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**SYRIZA's POPULISM: TESTING AND EXTENDING
AN ESSEX SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE**

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Historical Anomaly or Paradigm Shift?

*** WORK IN PROGRESS – NOT TO BE CITED WITHOUT PERMISSION ***

Introduction

Recent egalitarian movements and parties in Europe (SYRIZA, PODEMOS, Front de Gauche, etc.), not to mention the Corbyn phenomenon in the UK, have radically put in doubt the reified association between populism and the extreme right in the European context. This panel seeks to explore the rise of left-wing populism in Southern Europe as a distinctive political phenomenon in a bid to assess its significance for global populist politics and for populism research in general. It does so by covering both the supply and the demand side and combining the concrete analysis of empirical cases with an attempt to draw its theoretical and conceptual implications. Within this context, this paper focuses predominantly – but not exclusively – on the supply side, primarily examining the political discourse, rhetoric and messages articulated by recent left-wing populist actors; in the concluding parts, however, we also explore the conditions overdetermining the reception of this discourse and its political effectivity. Engaging with research conducted within the scope of the POPULISMUS research project and the POPULISMUS Observatory,¹ we place strong emphasis on the specificities of populist discourse, employing a methodological orientation inspired by an Essex School type of Discourse Analysis.²

¹ The 'POPULISMUS: Populist Discourse and Democracy' research project (2014-5) has been implemented at the School of Political Sciences of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki within the framework of the Operational Program 'Education and Lifelong Learning' (Action 'ARISTEIA II') and was co-funded by the European Social Fund (European Union) and Greek national funds (project no. 3217). More information is accessible from the POPULISMUS Observatory: www.populismus.gr.

² For a detailed account of the methodological toolkit, the comparative advantages and the analytical promise of such a discursive perspective, see: <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/workshop-report-final-upload.pdf>

Indeed SYRIZA has been the first of the aforementioned left-wing populist parties to signal this trend and to take power. In this paper, the Greek case is used to illustrate the basic theoretical premises, methodological orientations, conceptual innovations and analytical insights of a discursive approach to populism research. Thus special emphasis is given (1) to the architectonics of SYRIZA's discourse; (2) to the role of crisis in its articulation; (3) to the polarised language games influencing its trajectory. Accordingly, we explore (1) whether 'the people' functions as the main nodal point in SYRIZA's discourse within an antagonistic representation of the political space; (2) to what extent crisis – as systemic dislocation – triggers and, simultaneously, – as performative construction – is produced by populist discourse; (3) whether such construction takes place within a polarised political culture marked by the mutually established frontier between populist and anti-populist discourses. Our analysis encompasses both the performance of SYRIZA in opposition as well as its record in power, something that permits the cross-fertilisation of a discursive approach through the utilization of new theoretical insights ranging from James Scott's discursive theory of charisma to Herzfeld's discussion of crypto-colonialism.

Theorizing populism: Beyond euro-centrism³

There is no doubt that in today's Europe, both in the academic realm and in the public sphere at large, the word 'populism' usually refers to the extreme right. We are, of course, entitled – indeed obliged – to deal with this phenomenon, especially given its pan-European manifestations, about which many social scientists have contributed illuminating accounts and theorizations from a variety of perspectives (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2007; Wodak 2015).

The question is how exactly to conceptually and politically deal with this problem; in particular, is the category of 'populism' the most suitable way? If, that is to say, what we are currently facing is the pan-European rise of a nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionist and, very often, violent extreme right (the cases of France, Hungary and the Greek Golden Dawn are indicative), is the category of 'populism' the proper conceptual instrument through which the problem should be perceived, categorized and debated? What are the implications (direct and indirect) of such a naming? And what are the risks for critical analysis and for democratic political strategy? Sticking to a restrictive association between 'populism' and extremism may pose certain dangers that have to be seriously taken into account, especially in times of crisis.

Indeed, it is not by coincidence that doubts are increasingly voiced both in the theoretical and in the political literature regarding the rationale behind such a strong association. Étienne Balibar, for example, has pointed out that today there is a divergence between those theorists and analysts for whom a populist movement is essentially 'reactionary' – this is the case not only in the

³ In this section we draw on Stavrakakis 2014a and on the theoretical and methodological rationale of the POPULISMUS project. The question of euro-centrism has also been raised within the context of a Leverhulme public lecture organised at Queen Mary University of London on 19 November 2014 and entitled 'The Global Populist Challenge: Beyond Euro-centrism'.

'etymological' sense that he mentions, but also in the political sense, which is equally important in our context – and those theorists

for whom it brings back (even in a mystified, or destructive way) an element of popular contestation of power, and resistance to the 'de-democratization' of neo-liberal 'democracies', a voice of the voiceless without which politics becomes reduced to the technocratic 'governance' of social tensions which are deemed both unavoidable and inessential (since they do not involve *historical alternatives*) (Balibar, 2011).

And, of course, Balibar's comments do not emerge out of the blue, since this second camp has been gaining in credibility, theoretical sophistication and analytical rigor within the last few years thanks to the innovative approaches to populism initiated by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Margaret Canovan, Jacques Rancière and others (see, for example, Laclau, 2005a; Canovan, 1999; Rancière, 2007).

These predominantly discursive/structural approaches have, indeed, changed the landscape as far as the study of populism is concerned. So what can a discursive approach contribute here? (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Torfing, 1999; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000; Howarth, 2000; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Howarth & Torfing, 2005). Initiated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, discourse theory – also known as the Essex School (Townshend, 2003, 2004) – combines a theoretically sophisticated grasping of the processes through which social meaning is articulated with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points and their differentiation from other discourses in a bid to hegemonize the public sphere and to influence decision-making. Here, the term 'discourse' does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all 'systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects' (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000: 3-4) through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers. Interestingly, populism has been, already from the 1970s, one of the main *foci* of Laclau's discourse analysis (Laclau, 1977), to which he has more recently devoted a monograph (Laclau, 2005a); it has also been a central priority in debates within the Essex School at large (Panizza, 2005; Stavrakakis, 2004, 2005; Ardit, 2007).

