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Against The Populist *Ressentiment*

Dr Christos Marneros

Abstract: Populist discourses, despite their multiple differences and often oppositional political agendas, share a common feature. This feature is the construction of a notion of “the people” as “the underdog” that stands against the essentialist politics of “the elites.” In this article, I argue that this construction of “the people” is fundamentally problematic due to two, interconnected reasons. First, the primacy which is given to “the people” as a political agent, who is the rightful holder of a notion of “common good,” leads to the formation of politics that are essentialist and exclusionary. Drawing from Max Stirner’s notion of the “spook” or “phantasm,” I argue that “the people” become such and thus, the political demands of populist discourses remain “haunted” by this moral primacy of “the people.” Secondly, the construction of “the people” as “the underdog” suggests that their construction is based on negative feelings of envy and revenge, what Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed as the feeling of *ressentiment*. This feeling of *ressentiment* renders the political demands of populism incapable of producing an affirmative version of politics. As a result, populist discourses not only are incapable of becoming a threat to the fatalistic, neoliberal politics of the capitalist market but at worse they become their accomplices.

Keywords: The people, Spooks, *Ressentiment*, Nietzsche, Stirner

I. “The people” of populism, a multiplicity of meanings?

The term “populism” dominates the political debates of the last five years, yet the term and its uses have a long history¹ and a multiplicity of meanings that are characterised by their differences rather than their commonalities. Margaret Canovan, for example, in her early influential work on the phenomenon of populism states that “the term is exceptionally vague and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena.”² For instance, unlike other political terms, populism has been used to define movements and parties that belong to different, even oppositional, ideological milieus and positions. To that extent, we often hear about both left-wing and right-wing “populists,” either to signify the positions of political parties or grassroots movements.³ This becomes evident when we pay attention to some of the events that led to the popularity of the term “populism” and its uses (and abuses) by mainstream media and commentators. Perhaps, the most defining of the them were the following: 1) the UK referendum that led to Brexit, 2) the election of Donald Trump as the

¹ Two early, influential works on the subject are: Peter Worsley, “The Concept of Populism” in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds.) *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (New York, Macmillan, 1969), 212-221 and Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981). These works are infused by “doubts” on the possibility of using populism as a term that can lead to a coherent analysis of a political phenomenon, due to the term’s inconsistent uses and multiplicity of meanings.

² Canovan, *ibid.*, 3.

³ See, for example, Éric Fassin, *Populism Left and Right* (Cambridge, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2020).

45th president of the United States of America, 3) the qualification of Marine Le Pen for the second round of the French presidential elections in 2017, 4) The policies of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán and 5) Poland's populist turn with the policies of the "Law and Justice" governing party. While these aforementioned events are a manifestation of the emergence of (far)right-wing populism, on the other side of the political spectrum, we observe certain important events that can be read as the emergence of left-wing populism. Perhaps, the most influential examples of left-wing populist movements' successes are 1) The win of Syriza in the Greek legislative elections of January 2015, 2) the emergence of Podemos in Spain and their subsequent role in the coalition government, after the Spanish general election of November 2019 and 3) the refusal of Latin America governments (most significantly in Venezuela and Bolivia) to follow the so-called "Washington consensus."⁴

At the same time, another difficulty arises due to the use of the term with both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, the term is used in many cases as a derogatory one in order to demote the politics (or, in better terms, the lack of any substantial political agenda) of an adversary, who is characterised as "populist." The populist leader is, often, seen by the adversaries as a *persona non grata* whose demagogic skills and charisma are powerful enough to create a movement that threatens "stability," the rule of law and the normativity of political life and as such, this leader is an imminent "danger to democracy."⁵ For example, the attacks against adversaries and their characterisation as populists and demagogues are a common strategy of the so-called centre-right or traditional right parties (often called in the European political arena as pro-European right). These anti-populist parties and movements tend to be considered as part of the "elite." While anti-populists profess to oppose both right-wing and left-wing populists because they claim to be against the "immaturity" of a politics based on emotion, we often see them co-operating with and promoting the xenophobic agendas of right-wing populists.

