its narrow 'trade union' interests and becomes capable of integrating the interests of other 'subaltern' classes into its political project. In other words, hegemony entails the translation of the particular into the universal. If politics entails the conflict of particular and opposed interests, and ethics a universal interest through which such conflicts are superseded then hegemony entails quite literally an ethico-political moment culminating in concrete universality (Gramsci 2007, 63).<sup>16</sup> It is not difficult to see the attraction of the Italian Marxist preoccupied with the 'southern question' for a figure like Laclau who was profoundly attentive to the semi-peripheral status of his native Argentina. It was precisely in semi-peripheral states that the process of translation or what Laclau would call 'articulation' between particular and universal would become so consequential.

Laclau approaches Gramsci through an Althusserian-Poulantzian lens (1977, 125), which means that he seeks to interpret the Italian theorist through the idea of *structural* as opposed to *expressive* totality. For the latter, most clearly outlined in the early work of Georg Lukács (1972), totality was understood (at least according to Althusser) as *expressing* a single underlying contradiction within the realm of the economy between the relations and forces of production, that would prioritize the working class as the agent of revolutionary change.<sup>17</sup> From

the standpoint of the expressive conception of totality, class determinations that arise out of this contradiction can be located at every level of society as a whole; state and politics, culture and ideology. For example, Lukács famously argued that proletarian consciousness provided an answer to some of the most complex philosophical questions arising out of German Idealism. Against this, Althusser developed a notion of structural totality between different instances of the mode of production, each of which possessed a 'relative autonomy' from one another, although the economic was ultimately the determining element. While for the Hegelian-Marxist conception of totality secondary contradictions simply reflect principal contradictions, for the structuralist conception of totality, Althusser argues 'the secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its conditions of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence' (2006, 205). The relation between the different elements of a mode of production is established via a notion of *articulation*.

In the 'Theory of Populism' essay included in the volume *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*,<sup>18</sup> Laclau argues that Lukácsian Marxism seeks to understand politics and ideology – and populism by extension – on the basis of reductionism. Reducing them to the ruling class positions, Laclau seeks to understand them in terms of *articulation*. Articulation means a linkage of elements in a given ideology or what he later calls 'discourse.' As he puts it succinctly, 'classes exist at the ideological and political level in a process of articulation and not of reduction' (1977, 161). Laclau conceives of populism as an 'antagonistic synthesis,' a synthesis of heterogeneous elements with no necessary class belonging, that plays a role in a given antagonism between the 'people' and the 'power bloc' or state. In other words, the contradiction between proletarian and bourgeois at the economic level took the form of an antagonism between 'the people' and the 'power bloc' at the level of politics and ideology (1977, 107). Moreover, there was no necessary relation between the two. The content – what makes a given ideology democratic or authoritarian – has to do with its form of articulation.<sup>19</sup>

In his hugely influential yet profoundly controversial subsequent work (for example, see Wood 1986) with Chantal Mouffe entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau seeks to develop his analysis of populism so as to generate a new post-Marxist politics. In other words, Laclau is developing in a British context (he was based at Essex University) a political strategy that is germane to a context that has seen the rise of what Stuart Hall has called 'authoritarian populism' (1988, 123–150) in the form of Thatcherism (which was successful in facing down the Arthur Scargill and the NUM just around the time of the book's publication). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*<sup>20</sup> differs from Laclau's earlier work in at least two ways: 1) it breaks with Althusserian Marxism, particularly Nicos Poulantzas, insofar as it no longer accords the working class a privileged role in social transformation; and 2) it provides a discursive account of the social. As Laclau and Mouffe argue:

In our view, in order to advance in the determination of social antagonisms, it is necessary to analyse the plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions, and to discard the idea of a perfectly unified and homogenous agent, such as the 'working class' of classical discourse. The search for the 'true' working class and its limits is a false problem, and as such lacks any theoretical or political relevance. (1986, 84)

The continuity, however, lies in the fact that Laclau insists upon the centrality of the concept of hegemonic articulation of heterogeneous political demands as the basis of a leftist political strategy.

