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THE PLACE OF THE PEOPLE IN POST-DEMOCRACY RESEARCHING 'ANTIPOPULISM' AND POST-DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS-RIDDEN GREECE*

*por Giorgos Katsambekis***

> [I]t is now quite clear that the democratic states of the capitalist world have not one sovereign, but two: their people, below, and the international "markets" above (Streeck 2012: 64).

Introduction

Wolfgang Streeck's words are typical in reflecting a shared worry among contemporary democratic intellectuals, political theorists and economists, concerning a power shift nowadays evident in most developed countries of the western world. It seems that from "the people" we are passing to "the markets" and from popular sovereignty to technocratic virtue and managerial rationalism. Sociology and political theory have coined the term "post-democracy" to designate —among others— this multifaceted shift that seems to have started somewhere in the early 1980s and has most probably peaked during the last years.

Hence, while the concept of "post-democracy" was until recently only marginally used by radical political theorists and sociologists, today, amidst an unprecedented crisis, it acquires a renewed interest and importance. Post-democracy signifies a transition that can be seen and investigated on many levels of political life and society. From its sociological aspects and the structural transformations within societies, to the ways that the modern globalized economy functions or the way "high" politics is conducted, one can

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** PhD. candidate, School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: giorgos_bek@hotmail.com.

discern myriads of changes. My main concern in this paper will be post-democracy's darker aspects and its eventual dismissal of "the people" as the ultimate authority, the legitimizing ground and central symbolic reference upon which democratic polity stands (Lefort 1988, Canovan 2005, Laclau 2005, Rancière 2006). This endeavour can also be formulated as an attempt to reflect on the dialectic between post-democracy and the proliferation of "antipopulist" discourses. After all, post-democracy's dismissal of "the people" dovetails here perfectly with the late (neo)liberal paradigm of consensual and "post-adversarial politics", that, except from mainstream political arenas, seems also to assert its hegemonic grip over the broader field of academia (Mouffe 2005a: 75-76).

Again, there are various ways that one can test the hypothesis that the people are losing their political priority, that the people are no longer relevant. One could look at the ways that popular participation (from elections to trade unions and collective movements) has generally declined over the last decades or at the immense inequalities (social, economic and others) across the western world. Another possible investigation would involve a mapping of the promise/performance ratio, i.e. the contradictions in the programmes of political parties before and after elections. In other words, how close are today's government policies to the popular mandate? This is crucial, because we can see today a tendency in governments across the western world, especially in the crisis-ridden EU periphery, not only to abandon their pre-electoral programmes/promises, but to implement the exact opposite policies from the ticket on which they had been elected —often in the name of an "emergency" or mere "economic necessity". Last, but not least, one could trace an indirect dismissal of the people in the marginalization of its elected representatives, in the growing importance of the various technocratic experts, or the slights-of-hand that various governments utilize to bypass a vote in the parliament[1].

[1] Among the most graphic illustrations of such practices is today's Greece, in which legislation is now mostly introduced through (presidential and/or ministerial) decrees, without ever being put before parliamentary scrutiny. Even the country's Constitution is often considered an "obstacle" for members of the government, like Evripidis Stylianidis who was then minister of interior and has publicly claimed that for Greece to move on in certain policy areas the government should not "just change the obstacle of the Constitution, but should find ways to subtly bypass it" (Karagiannis 2013, my emphasis).

If yesterday's "dark continent" is now becoming a "grey post-democratic continent", then there is no better place to investigate post-democracy's excesses than crisis-ridden Greece. After tracing the signs of its post-democratic transition over the last fifteen years, in what follows I propose that post-democratic theory is a significant tool in understanding today's Greek political system and society. To be sure, the ongoing crisis has sharpened discourses and polarizations, has pushed political subjects to take rigid positions against the administration of the crisis and eventually has led the once just convergent mainstream political forces (PASOK[2] and ND[3]) under the same political roof. So, in a way, politics is dynamically back on the agenda and post-democratic tendencies are challenged.

My main focus will be on the discursive administration of the crisis and the operation of various signifiers in the elites' discourse. "Discourse" is understood here in the sense given by Laclau and Mouffe and the broader project of the "Essex school" discourse theory, that is as a set of "systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3-4) through the construction of social antagonisms and collective identities and the drawing of political frontiers. In this sense, discourse doesn't only build hegemonic narratives and construct what eventually is perceived as "normal". It also reflects and justifies a set of already existing institutions as well as social relations and practices, while at the same time can pre-figure possible future alternatives.