On the other hand, populism is often adopted as a term by supporters of a populist movement in order to define their theoretical aspirations and strategies for a new political force that, usually, aims to transcend the boundaries of the classical dichotomies between left and right political powers and to offer a radical model of democracy by the people and for

⁴ For discussions of these three significant events on the emergence of left-wing populism see, respectively: Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: The Case of SYRIZA" (2014) 19(2) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 119; Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, *Podemos: In the Name of the People* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2016); Francisco Panizza, *Contemporary Latin America: Development and Democracy Beyond the Washington Consensus* (London and New York, Zed, 2009).

⁵ Pierre-André Taguieff, "Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem" (1995) 103 *Telos* 9, 10.

the people against the dominance of the elite.⁶ Such a model of populism, according to its supporters, is the only viable solution that can “recover and deepen democracy.”⁷

Subsequently, this multiplicity of uses leads us to wonder if it is ever possible to examine the emergence and dominance of populism in the socio-political state of affairs of our era as a single phenomenon. In other words, shall we concede that the (over)use of the word “populism” by the mainstream media, academia and the general public is yet another strategy or “trend” that in reality talks about completely different and unrelated ideas and movements? I would suggest that this is not the case. As Ernesto Laclau states, “[a]ny definition presupposes a theoretical grid giving sense to what is defined.”⁸ In that sense, the definition “populism” is not an exception to this rule. To that extent, as I argue, despite its multiplicity of meanings, the signifier “populism” signifies that there is a common thread that links all the multiple and diverse movements, parties and political agendas. As Roger Brubaker explains, while it is difficult to define populism coherently and in a consistent manner, the term may be understood as something akin to the Wittgensteinian notion of a “family resemblance.”⁹

“Just as there may be no common feature shared by all games, but instead a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail”, so it may not be fruitful to seek to specify a necessary or sufficient set of elements for characterising a party, politician, or discourse as populist. A further implication of the family resemblance idea is that elements of the repertoire, taken individually, are not uniquely populist, but may belong to other political repertoires as well, and that it is the combination of elements – a rather than the use of individual elements from the repertoire – that is characteristic of populism.”¹⁰

To that extent, this common thread or “repertoire” of populism is to be found in the populist invocation of the people or the discursive activity of speaking *in the name of the people*. The definition of the “people”, however, causes some further issues. Just like the term “populism,” the term “people” signifies a multiplicity of different meanings within the populist discourse(s). So for example, for the xenophobic, (far)right-wing populists, “the common,” “pure,” “real” or “pious” people as these right-wing populist leaders like to call

⁶ The works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe stand as, perhaps, the most well-known and celebrated examples of a proposal of a “left-populism” that will be in a position to bring together the demands of the most marginalised groups, under the name of the “people” (what they call “a chain of equivalence”). On equivalence and difference see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso 1985) esp. 127-134. On a more comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the model of populism that they espouse see, Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, Verso, 2005) and the more recent, Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London, Verso 2018). See also the work of Yannis Stavrakakis. For a comprehensive summary of his notion of a left-wing populist see, Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Return of “the People”: Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis” (2014) 21(4) *Constellations* 505.

⁷ Mouffe *For a Left Populism*, 5.

⁸ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What is in a Name?” in Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London, Verso), 32.

⁹ Roger Brubaker, “Why Populism?” (2017) 46 *Theory and Society* 357, 361.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

them, share a common identity or the purpose to preserve and salvage their self-professed legitimacy.¹¹ They are, in that sense, according to this populist narrative the only “legitimate” and “sovereign” inhabitants of a county. These so-called hardworking and *rightful* citizens of a state were betrayed, abandoned and led to precarity by the policies of “the elite” of politicians, bureaucrats and the mainstream media. To add an insult to injury, the populist leader will often state that these elites operate in ways that satisfy foreign interests, be that of multinational companies, bureaucrats of transnational organisations or even people who are not part of the elite, such as minorities and migrants. The term “people” of the right-wing populist discourse is then constructed around a sense of an identity, which is characterised by homogeneity – be that national, religious or even a moral understanding of what constitutes a law-abiding, hard-working subject, in short, the “good citizen.”