In *On Populist Reason* (2005) Laclau develops the basic notion of populism as an 'antagonistic synthesis,' but now he understands this in terms of an equivocal articulation of differences in relation to an 'antagonistic frontier' (2005, 84–86). For Laclau, as becomes apparent in his excoriating criticisms of Hardt and Negri's concept of the 'multitude' and what he calls Žižek's 'Martian politics,' all democratic politics are populist (223–50). In other words, if we assume that society is inherently heterogeneous, politics must entail the hegemonic articulation of a multiplicity of political demands in a manner that is always provisional and open to revision. A given hegemonic equivocal articulation of differences is always shifting and temporary and is based on the logic of the empty signifier. The key difference from his previous work is Laclau's attempt to conceptualize the affective dimension of politics via Lacanian psychoanalysis. John Kraniuskas (2006) understands this as the articulation of a Gramscian Lacan in contradistinction to Žižek's Hegelian Lacan. While the latter takes as its point of departure the understanding of the 'desire of the Other' (the impossible-because-unattainable desire for intersubjective recognition), the former can be understood in terms of political desire. For Laclau political desire is geared to what Lacan calls the 'objet petit a,' meaning a partial object that is a fragment of the Real (the order that eludes symbolization yet is caught within the symbolic order). The 'objet petit a' is often symbolized by the bountiful breast; and as such promises a return to an original plenitude prior to the symbolic order based on a differentiation and non-identity between signifier and signified. Political desire, then, is established through the Name or the coincidence of signifier and signified that is only set retroactively. The key point Laclau is making here is that this Lacanian understanding of political desire enables us to understand desire in an way alternative to Freud's, the latter being mass politics grounded in the love of an authoritarian leader who represents the Imago of the father. In contrast, political desire grounded in the utopic logic of the 'objet petit a' is characterized by the horizontal relations between brothers (and sisters, presumably).

Several criticisms can be made of Laclau's approach to populism. Critics have drawn attention to its formalism stemming from its reliance on structural linguistics in which signification is understood by way of a system of differences with no positive terms. This formalist premise is the basis for his understanding

of the figure of the *people* as an empty signifier that can take on radically divergent contents. What the approach seems to elide is the diachronic continuity of this figure. The idea of 'the people' (*demos*) has a rich and semantically charged history stretching back to fifth century B.C. Athenian democracy, which surely must counter-balance the semiotic openness proposed by Laclau. While in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau provides (with Mouffe) a genealogy of the concept of hegemony, in *On Populist Reason* he avoids providing the kind of account of the people that is, for example, sketched by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (Kraniauskas 2006).<sup>21</sup> Secondly, and relatedly, while Laclau is correct to take a sceptical attitude towards the class reductionism of Lukács and Althusser's notion of determination in the last instance by the 'economic,' does this necessitate understanding the social as marked by radical contingency? It seems that Laclau thinks *either* we must conceive of necessity in terms of a Hegelian or Marxian philosophy of history that offers the possibility of a closed historical totality in terms either of Absolute Spirit or Communism, *or* the social dissolves completely into an infinite, quasi-deconstructive play of radical difference.

Turning to Marx's political writings, it is hard to maintain that the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1979, 99–197) is an exemplar of 'class reductionism.' Rather, it is a very nuanced understanding of class struggle that works against the grain of any straightforward progressivist philosophy of history (Gandesha 2017b). Thirdly, Laclau also seems to downplay the role of institutions in historical change and continuity. Can we understand the mechanism of articulation other than through institutions such as the state, political parties, trades unions, and the whole host of organizations and associations that comprised what Gramsci called 'civil society,' which was, for him, the theatre of a 'war of position' or a cultural-ideological struggle? Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, the above questions are raised by the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis upon which Laclau depends to ground his account of populism, in particular to rescue populism from the 'denigration of the masses' (205, 21–30) of figures like Gustav Le Bon. However, Laclau's engagement with Freudian social psychology must be regarded as a missed opportunity, since he ignores the problem that occupies such an important role in *Group Psychology and the Function of the Ego*, namely the phenomenon of the regression of the group to the primal horde. As John Kraniauskas argues:

In Laclau's populist version, the former is no longer the authoritarian Father but just another brother, one among equals, and, as a model for thinking the hegemony of one equivalential claim among others, it is the means through which populist political identity is produced. (Kraniauskas 2006, 51)

The possibility of regression marks a key feature of psychoanalysis that Laclau struggles with in his account of populism, namely the manner in which the

‘past weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’ – as Marx puts it in the *Brumaire* – and the closely related problem (for both Freud and Lacan) of the compulsion to repeat. Surely, to understand populism today (particularly its authoritarian form) it is necessary to come to terms precisely with such phenomena. In other words, from both ontogenic (relating to the individual) and phylogenetic (relating to the species) perspectives, psychoanalysis understood not merely a formal model by which the equivalential articulation of differences is possible, but also substantively in terms of a method for working through the stubborn persistence of effects of past traumas, which is profoundly at odds with Laclau’s seemingly voluntarist emphasis on the radical *contingency* of the social.

