

Steering the People to the Left: Reviving a Socialist Populism

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Abstract

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, and Marine Le Pen's impressive second place finish in the 2017 French presidential election reflected a populist moment. A populist moment begins when the popular-democratic demands of the people are presented as an antagonistic option against the interests of the power bloc in the context of a broader social crisis. Currently, the dominant ideology of neoliberalism is being challenged by popular-democratic interpellations pitting the people in opposition to the power bloc, while the latter is effectively incapable of neutralizing this antagonism through traditional channels. Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen have led their respective supporters – who are experiencing social, cultural, and economic insecurity – away from socialist objectives. However, we argue that those same supporters may be susceptible to alternative popular-democratic interpellations that speak directly to their grievances.

I. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, and Marine Le Pen's failed albeit remarkable bid for the French presidency in 2017 reflected a populist moment. Following Ernesto Laclau (1977a; 1977b), a populist moment begins when popular-democratic demands of the people are presented as an antagonistic option against the interests of the power bloc in the context of a broader social crisis. The widening gap between the power bloc and the people in advanced capitalist countries has become the singular question of our time. The populist backlash against this trend comes at a time when economic stagnation persists nearly a decade after the Great Recession, and when a de-legitimized power bloc is incapable of neutralizing this reaction through business-as-usual politics. Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen have led their respective supporters – who are experiencing social, cultural, and economic insecurity – away from socialist objectives. This fact reflects a failure on the part of the socialist Left to identify itself with the people.

However, we argue that Trump's and Le Pen's respective constituencies may be susceptible to alternative popular-democratic interpellations that speak directly to their grievances. Going forward, socialists must correctly identify the grievances of the broad masses of working people and translate them into a popular-democratic program that consolidates the broad masses of working people in opposition to the power bloc. Socialists must revive the populist spirit of socialism by engaging in the arena of popular-democratic struggle at a time when the gap between the power bloc and the people continues to widen. The political logic of populism (Laclau, 2005) has practical implications while the historical record is indisputable: all successful socialist revolutions were populist ones.

Sections II and III attempt to explain the populist moment in the United States and France, respectively. Section IV revisits the lessons of Bulgarian Communist, Georgi Dimitrov, and German Communist, Karl Radek, on the importance of socialists engaging in popular-democratic struggle in a time of crisis. Finally, section V concludes with suggestions on moving forward with a socialist populism.

II. A Populist Moment in America

When consuming the media during the US presidential primaries, we got the impression that the American people were a dangerous and ensorcelled mob. Just as the Roman patricians scorned the democratic passion of the plebeians, the American Establishment scorned the democratic passion of the American people with classist derision when the latter decided it had had enough with the existing state of affairs. In fact, the pedigreed elites of America have always looked down on the “white trash” (Isenberg, 2016) with equal doses of fear and contempt. Fear because, as historian Nancy Isenberg argued, the “white trash” “ha[s] stood front and center during America’s most formative political contests.” (Isenberg, 2016, p.xxvii) Contempt because the elites hate democracy. Indeed, democracy is messy, tumultuous, and unpredictable. Like Andrew Jackson’s “crackers” and “squatters” in the 1820s and 1830s, those who brought outsider Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 have stormed onto the political stage in dramatic fashion and have struck fear in the hearts of many.

In an article published by *The Guardian* in February 2016, Harvard philosopher and author Michael Sandel (2016) argued that the US presidential primaries reflected a populist moment in American politics. Whereas the intelligentsia usually dismisses populism as an authoritarian mass movement, we understand populism instead as a political logic (Laclau, 2005, p.117) linked to an ideological crisis in conjunction with a broader social crisis. Indeed, populism begins at the point where popular-democratic demands of the people are presented as an antagonistic option against the interests of the power bloc in such a context. In the case of the United States in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, we witnessed a populist backlash against the dominant ideological discourse of neoliberalism in the context of persistent economic stagnation and growing inequality.