Approaches to populism elaborated within a discursive framework or influenced by it, have indeed contributed a series of operational criteria able to discriminate between populist and non-populist discursive practices. In particular, they highlight the importance of ascertaining whether a given discursive practice under examination is (a) articulated around the nodal point 'the people' or other (non-populist or anti-populist) nodal points and, (b) to what extent the representation of society it offers is predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two main blocs: the establishment, the power bloc, vs. the underdog, 'the people' (in opposition to dominant political discourses asserting the continuity and homogeneity of the social fabric and prioritizing non-antagonistic technocratic solutions). From this point of view, populism denotes

neither a set of particular ideological contents nor a given organizational pattern, but rather a discursive logic, a mode of representing social and political space which, no doubt, influences both these realms.

Now, the performative process through which populist discourse is articulated typically involves the establishment of linkages between a series of initially heterogeneous unsatisfied demands and distinct types of collective subjectivity, which enter into relations of equivalence thus forming a collective identity around 'the people' and the leadership representing them. The equivalential linkage sublimating heterogeneity is achieved through the opposition towards a common enemy (the power bloc, the establishment) accused of frustrating the satisfaction of these demands in the first place. Last but not least, the resulting populist discursive articulation can acquire a hegemonic appeal through processes of affective investment.

Through the utilization of such relatively formal criteria, this discursive orientation offers the possibility of developing rigorous typologies of populist movements, identities and discourses. Thus, the articulatory nature of populist discourses and the flexibility of populist ideological articulations, both underlined by discourse theorists, can illuminate the paradox of antinomic formulations of populist ideology, from socialist-populist hybrids to be found in contemporary Latin America to the newfound contemporary grassroots populist movements in the European periphery (Greece, Spain and Beppe Grillo's Italy) and the US (OWS), to the paradoxical elitist populism characteristic of extreme right-wing movements in Europe.

Such a flexible yet rigorous conception of populism can also illuminate what still remains a major point of contention in the ongoing debate: the ambiguous relation between populism and democracy (Mény & Surel, 2002). On the one hand, the particular ways through which some populist movements articulate their claims to represent 'the people' –relying on charismatic leaders, fueled by resentment, virtually bypassing the institutional framework of representative democracy and/or often containing an illiberal, anti-rights and nationalist potential (Taggart, 2000)– need to be taken very seriously into account. And yet such a picture cannot exhaust the immense variety of populist articulations. Indeed, by representing excluded groups, by putting forward an egalitarian agenda, other types of populism – combining the formal populist core with the legacy of the radical democratic tradition – can also be seen as an integral part of democratic politics, as a source for the renewal of democratic institutions (Canovan, 1999). From this point of view, the more Western democracies turn to de-politicized forms of governance (to what Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe call *post-democracy* – see Mouffe, 2000; Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2007), the more populism will figure as a suitable vehicle for a much-needed re-politicization (Laclau, 2005a).

Is SYRIZA populist? Discursive architectonics, conditions of possibility⁴

⁴ I this section we develop further arguments first articulated in Stavrakakis 2014b & Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014, incorporating evidence from the POPULISMUS research of the Greek case

Let us now explore whether such an Essex School theorization of populism can help us inquire into the populist profile of SYRIZA and its political operation within the Greek crisis-ridden context. From a point of view interested in the evaluation of the left-wing populist trend in contemporary Europe, Greece constitutes here a crucial case in point, for a variety of reasons. First, since it was the first country in Southern Europe to experience, suddenly and with unimaginable economic and symbolic violence, the imposition of draconian austerity, it was to be expected that it would go through the development of a complex (and at times contradictory) culture of protest, as well as through its gradual channeling towards popular/populist paths of various kinds. Second, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that part of the domestic 'modernizing' elite saw in the crisis the opportunity to radically restructure the economic, political and cultural life towards a very specific direction, which is post-democratic *par excellence*, and in which there seems to be no real room for a 'people'. Due to the populist culture that has dominated Greece since the restoration of democracy in 1974 onwards, it also seemed very convenient to blame the very 'corruptive nature' of populism for the crisis, so as to simultaneously legitimize technocratic, post-democratic solutions, and pre-empt popular protest.

For all the above reasons, the confrontation between *populism* and *anti-populism* emerges today as a crucial discursive cleavage within the Greek public sphere (Stavrakakis, 2014; Pappas, 2015). On the one hand, as it was to be expected, the demands of social strata and citizens that went through a violent downward social mobility were gradually articulated within a framework of demands that pit 'the people' against domestic and European political and economic elites. On the other hand, something not equally expected, being unable and reluctant to productively register and sublimate the 'popular', these elites tried to suppress the latter, reducing it to its 'populist' equivalent, on which they could conveniently blame any misfortune, including all their own diachronic institutional failures. 'Populism' thus emerged as an empty signifier *par excellence*, and therefore as a vessel capable of accommodating an excess of heterogeneous meanings, becoming the synecdoche of *an omnipresent evil* and associated with all its manifestations imaginable: irresponsibility, demagoguery, immorality, corruption, destruction, irrationalism.

