

Bojan Vranić

Original Scientific Paper

POPULISM TO THE LEFT: Democratisation and class consciousness

Keywords:

Populism; class consciousness; Marx; Engels; Laclau.

Author:

Dr. Bojan Vranić is an Assistant professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade, Serbia.

Correspondence:

bojan.vranic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

Field:

Political theory

Summary

This paper analyses the possibility of left populism to trigger class consciousness with what Laclau calls populist subjects. The author argues that populist subjects and class consciousness are not identical nor interchangeable concepts in respect to the classical Marx and Engels notion on the proletarian class. In the first part of the paper, the author sets a description of populism based on its three key features: reaction, the notion of the people, and the struggle. In the second part, the idea of class consciousness is analysed, showing that class consciousness is necessarily political. In the third part of the paper, the idea of left populism is explored by using the findings of the second part of the paper, showing structural inconsistencies in the idea of the populist subject.

DOI:

10.5937/politeia0-19897

Paper received on:

28.10.2018.

Paper accepted for publishing on:

13.12.2018.

INTRODUCTION

Explorations on populism have advanced in the past decade with such haste that it is now safe to speak of a whole new branch of studies in political science, namely populism studies. The subject matter has been approached from various points of view: economical, sociological, institutional, structural, comparative. However, an ideological approach has remained at the core of the studies: populism seems to be set in stone as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). It is still common to speak of populism as a project from the right ideological specter or, more recently, of the centrist populism. This is a consequence of the political fact that in the past two decades, right-wing populism has had some of its major successes, such as the UKIP and Brexit campaign in 2016, Marine Le Pen's presidential candidacy in 2017, or the successes of AFD in the local and national elections that resulted in becoming the second most popular party in Germany in 2018, just ahead from the SDP (DW, 2018).

The studies of populism are characterised by a gap between political science and political theory. While the former concerns itself with the actual political phenomenon, the later tries to explore and justify political ideas that still float somewhere between reality and hypothesis. The state of political theory of populism can, almost without any residues, be applied to what has been on and off in relevant literature referred to as *left populism*. With punctual political success (mostly in Latin America), left populism has remained an intellectual current derived from the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The ideas and concepts that constitute left populism are tangential and sometimes overlapping with

concepts of democracy and democratisation, the people, neoliberalism and the free market, and the role of the state and its (hegemonic) institutions.

This level of conceptual development of left populism allows us today to dive into nuances of conceptual meaning and explore its reaches. My goal in this paper is to explore one such nuance, namely whether the concept of democratisation (as it is used in the left populism theories) can result in the emergence of a class consciousness of designated groups that transcends the working class as the traditional bearer of the idea. Both democracy and class consciousness are connected with concepts of identity, direct action, institutional change, and anti-capitalists struggle; therefore, it should be relatively simple to reach the conclusion that a devoted left populist movement can lead to the socio-political radical change all Marxists dream of.

This paper demonstrates that the idea of democracy triggered by left populism doesn't necessarily lead to the rise of a new political identity (and even less, entity) that is presupposed by the idea of class consciousness. In a nutshell, my argument is that left populism generates a political class, which falls under what Marx and Engels called an illusion of the *époque*. Therefore, my argument is theoretical in its nature whereby I analyse the idea of left populism from the viewpoint of political philosophy. The empirical side of left populism is only secondary to my goal to explore the structural and logical consistency of one of its key ideas, the democratisation of the society. In the first part of the paper I examine some of the key elements of the definition(s) of populism and left populism in particular. In the second part I give an account of class consciousness, starting from Marx and

Engels's idea to the more recent neo-Marxist interpretations. In the concluding part of the paper I compare the ideas of democracy and class consciousness, showing where left populism fails.

DEFINING POPULISM: TWO STEPS RIGHT, ONE STEP LEFT

It has become common now to state at a beginning of a text that there are various definitions of populism. There are authors (Taggart, 2000) who explain this cacophony by referring to populism as an essentially contested concept. Whether this is truly so is not a primary concern of my paper. My goal in this part of the paper is to compare the definitions of right and left populism to see if there are at least some minimal definitional overlaps.

