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## Is there a leftwing anti-populism? Meet Slavoj Žižek

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**Abstract:** In October 2018, Slavoj Žižek published a two-part contribution titled ‘Should the Left’s answer to rightist populism be really a “me too”?’. In this text, Žižek reproduced his diachronic skepticism on populism as a fruitful strategy for the Left. In a critical vein, we believe that Žižek’s latest interventions join – unconsciously or not – an avalanche of anti-populist discourses that usually emanate from elitist politicians and journalists, and reproduce a moralist, alarmist stance against populism. As a consequence, anti-populist elitism blurs the concept of populism even more thereby hampering our possibilities to capture the changing politico-historic reality in the age of collapsing neoliberalism.

Keywords: Populism, Žižek, Laclau, Discourse Theory

## Introduction

Slavoj Žižek's skepticism towards populism dates back to an old dialogue on the contemporary intellectual Left which took place, predominantly but not exclusively between him, Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau (2000). Žižek's disbelief about populism is best evident in his 'Against the Populist Temptation' (2006) as well as in the chapter 'Why populism is (sometimes) good enough in practice, but not in theory' (Žižek 2009).

Most recently, we observed Žižek's anti-populist vocation reaching new levels. Not only the old thesis is communicated publicly in an accelerating manner in the forms of interviews, mini publications, and blogposts, but it also resembles, politically, mainstream liberal ideologues. For example, in October 2018 Žižek published a long, two-part, contribution titled 'Should the Left's answer to rightist populism be #MeToo?' in which he essentially accuses proponents of left wing populism for applying a 'copy-paste' method with respect to the rightist strategy (Žižek 2018a, 2018b). Before the publication of the aforementioned text, Žižek gave an interview to *The Economist* in which he equated populism to fascism: "As with fascism [...]", Žižek asserts, "[...] populism is simply a new way to imagine capitalism without its harder edges; a capitalism without its socially disruptive effects" (Žižek 2018c). In this essay, we challenge the anti-populist views expressed in the abovementioned articles.

On the theoretical plane, Žižek relies on the employment of Lacanian and post-structuralist concepts and methods to oppose populism. But as we will further argue later he deliberately and instrumentally mistreats his own tools. On the political plane, Žižek's remarks can be located within a broader framework of anti-populist elitism that hit its peak with the double shock the victory of Brexit in the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump and emanates predominantly from a liberal perspective. Being informed by the Marxian tradition, it has to be clarified that Žižek's motivation is indeed different from that of the liberals. However, the political consequences of his anti-populism are similar.

## **Žižek as an Anti-Populist**

We define anti-populism as a political discourse that articulates a radical opposition to populism. Anti-populism ascribes to itself a moral and political superiority and exposes an aversion towards people-centric discourses that put forward ideas of popular sovereignty. In this process of demonizing populism *tout court*, mainstream anti-populism tends to amalgamate rightwing and leftwing populism. Thus both rightwing and leftwing populisms are collapsed under the same rubric. Žižek associates 'populism' – *in general* – as the locus of xenophobic politics; synchronically he uses the examples of egalitarian populists such as Podemos in Spain (who are open to immigration for example) and points out the limitations of populism with respect to the question of capitalism. The fact that Žižek does not see the distinctions (Left/Right, xenophobic/egalitarian, successful/non-successful populism) is not only a theoretical but also a methodological and at the end a political pitfall from his part.

Contemporary anti-populism operates on the omnipresent distinction between "good" and "evil", "normal" and "pathological". It places, on the one hand, an array of positive signifiers such as democracy, pragmatism and stability and, on the other hand, negative significations such as demagoguery, lies, irresponsibility and chaos. Additionally, anti-populist discourses render visible a distinction between reason and emotions. They place rationality in opposition to irrationality, a proper as opposed to paranoid or hysteric style in doing politics. The latter, the pejorative significations, are associated with 'populism' and the former, the positively valorized ones, with the anti-populist forces. The choice of the (positive or negative) signifiers involved in anti-populist discourses is related to the political/ideological horizon of the (anti-populist) discourse (e.g. center-Left, center-Right, extreme-center etc.). In the predominantly liberal anti-populist accounts, populism is perceived as a necessarily exclusionary form of identity politics that constitutes a paramount threat to democracy.