On the other hand, the left-wing populist understanding of “the people” does not aim to develop a populist discourse that revolves around certain homogenous characteristics. Instead and according to Laclau and Mouffe, the people is something to *be constructed* and it is something that does not hold a fixed identity.¹² The emergence of the people is the result of the fulfilment of three steps that function as a precondition to a populist discourse:

“(1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the “people” from power; and (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the ‘people’ possible. There is a third precondition which does not really arise until the political mobilisation has reached a higher level: the unification of these various demands – whose equivalence, up to that point, had not gone beyond a feeling of vague solidarity – into a stable system of signification.”¹³

Thus, just like populism, the people as a term is an empty or “floating” signifier,¹⁴ which gains meaning and it is constituted by the “coming-together” of the multiple demands of heterogeneous groups which act in opposition to the oligarchic rule of the elites.

Yet and despite the different understanding of the term “people” by the multiple and oppositional populist discourses, I would argue that this activity of doing politics by invoking the name of the people is the central problem with populism (as a discourse and a political activity). Operating in the name of the people, populism is incapable of producing and giving rise to a radical mode of doing politics in an affirmative or positive way that is able to combat the fatalistic policies of the neoliberal and capitalist elites without falling back into the trap of a narrative which is amplified by a negative and resentful and, at the same time, hollow anti-elitism. This is due to the fact that populist discourses, both in the xenophobic right-wing and progressive left-wing manifestations, share the logic that the people are “the “underdog”

¹¹ See, for example, Tim Kington, “I’m putting gospels into action, says Italy’s anti-migrant leader Matteo Salvini” *The Times* [February 27 2018]. Salvini goes to the extent of referring to the people (his supporters) as “apostles.” See also, “Nigel Farage: This is A Victory For Real People” *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2016/jun/24/nigel-farage-eu-referendum-this-victory-for-real-people-video> [Accessed 13 March 2021].

¹² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, esp. chapter 4; Mouffe (no 7), introduction.

¹³ Laclau, *ibid*, 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

[which] stand against “those in power.”¹⁵ Ultimately, this *fixation* and the subsequent notion of *victimhood* of the people by populist discourses results in two fundamental problems. First, the notion of the people receives an unprecedented position of (moral) superiority and hierarchy – it becomes a “fixed idea,” as I will explain further in the next section. This leads to a situation where anything or anyone that questions the “benevolence” and “the self-righteousness” of anyone who acts in the name of the people is, automatically, treated as an enemy of them. Furthermore, this prevalence of the rightful demands of the people within the populist discourses suggests that all new ideas and strategies for the emergence of a new ethico-political activity must be filtered and adhere to these demands. As a result, “the people” become an origin or the foundation of anything new. Ironically so, the populist position becomes in itself essentialist and exclusionary. Secondly, this prevalence of the people is, as explained above, constructed by a coming-together of agents that are defined by a combination of negativity and victimhood – they are after all the “underdogs.” This, as I will explain in **Section III**, leads to the notion of *ressentiment*, which is a state of being defined by total negativity and “hatred against life”¹⁶ and to that extent, the failure of populist political agenda to *act* affirmatively, but instead to merely *react* against the politics of the elites.

In what follows, I will expand on what the consequences are for our ways of existing and doing politics when we turn our ways of thinking towards higher notions and values, and for the purposes of the article, on how the populist discourses construct this notion of “the people.” Drawing from the notion of the “spooks” or “phantasms” [*Spuke*] coined by the anarchist, 19th century philosopher, Max Stirner in his *The Unique and Its Property*,¹⁷ I aim to demonstrate how the populist conceptualisation of “the people” becomes akin to this notion of the spook (**Section II**). Consequently in **Section III**, building on the concept of *ressentiment* as this is explained by another German thinker of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, I aim to demonstrate how populist discourses function in this mode of *ressentiment* and thus, even in their most progressive manifestation, they fail to produce a politics of affirmation and positivity¹⁸. As such, populist discourses not only are incapable of becoming a threat to the fatalistic, neoliberal politics of the capitalist market but at worse they become their accomplices.

¹⁵ Mouffe (no 7), 11.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson (Columbia University Press, 2008), 122.

¹⁷ Max Stirner, *The Unique and Its Property*, Trans. Wolfi Landstreicher (Middletown DE: Underworld Amusements, 2017), also translated as *The Ego and Its Own* [the original German title is: *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum*].