Populism is often seen as a perverse side of politics. This doesn't necessarily carry a bad connotation. It simply states that populism tends to be (more or less radically) different from what is considered to be a mainstream pattern of politics. Therefore, I argue that the most important feature of populism is that it is *reactionary*. Populism is not an organic type of politics that emerges on its own. It ranges somewhere from the consequence of the perceptiveness of corruption of mainstream political institutions to being an epiphenomenon. In relevant literature (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2005), in particular on right-wing populism, it is often argued that this reactionary politics emerges from what is perceived as the deviance of the representative democracy or liberal democracy.

The problem with the populist deviance is that it is always heavily contextualised. In the studies of Western European populism and populist movements, the deviance of

the representation is more often than not connected to the cleavage between national, multicultural, and supranational state, raising the question who constitutes the general will and carries the sovereignty. For that reason, scholars such as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 34) write arguably about the connection of nationalism and populism that results in authoritarianism and right-wing policies: "Hence, the xenophobic nature of current European populism derives from a very specific conception of the nation, which relies on an ethnic and chauvinistic denomination of the people. This means that populism, authoritarianism, and nativism are experiencing a kind of marriage of convenience in Europe nowadays."

In Latin America, however, this kind of populism is more an exception than a rule (e.g. Evo Morales's policies of true natives of Bolivia vs. colonisers from Europe (Panizza, 2005: 17)). The logic of populist reactionary politics is different in this context, namely it draws its consistency from a resistance to capitalism and neoliberal politics in particular. In his recent book of historical analysis of genesis of populism, Federico Finchelstein (2017: 199) provides a list of (neo)populistic regimes in Latin America that belonged to the left ideological specter: "The Kirchner administrations in Argentina (2003–15), Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and Nicolás Maduro (2013–) in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007–17) ...".

The difference between right and left populism is structural in its nature. While the former rests on the grounds that the society's key problems are in the inadequacy of political institutions, the latter targets the grounds of (capitalist) economy. Populisms from each side of the ideological specter find that equality is the cornerstone of the

critique and the key agent for the political mobilisation. From the right side, populists claim that people have become too equal, and that true equality can only be achieved within the idea of pure people constituting the nation. Left populism claims that inequality has corrupted the socio-economic relations in a society: whether we speak of elite vs. mass cleavage, the distribution of wealth, globalising institutions that negates national social policies, once we achieve economic equality all corrupting influences upon society will be dispelled.

This leads me to the second common feature of all populist definitions, the notion of the *people*. There is no straightforward definition of *the people* that we can assign to the populist use of it. As Margaret Canovan (2002: 34) puts it, *the people* are often considered as “a corporate body with a continuous existence over time, capable of having common interests and a common will.” From this corporate feature, Canovan (2002: 34) derives a conclusion that populism tends to treat people as a nation: “But its sovereign independence of external powers also gives it territorial definition, linking its borders to the boundaries of the polity, while its essential unity narrows down its identity, making it equivalent to the nation.”

Again, this equivalence is true only if certain contextual historical and ideological determinacies take place. Where we are faced with strong feelings regarding nation and nationality, in those societies it is more likely that populism will try to link the idea of *the people* to nation, designating it as the *true* people (consequently creating the idea of *the others*). This kind of discourse is again connected to the ideas of the right-winged populism. As Müller (2015: 83) suggests in his definition, populism tends to be perceived as “a political world, which

places in opposition a morally pure and fully unified people against small minorities, elites in particular, who are placed outside the authentic people.” These “small minorities” are clearer if termed as identities, since right-winged populism tends to contest everything that doesn’t fit into the true people mould. Therefore, on the right side of the specter, *the people* are designated as *ethnos*.

This designation doesn’t stand necessarily for the left side of the specter. Left populism rather terms *the people* as *demos*. The use of *demos* here is specific, and it requires some clarification. In the standard use of the term, the *demos* usually refer to those layers of the society that participate in power sharing activities. However, as stated before, populism is a reactionary politics, implying that it mobilises not those who share power, rather those who are deprived of any means of power-sharing. In a more traditional leftists dictionary, this deprived class is designated as *the proletariat*. There is, however, a difference between *proletariat* and *demos*: the former is deprived of property, while the latter is deprived of political rights. The reason why left populism changed the Marxist narrative of deprivation lies in the changed historical circumstances in which liberal democracy has hegemony over all other societal forms of democratic government; as Benjamin Arditi (2007: 50) judiciously puts it, populism is “a spectre” that haunts democracy.