My aim is to show that today the popular-democratic subject of modernity, as historically incarnated in "the people" is systematically ignored, marginalized, even stigmatized and suppressed, as contemporary European elites develop a new "fear of the masses" —or "demophobia" (Marlière 2013)— and attempt their own "revolution from above" (Balibar 2011). The hypothesis is that the (discursive) marginalization of "the people" (or "antipopulism") reflects a broader shift from the *political* (as antago-

[2] PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) was founded by Andreas Papandreou in 1974. Emerging as a radical left political force in the 1970s, it would adopt a more pragmatic and moderate profile when in office in the 1980s, before gradually joining the trajectory of third-way European social-democracy.

[3] Founded in 1974 by Konstantinos Karamanlis, ND (Nea Dimokratia) is a center-right party, one of the main pillars —together with PASOK— of the Greek two-party system (1974-2012). In 1974, it won the elections with an overwhelming 54.37% and formed the first government of the Third Hellenic Republic.

nism, rupture, etc.) to the *post-political* (as management, administration, consensus, etc.) and from *democracy* to *post-democracy*; from antagonism and political debate on alternatives to "neutral" management and "enlightened" administration; from passionate identification to raw interest speculation. Indeed, what the pressures of the current crisis produced wasn't a renewed open and democratic space where peoples and citizens could participate more, get further involved, deliberate, disagree and co-decide on issues that are equally affecting them, if not radically changing their ways of life. On the contrary, the crisis, since now, has given ground to European and Greek elites, along with various trans-national or supra-national institutions, like the IMF and the ECB, to further consolidate their power over the national parliaments and impose an *emergency consensus*, particularly hostile to popular dissent.

"The people": clarifications on a contested notion

But let me first focus on the notion of "the people". To be sure, talking about the people is far from being unambiguous. Democratic political theory has long struggled with the term and has often been found in grounds of conflict staging the people against rival conceptions of democratic agency, such as the "multitude", "civil society", or the "proletariat" and so on. References to "the people" became a constant in political life after the passage to political modernity and the so-called "disenchantment of the world" (Gauchet 1997). "Popular sovereignty" and "representation" would then replace the "Divine Right of Kings" as the legitimising cornerstone of any democratic political order. And with the kings gone, the people became the occupant of the "empty place" of power (Lefort 1988: 225). Today, as Margaret Canovan maintains, "[t]he English term [the people] shares three basic senses with its equivalents in other European languages: the people as sovereign; peoples as nations, and the people as opposed to the ruling elite (what used to be called 'the common people')" (Canovan 2005: 2). And while this phenomenological distinction is adequate, we should supplement the notion of "the people" with the element of radical *potentiality*, to adequately grasp it as the subject that emerges after the democratic rupture of political modernity (Rancière 2010), the subject that is at once the bearer of *constituent* and *constituted* power (Kalyvas 2005).

I should thusly stress that I don't speak of the people in the "traditional", Hobbesian sense, a people tied to a leader or a concrete "common will", a people unified and homogeneous, with a collective sense of destiny and so on, a people that is already there as we speak of it. After all, contemporary political theory has shown that what we call "the people" never had such a concrete referent/form and fixed specific attributes (Agamben 1998: 177), except when it is taken in an absolute sense and it is attached to a biopolitical referent (e.g. the people of the extremist xenophobic right: people/nation/blood/race). So, the people could be better grasped as an ever present subject/possibility, elusive and paradoxical in the sense that the very thing that "grounds" it, might also be "the thing that renders it impossible"[4]. In that sense, Jacques Rancière suggests that the people signifies the inscription of the "part of those who have no part"; the inscription of the excluded, the "uncounted", who break with the existing order and claim their inclusion; the particularity that speaks and acts in the name of "the people", identifying itself with the whole of the community (Rancière 2010: 33-34, 85). The people thus can be seen as the specific subject of politics, where "*politics*" as opposed to "*police"* is understood as a disruptive force/process which, through the constitution of egalitarian discourses, puts into question established identities and norms, disturbs fixity and re-opens the field of contestation (Rancière 2010: 36-37). Understood in this sense, the people becomes "a political category" par excellence: "not (…) a datum of the social structure (…) not a given group, but an act of institution that creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements" (Laclau 2005: 224).