The crisis context and the emerging polarization

After three years of extreme austerity measures and massive budget cuts, the country, which entered the euro-zone in 2001 and staged the Olympics in 2004 to huge international acclaim, was clearly facing one of the most difficult moments in its contemporary history. Within the context of the global economic crisis, its debt and deficit were overnight declared unsustainable and draconian austerity measures were demanded by the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund in return for a bailout agreement. The policies implemented induced an economic and social situation comparable only to the

and from the conclusions of the project: <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/POPULISMUS-background-paper.pdf>

1929 crash in the US: GDP contracted by 20% between 2008 and 2012 and unemployment soared to 27% with youth unemployment reaching 60%. It was obviously impossible for the ensuing frustration, anger and despair to leave party identification and the political process untouched. The parties affected included those entrusted by the *troika* to implement austerity policies, tough fiscal discipline, radical budget cuts, massive privatizations and structural reforms of the neoliberal type: initially George Papandreou's PASOK and then all the parties supporting the government under the technocrat Loucas Papademos, namely PASOK, Nea Dimokratia (ND) and LAOS. All three of them saw their electoral support collapse in May 2012, with LAOS failing to make it into the new parliament, ND losing almost half of its voters and PASOK taking a harder hit and dropping from 43.92% to 13.18% of the vote.

Against this background, the Greek radical left, SYRIZA, led by its young political leader, Alexis Tsipras, managed to appeal to and mobilize a noteworthy part of the voters. Initially, Tsipras's SYRIZA coalition received a significant 16,78% of the vote and more than tripled its power. These numbers would rise even more in the elections of June 2012, in which SYRIZA got 26,89% of the vote continuing its upward dynamic.

One should bear in mind here that the radical left's dynamic was not self-generated, but probably fueled by the massive anti-austerity popular movements already on the rise (from national strikes and mass demonstrations to solidarity movements). These included the so-called 'Aganaktismenoi', which followed the demonstrations against austerity of the namesake 'Indignados' in Spain. Indeed SYRIZA was probably the only party to engage with the protesters' demands and meet them out in the streets. It is there that a chain of equivalences started to be formed between different groups and demands through a shared opposition towards European and Greek political structures, later to be interpellated by SYRIZA as representing 'the people' against 'them'.

SYRIZA's program, embracing most of the demands of the popular movements, was based on an alternative mixture of policies involving a break with the so-called 'Memorandum' (the loan agreement between Greece and its emergency lenders signed in April 2010) and the politics of austerity, which was blamed for the exacerbation of the crisis in the Greek context. Based on a crisis narrative involving strong claims of blame attribution, SYRIZA called for a broad coalition that would lead to a left government bold enough to annul the 'Memorandum(s)', while supporting the country's place within the Euro-zone (but 'not at all social cost'), raise taxation on big business, put the banking sector under public control, call a moratorium on debt repayment until Greek society gets back on its feet, scrap salary cuts and emergency taxes. Such claims were stigmatized by the parties supporting austerity as outrageously populist and unattainable, even unthinkable; as a policy that would certainly lead the country out of the Euro-zone, if not out of the EU altogether, and from there to an economic and social hell.

At any rate, both the unexpected electoral results achieved by SYRIZA and the need to radically oppose it were explained by mainstream media and by the

three parties supporting the government formed after the June 2012 elections (ND, PASOK and DIMAR) with recourse to its *populist* message, a message that was supposed to be as dangerous as it was mesmerizing. Moving from the level of political antagonism and media reporting to that of theoretically-informed political research, how can we assess SYRIZA's discourse? Using the two formal criteria outlined above, can we accept its populist characterization? In trying to determine whether the discourse of SYRIZA constitutes a populist discourse or not we shall thus attempt to utilize and test the discursive criteria formulated earlier. In this line of inquiry, our main research questions will be as follows: Is the discourse articulated recently by SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras a populist discourse? Does it fulfill the two criteria highlighted by an Essex School perspective, namely, a central reference to 'the people' and an equivalential, antagonistic discursive logic?

The status of 'the people' in SYRIZA's discourse

The unprecedented economic, social and political crisis in Greece has initiated a twofold process that transformed SYRIZA's pre-crisis discourse and its constituency. On the one hand, growing impoverishment, frustration and anger lead large sections of voters to dis-identify with their previous party preferences and enter a more fluid stage. On the other hand, when SYRIZA realized that it can potentially represent the majority of these subjects and groups (at least those entertaining more or less egalitarian sensitivities), it became clear that only one signifier from the semiotic *reservoir* of European political modernity and Greek history could establish such a relation of representation and guarantee realignment: the signifier 'λαός', 'the people'. What allowed SYRIZA to jump from marginal coalition of the left to a party close to seizing power seems to be precisely the acceptance of this task of representation. In fact, a new type of representation seems to have been crucial in SYRIZA's message, a key-theme that emerged in our interviews with emblematic SYRIZA activists and politicians:⁵ 'There is no representation today [...] there is no representation at all [...] Let's go back to popular sovereignty [...] at least a minimum of [...] bourgeois representation. Not even that exists' (Rena Dourou, interview, Athens, 15 December 2014).

There is plenty of evidence on which we can substantiate this hypothesis. One can, perhaps, start from a mere enumeration of references to 'the people' in party discourse. An illuminating illustration of SYRIZA's 'turn to the people' can be found in the discourse of its leader. While in pre-election speeches for the parliamentary elections of 2009, Alexis Tsipras referred only a few times to 'the people', during the two successive campaigns of 2012 (May and June) one encounters a completely different picture, where references to 'the people' appear even up to fifty times within a single speech. For example, if one examines Alexis Tsipras' speech at the central electoral campaign rally of SYRIZA in Athens (Kotzia square) on 29 September 2009, he/she will count only five references to 'the people'. In sharp contrast, only three years later, at the central

⁵ A total of ten semi-structured interviews have been conducted in Athens in two visits, between 30 September and 2 October 2014 and between 15 and 18 December 2014.

electoral campaign rally of SYRIZA in Omonia square on 14 June 2012, one finds in Alexis Tsipras' speech no less than fifty one references to 'the people'!