The changed narrative of deprivation is the result of left populism’s efforts to reconfigure what Laclau (2005: 33) calls “the logic of articulation”. The reconfiguration means that the logic of the political struggle has changed and that motivational goals that left parties and movements target should follow this wind of change. A change of

strategy, however, doesn't imply that left populism gives up the idea of property deprivation as the core of inequalities, just the idea that capitalist economy is the only or at least primary source of inequalities (Mouffe, 2018: 81). Left populism tends to solve the problem of political inequality, by reconfiguring the logic of articulation of exiting a political institution making them more responsive to the will of the demos.

Paul Cammack's (2000) account on the logic of articulation of the populism in Latin America gives one of the best theoretical overviews of the reconfigurational efforts of left populism in general. Following Ernesto Laclau's argument, Cammack (2000: 153) argues that capitalism rests on the idea of the demand: property holders need opposition in a property-deprived class to leverage them with salaries. This property conditioning enables the property holders to exploit the work force of the proletariat, while the latter use the salaries to survive. The economic logic of articulation of societal relation between those two classes is necessary, but not a sufficient condition for continuous exploitation. For capitalism to thrive, it requires a political element, i.e. the state institutions that provide continuity of class relations. Put differently: "One of a number of essential roles of political institutions under capitalism, therefore, is to mediate between the minority who rule and the majority who must not, to block the direct enforcement of the interests of the propertyless majority, and to work to make it more likely that people will actually make political choices which respect the practices and disciplines which capitalism requires" (Cammack 2000: 153).

Left populism is therefore structurally connected to capitalism, but it targets political institutions and their inability to

reproduce legitimacy of the existing economic model (Cammack 2000, 157). Populism became a new strategy of the left because social-democracy also plays an important role in legitimising capitalism: "Under the pretext of the 'modernisation' imposed by globalisation, social-democratic parties have accepted the diktats of financial capitalism and the limits they imposed to state interventions and their redistributive policies" (Mouffe, 2018: 32). Those are some of the main reason why the deprived class feels resentful towards the existing institutional establishment and why it is filled with negative passions (Mouffe, 2005: 55). These passions are unarticulated and can be turned both into generating ethnic cleavages (as right-wing populism does) or, as left populists hope for, to radically change the face of the democratic intuitions. On these grounds, left populism establishes its strategies to expand the notion of the proletariat to the notion of the demos.

Finally, the third feature of definitions of populism is the notion of a *political struggle*. There are again at least two ways to describe this notion. The first rests upon the sociological fact of the elite vs. mass cleavage. The "denunciation of the elites" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 5) is the cornerstone of populist attacks against liberal governments. In the context of liberal (Western) democracies, it would be more precise to speak of "the establishment" than of the elites. The establishment, being an elusive term, allows the researchers to better understand the nature of a populist struggle. Its target is not necessarily the elites who hold the power, rather the minorities who are in opposition to the true people. Right-wing populism usually targets two of such minorities: ethnic minorities and bureaucrats. In the former case, the difference is whether we are

researching old or new democracies. In old western democracies, minorities are usually tied to immigration issues, where immigrants are treated as those who are making the true people underprivileged, by taking away their jobs, social aid, etc. *The France National* is the scholarly example of a populist party whose main target are immigrants. However, in new (post-communist) democracies, ethnic cleavages are connected to the existing, sometimes centuries old struggles against the ethnic majority and minority. The Caesaristic populism of Slobodan Milošević was a prime example of the kind of policy outcomes of such a political struggle.

The second type of political struggle against the establishment is connected to the centre-right populism and aimed against the bureaucrats. Here again is the question of representation being the key one, but the logic of articulation is different. The bureaucrats, e.g. EU commissioners, judiciary, various regulatory bodies, and similar forms of independent political controls are found by populist movements to be illegitimate. For centre-right populists, these liberal forms of government control are illegitimate because they are not derived from the sovereign will of the people and therefore, they do not belong to the world of politics. Populistic demand is that the control needs to be put back into people's hands, stripping it away from a traditional liberal check and balance type of institution. That is why this populism is often termed as illiberal. Examples of it can be found in Viktor Orban's struggle against EU administration in Hungary and in Jaroslav Kaczyński's struggle against the judiciary in Poland.