¹⁸ It should be noted that my reading of the two thinkers, Stirner and Nietzsche, draws from and follows an anarchist, anti-capitalist tradition. While Stirner is more widely considered and read as an anarchist thinker, Nietzsche’s thought is used in order to inform multiple positions (e.g. the unfortunate distortion of his work by the Nazis in order to justify their resentful and hateful politics). Yet, Nietzsche’s distaste for any sort of higher norms, authority and sheep mentality was and still is a huge influence on anarchist thinkers and tendencies. For Nietzsche’s relation to and influence on anarchism see, Emma Goldman, *Living My Life: Volume 1* (Dover Publications, 1970); Renzo Novatore, *The Collected Writings of Renzo Novatore*, Trans. Wolfi Landstreicher (San Francisco: Ardent Press, 2012). For more recent works see Shahin, *Nietzsche and Anarchy* (London and Bristol: Elephant Editions and Active Distribution, 2016); Christos Iliopoulos, *Nietzsche and Anarchism* (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2019).

II. “Man, your head is haunted!”¹⁹

Speaking in a party congress and criticising his opponents, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said the following: “We are the people. Who are you?”²⁰ Jan-Werner Müller notes that this articulation and the choice of the wording was not only a matter of “empirical” observation (after all Erdoğan knows that his opponents are Turks and people of course) but one which “is always distinctively *moral*.”²¹ Here, Erdoğan not only manages to de-humanise his opponents by excluding them from the group of “the people” but he also manages to elevate his people to a category of a moral foundation, bestowing on an element of quasi-theological dimensions. In a similar fashion, the leader of the far-right party, Lega and former deputy prime-minister of Italy, Matteo Salvini brought together the political elements of his anti-migrant, xenophobic policies with a theological one. Addressing his party members, he claimed to be the one that “was putting gospels into actions.”²² In a rather theatrical performance, Salvini, as a self-professed Messiah, swore on copies of the Italian constitution and the bible and he went to the extent of calling his people “apostles” that have as their quest the “mass cleaning” of Italy from migrants. Again, we can observe a powerful elevation of the people to a position of absolute “purity.”²³ The people, through this populist discourse, achieve a moral high ground and at the same time, those who are excluded from the people have to conform or – in the case of migrant’s and Lega – to leave or even to be extinguished.

Left-wing populist movements, while they are to be distinguished on multiple and significant grounds from the xenophobic and fundamentalist discourse of right-wing populism, operate in a discursive strategy that equally places the notion of the people in a predominantly, foundational and quasi-theological position. Talking to the ex-prominent member of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón, Chantal Mouffe states the following:

“Collective wills crystallise around a conception of the common good around a definition of public interest, and this is a very important dimension of democratic politics. This could seem paradoxical, given that, according to the pluralist approach I’m defending, the common good doesn’t exist because there can be no such thing as “the” common good. But it plays the role of a horizon. A people is built from a given idea of the common good. In other words, there will always be a struggle around the definition of the common good. The fight which I call agonistic is a fight for defining the common good. Those capable of persuading the majority to identify itself with their conception of the common good achieve hegemony.”²⁴

In the above passage, Mouffe, while she recognises that “the common good does not exist,” still relies on a notion of “the common good.” While she initially dismisses a homogenising

¹⁹ Stirner (no 17), 61.

²⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Kington (no 11).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Errejón and Mouffe, *Podemos: In the Name of the People*, 41.

existence of fixed essence of “a common good” she still does not effectively go beyond the need of constructing a new foundation. She rather understands common good as “a horizon” where the heterogeneous demands of the underdogs will find the fertile ground to come together and join their forces. However, the choice of the wording and the reference to “the common good” manifest, yet again, that the people, as a group, are the rightful holders and representatives of an objective essence of “the truth” and “the just.”²⁵ Thus, even though Mouffe’s “common good” is variable and always in flux, its understanding is always filtered and defined by anyone who is considered to be part of the people. Ultimately, it remains exclusionary.