In such an understanding of the people also lies what Rancière (2006) calls the "scandal of democracy", which is exactly what seems to disturb today's antipopulist technocratic elites, that still call upon the Saint-Simonian dream of an apolitical "administration of things": "that [in Democracy] the power belongs to those who have no qualification to rule" (Rancière 2011: 3). This suppression — of "the people" as constituent power— is clearly revealed in the dominant discourse, when in the Greek (but also European) context, as I will try to show in what follows.

[4] I am paraphrasing Rancière here, who wonders "whether that which 'grounds' politics is, in fact, not also the thing that renders it impossible" (Rancière 2010: 86-87).

Post-democracy (and the spectre of populism)

"Post-democracy" is a term initially coined by Jacques Rancière (1995) and consolidated in mainstream academic research through the elaborations of Colin Crouch (2004) and Chantal Mouffe (2005), among others. It designates a series of *tendencies* that mark a passage of modern developed democracies to norms and practices that are resemblant to pre-democratic rule (Crouch 2004: 6). So, while all the formal institutions of democracy remain in place, the centers of political decision and the very energy of political antagonism, have gradually moved to somewhere else. The temple of democratic decision making isn't anymore the parliament, nor is the "sovereign people" the cornerstone of the polity's legitimization. The parliament is still there, it typically functions, but there are myriads of non-democratically controlled institutions, formal or informal, that effectively take part or seriously influence decision making, while the media and the various "experts" have acquired a very powerful role. As for the moment that the electorate is called upon to choose its representatives, "while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams" (Crouch 2004: 4). And it gets even more complex if we turn our gaze from the national to the various international or supranational institutions. From the notorious rating agencies and the IMF to the EU and large multinational corporations —what Crouch prefers to call "the firm" or "the giant firm" (Crouch 2011)— and financial capital, political decision is repeatedly filtered, influenced and many times altered, leading in several cases democratically elected governments to impose the very opposite policies to the ones they promised, fueling in this way frustration and political cynicism.

> "Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimation of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests" (Rancière 1999: 102).

It is in this context that "populism" becomes part of the (post-democratic) story. Since populism's main operation is the discursive construction

and interpellation of "the people" in opposition to the "power bloc" (Laclau 2005), while post-democracy's aim is to make "the people" disappear (Rancière 2006: 80, Feinberg 2008: 61-66), the confrontation between post-democracy and populism comes rather natural. As Serge Halimi has recently pointed out, "[a]nyone who criticizes the privileges of the oligarchy, the growing speculation of the leading classes, the gifts to the banks, market liberalization, cuts on wages with the pretext of competitiveness, is denounced as 'populist' who 'plays the game of extreme right'" (Halimi 2011). Again, Rancière had already highlighted that populism can be seen today as the "convenient name" under which the denunciation and discrediting of alternatives legitimizes the claim of economic and political elites to "govern without the people", "to govern without politics" (Rancière 2006: 80). Halimi and Rancière's concerns are reflected in a growing literature on the stakes of European democracy in front of the crisis. Heavyweight intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Étienne Balibar have also voiced their concern on Europe's post-democratic trajectory, the absence of solidarity amongst EU members and a growing "democratic deficit" that can bid popular sovereignty farewell (Balibar 2010 and 2011, Beck 2011, Habermas 2011a and 2011b). In their accounts the role of popular representation and popular participation acquires a central position in the envisaging of a break with the post-democratic regime and a radical-democratic way out of the crisis.

But instead of more popular involvement, the European elites as we have seen have chosen less and less popular involvement and deliberation. The emphatic dismissal of "populism" by the European elites[5] seems to confirm the suspicion of Ernesto Laclau, expressed in 2005, that this rejection entails "the dismissal of politics *tout court*", and "the assertion that the management of community is a concern of an administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a 'good' community is" (Laclau 2005: x). "Proper knowledge" or "expertise" can be seen here as metonymies of the pre-democratic logic of the *arkhè*, that entails a "'normal' distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it" (see Rancière 2010: 30-31). Today, the logic of the *arkhè* can be better described as post-political technocracy or "expertocracy", to remember Karl Bracher's (1964) timely insights back in the 1960s.