It is well known that in recent years populist movements are becoming an important political force. In her latest book, *For*

a Left Populism, Chantal Mouffe (2018: 23) terms this period as "the populist moment": "We can speak of a 'populist moment' when, under the pressure of political or socio-economic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilised by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands. In such situations, the existing institutions fail to secure the allegiance of the people as they attempt to defend the existing order. As a result, the historical bloc that provides the social basis of a hegemonic formation is being disarticulated and the possibility arises of constructing a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust." She argues that left populism should use this moment in which political relations are still amorph and reconfigure them in the conditions of increased democratisation. Put in a more traditional Marxist vocabulary, left populism should use the existing crisis of liberalism caused by right-winged populism to shape the class consciousness of the demos. I will return to this point, once I analyse the idea of class consciousness in the next part of the paper.

POLITICAL CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS?

The question raised by the subtitle can have at least two meanings. One wonders whether a political class can have a consciousness, or if class consciousness can be political. Both of these puzzles overlap in the idea of left populism. However, to fully understand the consequence of these meanings, I will return to Marx's original idea of class consciousness.

There is no clear definition of class consciousness, only several accounts scattered in some of Marx and Engels's early works (e.g. *The Communist Manifesto*, *German*

Ideology and The Critique of Political Economy). Therefore, I turn to exploring the possibilities for answering the question raised above. In *The Communist Manifesto* (CM), Marx and Engels (1948: 18) famously stated, “every class struggle is a political struggle”. To determine the relation to the aforementioned struggles, one must understand the nature of this “is”. The relationship established between class and political struggle can be analysed in two ways. The “is” can be understood as a relation of identity and a relation of equivalence. In the former case, a class struggle and political struggle are interchangeable: one can freely use both of these terms in any related context without losing its meaning. Each political struggle is in its nature a class struggle and *vice versa*. In the latter case, a political struggle is defined by conditions of the class struggle: no process is truly political if in its basis lies no class conflict. The relation between class and political struggle is not of identity, albeit that of consequence.

In CM there’s no detailed elaboration of the nature of this relation. From this political programme, the nature of the relation can only be inferred from the definitions of the concept of class and the political attribute. The class is clearly defined in every Marx and Engels’s work as the social group that is determined by the economic system. Perhaps the best definition can be found in the “Preface” for *A Contribution to The Critique of Political Economy* in the seminal line: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (Marx 1904: 11-12). This means, as Marx (1904: 11) argues, that “in the social production which man carry on they enter into definite relation that are indispensable and independent of their

will”. Classes are, therefore, a social mirror of human existence in a particular history, a history that depends on a dominant mode of production. Belonging to a class means taking upon oneself the social role of oppressor or the oppressed. The notion of the class goes beyond the idea of the representation, defended by the liberals; classes are chains, which one can pull or be pulled with.

For this reason, the nature of class history is one of struggles (Marx & Engels, 1948: 9). From the lexical nature of the sentence “political struggle” it is clear that struggles are necessarily political ones. I don’t bring this claim into question; what I’m concerned about is the domain of the attribute *political*, whether it includes classes, or they stand independent in its domain. In CM, Marx and Engels give only few examples about the relation of the class and the political. They only briefly state that each struggle necessarily leads to centralisation on a national level and that starting victories for the proletariat (prior to the revolution) are won on a legislative level. Since CM is a political manifesto, it is only natural that a political struggle is seen as a call for the mobilisation of the proletariat, i.e. rallying, protesting, destruction of the machines etc.

More on the political nature of a struggle can be found in *The German Ideology* (GI). In this collection of works on German idealism, Marx and Engels provide us with an interesting feature of the class. It seems that class is a form of group interaction that is a necessarily *national* one (Marx & Engels, 1974: 80). Put differently, classes are also a mode of production that go beyond material objects that satisfy only biological needs of humans. Sum & Jessop (2013: 117) elaborate this point by drawing on arguments from GI: “These founding fathers of historical

materialism argued that production is the production of a mode of life – not just the satisfaction of immediate physical needs. It has a day-to-day, life-cycle and intergenerational aspects, and involves both immediate production and the production of the material and social conditions that enable production to occur. A crucial moment of this is language, which, as the practical consciousness of nature, of other humans and of social relations, exists also for others (and hence for the speaker too).”