But how do these examples and the elevation of the people to a foundational state that dictates “the good” and “the moral” relate to the notion of spooks or phantasms? Stirner’s *Unique and Its Property* can be read as a direct and ferocious assault on these “fixed ideas” or foundational (moral) principles. Stirner starts its critique by questioning the emancipatory promise of the Enlightenment, an era which is, often, defined as the point of departure for the centrality that humanity enjoys in the Universe. The “era of reason” is usually thought of as the historical period when the human was liberated by the bondages and the commands of the Divine, the era when all forms of authority became the subject of strong doubt and criticism. The words of the Scriptures or any other Holy book are subjected to strong criticism and the Divine becomes even something which is subjected to “mockery.” Yet, this revolution of humanity remained rather incomplete, because, according to Stirner, even the most radical of the revolutionaries remained entrapped and in need of a highest essence to believe in.²⁶ As he eloquently puts it:

“The atheists carry on their mockery of the higher essence, which also gets worshipped under the name of the “highest” or *être suprême*, and trample one “proof of its existence” after another into the dust, without noticing that, out of a need for a higher essence, they only destroy the old one to make room for a new one.”²⁷

In other words, God or the Divine is now *replaced* by other phantasms or spooks that “haunts” our modes of existing and thinking. For Stirner, these phantasms can take the shape of any form of authority that has the ability to alienate someone and convince him/her to act in the name of abstract, supposedly higher and “noble” causes such as, the nation, the law,

²⁵ It is striking here how this reference to the common good resembles the notion of Platonic Ideas or Forms. According to Plato, the world of Ideas is a non-material but substantial realm which manifests the most accurate form of reality. So, in other words, an Idea is what gives the essence to a being. Someone or something is to be considered good if they adhere to the Idea of “the Good.” This mode of thinking leads to a hierarchical and exclusionary categorisation of beings (some are considered bad simply because they do not follow the commands of “the Good”). Similarly here, it could be argued that anyone who does not espouse this notion of the common good is automatically, excluded from “the people”.

²⁶ Or as Nietzsche noted after him, God may be dead and “we have killed him” but “given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.” See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, With a Prelude of Rhymes and An Appendix of Songs*. Trans. and Commentary Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), Aphorism 108, 167.

²⁷ Stirner (no 17), 56-57.

morality or the very notion of humanity itself.²⁸ As Saul Newman, rightly notes, “the creation of a modern secular world [is] haunted by the legacy of religion. We are surrounded by spooks, ghosts, ideological abstractions, figments of our imagination that dominate our consciousness.”²⁹

What is problematic with this over-reliance to and fetishization of higher causes is that it leads to an absolute form of alienation with ourselves and life in a general sense. This is due to the fact, that people, often, become so accustomed to obeying without questioning certain rules and modes of existence that are considered to be higher, and objectively moral and “true”. At the same time, any effort to critique and think otherwise is labelled as “fringe”, often leading to a “banishment” and a constant feeling of guilt for failing to be deemed worthy “servants” of these higher causes.³⁰ In a similar vein and as this is explained by the three aforementioned examples, the populist discourses epitomise this replacement of the Divine with the formation of “the people” as a modern manifestation of a spook *par excellence*. The spook of the people “haunts” populist discourses and politics and, subsequently, it makes them unable to address the current state of affairs without the need to refer back to rather abstract and supposedly higher values of “common good”, “common will” and so forth. Populist discourse thus becomes alienating. It is alienating because it functions in an exclusionary way which thinks in terms of binaries, between “the people” and those who are “the enemies of the people.” To paraphrase Stirner: “[Populist] your head is haunted; you have bats in your belfry! You’re imagining big things and painting for yourself a whole world of gods that is there for you, a haunted realm to which you are called, an ideal that beckons to you. You have a fixed idea!”³¹ Ultimately, this mode of thinking leads, as I explain in the following section, to a predominantly negative and reactionary way of doing politics, characterised by *ressentiment*.

III. “...You all laughed at me. Well, you’re not laughing now.”³²

Nigel Farage, the architect of the success of the Brexit vote and a long serving member of the European Parliament for the Eurosceptic and populist UKIP and then Brexit Party, in his first appearance in the European Parliament after the British Referendum unleashed a ferocious attack combined with vitriolic mockery. He addressed his fellow MEPs by stating: “When I came here 17 years ago and said I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the Europeans Union, you all laughed at me. Well you're not laughing now.”³³ Farage’s words and his whole performance, full of bragging manifests resentment and a feeling of revenge. He was not merely satisfied because the central political aim of his career was achieved, against all odds. His satisfaction derives its essence from a vengeful feeling which thrives not so much on his success but rather on the failure of the enemy. Furthermore, Farage’s

²⁸ For a similar view and some further examples, see, John Blumenfeld, *All Things Are Nothing to Me* (Zero Books, 2018), esp. 29-31.