[5] The two top European officials, Herman Van Rompuy and Manuel Barroso, rarely miss the chance to stress that the arch-enemy of today's Europe is "populism" (Van Rompuy in Stabenow 2010, Barroso in Cendrowicz 2012).

I shall now turn to further investigate the suspicion/hypothesis of Laclau on the grounds of Europe's most prominent biopolitical laboratory nowadays: Greece.

Greece in the 1990s and the 2000s: enter post-democracy

Greece probably shows its first clear signs of post-democratic transfomation somewhere in the mid-nineties. The two major political parties, which have enjoyed the support of more than the 80% of the electorate, had by then converged to such a point that the center-right Nea Democratia was often accusing the center-left PASOK of having "stolen" its programme (Bratakos 2002: 681). Both political forces claimed to be "modernizers" and rallied for consensual politics beyond right and left, beyond "extremes", and towards a society fully reconciled and devoid of divisions and internal antagonisms. In this consensual paradigm the excesses of political passions and popular identifications around specific centres (be it a leader, a common idea or a common cause) are abandoned —if not discredited— to give place to economic pragmatism, the daily administration of everyday lives and an almost sacralised and unfailing (economic) growth. References to "the people" are considered outdated and "populist" and are soon replaced by more neutral terms, like "civil society", the "middle ground", the "citizen", the "individual", and so on.

Indeed *antipopulism* soon acquires a prominent place in the discursive repertoire of both ND and PASOK from the 1990s onwards. For Costas Simitis (leader of PASOK and prime minister of Greece 1996-2004) antipopulism was a *sine qua non* for his project of "modernization" already by the late 1980s[6], while for his main rival, Costas Karamanlis (leader of ND and prime minister of Greece 2004-2009), "populism" also formed the "constitutive outside" of his political project based on the so-called "middle ground", launched in the late 1990s. A discourse of "third-way" national optimism flooded the public space after the mid-nineties and is most evident in the very titles of the books of the then prime minister, Costas Simitis: terms like "powerful Greece", "pow-

[6] Considering the populist past of PASOK under the leadership of Andreas Papandreou (1974-1996) Christos Lyrintzis describes the transition under Simitis as a passage "from populism to modernization" (Lyrintzis 2005: 249-252).

erful society", "creative Greece", along with "good governance" and so on, acquire here the role of key signifiers. This peculiar upward spiral of (verbal) modernizing optimism would reach its peak when Greece entered the Eurozone in 2000 and then hosted the Olympic Games in 2004. The country was at last seen as a fully integrated member of the group of the most developed and powerful states of Europe, worthy of its place in the Euro area and ready to declare its own liberal "end of history".

But still, this is not all. It is not only the emphasis on consensual politics and apolitical pragmatism that paint the picture here. All the other features described by theorists of post-democracy are here too. In the absence of effective alternatives and political choice(s), expert management (Ladi 2005) and economic calculation constituted the dominant paradigm of governance. And since political/programmatic differences were on a sharp decline, experts of communication were also brought to the fore, so that political antagonism could migrate and be expressed at the terrain of the spectacle. Moreover, experts from the field of finance and economics acquired a prominent place since the field of the economy already reigned supreme over that of politics; central bankers and professional academics were here to guarantee that political parties are relying on the knowledge and expertise of the best technocrats in pursuing the most effective administration of things.

But as Chantal Mouffe has shown, political antagonism can be suppressed but not ever fully eliminated. It can always manifest itself elsewhere (Mouffe 2005b). So, as in other European countries, suppressed antagonism initially translated into an "increasing moralization of political discourse" (Mouffe 2005b: 57). Since there is only one politics that is possible, and since there is no alternative, it is a matter of a better, more virtuous political subject/manager to implement the measures that are considered to be objectively necessary. It comes as no surprise then that one of the main slogans of the ND opposition against the Prime Minister Costas Simitis in the late 1990s and early 2000s was that he was the "archbishop of corruption". Not surprisingly, ND would then claim that it purported to *continue* on the same track of reforms, but would now do so with "humbleness", "modesty" and through the establishment of a broad "consensus". Actually this became the main motto of Costas Karamanlis' government as soon as he became Prime Minister in 2004: "with humbleness and modesty".