Obviously, Žižek does not share the same ideological perspective and hence the same worries as the paradigmatic liberal anti-populist. Alike the liberal anti-populists however, he also diminishes the distinction between these two versions of populism.

For him, rightwing populists simply mobilize citizens based on irrational affects, and leftwing populists simply see their reactionary counterpart *à la* “Me too!”. In the end, Žižek’s uncritical polemics end up in joining a demonization campaign against populism.

Žižek, as a specialist in Lacan, could not ignore the role of affects in politics. However, he perceives populism as a mere manifestation of emotive politics. In *The Philosophical Salon* (2018a) he argues that:

Leftist politics today does not need (just) confrontational passion; much more than that it needs a true cold rationality. Cold analysis and passionate struggle not only do not exclude each other, they need each other.

Instead of questioning this dichotomy, which is a political construction of modernity, Žižek reaffirms it. His comments on Corbyn’s Labour Party are indicative. Žižek states that Labour politics is a triumph of rational pragmatic argumentation against the rightist *populist* passion. Evidently, he does not perceive Corbyn’s Labour as populist since he perceives his politics as rational; but rationality in this respect is equated for Žižek to the politics of his own taste.

In the case of mainstream anti-populist liberals, the hidden fantasy is that of a rational politics that would be liberal. In the case of Žižek, the reasonable position that must oppose the pure irrationality of populism is Žižek’s very own “Marxist” truth. We are now only left with a theoretical impasse which comes in serious contradiction with Žižek’s past work rooted in deconstruction and post-structuralism which were indeed long evident. Žižek favors an a priori truth which is eclectically situated as a privileged horizon over a terrain of undecidability (be that the working class as the collective majoritarian subject, or anti-capitalism as the ultimate fantasmatic horizon).

His critique of the affective dimension of populism ignores the psychosocial dynamics in collective identity formation. Laclau stresses the fact that a populist discursive articulation can acquire true hegemonic appeal through processes of affective investment in which discursive *form* acquires its hegemonic *force* (Laclau 2004: 326). But the role of affect is not restricted to populism. Our everyday experience tells us that emotions play a critical role, not only in populist politics but in all sorts of politics or even social interactions. Žižek however instrumentally undermines the productive and creative function of desire and social fantasy can

play in left politics. He solely focuses on the regressive and destructive emotions ascribing a certain 'essence' to humans. In our view, we should break the rigid dichotomy between 'the cognitive' and 'the emotional' which frames them as mutually exclusive dimensions. We think that they are inseparable dimensions and what is at stake here is not whether affects are present or not, but *which* affects are mobilized and *how*. Although Žižek seems to register this at the macro-level, his work of populism seems to disavow this crucial insight.

### **A Monolithic “People” and Its Enemies**

Another point of convergence between Žižek and mainstream anti-populism is his description of “the people” as a ‘substantial notion’, or closed signifier. In mainstream populism studies in general, and in mainstream anti-populism in particular, one finds the idea that “the people” is a homogenous, pure and virtuous entity, in a passionate irrational moral struggle against the corrupt other (see Mudde 2004). This allegedly monolithic notion of the people is perceived as a threat to democracy as it is depicted as necessarily anti-pluralistic. Here Žižek is caught up in the liberal trap which brings populism in opposition to *liberal* democracy, yet he structures his argument in a different – Lacanian – way.

Žižek claims that two critical consequences follow from the fact that in populist discourse “the people” occupies the position of the master signifier that plays the role of the big Other. On the one hand, he argues that it suspends social antagonism (see Žižek 2017). On the other hand, it constructs an ‘other’ or an ‘enemy’ qua scapegoat. For us, it is clear that the idea of populism suspending social antagonism cannot be sustained. Populism can only transform political frontiers, but never abolish it. But what is more interesting is the second part of Žižek’s argumentation. For Žižek, a necessary consequence of the “people” being treated as the big Other, is the “*urge to construct the Enemy*”, which constitutes “*another fatal limitation of populism*”. Based on this need, he identifies the “natural convergence” between populism and nationalism or nativism:

It is because of their focus on concrete enemies that Left populists seem to privilege national sovereignty, the strong nation state, as a defense against

global capital (even *Auferstehen* in Germany basically follows this path) (Žižek 2018a).