A question can be raised here; as to at what point does a class produce itself as a political class? It becomes a *political class* once its mode of reproduction is mediated by *the state*. It is important here to make a reference on famous argument that politics and law, as a superstructure of the real (economic) basis, are illusions (Marx, 1904: 12). Marx didn't argue that a *political class* is an illusion, but that a *general will*, as a socio-political glue of (the conflicting) classes, is what is illusionary. As I demonstrate further in the paper, this is a core distinction on which the project of left populism rests upon.

Because the class can be only a national class (that is, organised on a national level, not nationalistic), the scale of a struggle can only be at a state level, i.e. institutional level, implying its political character. Therefore, politics is always a product of a ruling class, or as Marx and Engels (1974: 64) seminally wrote: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.” The struggle of the repressed class always begins *against* the politics of the ruling class. It only forms itself as a struggle *for* politics once the *class consciousness* is gained. Historically, class consciousness is

only possible in the context of civil society, or *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (Marx, 1904: 11; Marx & Engels, 1974: 57). The modern context of civil society, urbanisation in particular, provides a necessary freedom to the individual, so he or she may understand that they are persons. As a person, an individual is a bearer of a certain social role. The division of labour that always pre-exists in a society necessarily defines these roles. The existing order of civil society, via the means of the state, alienates an individual from real personhood, by exploiting its workforce and exchanging it for a wage. This being a part of the official state policy, the process of alienation becomes a universal characteristic of a modern society, creating masses without property of their own (Marx & Engels, 1974: 55-56). The mass proletarian society is the ground of a revolution, and the entire process is determined by class consciousness.

The class consciousness is the process of the organisation of workers. It is a consciousness of a need for a working class to be organised at a nation level, just as a bourgeois class historically did. The proletarian class consciousness is always triggered by the process of exploitation or, in political philosophy vocabulary, by the rise of inequalities. However, the process of building the class consciousness is always a political one, since its primary goal is to create a national political organisation and, in time, an international one. I infer that in Marx and Engels's account, class consciousness is a political one, while the political class is a general name for illusionary struggles. In the final part of the paper, I will use this conclusion to answer the question of whether the project of left populism built the political feature of class consciousness.

DEMOCRACY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The historical context in which Marx and Engels wrote about the class consciousness is that of the second industrial revolution, political turmoil with absolutism in Europe, and the beginning of expansionist colonialism. Albeit all of these structural elements led to the dominance of world capitalism, the historical context in which left populism articulates its political ideas and agendas is radically different from that of the mid-19th century. The nature of capitalism itself has been shifted from industrial to financial capitalism. This structural change of capitalism entails changes in political and legal systems by enforcing the hegemony of neoliberal political ideology and the primacy of human rights over national and political rights.

These structural changes have had a significant impact on social relations. The hegemony of pluralistic democracies has led to the growing pluralisation of social interest, justified by the human right's legal doctrine. This pluralisation was seen as a problem even for early Marxists, as Eduard Bernstein's seminal denunciations of Marx's idea of a revolution under a unified workers movement for reasons of difference of interests of trade unions and industrial branches. Today, due to the expanded division of labour between primary, secondary and tertiary modes of production caused by globalisation and the expansion of financial capitalism, it makes it almost impossible for workers to unite on a single front against rising social and economic inequalities.

One of the most influential political philosophers of left populism, Ernesto Laclau (2005: 35), frames, thereof, the problem in terms of *demands*. For Laclau, the social interaction rests on fulfilled

demands, meaning that all social interaction is structurally defined. The fulfilment of the demands therefore needs to be structurally determined as well, meaning that the power can be recognised only to formal institutions. More precisely, due to the pluralistic character of contemporary societies, formal institutions need to make choices when (re)distributing demands, making them *political*. Therefore, political praxis has an "ontological primacy" (Laclau 2005: 33) over all other social practices in articulating demands. This type of social behaviour Laclau terms as "the logic of difference" (2005: 36).

It is not difficult to see why for Laclau politics and populism are "interchangeable terms" (Arditi, 2007: 48). Populism is in Laclau's account a synonym for an alternative to an existing institutional structural solution. It is a political necessity in which different and often divergent interest articulate in a single unifying political idea (or at least, a cluster of intertwined ideas). To explain this process, Laclau (2005: 37) introduces the idea of the "equivalent chain", i.e. the result of reaggregation of interests under a single political end. This idea is very similar to the idea of class consciousness, but it has a different logic of articulation: while the class consciousness presupposes that all subjects have similar sufferings and therefore a common interest, an equivalent chain starts from the idea that sufferings are radically different yet connected with an inability of political institutions to fulfil their demands. Put differently: "Left populism on the contrary 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” (Mouffe, 2018: 43).