But let us examine in some more detail how the signifier 'the people' operates within Tsipras's discourse. In some of his most original populist moments Alexis Tsipras performs a virtual self-vanishing gesture presenting SYRIZA as an almost neutral multiplier of popular power: the people's vote for SYRIZA is a vote that strengthens the people itself leading to a mirroring dialectic between the two. In Tsipras's words,

[o]ur people, through their vote for SYRIZA-USF will open the way for a great change in History. [...] Sunday is not just about a simple confrontation between SYRIZA and the political establishment of the Memorandum. [...] It is about an encounter of the people with their lives. An encounter of the people with their fate. [...] Between the Greece of the oligarchy and the Greece of Democracy. [...] The people unite with SYRIZA-USF.

In his speech, Tsipras is in effect echoing what is clearly stated in the electoral declaration of his party for the May 2012 general elections: 'Now, the people are voting! Now, the people are seizing power!'. It is also noteworthy that, in another speech, Tsipras will even reactivate memories of the populist 1970s and 1980s by speaking in the name of the 'non-privileged' [*μη-προνομιούχοι*], utilizing thus a highly charged signifier, the main synecdoche of 'the people' in Andreas Papandreou's discourse during the years of PASOK's populist hegemony.

It is already becoming clear, through such formulations, that the signifier 'the people' does not repeatedly appear in Tsipras and SYRIZA's discourse as a 'colorless' cliché, as a neutral reference to the constitutional basis and legitimizing ideal of democracy; it clearly assumes the role of a privileged reference, a *nodal point* that overdetermines this discourse from beginning to end, fulfilling in this way the first criterion highlighted earlier.

Antagonism and the logic of equivalence

If, on the one hand, 'the people' clearly emerges, within the conjuncture of the crisis, as its nodal point, what is, however, the discursive logic that governs SYRIZA's discourse? We have already seen how, according to an Essex School orientation, populism typically represents the social field in dichotomic terms. The research question that follows is thus clear: is the discourse of Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA an antagonistic discourse incarnating an equivalential rationale?

SYRIZA's main slogan for the campaign of the May 2012 elections gives a first revealing answer: '*They decided without us, we're moving on without them*'. This slogan, along with other similar ones, aimed to capture popular sentiments of frustration and anger against the harsh austerity measures; at the same time, it purported to point to an alternative path, building on popular hope for something better, something 'new', for an alternative. It functioned as a discursive tool to establish 'chains of equivalence' among heterogeneous

frustrated subjects, identities, demands and interests by establishing and/or highlighting their opposition to a common 'other': the 'enemy of the people', that is the 'pro-austerity forces', the 'memorandum', the 'troika' and so on; in this discourse, all these forces, also organized through an equavalential logic, were presented as distinct but interrelated moments of the 'establishment'. SYRIZA's discourse thus divided the social space into two opposing camps: 'us' ('the people') and 'them' (the 'establishment', the 'elite'), power and the underdog, the elite and the non-privileged, those 'up' and the others 'down'.

Another slogan from SYRIZA's campaign for May's elections formulated the same political logic in even more unequivocal terms: *'it is either us or them: together we can overthrow them'*. In this way, drawing a deep antagonistic/dividing line, SYRIZA's slogans pointed to the democratic deficit in Greece, to the gap between the people which is supposed to decide and the ones that actually decided 'without the people'. The *'either us or them'* slogan designates the fundamental opposition between the two antithetical camps, between the two identities, positing the one ('them') as radically antagonistic to the other ('us').

But who are 'they' and who are 'we'? Let us start with 'them'. First of all, the enemy in SYRIZA's discourse is clearly those forces, which, throughout the past years, have been governing and dominating Greece and, more recently, have been dictating and implementing austerity policies leading to unprecedented levels of recession, unemployment, poverty. In our interview with the then SYRIZA secretary Dimitris Vitsas, what emerged as the main focus was the 'triangle of sin' involving the linkages between corporate and banking interests, the media sector and the party system (Dimitris Vitsas, interview, Athens, 17 December 2014). Two distinct levels can be observed here: on the *first level*, specific forces within the country are targeted (for example, the old party system: ND, PASOK, DIMAR, LAOS); on the *second level*, that of an ongoing 'war of positions', a broader confrontation is staged, where the enemy is *neoliberalism* and its advocates (international financial institutions like the IMF and the current leadership of the EU). There are various operations in SYRIZA's discourse through which those two levels are linked. The most telling one is the pun often used by Tsipras about 'troika *exoterikou* – troika *esoterikou*' (external troika – internal troika) where the three-party coalition government between ND, PASOK and DIMAR is effectively equated with the country's emergency lenders, the EC, the ECB and the IMF.

And what about the 'we', that is 'the people' that SYRIZA calls upon? Tsipras, in his own words, is defining SYRIZA as a 'mirror' large enough to reflect and capture a variety of social sectors, constituencies and subjectivities together comprising 'the people' to be represented:

SYRIZA is the face of a society under attack. It is the worker, it is the worker on strike. It is the unemployed who demands work. It is the pensioner. It is the immigrant who asks for light and dignity. [...] It is the young working woman that works part time in two and three jobs. It is the sixteen-year old who feels suffocated. It is the doctor who

fighters for the life of her patients, the educator who tries to keep alive public schools and universities. It is the youth who fights for the environment, the water and the air. It is every person with a unique characteristic that does not want to experience it as a defect. SYRIZA is all of us, the face of every repressed person in Greece today (Tsipras, 2013).

