

Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of Populism

Gonçalo Marcelo

Abstract

This paper aims to define and set the goals of what it calls a 'Critical Hermeneutics of Populism'. Starting with the diagnosis of the ascent of rightwing populism being directly tied with the democratic legitimation deficit and the social problems caused by neoliberal policies, it assesses populist phenomena through the lens of hermeneutics. It argues that populism is not an entirely irrational phenomenon and that in spite of some common features of its intrinsic logic, substantive differences exist between left (or progressive) political proposals and their rightwing, exclusionary counterparts. The paper claims that only an assessment of the discourses, values, and practices put forward by each political proposal that can be dubbed 'populist' will reveal its perils and promises, and help distinguish which types of populism are lethal to liberal democracy, and which can actually help to deepen it. Finally, it argues that given the interpretative and potentially transformative features of Hermeneutics, a Critical Hermeneutics of populism might be the approach providing us with the best tools to operate such distinctions.

Keywords: Critical Theory, democracy, hermeneutics, populism

1. Introduction

There is hardly a more urgent matter for social and political theory today than tackling the newfound force of populism. My aim in this paper is to lay the ground for what could be called a critical hermeneutics of the various, widespread phenomena of populism. But this begs an explanation. First, here I am using critical hermeneutics as applied

to a social phenomenon, that of populism. As I have argued before (Marcelo, 2012), following Walzer (1987), the method of interpretation is not confined to textual hermeneutics in a strict sense, and can rather serve as a toolbox for social theory, insofar as we can argue for its superiority if compared to what Walzer calls the methods of 'discovery' or 'invention'. Second, as I shall explain below, 'critical hermeneutics' as is understood here should be taken as a specific type of Critical Theory and so its goals, like in other strands of Critical Theory in the Frankfurt or closely related traditions, are taken to be both interpretative and emancipatory. Third, similarly to other critical exercises such as those prone by post-Kantian philosophy, the use of 'critique' entails a certain type of judgment, whose outcome is a distinction between different occurrences of a given phenomenon, some of which might be deemed legitimate, while others will not, and this according to the criteria laid out for what will be a sound response to a given problem.

Against this backdrop, the first section of the paper will briefly recall the specificity of populism as a political logic, according to Laclau (2005). This will serve as a reminder that populism is not necessarily, as it were, a totally 'irrational' phenomenon; quite the contrary, populism exists because of specific reasons, and it possesses an inner reason itself, to which Laclau precisely calls 'populist reason' (2005); understanding it is key to make a certain path with populism before grasping which populist phenomena must be fought and which might actually be a part of a democratic society or a 'good' society, to use a thick concept.

In the second section, against the backdrop of a recapping of the purpose of a Critical Theory of society, and the definition of hermeneutics as an intrinsically emancipatory project (following Vattimo and Zabala, 2011) the paper briefly spells out the tasks of a Critical Hermeneutics. In order to do so, a concise historical analogy will be made: much like the first generation of Frankfurt critical theorists took it as

an integral part of their task to understand the rise of Fascism through an analysis of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et. al, 1950; see also Horkheimer, 1947) and the fascination it exerted on the collective psyche of those times, so today we need to grasp the implicit and explicit causes behind the rise of populism, albeit perhaps with new tools. This is not tantamount to overextend the analogy and to implicitly claim that we are living today something exactly akin to what happened in the 1930s or that every populist movement or proposal can be dubbed 'fascist'; but it does entail that populism is today begging a critical understanding and response, much like Fascism and Nazism did in the 1930s.

The third section assesses what to some might seem counterintuitive: a theoretical proposal aiming to justify political movements that might arguably be described both as 'populist' and 'progressive', i.e., what Chantal Mouffe proposes to call a 'leftwing populism'. This third section will also build on something shown in the in the first section: populism is not the only problem facing democratic societies and progressive political options, as we also have to deal with the consequences of decades of neoliberal policies. Finally, my very brief conclusion glimpses at what lies ahead for this attempt at a critical hermeneutics of populism.

2. People, Popularity, Populism

What makes populism so popular? And how do we define it? Is there a way to really understand it? The answer to these questions hinges on some specific wagers. To start with, and even though one often evoked striking feature of populism is its use of affects, the starting point of any attempt to interpret populism needs to be a refusal to reduce it to a purely irrational phenomenon. Second, it must also acknowledge the existence and pertinence of something such as 'collective identities'

including the construction of a 'people'. And while this might seem obvious, at least in the social sciences, it does entail going beyond methodological individualism, which has been prevalent in social theory for decades.

