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Introduction to special issue: Rethinking populism and democracy in politically turbulent times

Introducción al monográfico: Repensar el populismo y la democracia en tiempos turbulentos

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The past two decades have witnessed a resurgence of populist politics across the globe. The early 21st century saw the pink tide of left wing populism in Latin America, the Southern European populisms that rejected the politics of austerity after 2013, and the right wing populisms that now dominate not only European but global politics. Although each instance of populist politics is distinct, all share an appeal to the people, to the true people, who both oppose and are dominated by the political elite. The nature of this elite also varies – in some cases it is predatory capital; in other cases it is the multicultural left; in yet others the anonymous bureaucrats in Brussels undermining national sovereignty. This special issue of RECERCA poses one question: how does populism relate to democracy? Is it democracy's other face?

In this context, the first three articles here affirm that populism can be democratic, and that even in its right-wing versions there are democratic impulses at play. The second three articles explore ways in which the democratic imaginary might be extended, in light of the challenges presented by populist forms of politics. Let us give some context to these concerns. Populist politics always arises in response to inequality, at least that is our key contention. While right wing populist movements may target immigrants or other minorities, they do so with the mistaken perception that these groups are privileged and have in some sense benefited at the expense of the people. The felt experi-

ence of oppression or exclusion is not unwarranted. Even the most conservative of statistical measures demonstrates that over the past three decades there has been a sustained transfer of wealth to a very small group, the 0.1% rather than the 1%. The simultaneous disinvestment in social welfare and privatisation of public resources have left millions at the mercy of debt while loading responsibility for their supposed failures onto the very people most afflicted by the changed political terrain.

This double-edged sword transfers responsibility for all aspects of life, and responsibility for failure to sustain life, onto individuals. The gloss of democratic individualism is deployed to justify such policies. Neoliberal politicians – at least in Europe – brandish non-discrimination as their cover while restructuring social relations. This is compatible with the introduction of formal logics of measurement that appear to protect against discriminatory practices. Note for example the diversity and inclusion policy of Barclays Bank:

We aim to foster a culture where individuals of all backgrounds feel confident in bringing their whole selves to work, feel included and their talents are nurtured, empowering them to contribute fully to Barclays vision and goals. We have five global pillars of focus: Disability, Gender, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender), Multicultural and Multigenerational.¹

Such abstract measurement is the smiling face of economic inequalities deepened with the outsourcing of government and the withdrawal of welfare support. Populist movements explicitly reject the extension of the market to every aspect of life, and insist that states should intervene for the national people. Yet when aligned with national borders in the form of welfare chauvinism or private sector investment for the true people, populism undermines democracy. Restrictive trade barriers deemed to be in the true national interest as in the case of Hungary, too often align with exclusionary forms of politics.

Where left wing and liberal populisms insist on equality in both its redistributive and identitarian dimensions, right wing populists reject the extension of civil and political liberties to immigrants, gay men and women, feminist activists, environmentalists and transgender people – the key elements of the so-called new left. In supporting an end to all forms of preju-

¹ See: <https://home.barclays/who-we-are/our-strategy/diversity-and-inclusion/>

dice – but without extending this to material equality in areas such as housing, income, wealth and property – third way political parties prepared the space for the intervention of right wing populists committed to welfare chauvinism and left wing populists committed to the deepening of democracy.

Such populist demands find little resonance in the void that is the empty rhetoric of liberal democracy. Political elites characterise populism as a threat to democracy. In their blindness and deafness, in their failure to keep in touch, they cannot recognize the earthquake shaking the foundations of the neoliberal consensus. For those of us committed to democratic politics – understood as the enactment of equality – populist politics present an extraordinary opening. In all of its forms populism claims to represent those excluded from political representation, from the media industry, from education and from the material infra-structures that underpin the very possibility of democratic life. We are compelled as do the contributors to this volume to experiment with new forms of democratic inclusion. These could include transnational forms of collaboration such as UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations) that after 2008 established a range of economic and political mechanisms for mutual support between nine Latin American nations. It might include forms of democratic innovation such as new participatory ecologies, the use of jury systems, participatory budget making or the use of lots when cities make key decisions about their futures. Whatever else, it will also include redistribution of the global wealth that has been enclosed in the tax havens, tax policies, and property portfolios that have ruined the planet we live on. The challenge of populism however is not only a challenge to those who implement, protect and maintain global inequality. These inequalities are implicated in an ideological commitment to the maximization of resource extraction from the earth, and the exploration of every new frontier – whether it be genetic, informational or material – for the purpose of profit. Such colonial metaphors reflect the continuity between contemporary forms of neoliberalism and the centuries long destruction of the earth and its inhabitants. In their different ways each article in this volume address this conjuncture – a conjuncture that presents neoliberal democracy with the faces of peoples who say no.