The various subjects named above form a broad popular alliance, not on the basis of a common positive characteristic, of some sort of pre-existing essentialist unity, but on the basis of *sharing a lack that pervades them all* (Laclau, 2005a: 38); it is this negative commonality that is supposed to unite them in a bid to overcome the existing order. This flexible 'lack' can correspond to a variety of different empirical situations; it can acquire different meanings depending on what exactly heterogeneous individual or collective subjects have lost in the years of the crisis, be it salary or pension cuts, their works, health insurance and so on. It is also clear that 'the people' here are not invoked in a way that excludes plurality and social heterogeneity for the sake of a homogenizing 'unity'. It is a common democratic struggle that holds the various subjects together orienting their action towards a common cause: the overthrowing of two-partyism and austerity policies. In this sense, this is an open-ended chain of equivalence, avoiding the limitations typical of right-wing populism. Any explicit or implicit references to a resistance imaginary against the troika with national/nationalist connotations is overdetermined by an anti-colonial rationale; indeed, in the resolution of its founding conference, SYRIZA denounces the transformation of Greece into a 'debt colony' (SYRIZA 2013: 1) and pledges to reverse it (SYRIZA 2013: 5). In our interview in 2014, current economy minister Euclide Tsakalotos had stressed that SYRIZA's conceptualization of 'the people' is not nationalist but social-based and even class-based, something also related to the party's decision to reject a return to the drachma and to prioritize the creation of alliances of all European progressive forces (Euclide Tsakalotos, interview, Athens, 18 December 2014). In fact, it is crucial to stress here that since its constitution SYRIZA has been one of the most consistent advocates of the immigrants' equal rights and their full inclusion in Greek society. The same applies to gender equality and LGBT rights; SYRIZA is actually the only parliamentary party that supports the right to gay marriage and has, as soon as it formed a government (2015), indeed passed a bill through parliament legalizing same sex civil unions. In this sense, SYRIZA's populism could also be described as an 'inclusionary populism', as defined by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

SYRIZA, in other words, interpellates a (political) subject tightly bound to collective action and a project of self-emancipation through a linkage established in terms of a shared lack/frustration attributed to the action of a clearly delimited enemy, both external and internal. This is a process of creation that clearly relies on the dichotomization of social and political space and on privileging the signifier 'the people' as the proper name of this emerging collective subjectivity. Both these aspects have been established by our discourse-theoretical analysis of material from Tsipras and SYRIZA. In short, an

analysis utilizing the minimal criteria formulated previously seems to substantiate the populist characterization of SYRIZA's discourse.

From populism in opposition to populism in power

The unexpected resilience of SYRIZA's populism⁶

It seems that very few really believed that SYRIZA would stick after the victorious 2015 election to its pledge to voice the popular demand for an end to the austerity avalanche destroying Greek society. This may be fine for an electoral rally in Athens, but highly inappropriate for a Eurogroup meeting in Brussels. Two different logics clash with each other here: the political logic of democratic representation and the economic logic of a neoliberal 'business as usual' that seems to value austerity higher than democracy and actively forecloses even the slightest recognition of the failure of the imposed policies. Already from his first days as prime minister, Alexis Tsipras has made clear that honoring SYRIZA's contract with the Greek people remained his main priority. He was thus bound to break the Euro-zone's code of silence: 'The present government can only be the voice of this people', he declared in parliament. As Yanis Varoufakis, the finance minister, has added: 'It is time for what has been up to now said only when the microphones were closed to be voiced openly in the public European debate'. No wonder that this stance was met first with surprise and then with the wrath of dominant European circles. As a result, negotiations between Greece and the Euro-zone on the way forward were quickly deadlocked with all outcomes and scenaria (from the most benign to the most catastrophic) remaining open.

At any rate, however, the stance adopted in the first weeks after the elections quickly produced significant effects at the level of popular identification with SYRIZA and its leader. Previously unable to speak and be heard, Greeks have suddenly realized that they do have a voice and that this voice can even be heard in Brussels. 'Tsipras' Strategy Gives Greeks a Voice' was the title of a relevant article uploaded at the *Deutsche Welle* website. The article includes an interview with an unemployed woman that provides crucial insights on how SYRIZA's post-election strategy has been strengthening the populist bonds of democratic representation:

[A] quiet and determined middle-aged mother, [she] had long wanted a leader who stood up for the interests of Greeks, 'not bankers, Eurocrats or German politicians'. [...] 'We have lost our money and our dignity these last five years. We can't let leaders in Brussels and Berlin continue to hit us with austerity. It's not working!' [...] So she's been relieved and heartened to see 40-year-old Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, whose leftist, anti-austerity party Syriza came to power two weeks ago, stand up to everyone from euro-zone finance chief Jeroen Dijsselbloem to Greek oligarchs evading taxes. 'I hope he fights them

⁶ This section rearticulates and advances further a line of reasoning first put forward in Stavrakakis 2015 and Stavrakakis 2016 and discussed at many POPULISMUS activities.

all', she said. 'I will be really disappointed if he backs down. I don't want to see another Greek politician lower his head to people who treat us like we're nothing' (Kakissis, 2015).

Opinion polls conducted during this first period of populist rule have captured the broader socio-political dynamics involved here. A series of surveys have indeed shown a remarkable surge in public support for the way SYRIZA has been behaving in power, with around 70% of respondents approving its strategy towards Euro-zone institutions. How can we account for this development? This may indeed be the instance to start extending an Essex School perspective in the direction of incorporating a theory of charisma.