Far from being accidental, historian Michael Kazin (2016) argued that populist outbursts occur “in response to real grievances: an economic system that favors the rich, fear of losing jobs to new immigrants, and politicians who care more about their own advancement than the well-being of the majority” (p.18). For most Americans, neoliberalism has only meant declining real wages and growing indebtedness while struggling to make ends meet (Saltis, 2011); in other words, greater social and economic insecurity. While Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan were able to consolidate a significant minority of Americans against neoliberal policies in the 1990s, those expressions of popular discontent would be co-opted by both established parties.

But the Great Recession was the final straw. This catastrophic event spawned what Karl Polanyi (2001) called a “countermovement.” Echoing Polanyi, neoliberalism has been “met by a countermovement checking [its] expansion in definite directions.” (p.136) Following the Great Recession, we witnessed fits of popular discontent, including the Tea Party movement, the Wisconsin uprising, Occupy Wall Street, and the living wage movement. Thanks to those struggles, the American system’s contradictions were exposed and accentuated. Yet those struggles were only a prelude for what was to come.

Louis Althusser (2001) believed that all ideology “hail[s] or interpellate[s] concrete individuals as concrete subjects...” (p.117) In his words, ideology “‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals...or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects...” (p.118) Echoing Althusser, Laclau (1977a) stated:

“[t]he crisis of confidence in the ‘natural’ or ‘automatic’ reproduction of the system is translated into an exacerbation of all the ideological contradictions and into a dissolution of the unity of the dominant ideological discourse. As the function of all ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects, this ideological crisis is necessarily translated into an ‘identity crisis’ of the social agents. Each one of the sectors in struggle will try and reconstitute a new ideological unity using a ‘system of narration’ as a vehicle which disarticulates the ideological discourses of the opposing forces.” (p.103)

Indeed, during the presidential primaries, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders attacked the dominant ideological discourse, articulated new “systems of narration,” and mobilized millions of new democratic subjects. Both candidates became the points of concentration for disparate social groups that had been either left behind or cast aside by mainstream politics. Both brought to light the grievances and popular demands of working Americans. Both represented *the people*.

From the left, Bernie Sanders became wildly popular among young voters, students, and working people for railing against a rigged political and economic system benefitting a rent seeking corporate elite and “billionaire class.” As Thomas Frank (2016) explained, Sanders’ was “a platform of New Deal-style economic interventions such as single-payer health insurance, a regulatory war on big banks, and free tuition at public universities.” (p.28) Moreover, Sanders galvanized his followers by promising to end the corrupt campaign finance system and tearing up existing free trade agreements. However, although Sanders’ policies resonated with working Americans, he did not win them over completely. His message lacked strong patriotic or civic-nationalist interpellations that could have competed with Donald Trump’s ethno-nationalist interpellations (Kazin, 2016).

From the right, Donald Trump promised working families that he would “make America great again.” In the words of Nancy Isenberg (2016):

“recovering greatness meant replenishing the strength of an all-American workforce, returning it to its accustomed (and deserved) position at the top of the food chain. Hardworking breadwinners who had come to see diminishing returns, their pride in performance outstripped by foreign manufacturing, found their candidate.” (pp.xxi-xxii)

Indeed, Michael Kazin (2016) argued that Trump “ha[d] tapped into a deep vein of distress and resentment among millions of white working- and middle-class Americans” (p.17) much more than Sanders had. Donald Trump keenly understood that humiliated and demoralized working Americans wanted to believe in something greater than them and be proud of who they were. While he promised to deport illegal immigrants, “beat China,” “win more,” and “drain the swamp,” he also promised jobs and prosperity. Fundamentally, Trump promised to restore the American Dream, a dream stolen from working Americans by enemies both foreign and domestic. Trump successfully hailed the “forgotten men and women” with an anti-free trade and anti-immigration campaign. Once Sanders was defeated in the Democratic primaries, Donald Trump became the vote for change.