This is not to say that 'the people' is or can be a unified phenomenon, and to believe it is so is misguided; this is one important limitation of many theories of populism, as in their attempts of devising an agonistic strategy of hegemony, they might forget that every collective identity has to acknowledge and respect plurality, both internally and externally.

Be that as it may, populism is becoming increasingly popular. In this section I mostly rely on Laclau's (2005) account of populism, because it makes the wagers I just evoked. But to understand what is driving this popularity we have to take a glimpse at the context in which this is happening. There is a reason why populism often appears in pejorative fashion, as some sort of scapegoat concept. It is because it runs counter to the political mainstream. But how has this political mainstream fared in the public eye in these last few decades? Let us just take some examples of our Northern Atlantic context.

After the fall of the Berlin wall and the demise of the Soviet Union, something happened within mainstream economic policy and politics. The acceleration of the globalization processes was in fact determined by what has come to be (also pejoratively) defined as neoliberalism. Mouffe (2018) describes the success of neoliberalism, led by the political figure of Thatcher, as nothing short of a revolution, in that it succeeded in creating a new hegemony, with a new language and new frontiers of what was deemed politically acceptable: thus the T.I.N.A. (There is No Alternative) discourse. According to Mouffe, it was no surprise that Thatcher admitted 'Tony Blair' and the 'New Labour' had

been her 'greatest achievements', because what the neoliberal revolution did was to 'force [their] opponents to change their minds' (Thatcher, quoted by Mouffe, 2018: 64).

What this means is that with the so-called 'third way' politics, the left basically accepted, to great extent, the terms and the policies that were imposed by increasingly deregulated market capitalism; both in Western Europe and the US, we witnessed a rise both in income inequality and the precarization of labor, while this abandonment of the mainstream leftwing parties of sharper critiques of capitalism and the dismantling of the old social democratic consensus that once led to strong Welfare states (especially in Europe) was a key factor in what is sometimes described as a 'crisis of representation' in Western democracies. Over the course of the past few decades more and more people felt disenfranchised and no longer represented by traditional political parties. And while the economic expansion of the 1990s helped to conceal this phenomenon, it eventually burst out into the open with the subprime crisis – later transformed in the Eurozone's sovereign debt crises affecting the peripheral countries with weaker economies – and the worsening of the social situation in many countries.

This paved the way for the growth of populism. Appealing to the discontentment of all those who felt outside of the political mainstream, movements coalescing around charismatic leaders and who more often than not put forward simple proposals to complex problems were able to broaden their base of supporters. Now, all of this would not in itself be a problem, were it not for the substantive content of the proposals advanced by these populist movements. Indeed, and mainly in rightwing populist parties, what we see is the multiplication of enemies and a growth of racism, xenophobia and hate speech which is, in itself, unacceptable in liberal democracies.

However, the lack of rigor with which the concept of 'populism' appears in the public sphere, and is mostly derided (in its many forms,

or even in *all* its forms) by the so-called 'elite', including not only by traditional mainstream parties but also by what has been dubbed the 'liberal bubble' actually has a perverse effect. It is true that right-wing populism thrives on an anti-intellectual stance; but to automatically disqualify *all* populist forms as being 'irrational' and the populist base as being made up of 'deplorables' (to quote the way in which Hilary Clinton once referred to Trump supporters during the Presidential campaign in 2016) is detrimental, as it fuels the anger of all those who feel misrepresented, while it also conceals the failure of the 'establishment' to tackle the social problems brought about by neoliberal policies, and that fanned the flames of the populist appeal in the first place.

This is the reason why I argued before (Marcelo, 2018) that rather than demonizing 'populism' in all its forms, we should make an effort to tackle the social problems leading up to it, while also striving to distinguish between the substantive content of the values of proposals of each 'populist' movement. While it might be tempting to adopt an analysis reminiscent of Arendt's take on Totalitarianism, arguing that on both sides of the 'populist spectrum' we have the same phenomena, this would also be a partial and misleading interpretation of our current political predicament. Arguing that Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Podemos or Syriza on the left, and Trump, Bolsonaro, Farage, Orban, Salvini and all the other authoritarian or proto-authoritarian leaders on the right are two sides of the same coin, and to reject these altogether as demagogues, and their bases as deplorable idiots easily manipulated and unable to grasp that only 'liberal' solutions are worthwhile, is missing the fundamentals of the current political shift away from the center.