To the extent that, from the beginning, Tsipras and SYRIZA seemed to be increasingly appealing to parts of the population that never before thought about supporting them, and have managed to attract in a very short time-span after the January 2015 elections such remarkable rates of approval, this particular period may have signaled the charismatic investment of SYRIZA's populist appeal. Obviously, the category of charisma has a long pedigree both within the social sciences – Weber's name instantly comes to mind – and within populism studies, where it is usually presented as proof of the irrational and potentially dangerous nature of the populist link between leader and people. However, one should not underestimate the importance of charisma in times of crisis 'as an extraordinary force of symbolic change and an institutional-legal creation able to break with the limitations and constraints of traditionalism, formal legal-rational authority, and bureaucratic rule' (Kalyvas, 2008: 11). Political anthropologist James Scott has offered such an analysis of charisma revealing the mechanisms at work in its creation and consolidation. As we shall see, these mechanisms are directly relevant to the post-election reality in Greece.

In Scott's overall schema, every social order or political institution (the European edifice, for example), every process of domination, 'generates a hegemonic public conduct and backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power' (Scott, 1990: xii). Thus both a public and a hidden transcript emerge: 'If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript, I shall use the term *hidden transcript* to characterize discourse that takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by powerholders' (Scott, 1990: 4). Under relatively normal conditions, these hidden transcripts are rarely enacted. And yet, sometimes, when conditions enter the realm of the extraordinary, they storm the stage shifting the coordinates of a situation: 'the most explosive realm of politics is the rupture of the political *cordon sanitaire* between the hidden and the public transcript' (Scott, 1990: 18). Hence, charisma is not a quality possessed by someone; it has less to do with 'personal magnetism' and more with a socially produced reciprocity (Scott 1990: 221). Such a reciprocity is established when something hidden (foreclosed by the power bloc) – the predicament, the grievances as well as the demands of a subordinate group – suddenly becomes sayable, creating thus a charismatic bond between this subordinate group and the agent openly voicing the 'hidden transcript'.

Surely, the Euro-zone austerity TINA dogma and its reliance on the need for everybody to reproduce its 'success story' in the face of social destruction qualifies as such a 'public transcript'. And suddenly a new government appears that breaks this *cordon sanitaire* and pledges to represent the voice of the previously excluded people, the 'hidden transcript'. As Varoufakis has put it in an interview to the Guardian: 'We've lost everything. [...] So we can speak truth to power, and it's about time we do'. No wonder that this stance triggered such a remarkable surge in SYRIZA's approval ratings. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that it constituted a 'charismatic act' advancing the depth of the populist bond between SYRIZA and the electorate.

Yet, we all know what has followed. Obviously the SYRIZA experiment has failed to 'liberate' Greece from neoliberal austerity and to start changing Europe. The dramatic negotiation between the SYRIZA-led government and the European and international institutions ended up in a stalemate and a referendum was called on the Euro-zone proposal on the table, which resulted in the resounding victory of the NO camp with 61,31%. However, the pressure on the Greek side intensified leading to the acceptance of a new austerity memorandum. How can we make sense of what many commentators have called SYRIZA's 'capitulation'? Or even SYRIZA's 'betrayal'? What were its implications on the evolving populist bond between SYRIZA and its constituency?

First of all, I think it is important to acknowledge that the NO in the referendum constituted an astonishing event in itself, as it took place against all mainstream media, with capital controls imposed, under circumstances of extreme tension and insecurity (with the closed banks soon being coupled by shortages in medicines etc.). As such, it seems to put in doubt simplistic models of economic voting, etc. At the same time, its 'heroic' character should not make us disavow its formal structure. The 'NO' did constitute an empty signifier *par excellence* in Laclau's sense. In other words, it incarnated a primarily negative gesture of Machiavellian nature, registering solely a desire 'not to be dominated' anymore in the brutal, often *undemocratic* and *undignified* way experienced throughout the Greek crisis. It constituted, in essence, a radicalized, politicized Bartleby type moment of 'leave me alone!', 'Enough is enough!', 'No more austerity!', 'No more measures imposed from the outside!'; I really prefer not to... It did not, however, include any positive indication of the way forward in terms of concrete policy directions (for example, with regards to the currency situation). The challenge was thus to transform this negative gesture into a positive course of action; this is exactly where a certain short-circuit has obviously emerged. How was the NO in the referendum transformed into a new memorandum between the SYRIZA government and the troika? Into a continuation of the austerity avalanche and a consolidation of an almost protectorate-style supervision of central aspects of economic and social life by the so-called 'institutions'?⁷

On a first level, especially within the ranks of the party, the turn of events produced resignation and a feeling of frustration and hopelessness. It also

⁷ Admittedly with a pinch of 'social justice' in attributing the tax and cut burdens.

gradually led a whole faction of the party to speak of betrayal and leave the organization in order to initiate a new party called 'Popular Unity'. Indeed Popular Unity was founded on the basis of interpreting the NO in the referendum not only as a rejection of the austerity agenda imposed on Greece but also – and most crucially – as a willingness to leave the Euro-zone, as a NO to the euro. And yet, the elections of 20 September 2015 have shown that people still continued to support – even reluctantly and under the continuing threat of an 'excommunication' from the Euro-zone – Tsipras's orientation, although abstention has also increased substantially and the new 'Popular Unity' party has managed to get almost 3% of the vote (failing, however, to enter the new Greek Parliament). At any rate, SYRIZA lost less than 1% compared to the January 2015 elections. This paradoxical *resilience*, 'prevailing over every theory of economic voting', has been highlighted in recent accounts (Aslanidis & Kaltwasser 2016: 3). As Takis Pappas has put it,

beyond anybody's (especially the pollsters') expectations, Syriza won big [in September 2015]. This, mind you, happened in the face of a disastrous term in office during which unemployment didn't decline, the banks closed and capital controls were imposed, Greece's future in the euro was seriously risked, and Syriza suffered a huge internal party split. And yet, in the course of this most calamitous year for the country, Syriza's share of the vote only declined from 36.3 percent in January to 35.5 percent in September (Pappas 2015).