Just like Brexit voters in England and Le Pen voters in France, working Americans were hurting and fed up with being ignored by a disconnected elite. Greg Sargent (2017) of *The Washington Post* reported that Democratic Party pollsters belatedly discovered a

fact long understood by the Trump campaign: that many white working Americans who voted for Obama in 2012, ended up voting for Trump in 2016, particularly in Rust Belt states that helped decide the election. According to the research cited by Greg Sargent, “Obama-Trump voters” came to associate the Democratic Party with the one percent and the *status quo*. Indeed, thirty percent of “Obama-Trump voters” “said their vote for Trump was more a vote *against Clinton* than a vote for Trump.” Unsurprisingly, these so-called “Obama-Trump voters” faced “severe economic anxiety” and worried about their incomes falling behind the cost of living. The politically correct Democratic Party of white-collar professionals and minorities perilously downplayed the anxieties of white working Americans with feel-good “yes we can” politics. Instead of addressing their legitimate concerns and bringing them back into the fold, the Democrats simply dismissed them as “a basket of deplorables.”

Hillary versus Trump. Old news versus fake news. American society was henceforth divided into two antagonistic and irreconcilable camps. The 2016 presidential election became a contest between the pedigreed elites and the disaffected, the insiders and the outsiders. One popular-democratic interpellation emerged as the hegemonic “chief reorganizer” (Laclau, 1977a, p.104) or “empty signifier which both expresse[d] and constitute[d] an equivalential chain” (Laclau, 2005, p.129) of popular demands in opposition to the Establishment during the election campaign. Donald Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” was that “empty signifier.”

III. A Populist Moment in France

In France, we witnessed a similar chasm widen between the people and the power bloc. On the surface, the 2017 presidential election was marked by a resounding rejection of the traditional party system in the first round of voting. However, at a deeper level, the presidential election boiled down to a contest between *les petits Blancs* in “peripheral France” and “*les nouveaux Rougon-Macquart*” of “*la France d’en haut*” (Guilluy, 2016, p.14). This seething antagonism was personified by, on the one hand, Emmanuel Macron, the little Bonaparte of an out-of-touch *petite bourgeoisie*, and, on the other, by Marine Le Pen, the tempestuous tribune of the disdained excretions of globalization; to wit, between those who were conveniently derided as “racists,” “xenophobes,” and “fascists” for wanting to preserve their social and cultural capital in tough times, and those who regularly whisk off to the Mediterranean for *le weekend* and “live, work, and play” in the sixth *arrondissement* of Paris.

The results of the first and second rounds of voting proved this point. During the first round of voting, those who were better off and educated, and who believed their children would do better than them, tended to vote for Emmanuel Macron (Ipsos, 2017a). In contrast, Marine Le Pen finished first among low-income households, blue-collar workers, those who said they struggled paycheck to paycheck, those who believed their industry was in decline, and those who believed their children would do worse than them (Ipsos, 2017a). Meanwhile, the biggest loser of the day was Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the tartan *France insoumise* and longtime fellow traveller of every strand imaginable of the French Left. Mélenchon finished first only among the unemployed and young voters aged 18 to 24 years (Ipsos, 2017a). Note that Le Pen finished second among young voters.

The results of the runoff were even more telling. Marine Le Pen’s first round result of 21.3% jumped to 33.9% in the second round thanks to 56% of working-class voters and

69% of voters who said they struggled paycheck to paycheck (Ipsos, 2017b). Unable to stomach either Macron or Le Pen, 41% of Mélenchon voters decided either to stay at the café or spoil their ballots in the second round (Ipsos, 2017b). While Macron's second round margin was significant, it paled in comparison to Jacques Chirac's overwhelming victory against Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 2002 presidential runoff.