That's why populism tends to be nationalist in calling for people' unity against the (external) enemy, while Marxism focuses on the inner split that cuts across each community and calls for international solidarity because we are all traversed by this split (Žižek 2018b).

To begin with, it is worth noticing that different philosophical currents, from Carl Schmitt to Jacques Derrida, recognize the function of the constitutive outside in terms of identity formation. But long before any of these developments in Political Theory, long before Saussure argues that identity necessarily relies on difference, long before the neo-Schmittian approaches on "friends and enemies", long before Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe the hegemonic process in which a particularity claims to be a universality, highlight the irreducibility of antagonism, it was Marx himself who offered us a great example of this process in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1994):

No class of civil society can play this role without arousing a moment of enthusiasm in itself and in the masses, a moment in which it fraternizes and merges with society in general, becomes confused with it and is perceived and acknowledged as its general representative, a moment in which its claims and rights are truly the claims and rights of society itself. [...] For one estate to be acknowledged as the estate of the whole society, all the defects of society must conversely be concentrated in another class.

What Marx was aware of – and Žižek seems to ignore – is that hegemony itself relies on establishing particular distributions between positive and negative. The constitutive dimension of antagonism, however, does not imply that the antagonistic other is treated as an enemy to be eliminated. In line with Chantal Mouffe, we argue that political conflict may instead lie at the core of democratic politics. Specifically, as Mouffe (2016) has argued, "what democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas would be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be put into question".

Moreover, populism as such presents different discursive architectonics as the ones described by Žižek. Using a discourse theoretical framework, Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) have argued that populist discourse revolves around the vertical axis (down/up) which juxtaposes those at the bottom of society, the marginalized or the underdog, and those at the top. Nationalist discourse, on the other hand, is organized in an Andersonian way, on a horizontal axis (in/out), which favors exclusion from a community whose boundaries are already agreed a priori. Although the term 'the people' may be used in such discourses, the discourse is not organized around "the people" as an open signifier but around the nation, and it refers to an a priori constructed and therefore closed signifier of the people qua nation. In leftwing populism, the construction of open identities implies problematizing the fantasy of a diabolical antagonistic other at the roots of all evil. This fantasmatic reasoning is not and should not be what defines leftwing populism. And, for the same reason, leftwing populism should not be confounded with nationalism or nativism.

We recognize that the above analytical distinction –between typical populist and nationalist discourses- is of heuristic nature and we do recognize that empirical reality is much more complex. Having said that, one cannot escape the debate around the Left and the nation. We understand the nation as a critical battlefield of signification. We recognize that "the nation" remains first, a significant locus of salient identifications and second, the territorial space within which politics continues to take place.

The contemporary public debate around democratic representation is still very much based around the nation state. Especially since the 2008 crisis, which rendered visible the limits and downturns of globalization and financial capitalism, the idea of sovereignty has reemerged. We strongly believe that it is wrong to reduce every claim around sovereignty as synonymous to *national* sovereignty (see Gerbaudo, 2016).

Claims for sovereignty are expressed in the national terrain but this need stems from the very processes of modern nation-building which is rooted in the French and the American revolutions. The boundaries of the state must be understood as important in providing historical, political 'resources' such as memories, histories and struggles

from which, “the peoples” are constituted as a potential political subject. Is it strange then to expect populism to rise from within the framework of the nation-state? No. This however, does not mean that populism is identical to nationalism, xenophobia and the extreme right. Rather the nation may emerge in its sublimatory open version which may result to republican or patriotic versions of populist politics. We should not forget anti-colonial and anti-imperialist national struggles for self-determination and emancipation.

Judging from Žižek’s critical engagement with post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory one would expect him to distinguish how political symbols can operate differently from the logic of the big Other. In the very first page of *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), he reminds us of the revolution that overthrew Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania in 1989. For Žižek, one of the symbols of that revolt – the Romanian flag with a hole in the middle, where once stood the socialist coat of arms – would precisely represent this lack in the big Other. Our argument is that the “people” in leftwing populism should operate in the same way as the hole in the Romanian flag. Nobody denies that it is a challenge, but the goal of leftwing populism, and what distinguishes it from its rightwing counterpart, is to discursively construct a “people” that refers not to a closed identity, but rather to an open one. An open identity implies the incorporation of previously excluded subaltern groups, and a valorization of democracy. If the signifier “the people” is to be truly empty in left wing populism, as Laclau puts it, it is the empty space of sublimation, the emptiness that precisely brings to the forefront the lack in the big Other – the fact that there is no big Other, that the symbolic order is inconsistent. This different way of constructing the symbolic space implies a very different account for the role of the signifier “the people”, “the enemy” and “the nation” in leftwing populist discourse if compared with Žižek’s account.