²⁹ Saul Newman, *Political Theology: An Introduction* (London: Polity, 2018), 51-52.

³⁰ Stirner (No 17), 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² Nigel Farage, “You are not laughing now” The BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36651406> [Accessed 25 March 2021].

³³ *Ibid.*

speech reaffirms the populist discourses' view of the people as the underdogs, who are, ultimately, successful despite all odds because they are the representatives and the holders of moral righteousness. This short phrase, as I argue, is a manifestation of the condition of *ressentiment* as this is explained by Friedrich Nietzsche. A condition that characterises populist discourses.

Nietzsche defines *ressentiment* as a psychological condition that hates everything which is “joyful” and affirmative in life because it demands full and blind obedience to moral values. As Newman explains, *ressentiment* “is the condition of rancour born of weakness and impotence; it is a hatred of the weak against the strong, a hatred that poisons the will and infests one’s whole being.”³⁴ In order to better grasp Nietzsche’s diagnosis of *ressentiment* as a prevalent condition that is so strong in its negativity that manages to engulf the very soul of every being, it is important to start with what the philosopher calls “the slave revolt against the masters” and the “reversal of values.”³⁵

In the sum of his corpus, the philosopher unleashes a ferocious assault against Christianity, not only as a religion but as a powerful mode of existing. What can be called as his central claim for that critique is the fact, that for him, the Christian world is akin to “a spread of disease” that led to the ultimate decadence of all aspects of life and eventually to the domination of “weak” and “feeble” values – everything that is against to his notion of “a proud” way of existing and of “philosophising with a hammer.”³⁶ In his own words, “Christian faith has meant sacrifice: the sacrifice of freedom, pride, spiritual self-confidence; it has meant subjugation and self-derision, self-mutilation.”³⁷ As Nietzsche explains in his *Genealogy of Morality*³⁸ the so-called triumph of the “slaves” is “a process” which is facilitated by the values of Judaeo-Christian tradition. Subsequently, this process or the genealogy of the dominance of “slave morality” begins with the “revolt of the slaves,” something Nietzsche identifies with the emerging influence and ultimate triumph of the Judaeo-Christian tradition over, what he conceives as, the “noble” values of the Ancient World.³⁹

This process began, when the “slaves,” “plebeians or “the herd,” for Nietzsche, managed to “depose the masters” and as a consequence “the morality of the common people has triumphed.”⁴⁰ This is the point where a “reversal of values” starts its operation. The slaves, in order to keep their dominance over the masters, reversed values such as “good and evil”.

³⁴ Saul Newman, “The Problem of Ressentiment and the Problem of Voluntary Servitude” in Sjoerd Van Tuinen (ed.) *The Polemics of Ressentiment: Variations on Nietzsche* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 17.

³⁵ It should be noted that Nietzsche with the use of the terms “slaves” and “masters” does not refer to any particular group of people or any race, gender or culture. Nietzsche talks about a psychological condition which can be, indeed, established in all human beings, through a very particular process.

³⁶ Nietzsche’s hammer can be read as a “diagnostic tool” that aims “to hit” with force any so-called values and to that extent to destroy any of them that are “hollow” and thus to manifest their decadent state. See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophise with a Hammer*. Trans. And Intro. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford Classics, 1998), xvi.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 44 (aphorism 46).

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. Carol Diethe, Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed.) (3rd ed. Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁹ Nietzsche (no 36), 83 (aphorism 195). [emphasis added].

⁴⁰ Nietzsche (no 37), 19 (Essay I, section 9).