We interpret Emmanuel Macron's victory as a temporary solution to the crisis of hegemony of the French power bloc. For decades, the two established parties, the centre-left *Parti socialiste* and the centre-right *les Républicains*, routinely traded places at the *Palais de l'Élysée* and offered the same cocktail of policies that hurt *les petits Blancs*. Recently, there emerged a growing sense among some in *la France d'en haut* that the *status quo* in French politics, coupled with the widening gulf between the winners and losers of neoliberal globalization, threatened to bring the National Front to the presidency. Sensing a populist moment in France, Emmanuel Macron campaigned with an anti-Establishment message and won. His objectives were simple: storm onto the political stage with a pseudo-populist message, smash the traditional parties, reconfigure the so-called "centre," and re-inject legitimacy into the neoliberal project. Suitably, Macron's *République en marche* is composed of the same opportunists, bigwigs, and distinguished alumni of *L'École nationale d'administration*, including his current prime minister, Édouard Philippe. However, an average abstention rate of 56.6% during the second round of the 2017 legislative elections (70% among blue-collar workers) points to a stumbling Fifth Republic (Ipsos, 2017c). Most of the abstentions were concentrated in "peripheral France." Hardly a *République en marche!*

Why did French workers vote for Marine Le Pen, even though a vote for her would, from a Marxist perspective, seemingly contradict their objective class interests? In a seminal article, Mayer and Perrineau (1992) found that one fifth of National Front voters surveyed after the 1988 presidential runoff identified as left wing. Starting in the early 1980s, the National Front began attracting voters who were disillusioned by Mitterrand's U-turn towards neoliberalism. Decades later, Mayer and Perrineau's insights on the "*gaucho-lepéniste*" (left-wing Lepenist) phenomenon still hold (Perrineau, 2016).

Aside from a small hardcore of dyed-in-the-wool ultra-right *poujadistes* and *pieds noirs* who identified more with her Paleolithic father, the majority of Marine Le Pen's supporters identify neither with the extreme-right nor with the National Front. National Front voters are generally voters who "come and go," tend to vote for issues, and "cross the left-right divide more often than any other electorate." (Mayer and Perrineau, 1992, p.128) In fact, National Front voters are more likely than other so-called right-wing voters to endorse state intervention in the economy, social rights and, in some cases, outright socialism. Chiefly, they are against free trade and immigration, legitimate concerns for those experiencing precariousness in small and medium-sized cities as well as in rural zones.

During the election campaign, Marine Le Pen galvanized her "*patriotes*" with a promise to restore "monetary, legislative, territorial, and economic sovereignty." Given that workers are an important base of the National Front, Le Pen's platform included familiar left-wing themes, such as re-industrializing the country with state backing, rejecting free trade agreements, maintaining the 35-hour workweek, and establishing a national plan for equal pay for women. Other important items in Le Pen's platform included limiting immigration and prioritizing French nationals in the labour market. In the eyes of *les petits Blancs*, the pillars of neoliberal ideology – free trade and the free flow of capital

and labour across borders – were not, and never will be, legitimate. In order to widen its electoral appeal, some within the National Front are pushing the party to double down on an anti-austerity agenda that focuses on bread-and-butter issues, including jobs, pensions, and purchasing power (Galiero, 2017).

Therefore, a vote for the National Front has always been about voting against the Establishment:

“It is a protest vote...more expressive of resentment than instrumental. Paradoxically the National Front plays the same part in the French political system as the Communist Party did yesterday. It too had a fringe of protest voters who did not believe in Communist values but saw in the party a defender of the little people...” (Mayer and Perrineau, 1992, p.134)

Today, the French Communist Party is a shell of its former self, the *Parti socialiste* has lost all credibility among *les petits Blancs*, and the postmodern / liberalized Left has chosen to abandon *les petits Blancs* for a placeholder proletariat, notably, immigrant communities in the banlieues and any other “wretched of the earth” *du jour*. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the tribunician National Front would attract *les petits Blancs* in the absence of a hegemonic left-wing political force that stands up for the little people and speaks directly to their grievances.

IV. Speaking Directly to the People: Lessons from Two Forgotten Communists

It is important to stress that, contrary to some claims, the populist moment in the United States and France was not a fascist moment. Let us be clear: neither Donald Trump, nor Marine Le Pen, nor their respective supporters, are fascists. However, for our purposes, we must turn our attention to two astute observers of fascism – arguably the most reactionary form of populism that emerged in interwar Europe – to understand why engaging in the arena of popular-democratic struggle is essential for socialists today. Behold the Bulgarian Communist, Georgi Dimitrov, and the German Communist, Karl Radek.