I thus argue (Marcelo, 2018) that rather than simply drawing the line between 'populist' and 'mainstream' political movements and unilaterally rejecting the former, we should assess their values and the substantive content of their proposals, thus making them undergo

what I propose to call a 'critique of populist reason' aiming to discern between legitimate and illegitimate uses of 'populist reason' (Laclau, 2005). If we take up such a task, we might very well discover that some progressive 'populist' proposals might actually be welcome to renew democracy and tackle the crisis of representation, and that the line of demarcation between what is legitimate or illegitimate could very well be drawn in the values that liberal democracies can or cannot accept. And it goes without saying that hate speech or the multiplication of the figures of the enemy within an exclusionary logic is something that we *cannot accept*.

What is, then, the intrinsic fundamental logic of populism? According to Laclau it is 'the very logic of constitution of political identities' (Laclau, 2005: 19). But these are taken to be 'differential identities' (69), that is, they are relationally constituted, the locus of a 'failed totality' or an 'irretrievable fullness' (70). For Laclau, populism is the key to understand politics ontologically, given that it is these constructions of a 'people' that reveal the inherently contingent nature of every political formation. Within populist logics, totality remains relevant, but it is seen 'as a horizon, not a ground' (71). Filling what Laclau calls the 'empty signifier', each particular group tries to form an 'incommensurable universal signification', and it is to this that he calls the constitution of a 'hegemony' (*Ib.*).

In order for this process of will-formation to take place, Laclau contends that a chain of 'popular demands' be articulated, to form a broad social subjectivity. It is important to note that unlike in mainstream political theory, this understanding of politics and democracy is anti-essentialist and agonistic. Democracy is here not seen as the technocratic management of a community through its administrative powers (*Ib.*: X) that somehow capture the political choices given to people; rather, the 'essential non-fixity' (Mouffe, 2018: 158) of social agents and social institutions resides in the fact that 'every order is predicated

on the exclusion of other possibilities (156) and, therefore 'things could have been otherwise' (*Ib.*), also because every order can be challenged by counter-hegemonic practices 'which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony' (*ibid.*).

Now, as Mouffe (2018) makes clear, one of the main challenges of this vision of democracy, which refuses to reduce it to the placid management of the *res publica* and, on the contrary, recognizes an intrinsic conflictual character in it, rather than the sole search for consensus, is to keep it at an agonistic (struggle between adversaries) level, preventing it from becoming properly antagonistic (struggle between enemies) (161). In Mouffe's words:

The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour but her right to defend them will never be questioned (161–162).

This brings us to a very important conclusion, emphasized by Mouffe, and to which we will come back in our third section. The fact that the connection between liberalism and democracy is contingent, and even that liberal democracies have, in recent decades, made significant concessions to neoliberalism, and been the cause of social ills and democratic misrepresentation, should not lead us to reject liberal democracies altogether. Instead, they should be cherished and renewed.

Mouffe's conclusion is that the crucial issue in a liberal-democratic regime is 'how to establish this we/they distinction, which is constitutive of politics, in a way which is compatible with the recognition of pluralism' (161). That is, we have to acknowledge this agonistic aspect

of politics, as it is revealed by populism, while also cherishing the pluralism without which liberalism is impossible and no just social order can exist.

And this is one of the points in which the menace of right-wing populism becomes clear, given that it tries to squash pluralism and minorities as it diabolizes the other and scapegoats him or her in a manner that is offensive and violating of Human Rights.

But how can we then respond to this with an analysis that tries to grasp the complexity of this problem while also making a contribution to tackle it? I believe this begs for the development of a critical hermeneutics of populism.

3. A Critical Hermeneutics of Populism

There are many theories of populism. And even though many fall short of trying to provide an overarching definition of it (an ambition that Laclau does not shy away from), most do tend to reject it as an entirely negative phenomenon. Running counter to that tendency, I believe we should be able to distinguish which 'populist' proposals are acceptable in our democratic process and which should be utterly rejected. I already indicated in the previous section some of the features that should guide this process. But let us now turn to the type of theory that seems suitable to be up to that task.

Several questions arise concerning this choice. Why a 'Critical Hermeneutics' of populism? Why does such a theory need to be 'critical' and what does the qualification 'hermeneutics' add to the several strands of Critical Theory that can be applied to populism?

Building on an earlier work (Marcelo, 2011) I contend that hermeneutics is the best method to 'make sense' of the social. First, because we need a theoretical toolbox that is sensitive to history and to the nuances of the many traditions that make up the complexity of our societies and the several different traditions within it. Traditions that

are not automatically justified by their mere existence, but should not be considered completely irrational either – rather, they have to pass the ‘critical test’ but before they do, if they are to be understood, they should be reconstructed in the terms that make them reasonable for the social actors that take part in them to adhere and stick to them as *their* traditions, partly constituting the collective identities in which they recognize themselves.