How can one account for this paradox?

The limitations of SYRIZA's populism

Conspiratorial explanations of betrayal thus fail to account for a certain *fidelity* established between the supposedly betrayed people and Tsipras. Under this light, it is crucial to try to interpret the reluctance of the people themselves – the same people that had voted in favor of the NO – to positivize the meaning of this initially negative gesture in a radically different way – one, for example, risking an exit from the eEuro-zone and the feared 'excommunication' from the so-called European family. What if, in other words, both sides have been conscious of the ambiguous mandate that regulated their relationship: 'Stay inside the Euro-zone but without austerity'? What if, in addition, SYRIZA's reluctance to risk a Euro-zone exit mirrored the reluctance of the people themselves, at least of a substantial part of those that voted in favor of the NO?

Obviously, there are many reasons that explain the inability to break out of the extremely constraining framework imposed by European and international institutions. The most visible comprise the difficulties involved in leaving a currency and adopting a new one as well as breaking from a legal and institutional framework like the Euro-zone and the EU that is implicated in all aspects of economic and social life in Greece and other European countries. It is clear that, at least in the short run, the situation might have been uncontrollable or even chaotic. Besides, neither SYRIZA nor any other political force in Greece (including the cadres that eventually formed Popular Unity) seemed to have

prepared a comprehensive plan making this option remotely appetizing and credible in the eyes of the citizens. On top of that, one should also take into account that a de-stabilization of the relationship between Greece and the EU might also have repercussions on a variety of other policy dimensions, like foreign affairs, and this is something crucial in a strategic region like the one in which Greece is located.

And yet, such pragmatic considerations are not enough to resolve the mystery. What if the preceding crisis failed to affect a crucial identity kernel binding Greece to Europe? What if the populist project that had emerged failed to encompass strategic dimensions of the previous hegemonic order? What if it failed to destabilize and restructure/reorient a long-established relationship between modern Greek identity and the European gaze?

Following Bob Jessop's critical realist analysis of crisis situations, one could argue that an operational solution with hegemonic pretensions would either have to shift directly the coordinates of the environment itself (the Euro-zone) or change the attachment people feel towards this environment, empowering them to imagine an alternative life and, crucially, imagine themselves outside this constraining frame, which – as a result – could potentially lose its grip on subjects. In Jessop's words: 'In many cases what is "correct" organically and chronologically (being first to resonate and/or to impose agreed reading [of a crisis]) matters more in selection than "scientific truth". Indeed, a "correct" reading creates its own "truth-effects" and may then be retained through its capacity to shape reality' (Jessop 2015: 255). It seems that SYRIZA not only has not succeeded to influence – let alone to transform – the way the Euro-zone functions (something that should have been expected); it also failed to put forward a credible, alternative reading of the crisis able to initiate – through its truth-effects in Jessop's jargon – a new relation of representation, to shape new types of subjectivity and sociality capable of imagining life outside the Euro-zone or even the (existing) EU if the negotiations were to fail. In this sense, SYRIZA's failure has less to do with some sort of 'betrayal' of its mandate and more with its inability to reshape this same mandate.

What, then, if the emerging populist political subjectivity in crisis-ridden Greece has not managed to associate itself with a new frame of reference, to produce a new reliable orientation shaping a new (subjective and objective) reality? What if it ultimately failed to eliminate its dependence on the gaze of the European Other? It may have temporarily suspended it, but what if this was only done in a desperate attempt to make this same Other (institutional Europe) to lessen its suffocating grip? What if, in other words, this potent gaze of the European Other has remained operative, thus explaining the eventual capitulation and leaving no other alternative from the transubstantiation of the defiant NO to a forced and dispiriting YES? This is probably how the referendum remained, at best, an *orphan event*. An event that has not managed to establish itself as a matrix of the new and whose subjects have been forced, maybe not to betray it, but certainly to *disavow* it. The fact that the BREXIT referendum has also remained a relatively orphan event – with both supposed victors and losers resigning – may point to an impasse in representation marking throughout the

European public space; an impasse indicating that we may be situated, in Gramscian terms, within an *interregnum*, an in-between period in which the old is dying but the new cannot yet be born.

As far as the Greek case is concerned, the evidence on which such a hypothesis can be formulated takes us back to the formation of the modern Greek state in the beginning of the 19th century. Throughout this process, Europe has functioned for Greece as both a 'model' and an 'observer'. We know from historical research that, being under constant observation, feeling at all times the ambivalent European gaze, both fascinated by ancient Greece and disappointed by modern Greece, increasingly shaped a type of identity oriented towards the continuous need to prove to Europe the worth of modern Greek achievement. What was continuously judged here was the required 'progress' of the new state following its 'entry exams' (the war of independence) and its generous acceptance into the 'civilized' European world, the EEC, the EU and, finally, the Euro-zone. Consequently, to the extent that the European gaze diachronically oscillates between admiration and contempt, in Greece, likewise, guilt alternates with indignation.