In a lucid report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935, Georgi Dimitrov (2012) explained the appeal of fascism in a time of crisis. According to Dimitrov, fascists appealed to the masses’ “most urgent needs and demands” (p.14) and, as he showed, “even a section of the workers, reduced to despair by want, unemployment and the insecurity of their existence, fall victim” to fascism (p.15). Indeed, the desperate situation facing many working people made them susceptible to what Dimitrov called “ideological infection” from the fascists.

Although Dimitrov was aware that “fascism aim[ed] at the most unbridled exploitation of the masses,” he warned that fascists approached the masses with “the most artful and anti-capitalist demagogy, taking advantage of the deep hatred of the working people against the plundering bourgeoisie, the banks, the trusts and financial magnates...” (p.14) Furthermore, fascists attacked the corruption and cynicism of the traditional parties and played on the people’s sense of justice and revolutionary traditions. Crucially, fascists depicted “their accession to power as a revolution” (p.14) on behalf of the whole nation. Constituting themselves as “a *party of attack*” (p.15), fascists could only come to power by posing as anti-capitalist revolutionaries fighting on behalf of the little people.

In an excellent essay on fascism, Ernesto Laclau (1977a) explained that, in interwar Germany,

“[[f]ascism arose from a dual crisis: (1) a crisis of the power bloc which was unable to absorb and neutralize its contradictions with the popular sectors through traditional channels...” and most importantly, “(2) a crisis of the working class, which was unable to hegemonize popular struggles and fuse popular-democratic ideology and its revolutionary class objectives into a coherent political and ideological practice.” (p.115)

Following the First World War, the prestige of the German power bloc was seriously damaged by its capitulation to the egregious terms of the Versailles Treaty, while “nationalist agitation amongst the middle classes took an increasingly plebeian and anti-capitalist trait” (p.128) as social degeneration and economic chaos reigned. Yet the German Communists failed to take advantage of the prevailing Jacobin mood and channel it in a socialist direction; they failed to be “a party of attack” so to speak. As Laclau argued, the Communist Party “should have presented itself as the force which would lead the historic struggles of the German people to their conclusion, and to socialism as their consummation...” (p.129) In other words, they should have hailed the German people with a popular-democratic ideology of “Nationalism, Socialism, and Democracy” against the Versailles Treaty (p.129).

Instead, the Communists – obsessed over ideological purity – utterly “failed to fully reckon with the wounded national sentiments and the indignation of the masses against the Versailles Treaty...” (Dimitrov, 2012, p.28) despite Karl Radek’s plea in 1923 to include nationalist agitation in the Communist program (Laclau, 1977a, p. 96). In Radek’s view, “the great majority of the nationalist-minded masses belong not to the camp of the capitalists but to the camp of the workers.” (Radek, 1923) That is why Radek insisted that the German Communists exploit the masses’ sense of national humiliation and translate it into revolutionary outcomes. Radek’s position became known as the *Schlageter line*, named after a young German counter-revolutionary nationalist who died resisting French occupation in the Ruhr. Instead of dismissing a young man like Leo Schlageter, who was radicalized in an explicitly reactionary direction, the Communists, argued Radek, should have spent their energies recruiting men and women like him to the revolutionary camp by addressing head on their demands of national redress. Unfortunately, the failure of the German Communists to properly address the real sense of national humiliation felt by ordinary Germans allowed the Nazis to gain ground on the political and ideological terrain and rectify Germany’s ills in a nefariously racist fashion.