Second, hermeneutics brings with it a distinctive methodological attitude. Michael Walzer (1987) talks about three possible paths for social criticism: invention, discovery and interpretation. Invention adopts a constructivist method, trying to procedurally determine the best values or rules to implement in order to make a just society (e.g. Rawls); discovery takes an essentialist approach to those values and rules, trying to find them in some sort of transcendent predetermined order, thus granting an ontological foundation to social orders and finding their grounding elsewhere (e.g. Plato); while interpretation, on the other hand, argues that the values and rules that guide societies are to be found in those same societies, and that if we are to exert moral and social criticism to that social reality in order to flesh out the values and rules that ought to guide it, we will find them in that very order; so they do not need to be discovered, or invented, just interpreted. Finding new, better interpretations of them is somehow just what we need to guide our practices or to bring them closer to the ideals we already have.

Consequently, as we can see, hermeneutics does not take a foundationalist approach to social reality. It is not a naïve realism and it does not need to appeal to objective truth standards outside of it, even though it is not purely relativist either – rather, hermeneutical truth is made up of a plurality of different interpretations and the process of perspective enlargement that is to be done through the adoption of certain sets of criteria. With its interpretative nature, hermeneutics is

midway between the descriptive and the normative (a position that Laclau [2005: 3] argued is the one of 'populism' too, which is a case in point for the adequacy of a hermeneutical method to grasp and assess populist phenomena), in that in the descriptions it puts forward we find entangled evaluations that implicitly or explicitly resort to values, as is characteristic of the hermeneutic circle.

Third, and even though this qualification might seem counterintuitive for many, I want to build on Gianni Vattimo's and Santiago Zabala's (2011) claim according to which hermeneutics can be seen as having a 'progressive' nature. Indeed, many progressive thinkers have in the past tended to snub hermeneutics given the fact that many of the prominent hermeneuticians tended to be conservative (a word well applied to describe Gadamer; Heidegger is of course a more problematic case, given his anti-Semitism – but this does not mean, of course, that his philosophy should be rejected altogether because of that). But Vattimo and Zabala refuse to see in hermeneutics a conservative project.

On the contrary, they consider hermeneutics to be anti-conservative, almost by definition. Insofar as hermeneutics is a post-metaphysical project, insofar as it aims to go beyond Being as presence and be an alternative to purely descriptive and naïve objectivistic thought dominated by the paradigm of the natural sciences (unlike, Vattimo and Zabala claim, analytic philosophy) hermeneutics is a transformative endeavor.

If this assessment is correct, then, it might turn out that hermeneutics is not only one more theory dealing with populism, not only one more method applied to social theory but rather the standpoint that might reveal itself to be the most adequate to solving this problem. Why? Because it belongs to a 'politics of interpretation' with emancipatory goals (Vattimo and Zabala, 2011: 76). On the one hand, it is

committed to a deep interpretation of existing practices – not to shunning them altogether or close them in the domain of the ‘unthinkable’ or the ‘irrational’. But, on the other, it ‘is committed to overcoming institutionalized conventions, norms and beliefs and certainly not to accepting existing practices’ (*Ib.*).

We see, then, that for Vattimo and Zabala hermeneutics is in itself political (77). Accordingly, they see in hermeneutics not only the emphasis on the plurality of interpretations but also a rejection of the conservative nature that they see in descriptive philosophies, in favor of action (*Ib.*). For them, hermeneutics is a potent tool against the bearers of power, and thus has an emancipatory and revolutionary potential. In their framing of hermeneutics as a form of ‘weak thought’, they rebrand it as also being ‘the thought of the weak’, i.e., a force pushing for change (96).

Now, drawing the consequences of this claim we can see the extent to which adopting a hermeneutical approach to populism can be fertile. It will be so because adopting an interpretative and emancipatory approach to social reality, hermeneutics can contribute to identifying the interests, and power-relations within a given society and provide a broad picture of the neoliberal status quo that led to the rise of populism; but also, with its value-laden interpretative analyses, discern among the many populist options which ones might be deemed acceptable.