Even in the 19th century, a dialectic of indebtedness marked the imaginary regulation of the identifications at stake: if modern Greece owed its political independence and survival to Europe, could Europe ignore the role of (ancient) Greece as the cradle of European civilization? As becomes evident from the way this question is posed, Europe is the privileged pole here and modern Greece emerges as the dependent variable, the one demanding recognition, support and even affection from the European Other. This is clearly when the relationship of Greeks to Europe acquired the symptomatic form of an enduring and troubling 'complex', as Greek historian Eli Skopetea has formulated it (Skopetea, 1988). Throughout modern Greek history this choreography often escalated into a superegoic climax sometimes even involving debt and bankruptcy. Today it is again the European superego in 'its revengeful, sadistic, punishing, aspect' that seems to run the show. And debt is once again of paramount importance. Is it possible to effect a radical change in the cultural, inter-subjective and psycho-social framework of this dialectic? Nobody has managed to offer an answer to this question.

What I am stressing here is the need to take into account what has been debated as the *crypto-colonial* relationship between Greece and Europe in order to make sense of the recent events. 'Crypto-colonialism' is a term introduced by Michael Herzfeld well before the recent European crisis to describe the 'political marginality that has marked Greece's relations with the West throughout most of its history as a nominally independent though practically tributary nation-state' (Herzfeld, 2002: 900). How exactly does Herzfeld define this crypto-colonialism? Primarily, as 'the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes

at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence' (Herzfeld 2002: 900-901). Recently Herzfeld has linked his theory of crypto-colonialism with the recent choreography of the crisis in Greece:

From its declaration of independence in 1821, in reality Greece has always been highly dependent both economically and politically. It looked to the West (as well as to Russia) for support in its struggle for emancipation from Ottoman rule, in doing so carefully eliding the history by which 'it' became an imperfect and Athenocentric simulacrum of the West's image of the ancient glories. Its survival has always depended on heavy infusions of economic assistance, usually in the form of loans – the very phenomenon that has prompted the present crisis.[...] I have proposed the term 'crypto-colonialism' to describe the paradoxical condition of a national independence that was contingent on the approval and support of colonial powers. In recent years, [...] neoliberal and right-wing forces inside the country seem to be intent on using the rhetoric of political correctness and the 'audit culture' to intensify Greece's dependency, rather than reduce it (Herzfeld, 2011: 25).

It is also crucial to highlight the role local modernizing elites played as representatives of the European Other and mediators guaranteeing recognition and acceptance. Indeed Herzfeld has stressed the uses in which internal elites employed 'civilizational discourses to enhance their own power, at the cost of accepting the collective subjugation of their country to a global cultural hierarchy' (Herzfeld, 2002: 903). These elites have cultivated among the citizenry, the Greek people, a deep fear of loosing the European gaze, a fear of 'becoming too closely identified with some vague category of barbarians' (Herzfeld, 2002: 902), of loosing their own sense of subjectivity as (potential) Europeans. In anti-populist discourse 'populism' is highlighted as the political expression of this 'barbarian' anti-Europeanism. To the extent that this schema remains in tact, one could risk the hypothesis that inclusionary populism will never be able to transform the crucial external as well as internal coordinates of Greek political identity.

It seems then that, on the one hand, a colonial reference has been instrumental in the crisis narrative and the We/Them populist articulation of SYRIZA. On the other hand, the peculiar effects of *crypto-colonialism* may have limited the scope of interventions open to the new populist government. This opens the as yet under-researched question of the function of colonialism as a determinant or an explanatory factor in the assessment of populist discourse. Indeed, as Dani Filc has recently argued, 'colonialism constitutes a main parameter for explaining the development of either inclusive or exclusionary populism' (Filc, 2015: 263). Filc's argument refers inclusive populism(s), like those typical of Latin America that 'stress the notion of the people as plebeians, thereby allowing the political integration of excluded social groups and, in the process, enlarging the boundaries of democracy', to the legacy of anti-colonial discourse: 'South American populism posits the people as including the colonized and as the antonym of the colonialist, who represents the Other, the

alien' (Filc, 2015: 271). In contrast, 'exclusionary populism emphasizes the organic understanding of the 'people' as an ethnically or culturally homogeneous unit' (Filc, 2015: 265) and thus 'reproduces an ethnocentrism characteristic of colonialism' (Filc, 2015: 277). The case of Peronism seems to be emblematic of the first scenario; the case of the *Front national* of the second. As Filc points out, from the latter's racist perspective, 'deeply embedded in the French colonial experience, the formerly colonized continue to be viewed as primitive and inferior' (Filc, 2015: 275). On the contrary, in the Latin American case, 'the indigenous is always a mix of Native Americans, mestizo, creole and black, a mix that is inherently inclusive' (Filc, 2015: 278).

Interestingly enough, Filc registers the potential of a colonial perspective to facilitate further research, making a direct reference to the new inclusionary populisms emerging in Southern Europe. In particular, he asks 'whether the emergence of allegedly left populist movements as Podemos and Syriza are — at least partially — a response to the colonial overtones in the relation between the Euro-periphery and Germany' (Filc, 2015: 278). We have showed in this paper that a crisis whose management involved potential colonial overtones has been explicitly represented by populist actors in the Greek context as risking the transformation of the country into a 'debt colony'. This frame has contributed in the articulation of the dichotomic populist discourse of SYRIZA; in line with Filc's argument, the utilization of anti-colonial repertoires has accompanied the construction of an inclusionary populist discourse, similar to the one characteristic of Latin American populism. This should not surprise us to the extent that both geographical areas historically share a semi-peripheral political culture (Mouzelis, 1986). On the other hand, the paradoxical *crypto-colonialism* affecting the Greek context – and Greece's incorporation into the EU and Euro-zone architecture – seems to complicate things further. If it helped trigger the formation of inclusionary articulations by populists in opposition, it may have also short-circuited the radicalization of the demands and strategy of populists in power.

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