### **The Idealized Object of Class Struggle**

As it was pointed out from the beginning, Žižek’s renewed interest on populism is connected with the wider debate regarding the strategy of the Left in the recent conjuncture. First, he argues that the deep structural changes in capitalism cannot be confronted by means of a simple populist mobilization and then adds that the



truth of populism is its failure to confront the real of capital. Regarding the relationship of populism with capitalism, his view is that populism either avoids the topic or embraces capitalism.

Leftwing populism would throw a smokescreen on the question of capitalism precisely because of its aversion of the proletariat as privileged revolutionary subject:

Left populists would, of course, insist that this is precisely why we should abandon the Marxist reliance on the proletariat as the privileged emancipatory subject and engage in a long and difficult work of constructing new hegemonic “chains of equivalences” without any guarantee of success. (There is no assurance that the feminist struggle, the struggle for freedom, and the struggle for the rights of immigrants will coalesce in one big Struggle) (Žižek 2018b).

Žižek cannot accept the contingency intrinsic in the process of creating a hegemonic bloc. Laclau claims that all elements that will be involved in a hegemonic struggle are equal in principle, and it is impossible to determine a priori which particularity will assume the representation of the chain of equivalence. On the contrary, Žižek insists that in a chain of struggles, there is –and there should be– always one, namely class struggle, which, while being part of the chain, pre-determines its very horizon. He insists a priori that the element of class will necessarily have the power to reshape the remaining parts of a chain of equivalence.

We deny that a populist strategy necessarily downgrades the importance of the working class in the political struggle for hegemony. However, we must insist that the picture is more complex from Marx’s time. It is worth noticing that even Marx himself developed, late in his life, a strong interest in Russian populism (see Shanin 2018). Populism relocates the antagonistic frontier placing it in a way that captures today’s contradictions: the economic inequalities and political marginalization interwoven with the perceived proliferation of identities, the predominant consumerism and decentralization of desires that result from the socio-economic and political transformations produced by neoliberalism in the last thirty years.

Žižek criticized populism because it supposedly subscribes to the “people” a metaphysical status or because populism treats the “people” as “*a substantial place of truth [...] the substantial agent, legitimizing power*” but he is completely blind to the

fact that he has already subscribed to the working class the same metaphysical status. Apparently, Žižek's critique is limited to which master signifier would supposedly assume this metaphysical status, not with the metaphysical status as such.

### **Leftwing Populism and Democracy**

Leftwing populism is a way to express what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe defined as a radical democratic project. As such, it is the moment of constructing a political frontier; it is the moment of intervention. It is not a political program with a specific set of ideas and policies to be implemented by every actor in every situation. Radical democracy is not a regime and it does not intend to build one. Leftwing populism can be a vehicle for radical democracy precisely because it is a moment of disruption in the symbolic order that emphasizes the contingent nature of hegemonic processes. That is why a metaphysical status of the "people" – or a privileged position assign to any political subject – is not compatible with leftwing populism: the "people" is not a universal agent, but a contingent agent of disruption embodying an open identity.

Mainstream anti-populist liberals focus on populism as a threat to liberal democracy but, in reality, the version of liberal democracy they defend is nothing more than a post-democratic establishment. They rely on anti-populist fantasies to impose the idea that there is no alternative way to organize the society and the economy, and to cope with the growing points of dislocation their policies create.

Nowadays, instead of being an exceptional moment, crisis has become a permanent state. There are two alternatives against this background. The first one is that of Žižek: fantasizing a world of certainty founded on what is believed to be objective social relations. The second alternative, riskier but with true emancipatory potential, is to embrace contingency in our common life. Leftwing populism faces the challenge of rearticulating hegemony in an age of "endless crisis", trying to construct a "people" based on openness. It proves an actual commitment to a radical democratic ethos, with the revitalization of democracy in post-democratic times.

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