In other words, this is just a way to emphasize the *critical* aspect of hermeneutics. To a certain extent, *critical hermeneutics*, such as it has been highlighted by Ricoeur, Thompson (1981) and others, much like Critical Theory, is reminiscent of a Post-Kantian operation of distinction, of depuration, of separating the legitimate from the illegitimate uses of a given faculty. With the difference here being that, within the context of hermeneutics, the result of critique is not only a negative demarcation and limitation of the domain of what can legitimately be

known, but rather the enlargement of what can actually be thinkable or feasible in action, through the process of what Ricoeur called the conflict of interpretations. That is, hermeneutics has at least as much to do with the multiplication of possibilities, the disclosing of realities, as it has with rejecting the wrong (political or theoretical) options through its evaluative capacities.

With this description of a critical hermeneutics in mind, and with the indications already given as to the way in which it might apply to populism, let us now begin to delineate its tasks. In this, it shall be useful to compare it with its closest option, Critical Theory, especially as it was formulated in its first generation as a response to social events that were more catastrophic than what is happening in our own time.

Let us be reminded that one of the first interdisciplinary tasks taken up by the Institut für Sozialforschung were the studies on authority and family. The study of the influence of the authoritarian personality (Adorno et. al., 1950) and, later, of mass culture, were of the utmost significance for the Frankfurt school's take on the rise of Nazism (see also Horkheimer, 1947). That we cannot grasp Nazism without understanding authoritarianism seems today obvious; but the Institut's claim was more profound. As Martin Jay makes clear in his masterful reconstruction of the early years of the Frankfurt School: 'one of the key elements in the Institut's interpretation of Nazism was the belief that the phenomenon [of authoritarianism] could not be isolated from general trends in Western civilization as a whole' (Jay, 1974: 134).

Jay recalls that there were two different approaches to Nazism within early Critical Theory: one closer to a more orthodox Marxism, focusing on the changes in legal, political and economic institutions that made Nazism possible, and whose representatives were figures like Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer; the other, composed of a number of authors around Horkheimer, emphasized less the economic

structure and 'paid increased attention to technological rationalization as an institutional force and instrumental rationality as a cultural imperative' (166). This latter strand was far more interested than the former in the 'psychosocial mechanisms of obedience and sources of violence' (*Ib.*) and acknowledged advanced capitalism's resistance to the collapse that was predicted by Marx, which led to some skepticism concerning the possibilities for change (*Ib.*). It was this tendency that became prevalent within the Institute, and that in later years led to the analysis of mass culture and its aesthetical critique.

Now, why is this historical reminder important? Because there are some parallelisms between our current political situation and the late 1930s in Europe. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the situation is the same. But as Michaël Foessel (2019) has recently argued, public discourse and popular sentiments today eerily echo, at least partially, those of 1938, in that today we see, like before, populist attacks on the judicial system and liberal democracy, a longing for more authority, a rise in nationalisms, and so forth. In other words, as Foessel argues, the logic of today's political movements is somehow similar to those of 1938.

Another striking similarity is the use of propaganda through new technological means. In the 1930s Goebbels and Hitler relied on the power of the radio to bypass traditional mediations and directly reach the people with their inflamed rhetoric. Today the so-called Nationalist International, under the tutelage of Steve Bannon and others, relies on fake news, fake profiles in social media and the creation of myths around their targets (e. g. the 'Soros bogeyman' theory) to manipulate their base and capture more and more voters disillusioned with globalism. Should these populist-nationalist leaders gain the upper hand throughout Europe, chances are that they would use these new technological means for social control, finding new ways to gather data on

their peoples, curtail basic freedoms and eventually eradicating pluralism within the frontiers of Europe.

Ultimately, we could be looking at the prospect of a much more monolithic Europe: hostile to cultural, religious, racial or sexual difference, exerting a strong grip within its borders, and much more closed off to those coming from outside. So what should we do? This paper does not delve on the aspects of citizen or political mobilization, even though they will of course be instrumental to change this course of events. Its main aim is just to sketch, from the side of theory, what could a 'Critical Hermeneutics of populism' contribute to what is needed. With this context as a backdrop, allow me to outline a few tasks ahead of us:

First, a critical hermeneutics of populism must comprehend the causes of populism. As I contented in the first part of the paper, there are significant differences between the several populist phenomena. As a result, some of the causes of populism might be widely shared, while other populist phenomena will certainly exhibit rather unique traits and causes. As a consequence, this critical hermeneutical task will be twofold: 1.1) to understand the social psychology behind right-wing populism, much like the Frankfurt School tried to understand the authoritarianism at the root of Nazism and, later, the mechanisms of domination underlying mass culture; and 1.2) to make a historical-hermeneutical reconstruction of the way in which different societies and communities have been affected in the last decades by the economic crisis, the democratic legitimation crisis, or other problems that might have broken down their traditional party system and led to a surge in populism.