While Laclau is deeply indebted to a particular post-structuralist interpretation of Freud, he fails to take seriously the challenge that Freud poses to his discursive account of the social. For Laclau, society as an ontologically coherent space is an impossibility, but rather society is itself a function of articulation. In other words, Laclau’s anti-reductionism is taken to its logical conclusion of denying the very possibility of certain minimal conditions shared by all societies, such as the necessity of the labour of material production and social reproduction. Yet the recognition of the necessity of work constitutes the basis for Freud’s late understanding of the dynamics of civilization, repression, and the nature of the resentment that they generate. This hampers his ability to grasp the full force of Freud’s contribution to social psychology which gives it a profoundly economic dimension both in the sense of the necessity of social labour as the basis for civilization and in the sense of the economics of libido, which is to say, cathexis.<sup>22</sup> In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1989), Freud makes clear the manner in which the ‘narcissism of minor differences’ of ethnic or national identity forms the basis for compensation for the demands of civilization. Such national identity finds expression in the figure of an authoritarian leader who is the object of love and the basis of group identity. By precluding such an understanding of Freud, Laclau is unable to come to terms with the way in which contemporary right-populism capitalizes on deeply authoritarian tendencies within neo-liberal capitalism.

Given the short-comings of both Norris and Inglehart on the one hand, and Ernesto Laclau on the other, it is necessary to build an account of populism that can integrate both explanations of economic and cultural insecurity via social psychological explanations. As Mudde puts it, ‘Economic anxiety is socio-culturally translated’ (Mudde 2017, 12). One tradition that is capable of doing so is that developed by the Frankfurt School starting from the 1930s, in their attempt to explain the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

### 3.3. Left and Right Populism

The problem of regression emerges again in terms of a resurgence of ‘authoritarianism’ to which the discipline of political science has paid increasing

attention since the early 1990s. A recent study by Matthew MacWilliams (2016) contends that the most significant predictor of support for Donald J. Trump is 'authoritarianism,' which he defines according to responses to a battery of four questions relating to child rearing.<sup>23</sup> The problem of authoritarianism in U.S. politics was first defined by the landmark study profoundly informed by Freudian psychoanalysis – especially *Group Psychology and the Function of the Ego* – by Theodor W. Adorno and his colleagues entitled *The Authoritarian Personality*<sup>24</sup> published in 1950. Motivated in part by a concern for the existence of authoritarian attitudes in the aftermath of the Second World War, and employing a unique synthesis of both European qualitative or interpretive and North American quantitative methods, the study used what it called the 'F-scale' (where F = Fascist), which could be boiled down to a measure for hostility to 'Otherness.' A key aspect of the theoretical framework of this study is that the institutional transformations of late capitalist society, particularly that of the family as a means of socialization, contributed to the conditions of regression. In other words, massification and the corresponding foreshortened space for individual initiative and judgment contributed to a propensity towards authoritarianism in the form of a relatively undisciplined Id, an over-developed Super Ego, and Ego weakness. Authoritarianism expressed itself, therefore, in an obsequious relation to authority and excessive cruelty towards those with comparatively less social power.

Just one year before the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman published their critical study of the figure of the American agitator, *Prophets of Deceit* (1970). The book amounts to a detailed analysis of the speeches of archetypal populist demagogues such as Father Coughlin, a contemporary of Huey Long, who can in some sense be regarded as a precursor to populist figures such as George Wallace and Donald Trump. Löwenthal and Guterman compare the agitator with two other types, all of which seek to address a prevailing socio-economic problem or crisis. While the latter two types strive to appeal to the Ego by providing a reasoned analysis of and program of action that can transform the situation so as to address the causes of the fear, anger and frustration of the people; the agitator, in marked contrast, appeals to the Id by inciting the crowd to express its emotions, which it then directs at the particular groups who are said to be responsible for the crisis.