However, it need not have been so. Since the situation in Germany during the 1920s was so volatile, there was an opportunity to steer the Jacobinism of the German people towards explicitly revolutionary objectives. As Laclau (1977b) put it, “Nazism constituted a populist experience which, like any populism of the dominant classes, had to avoid the revolutionary potential of popular interpellations from being reoriented towards their true objectives.” (p.174) While the fascists presented themselves to the German people as anti-capitalist revolutionaries who would overturn the Versailles Treaty and make Germany great again, the German Communists missed their appointment with History. With the Communists abandoning the arena of popular-democratic struggle, it is no wonder Karl Polanyi (2001) believed that “[i]f ever there was a political movement that

responded to the needs of an objective situation and was not a result of fortuitous causes, it was fascism.” (p.245)

V. Reviving a Socialist Populism

It should be clear by now that the task of all socialists going forward will be to correctly identify the grievances of the broad masses of working people and translate them into a popular-democratic program that consolidates the broad masses of working people in opposition to the power bloc. It goes without saying that socialists in the United States, France, and elsewhere must talk to ordinary working people and understand their grievances and aspirations. A socialist populist program must be rooted in the material world of working people.

Workers are neither inherently revolutionary nor inherently reactionary. Workers are politically constituted only through popular-democratic struggle, while the political and ideological content of that struggle depends on the balance of power of the contending forces. The example of Syriza in Greece is a case in point. During the worst of the Greek crisis, Syriza successfully steered the Greek people away from the siren calls of the fascist Golden Dawn party and towards a radical Left program. In fact, Syriza fused a radical Left discourse with a popular anti-German nationalism against the egregious terms of the so-called Troika. Ironically, the German government, through the Troika, ruthlessly imposed its own detestable version of the Versailles Treaty on the Greek people, but the Greeks astutely avoided the very German mistake of turning to fascism when the going went rough. In the spirit of Georgi Dimitrov and Karl Radek, Syriza militants went to the Greek masses and fiercely defended their economic, political, and *national* interests against the Troika dictatorship. Just as Dimitrov insisted, Syriza found “a common language” (Dimitrov, 2012, p.64) with working people and ascended to power as “a party of attack.”

Today, more than ever, socialists must wage a political and ideological struggle against the Trumps and Le Pens by articulating clear and popular arguments to the people and linking up “the present struggle with the people’s revolutionary traditions and past.” (Dimitrov, 2012, p.102) As Dimitrov warned, those who “sneer at all the national sentiments of the broad masses of working people” are gravely mistaken (Dimitrov, 2012, p.103). This point is crucial. Nationhood and nation-states have a material basis and “are of material importance to the populations composing them.” (Desai, 2012, 48) Therefore, a socialist populist program must take the national particularity of working people seriously and celebrate their heritage while pointing them to the future.

This exercise will be challenging for some socialists who have unconsciously internalized certain liberal myths. For example, in the realm of political economy, a socialist populist program in the United States, France, and elsewhere will inevitably include greater controls over capital and labour flows. With respect to labour flows, that will invariably mean placing stricter limits on immigration. The latter policy is a necessary corollary of any pro-worker economic program. The liberal myth of open borders and the supposed irrelevance of the nation-state are patently incompatible with a political economic program that prioritizes the interests of working people.

In summary, socialists must go back to their roots and revive the popular-democratic spirit of socialism. The political logic of populism has practical implications while the historical record is indisputable: all successful socialist revolutions were populist ones.

The Bolsheviks led by Lenin no doubt understood this fact in Russia. The “chief reorganizer” that convened all sectors in struggle, worker *and* peasant, in the October Revolution was “*Peace! Land! Bread!*” The same goes for the Chinese Revolution. As Mao pointed out (Mao, 1968, p.80), all those “classes, strata and social groups” that opposed Japanese aggression during the War of Resistance constituted “the people,” while all pro-Japanese elements were considered enemies of “the people.” Furthermore, all those “classes, strata and social groups” that supported socialist construction following the Chinese Revolution constituted “the people,” while all those opposed to socialist construction were considered enemies of “the people.” As Ernesto Laclau (1977b) so eloquently stated, “[t]here is no socialism without populism, and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist.” (pp.196-197)

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