Both aspects of this twofold first task could be seen as looking to attain a deep understanding of these social phenomena and, given the thick dimension of hermeneutics in which emancipatory values are also embedded, as we have seen with Vattimo and Zabala (2011), they

would also, to some extent, aim to apply a therapeutic model to these social ills, at least if we consider right-wing populism as a 'social pathology' (Marcelo, 2018). However, this task has one important caveat that must be mentioned.

Hermeneutics is historical-comprehensive and emancipatory. But one should not overemphasize the role of the critical theorist or, in this case, the critical hermeneutician in this. What I mean is this: critical hermeneutics should be wary of any 'epistemological break' between the 'theorist' and 'the people' / 'the masses'. Let us not forget that hermeneutics is not, and does not pretend to be 'objective' science. As such, and much like in French pragmatic sociology, what is at stake in this task is what Ricoeur would perhaps call the right mix between hermeneutics as a recollection of meaning and hermeneutics as the exercise of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970).

Allow me to unpack this last statement. Every diagnosis of a concealed meaning or every denunciation of domination through manipulation involves the exercise of some sort of suspicion, because what is at stake there is a distance between patent meaning and latent meaning; and this is why, as Ricoeur noted, we need hermeneutics as an art of interpretation, in order to decipher patent meaning and find what is latent in it (Ricoeur, 1970). However, the wager of hermeneutics, at least as it appeared in Ricoeur, inspired French pragmatic sociologists (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; see also Michel, 2012), and is an epistemological position very close to third-generation Critical theorists like Axel Honneth, is that social actors are not dumb puppets who need the social critic to come fully explain the world to them and come liberate them from the ills that the critic denounces.

This latter position is some sort of theoretical elitism which is not only self-serving but that actually fuels anti-intellectualism and resentment. This discussion is of course complex and wide-reaching as it

touches not only on the social role of theorists (including Critical theorists) but also on the foundational or anti-foundational theoretical stances that underpin the theories of society that are put forward. But it is true that there is a tendency that runs from Lukács to the first generation of Critical theory or to 'critical sociology' deriving, from instance, from Bourdieu (not to mention Althusser, who theorized the 'epistemological break' allegedly stemming from Marx's *Capital* in the first place) to institute this epistemological schism between those who would see the 'real' society or master the 'real' social science, and those who would need their help to see it.

And then these theorists are surprised when the 'Proletariat' does not really embody 'universal' interests and bring about the revolution, when it is allegedly 'bought' by the social Welfare states and acquiesces to capitalism, or when social movements tend to be rather inorganic and not driven by theory or instituted party systems. So what we need to acknowledge is a somewhat democratic distribution of rationality and the ability to grasp meaning. In a way, Ricoeurian hermeneutics gives us that ability. At the same time, this is not to say that social actors are entirely rational, as neoclassical economics, and namely rational choice theory would have it. Things are far more complicated. Affects play a role in motivation too, as does their ideological manipulation, for instance within the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). So people are neither entirely rational (nor is rationality the merely instrumental capacity it is sometimes taken to be) nor entirely irrational (and, as I mentioned above, rejecting the constituencies who votes for right-wing populists as being made up of 'deplorables' or dumb, irrational people, only adds to the problem).

Instead, we have zones of opacity within us, and we are prone to being seduced and manipulated, but also capable of resisting and grasping meaning. A critical hermeneutics of populism needs to take stock of this complexity, and, through education and interpretation,

help to provide people with the tools to identify their problems and reject the false and simplistic solutions that right-wing populists offer them.

Second, a critical hermeneutics of populism will have to rely on one particular instance of traditional, Gadamerian hermeneutics: the fusion of horizons, at least when what is at stake is fostering relationships of mutual recognition. Hermeneutics is not all about the fusion of horizons, just as politics is way more than consensus building. But something akin to a fusion of horizons is important for mutual understanding, for the welcoming of the standpoint of others, to see oneself as another and treat the others as selves equal in worth and deserving of esteem and respect. This much is upheld by Charles Taylor (1994) when he grounds his vision of multiculturalism in the fusion of horizons. Making a place for it is not tantamount to denying the agonistic trait of the political; but it is acknowledging that within the struggle that traverses our societies, space must be made for what Ricoeur (2005) called the 'clearings' of recognition.