Both studies are profoundly indebted to Horkheimer and Fromm's *Studien über Autorität und Familie* from the 1930s (Horkheimer et al. 1936; and also Horkheimer 2002) and to the first part Erich Fromm's essential book *Escape from Freedom* [1994] also more literally and aptly entitled *Fear of Freedom* (outside North America). Initially published in 1941, the methodological appendix to the book ('Character and Social Process') was especially important insofar as it synthesized the Freudian account of the self (character) and the Marxian account of society (social process). What is of particular importance for our purposes are the implications for political theory. Well before Isaiah Berlin's

(1990) landmark discussion,<sup>25</sup> Fromm takes as his starting point the opposition between *negative* and *positive* conceptions of freedom. Generally speaking, one is free in the negative sense to the extent one faces comparatively few constraints on action. One is free in the positive sense to the degree to which one possesses the capacity for self-determination or rational self-legislation. One can be free in the first sense without necessarily being free in the second sense, although the reverse is not the case. That is, it is possible, for example, to live in a society that has a free market and also allows few opportunities for participation in self-governance. Fromm argues that a deepening of negative freedom (a reduction in traditional constraints facing individuals) is not an *unequivocal* good. Without a corresponding deepening of positive freedom (the possibility for self-governance) such an extension of the sphere of negative freedom could be understood as threatening and encourage precisely the form of regression Freud maps out in *Group Psychology and the Function of the Ego* (1990). Such an extension of negative freedom could be perceived as contributing to a feeling of powerlessness insofar as there would lack secondary bonds to replace the primary bonds represented by traditional institutions such as the family, community, and church. In other words, in liberty without democratic institutions for genuine self-determination, individuals allay their fear (perhaps the term anxiety is more appropriate) by subordinating themselves to an all-powerful, authoritarian figure. The love of this figure consolidates the social bond but also generates fear and hatred of those who remain outside of it.

It is possible to argue that neo-liberal globalization – while leading to certain benefits to millions of people in countries as diverse as India, Brazil, and China – has had over all a myriad of adverse effects. According to David Harvey (2007), neoliberalism comprises: 1) accumulation by dispossession; 2) deregulation; 3) privatization; and 4) an upward redistribution of wealth. It has increased both economic insecurity and cultural anxiety via three features in particular: the creation of surplus peoples, rising global inequality, and threats to identity.<sup>26</sup> The anxiety wrought by neoliberal globalization has created a rich and fertile ground for populist politics of both right and left along the lines suggested by Fromm. Neither Norris and Inglehart nor Laclau adequately account for such insecurity in their theorization of populism. As we have seen, populism can be understood as a mobilizing discourse that conceives of political subjectivity as comprised of ‘the people.’ Yet this figure of ‘the people,’ as Agamben has indicated (2000, 29–36) is deeply ambivalent insofar as it can be understood both in terms of the body politic as a whole (as in the U.S. Constitution’s ‘We the People’), or in terms of what Ranci  re calls the ‘part that has no part,’ (2010, 33) or the dispossessed and the displaced; as in ‘The people united shall never be defeated,’ or in the Black Panthers’ famous slogan: ‘All Power to the People.’ In this dichotomy, the figure of ‘the people’ can be understood in terms of its differential deployments by right and left, which themselves must be understood in terms of the respective *enemies* through which ‘the people’ is constructed.

Right populism conflates ‘the people’ with an embattled nation confronting its external enemies: Islamic terrorism, refugees, the European Commission, the International Jewish conspiracy, and so on. The Left, in marked contrast, defines ‘the people’ in relation to the social structures and institutions – for example, state and capital – that thwart its aspirations for self-determination; a construction which does not, however, preclude hospitality towards the Other. In other words, while right-wing or authoritarian populism defines the enemy in personalized terms; while this is not always true, left-wing populism tends to define the enemy in terms of bearers of socio-economic structures and rarely as particular groups.<sup>27</sup> While the right, in a tradition stemming back to Hobbes (2017), takes insecurity and anxiety as the necessary, unavoidable, and indeed favourable product of capitalist social relations, and transforms such insecurity and anxiety into the fear of the stranger<sup>28</sup> and an argument for a punitive state, the left seeks to provide an account of the sources of such insecurity, in the processes that have led to the dismantling of the welfare state, and corresponding phenomena such as ‘zero-hours’ contracts, the casualization of labour, and generalized precarity, and proposes concrete policy solutions to these. Of course, left populism can also turn authoritarian – largely due to the interference and threatened military intervention of the global hegemon and its allies – with an increasing vilification of the opposition, as we are seeing today in Venezuela and Ecuador with Rafael Correa.