But what exactly is the problem with that? A simple answer would be “a hatred for life.” The “creative,” “joyful” aspect of life is replaced by *bad conscience* (or guilt) and *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, the moment that the *ressentiment* of “slavish beings” – those “who deny the proper response for action [and instead] they compensate [this lack] with imaginary revenge” – becomes “creative,” albeit in merely reactive, negative sense, it gives birth to all these moral values.⁴¹ What characterises these values according to Nietzsche is their tendency to say “no” “on principle to everything that is “outside,” “other,” “non-self” and this “no” is its creative deed.”⁴²

The next step of the reversal of values takes place when the “slave” is in need to define itself through a vicarious relation to an outside, to an opposite – *evaluation* of the slave’s self gives way to judgment of the outside. In other words, slave morality relies on an exoteric principle in order to define itself, and as such it gives primacy to negation over affirmation. In Michael Hardt’s example; “the slave mentality says “you are evil, therefore I am good,” whereas the master mentality says “I am good, therefore you are evil.””⁴³ To that extent, while in the first instance the negation of the outside, opposite being “affirms” the “slave’s self,” in the second one the affirmation of the “master’s self” negates that of the “slave.” So going back to the Farage example with which I started this section, it could be seen how the populist leader defined his very existence by deriving a resentful joy from the failure of his opponents. His success comes second to the failure of the other (which is in fact, the main source of his joy).

We thus, arrive at a point where the values of “slaves,” their morality, takes its “imaginary revenge”⁴⁴ against “the masters.” This imaginary revenge turns beings into pitiful entities that merely react to “external stimuli.”⁴⁵ At this stage the *ressentiment* of slave morality becomes creative in the sense that it can create its own rules, to define who is to be considered as “good” and who as “evil.” Yet, this creativity functions in a reactive rather than an active way. As Gilles Deleuze explains:

“Good and evil are new values, but how strangely these values are created! They are created by reversing good and bad. They are not created by acting but by holding back from acting, not by affirming, but by beginning with denial. This is why they are called un-created, divine, transcendent, superior to life. But think of what these values hide, of their mode of creation. They hide an extraordinary hatred, a hatred for life, a hatred for all that is active and affirmative in life.”⁴⁶

This sums up, perfectly, the problem with populist discourses and their fixation with notions such as the “common good” of the people. Just like the moral values that are critiqued by Nietzsche, the values and thus, the subsequent politics of populism remain, fundamentally “un-created.” Moral and populist values are “un-created” because they are to be perceived

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20 (Essay I, section 10).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Michael Hardt, ‘Preface’ in Deleuze (no 16), x.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche (no 37) (Essay I, section 10).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Deleuze (no 16), 122.

and used as unquestionable foundations of every existence on the basis of prevalued evaluations of the present. Furthermore, they rely on “higher notions” and so they are, merely, a conclusion of something external, a mere reaction as I stated above. Ultimately, the very fact that they are announced in the name of the right the just or the good, and in this sense are *a-genealogical*, i.e. they are not created by a present “anyone” (e.g. just like, in one sense at least, with the Judaeo-Christian notion of God, who is a-genealogical) suggests, for our purposes, that they cannot be adapted or modified or be the subject of any critique or resistance, other than to be applied in the form of a judgment infused by the condition of *ressentiment*.

IV. Conclusion

In this article, I aimed to demonstrate that populist discourses, even in their most progressive manifestations (i.e. left-wing populist), are not capable of offering a viable alternative to the fatalistic politics of neoliberal governance and the capitalist politics of the market. This is, as I argued, due to two reasons that are fundamentally interconnected with the construction of “the people” by the populist discourses. By turning “the people” into a foundational, moral principle, populists subjugate their politics to a new form of hierarchical position. As I explained, in their effort to fight the elitism and anti-essentialism of their opponents, populists create a novel “spook” or “phantasm” by making “the people” the point of reference for any supposedly “just” or “fair” demands and political programme. Furthermore, the articulation of their demands and the creation of their politics are fundamentally infused by the condition of *ressentiment*. This is because populists think in terms of binaries (“the people” and “the elite”) and as such, they define themselves in a purely negative way, a way which draws its existence and reason by acting in a reactionary way.

A proposal of an alternative political programme, that has the potential to resist both the neoliberal politics dictated by the capitalist market and the new form of essentialism of populism, is beyond the scope of this article. However, I argue that this examination and the diagnosis of the fundamental issues with populism discourses is an initial step that has the potential to draw a new way of “doing politics” which resists both the pitfalls of populism and elitism. Perhaps, such politics should try as a first step to detach themselves from a need to create new “spooks” that fetter their ability to *act* (rather than simply *react*) and *create*.

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