This is something particularly important when what is at stake is the absolute other, the one who is not a proper subject of rights because he or she is foreign to a given polity. Within their logic of antagonism and multiplication of enemies, right-wing populists tend to make the refugees, asylum seekers and migrants an easy target, a scapegoat for all economic woes and social malaises. Their problem thus becomes a matter of misrepresentation because they will often be left without a voice. A true politics of recognition and hospitality must thus rely on the wager of overcoming hostility through mutual understanding. Richard Kearney (in Marcelo, 2017) depicts it as the passage from the impossible to the possible, from hostility to hospitality, and proposes to operate this mediation through narrative imagination. It is through the exchange of narratives that this might be accomplished – which is in itself a hermeneutical act.

Third, when thought of in more general terms, applied not only to the fusion of horizons within the relationships of mutual recognition we have to engage in with those who are the most foreign to us, but to the entirety of relations between social groups and political actors within the same polity, the task of a critical hermeneutics of populism extends to involve something we already invoked with Mouffe: how to reconcile the agonism intrinsic to the political logic with the necessary respect for pluralism. This is one of the key distinctions that allows us to separate between legitimate and illegitimate populism, i.e., the populist forms that jeopardize liberal democracies, and those that do not.

Fourth, as I already hinted at – and this being something that follows as a consequence from the three other tasks –, a critical hermeneutics of populism must be able to pinpoint the political proposals that are able to renew and reinvigorate democracy and popular participation and welcome and foster them as a way to tackle the legitimation deficit of representative democracy, while it must denounce and reject the populism that squashes pluralism and liberal democracy. And this can only be done by hermeneutically analyzing political proposals, discourses and actions. And in when this comes down to political communication, this distinction will only come by through education and the exercise of critique – again, not by putting the critic in a pedestal, but by helping people to forge the tools they need to arrive themselves at these conclusions.

It goes without saying that this is a tentative and incomplete list of tasks for what is still only the sketch of a project. It seems to me, for the reasons explained above, that a Critical Hermeneutics can be well suited to tackle populism. And if critical hermeneuticians are able to fulfill, even if only partially, these tasks, then their contribution to saving and renewing liberal democracy would already have been precious.

In the next and brief section of the paper, I present a summarized outline of what has been dubbed a 'leftwing populism' by Chantal Mouffe, in order to show the differences between this proposal and rightwing populism.

4. Leftwing Populism: a reappraisal

I have been claiming not that all populist forms are alike and that rather than asking whether certain political proposal is populist and discrediting it if the answer is affirmative, we should do well to assess the problems it aims to solve and the values it holds.

Chantal Mouffe claims that due to the disillusionment brought about by mainstream politics we are living in a populist moment and that, as a consequence, in the next few years, the main locus of political struggle will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism. (Mouffe, 2018: 21) As a consequence, she believes, the only way to prevent the coming of authoritarian solutions will be to reaffirm and expand democratic values through the construction of a new, progressive hegemony. This new hegemony would be inclusive, even though, playing a part in the agonistic process, it would still have an adversary:

Left populism wants to recover democracy to deepen and extend it. A left populist strategy aims at federating the democratic demands into a collective will to construct a 'we', a 'people' confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy. This requires the establishment of a chain of equivalence among the demands of the workers, the immigrants and the precarious middle class, as well as other democratic demands, such as those of the LGBT community (50).

It is noteworthy that Mouffe believes that even though this new, inclusive democratic hegemony, necessitates a transformation in the

relations of power and a creation of new democratic practices (69), it does not require a revolutionary break with the liberal-democratic regime (70). That is, a new hegemony could be built within the same institutional framework; which is to say, might we add, that what are needed are new interpretations of the democratic ideal, rather than a complete destruction of the current institutional framework and ways of living. Mouffe believes it still necessary to define an adversary (in this case, the oligarchy) and to build a 'hegemonic offensive', because without it no real change will ever happen. The question then becomes how do populists treat such an adversary.

Indeed, the line between agonism and antagonism is fine. Insofar as left populism still draws a frontier and builds a hegemony, can it not also be exclusionary? In order to prevent it from being so, this agonism must be handled with care. One way to argue that it is not necessarily exclusionary resides in the fact that these conflicts we are alluding to are still, in a way, conflicts of interpretations. And insofar as the 'oligarchy' is actually an impediment to a democracy in which everyone really counts (not only in the formal procedure of voting) promoting a more equal distribution of power as a result of a progressive hegemony might actually be a *sine qua non* for a more fulfilled democracy.

Another possible problem facing left populism is its reliability on the charismatic leader. This is a striking feature of any form of populism: its use of affects that somehow are channeled through charisma. And there is an intrinsic tension between this feature and Mouffe's reliance in the current institutional framework. Allow me to unpack this diagnosis.