I can assert that class consciousness and the equivalent chain are not identical concepts. However, are they interchangeable? Does a struggle against inequalities change its meaning by introducing one or another concept as the core one? These questions can be answered by analysing the steps in which the equivalent chain is used to define populism. Laclau (2005: 37-38) recognises three of such steps. Firstly, the social unrests that are generated by individual demands are just “the tip of the iceberg” (Laclau, 2005: 37) and an analysis would show that underneath it there is always a wider social problem. Therefore, the core of the problem regarding populism is in the inadequate representations by political institutions. When subjects recognise this problem and take individual actions against the institutions, they transform themselves into “democratic subjects” (Laclau, 2005: 37). This transformation is always at a micro scale, since the demands that democratic subject strive to fulfill are always particularistic. Once particularistic demands reach a certain number, the equivalent chain starts rolling out, generating the next step in forming populism.

The first step is sufficiently similar to Marx and Engels’s idea of the development of class consciousness to state its interchangeability. They too argue that demands are particularistic in the beginning, i.e. that workers always notice poor working conditions in their own factories and only later do they try to transform this struggle into a universal one. The second step

that Laclau (2005: 38) presupposes is similar to the concept of class consciousness. He argues that once particularistic demands start aggregating, they are bound to lead to the transformation of a democratic subject to a populist one. The populist subject is the one that belongs to a partisan group that defend the hegemonic idea that unifies all particularistic demands under a single banner. Laclau (2005: 39) terms this idea as a signifier, i.e. the concept of representation that allows a populist movement to remain coherent despite the fact of heterogeneity of pluralistic demands. Developing this idea further to political action, Chantal Mouffe (2018: 84) asserts that left populism should give up the idea that socialism is the hegemonic signifier and needs to turn to democracy. In constructing the populist subject, Mouffe (2018: 82) claims that the contemporary context of pluralistic societies dispels the primacy of the working class in a political struggle against social inequalities: “However, there is no reason to assume that the working class has a priori privileged role in the anti-capitalist struggle. Indeed, there are no priori privileged places in the anti-capitalist struggle. There are many points of antagonism between capitalism and various sectors of the population, and this means that, when this struggle is envisaged as an extension of the democratic principles, there will be a variety of anti-capitalist struggles.”

Finally, the third step for Laclau (2005: 38) is the struggle itself. He argues that the nature of the struggle is determined by the nature of populism, i.e. the second step. The hegemonic signifier that unites the heterogenic democratic subjects into one populist subject creates a binary front between those who have the power and those deprived of it (“underdogs”). In the final

step, populism creates images of friends and enemies, the latter one being those who hold the power of political institutions in their hands. The populist struggle is the struggle for the change of role-play at the level of representation, from the underdog to power-holder; and this feature is what, according to Laclau (2005: 47), makes all populist movements *democratic and political* in their nature. Finally, the changed nature of struggle leads to a redefinition of the solution to the problem of inequalities in a society: a society becomes more equal not by eliminating economic inequalities, albeit by reconfiguring political ones. Therefore, the prime enemy of the populist subject is not capitalism per se; it is neoliberalism and its appraised form of democracy – liberal democracy.

The second and third steps show the significant divergence of Laclau's account from the concept of class consciousness. There are at least two differences that can be identified. The first one concerns the sequence of structural changes that (left) populism is making. As I showed in the second part of the paper, Marx and Engels argue that the struggle comes before class consciousness. Therefore, one first needs to know against whom he or she is fighting so one can find allies for the struggle. In the dialectics of class consciousness, it is impossible to achieve synthesis without antithesis: in Marx and Engels's scenario, the antithesis of the deprived class is the privileged capitalist class. In Laclau's scenario, the recognition of antithesis comes only after the populist subject is formed, i.e. when the (democratic) class consciousness is already triggered.