### 3.3.1. *The Problem of Human Rights*

Putting aside the kind of scepticism towards human rights voiced by Hannah Arendt (1976, 267–234) – not to mention that which has been engendered by the weaponization of human rights discourse by the neo-conservatives in the George W. Bush administration – the question arises as to the relation between populism and human rights. Human rights is to be understood not just in terms of the various UN conventions on Human Rights dating back to 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also in terms of its origins in the Magna Carta (1215) limiting sovereign power, and the American and French Revolutionary experiences in the late eighteenth century (which were grounded in the European Enlightenment). According to Amartya Sen, human rights can be understood to secure the freedom of the person and can be further differentiated into a) *capability* or a person’s ‘opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functionings’ (2004, 333). This is balanced by b) ‘*process* or the fairness or equity with which persons are treated’ (2004, 336). In other words, the latter can be understood in terms of primary human rights establishing conditions under which human beings are ‘simply left alone’ (Cranston) and the former as secondary rights such as social and economic.

Because right-populism purports to manifest – often through its charismatic leader – the general will or the will of the people, it presents a clear threat to

both individual and group rights. It raises again the spectre of the democratic demagogue as had worried Plato (1961) in the fourth century BCE, or the ‘tyranny of the majority’ as had troubled Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) and J.S. Mill (1978) in the nineteenth century. In keeping with a Conservative tradition indebted to Burke and the European counter-Enlightenment with figures such as Joseph de Maistre, Julius Evola, Carl Schmitt, and others, right-populism evinces an attack on the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution in general, and the doctrine of human rights in particular. Moreover, as I’ve emphasized in this paper, populism is based upon the opposition between the people on the one side, and the power bloc on the other. Right populism typically defines the enemy in personalist terms. If right-wing populism could be said to exhibit an underlying logic, it would be that it transforms the social *stranger* into the political *enemy* (Gandesha 2003, 1–7). In other words, the stranger can be said to represent a threat at both socio-economic and cultural levels and thus is metonymic – the part that stands for the whole – for globalization anxieties. The stranger is transformed into the political enemy insofar as this figure is made to condense such anxieties into an object of fear (Neumann 2017).

Left populism’s relation to human rights is more complicated and is closely related to Marxist theory and historical practice of ‘formerly existing’ socialism. From the standpoint of practice, socialism’s record on human rights has been a chequered one to say the least. From a theoretical perspective, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels explicitly state that under socialism the freedom of each would be conditional upon the freedom of all and vice-versa (1998). At the same time, because Marx eschewed speculating on future political arrangements, he arguably never thought through carefully enough the role of rights within a post-capitalist order, leaving Marxism with a considerable ‘political’ deficit and this can be seen as a serious failing (Stedman Jones 2016). As Miguel Abansour points out, however, Marx in his somewhat overlooked 1843 ‘Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’ (Marx and Engels – not to be confused with the 1844 ‘Introduction’ to ‘Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’) doesn’t disavow constitutionalism but articulates a republican understanding of ‘true democracy,’ arguing that the people (the *demos*) must be understood as the ongoing author of its own constitution (Abansour 2011). Socialism, in other words, represents not an abstract but a determinate negation of bourgeois rights and freedoms – not a simple cancelling but a *cancelling* and *preserving*. Such a determinate negation can be understood in terms of a preservation of the sphere of negative freedoms or freedom from state coercion, while also providing the basis for positive freedom or self-determination. In fact, an emphasis on human rights understood only in a negative sense – in terms of purely formal rights – without rights understood in a more positive sense (the difference between freedom as opportunity and freedom as exercise) can be self-undermining. In other words,