In a way, even though she does not explicitly acknowledge it, Mouffe's project is critical hermeneutical, insofar as in her attempt to spell out this sort of 'radical reformism' (88) what she is doing is trying to put some flesh in the bones of the very ethico-political principles of the liberal-democratic regime – 'liberty and equality for all' (77) –

through 'an immanent critique that mobilizes the symbolic resources of the democratic tradition' (78).

In other words: Mouffe just wants to recover values that we already adhere to in our democracies and to reinstate them in a more fulfilled manner. What she is aiming at is a reinterpretation of our founding (Ricoeur would call them ideological in a constitutive sense) values, within our current institutional framework, but with new practices and through a defeat of the ideology (neoliberalism) that made us forego or squash these same old values. And another key aspect is that she emphasizes the way in which 'political parties provide discursive frameworks that allow people to make sense of the social world' (105). That is, as is now clear, Mouffe's strategy of a left populism is hermeneutic through and through.

However, for all her reliance in our founding values and current institutions, there is an implicit (albeit not always emphasized) reliance on the charismatic leader. And this has its limitations. It can be argued that the same progressive strategy that is being put forward here can be born within institutions themselves or, more likely, in a more horizontal manner through social movements and using modes of communication that are more democratic and less centered on the figure of a leader. Otherwise it runs the risk of putting its faith on political solutions which might be devoid of meaning without the charismatic leaders that once led them. And if so, then left populism would not be very far from rightwing populism after all.

But it can be. Mouffe makes clear that her theory has no specific program or regime in mind (97). That is, the deepening of democracy she aspires to could assume the forms of democratic socialism, eco-socialism, associative democracy, participatory democracy (*Ib.*) or other forms, according to specific contexts. Rather, her goal is to get

more representation for the people: 'The remedy does not lie in abolishing representation but in making our institutions more representative. This is indeed the objective of a left populist strategy' (105).

We could then say that there is some intrinsic indeterminacy or vagueness in this proposal, but this has necessarily to remain so; otherwise the theory on left populism would really amount to no more than a political program. The goal is rather to inspire the political projects that can bring about more freedom, equality and democratic representation. Mouffe tries to re-signify populism in order to show in which manner it could recover democracy. And this, we could say, is also precisely another task for a critical hermeneutics of populism.

5. Conclusion

When successful and carried out to its ultimate consequences, a new and better interpretation of the social world can change it. It remains to be seen whether a 'left populist' attempt at hegemony will succeed in tackling both neoliberalism and rightwing populism and bringing about a more democratic, free and equal society. Part of the task at hand is, of course, hermeneutical. Such an effort would have to defeat both the 'new spirit of capitalism' and the resurgence of the exclusionary forces.

This new symbolic order would partially recover already-existing ideals but endowing them with new interpretations leading to new practices. Will this ever happen? That much cannot be affirmed with any degree of certainty. But the interpretative and emancipatory potential of a critical hermeneutics of populism could, and should, help in the task of identifying both the perils and possibilities of the current political landscape. And perhaps also contribute, with its critical capacity of distinction, to provide the tools allowing people to instantiate their will to live together and exercise their power-in-common through

the choice of the political options that better accommodate the founding values of democracy.

Bibliography

Adorno, T. H., Frenkel-Brunswik, W., Levinson, D. and Sanford, N. (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.

Boltanski, L. and Chiapello E. (2007). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L. (2006). *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Foessel, M. (2019). *Récidive. 1938*. Paris: PUF.

Horkheimer, M. (1947). *Eclipse of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jay, M. (1973). *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950*. London: Heinemann.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso.

Marcelo, G. (2018). Crítica da Razão Populista. *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 117, 73–88.

Marcelo, G. (2012). Making Sense of the Social. *Hermeneutics and Social Philosophy. Études Ricœuriennes / Ricoeur Studies*, 3(1): 67–85.

Marcelo, G. (2017). Narrative and Recognition in the Flesh. An Interview with Richard Kearney. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 43(8), 777–792.

Michel, J. (2012). *Sociologie du soi. Essai d'herméneutique appliquée*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a Left Populism*. London and New York: Verso.

Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ricoeur, P. (2005). *The Course of Recognition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition*. Ed. A. Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thompson, J. B. (1981). *Critical Hermeneutics. A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vattimo, G. and Zabala (2011). *Hermeneutic Communism. From Heidegger to Marx*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Walzer, M. (1987). *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