The second difference is in the domain of the concept. A populist subject, though it strives to include the excluded identities

and deprived subjects, is logically a thinner concept than the one on class consciousness. The credo that constitutes the core of the class consciousness concept is that the political dimension of the process of creating an overall national and international workers organisation will ultimately lead to a classless society, or on a moderate scale, an equal society. The concept of the populist subject strives only to transform the institutions to be more inclusive (Mouffe, 2018: 93), i.e. to (re)democratise society.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: LEFT POPULISM CREATES A POLITICAL CLASS

There are two driving arguments for left populism and its redefinition of classical Marxism I analysed in this paper. One argument is more in line with the structural thesis of Marxism, buttressed by the crisis of financial capitalism followed by the neoliberal political crisis. The other argument leans more on moral elements, by focusing on underrepresentation of identities in the context of neoliberalism and the liberal democracy. Both of these arguments, to more or less extent, change the nature of struggle described by Marx and Engels. Left populism creates a political class that is unable to generate class consciousness.

There are two consequences of left populism being a concept that entails the creation of a political class. First is its inability to organise a movement on a national level. The moral dimension of left populism has empirically shown not to be sufficient to make a movement sustainable. "Occupy Wall Street", "Podemos", "La Nuit Debout" were some of the most successful projects of left populism and all had the same problem: an inability to make their organisation

consistent in a long run. As I have shown in this paper, the reason for this lies in a structural mistake made by these movements. Instead of first building class consciousness between deprived subjects by finding a common enemy as the source of deprivation, they laid the building blocks of their movements respectively on political passions that drove democratic subjects to raise their voices in the first place. From the empirical perspective, right-winged and centrist populism, by focusing on “true people” vs. the elite legitimization principle is more politically successful and sustainable than the left populism.

The second consequence is that left populism ultimately becomes illusionary. This is not the case only with left populism, but with every form of populism, but it is most evident on the left side of the specter. By generating a political class whose prime goal is to reconfigure existing political institutions, left populism drops into a wormhole of legislative, a stronghold of private property. Left populism therefore recognises the legitimacy of property relations established by the (capitalist) state, even before it determines itself as the enemy of neoliberalism. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*, there are only two classes in a civil society and all other types of social struggles are no more than an illusion of the époque.

REFERENCES

- Arditi, B. (2007). *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.
- Arditi, B. (2005). Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics. In: F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (72 – 98). London: Verso.
- Cammack, P. (2000). The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 19, No. 2: 149 – 161.
- Canovan, M. (2002). Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy. In: Y. Mény & Y. Surel (eds.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (25 – 44). London: Palgrave.
- DW. (2018). *Alternativa prvi put druga*, <https://www.dw.com/sr/alternativa-prvi-put-druga/a-45590202>. Last accessed: December 13, 2018.
- Finchelstein, F. (2017). *From Fascism to Populism in History*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Laclau, E. (2005). Populism: What’s in a Name? In: F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (32 – 49). London: Verso.
- Marx, K. (1904). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1948). *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1974). *The German Ideology: Part One*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Mouffe, C. (2005). The “End of Politics” and the Challenge of Right-Wing Populism. In: F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (50 – 71). London: Verso.

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

Mudde, C. (2005). *Populist Radical Right in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2015). *Parsing Populism*. *Juncture*, 22(2): 80-89.

Panizza, F. (2005). Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy. In: F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (1 – 33). London: Verso.

Sum, N-L. & Jessop, B. (2013). Towards a Cultural Economy: Putting Culture in its Place in. *Political Economy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Бојан Вранић

Оригинални научни рад

ЛЕВИ ПОПУЛИЗАМ: Демократизација и класна свест

Кључне ријечи:

*Популизам; класна свест;
Маркс, Енгелс, Лаклау.*

Аутор:

*Др Бојан Вранић је доцент
на Факултету политичких
наука Универзитета у
Београду.*

Кореспонденција:

bojan.vranic@fpp.bg.ac.rs

Област:

Политичка теорија

Сажетак

Рад анализира могућности левог популизма да произведе класну свест код оних које Лаклау назива популистичким субјектима. Аутор показује да популистички субјекти нису идентични нити међусобно замењиви појмови у светлу Марксових и Енгелсових идеја о пролетерској класи. У првом делу рада, аутор поставља идеју популизма на основу три основна елемента: реакционарности, идеје народа, и борбе. У другом делу, анализира се идеја класне свести и показује да је она нужно политичка. У трећем делу рада, идеја левог популизма се објашњава закључцима о класној свести, где се показује структурална неконзистентност идеје популистичког субјекта.

DOI:

10.5937/politeia0-19897

Датум пријема чланка:

28.10.2018.

**Датум прихватања чланка
за објављивање:**

13.12.2018.