human rights without a genuine democratization of social life could continue to create the conditions under which authoritarian forms of populism continue to multiply and thrive.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This chapter was originally presented as a paper at the American Political Science Association Meetings in San Francisco, August, 2017. I am grateful to discussant, Guillermina Seri's comments, Lars Rensmann's constructive input at the session and John Abromeit's and Jeremiah Morelock's very helpful comments on a previous draft of the chapter.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Neoliberalism' has generated an enormous literature. David Harvey, for example, defines neoliberalism as comprising three distinct dimensions: an intensified 'accumulation by dispossession,' an upward redistribution of wealth, deregulation, and privatization. In his late lectures on biopolitics, Michel Foucault (2010) understands neoliberalism via Nietzsche in terms of governmentality or which he defines as 'the conduct of conduct.' Neoliberalism is geared to downloading responsibilities that had once been the purview of the state to the individual who must now take up an entrepreneurial relationship to oneself. Building on this account, Wendy Brown (2017) suggests that neoliberalism represents the transformation of the *homo politicus* into *homo economicus*. We understand neoliberalism in terms of a reorientation of the state along market principles – the state becomes geared to the maximization of individual utility.
- <sup>3</sup> See Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action Vol II*, where both the social subsystems of state and economy are the spheres of strategic rationality as opposed to the communicative rationality of the meaning-saturated sphere of the social lifeworld.
- <sup>4</sup> In among other books *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> In some ways, this is similar to the argument made recently by Carol Anderson in thesis that we can understand the Trump phenomenon as the culmination of 'White rage' or a white backlash against the Obama Presidency. See her Anderson (2016).
- <sup>6</sup> See Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, chapter 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* but also Theodor W. Adorno 'Freudian Theory and the Structure of Fascist Propaganda' as well the film by Adam Curtis, *Century of the Self*, which documents the role of Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, in single-handedly inventing the field of 'Public Relations' and its impact on public affairs.
- <sup>7</sup> Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.socialeurope.eu/immigration-policy-turn-danish-social-democratic-case>
- <sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, I have sought to understand this in psychoanalytical terms as an 'identification with the aggressor.' See Samir Gandesha 'The Neo-Liberal Personality,' in *Logos Journal* <http://logosjournal.com/2017/the-neoliberal-personality/>
- <sup>10</sup> In a sense this is successor to the earlier debate between the priority of the good versus the priority of right.
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 2013). See also Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. New York: Metropolitan, 2006 and Adolph Reed Jr. *Without Justice for All: The New Liberalism and Our Retreat from Racial Equality*. Westview Press, 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> Incidentally, the right-wing backlash, if we wish to call it that, in Germany is one directed not against cultural change per se insofar as Angela Merkel stated clear that 'Deutschland ist kein 'multikulti' Land' but rather her liberal refugee policy. In her view, such a policy simply upholds Germany's commitments under international law.
- <sup>13</sup> This was, in fact, the strategy of Canada's Conservative Party in the election of 2011 which saw it forming a majority government for the first time since the merger of the populist Reform-Canadian Alliance and the establishment Progressive Conservative Party.
- <sup>14</sup> Yet it is questionable that what we see is a consistent demographic picture insofar as one of the key aspects of Trump's popularity has to do with the rise of the Alt-Right, internet sites such as 4-Chan and Breitbart news all of which have politicized a new generation of white men who are susceptible to the proliferation of propaganda via new media. Right-wing populism in Europe such as Pediga, the EDL, and other populist movements have also attracted younger followers.
- <sup>15</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colour Blindness*. New York: New Press, 2012.
- <sup>16</sup> Gramsci describes the hegemonic moment in the following way:

A third moment is that in which one becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too. This is the most purely political phase, and marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures ; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become 'party', come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper-hand, to propagate itself throughout society-bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the

questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. It is true that the State is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter's maximum expansion. But the development and expansion of the particular group are conceived of, and presented, as being the motor force of a universal expansion, of a development of all the 'national' energies. In other words, the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups, and the life of the State is conceived of as a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups-equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest. (Gramsci 1996, 180–81)

<sup>17</sup> Georg Lukàcs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1972, and Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> What's also important, and brilliant, about Laclau's first book on populism, is his argument that early twentieth-century socialist parties focused too narrowly on the working class as the subject of revolution and ignored the progressive traditions of nineteenth-century democratic movements, which left it to the fascists to appropriate these traditions in their own perverted ways. Schmitt's appropriation of Rousseau, or Gentile's appropriation of Mazzini are exemplary in this regard. The left needed a politics that was both socialist and democratic.

<sup>20</sup> (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> John Kraniauskas, 'Critique of Pure Politics,' *Radical Philosophy*, 136 (March/April 2006): 51.

<sup>22</sup> See Eli Mandel, *Political Freud: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015 and Samo Tomšič's *Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015)

<sup>23</sup> The questions pertain to 'whether it is more important for the voter to have a child who is respectful or independent; obedient or self-reliant; well-behaved or considerate; and well-mannered or curious.' Voters who pick the first of the two answers incline towards authoritarianism. Politico.com

<sup>24</sup> T.W. Adorno et al. *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Norton, 1993)

<sup>25</sup> 'Two Conceptions of Liberty,' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Zygmunt Baumann's *Liquid Modernity*. <https://revise.sociology.com/2016/08/09/zygmunt-bauman-liquid-times-summary/>

<sup>27</sup> The two can, of course, run together occasionally as in, for example, 'World-view' Marxism's criticism of capitalism from the standpoint of concrete

labour in the figure of the banker or 'finance capital' which is often the metonymic representation of the Jew.

- <sup>28</sup> Samir Gandesha, 'The Political Semiosis of Populism' *Semiotic Review of Books*, 2003.

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