Interestingly enough, the vast majority of the Greek society (often more than 80% of the voters) consented to this model and stayed attached to the two

major parties, ND and PASOK, even after their post-democratic shift during the 1990s. Hence, to understand their long-lasting attachment to those parties, one should count in the widespread culture of an individualist hedonistic cynicism that characterized the Greek political culture from the 1990s onwards (Demertzis 1994 and 1997, Diamandouros 1994). In other words, citizens remained attached to PASOK and ND since they were more or less reconciled with the current condition, subject to a hegemonic post-political cynicism, and had given up on any possible radical change, or they simply didn't care.

Still, it wasn't a smooth ride all the way. The prevailing post-political consensus eventually triggered a variety of populist reactions in the early 2000s (varying from the extreme and religious right to the radical left) which attempted to present themselves as true political alternatives to a dead-end path, claiming to represent the "voice of the people". Although at times nationalist and xenophobic, these movements were still posing a legitimate claim: they asked for "more democracy" and for power to be returned to the now disempowered "people"[7]. Mainstream parties and a large part of the Greek intellectual community didn't bother to engage in a meaningful political debate around the causes of the populist emergences and the occasional uncontrolled explosions of collective *pathos*[8]. Their stubborn

[7] We should remember here that while "[p]opulist movements are widely regarded, especially in Europe and Latin America, as threats to democracy […] [they] explicitly claim to be true democrats, setting out to reclaim power for the people" (Canovan 2004: 244).

[8] There are at least five significant moments/incidents that stand out and disturb "politics as usual" in that period: (1) The massive and rather heteroclite rallies for the capture of the outlaw in Turkey leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Otsalan in 1999 (see Pantazopoulos 2002). (2) The massive rallies ("laosynakseis") organized by the Greek Orthodox Church as a reaction to the exclusion of religion from identity cards in 2000. It was later announced that the Church had managed to gather 3,008,901 signatures asking for a referendum on the optional inclusion of religion in Greek identity cards (Stavrakakis 2005). (3) The emergence of Giorgos Karatzaferis and his party LAOS (that actually means "the people" in Greek) in 2000, introducing in the Greek political mainstream a Le Pen-like national-populist mobilization with bold xenophobic characteristics (Ellinas 2012). (4) The massive and at times violent (against immigrants, especially Albanians) gatherings and celebrations at the centre of big cities after Greece had won the European Football Championship in 2004 (Karakostaki 2005). In a completely different context, one could add here (5) the massive revolt of the Greek youth in December 2008 after the assassination of a fifteen year old kid in central Athens by a police officer (Kalyvas 2010).

antipopulist moral condemnation of almost any social mobilization or reaction and any political opposition as irrational "populism" and "nationalism" seemed to prove antipopulism to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, *condemning the product of its suppression*.

Crisis-ridden Greece: post-democracy at the extremes?

The unexpected breakdown of 2010 shook existing alliances, subjective identities, loyalties and social compromises and initiated a radical dislocation of the political system. The biopolitical paradigm would soon violently shift from individualist and hedonistic cynicism to what we could call "punitive asceticism" (see Stavrakakis 2012: 2299). "We lived beyond our means", "we consumed more than we produced", "we wanted more than we could afford", "the party is over", "we all ate the money together"[9]: these were some of the most characteristic mottos of the dominant discourse in its effort to spread a feeling of collective blame and guilt. The "irresponsible populism" of the past decades that "flattered the people" with false promises was simultaneously identified as the root of this collective pathology. One can immediately point out here the European elites' lack of imagination, since these were the exact same discursive devices that were also used in the other countries of the European periphery that were struck by the crisis. Take for example the statement "we all partied" by the Irish Finance Minister Brian Lenihan (2010), or an article that went viral in the Cyprus media as soon as the crisis broke out, entitled "The party is over"[10]. Similar formulations have also flooded the public spheres in Portugal, Spain and Italy.

Enter the crisis

But let's step back a few months first to re-articulate the choreography of events around the Greek crisis from the beginning. In October 2009 Greece held what would prove its most critical national elections after the

[9] This last one coming from the then vice president of the government, Theodoros Pangalos.

[10] The article that is written in the Cypriot idiom was also widely reproduced in the Greek media. See http://www.tovima.gr/finance/article/?aid=506358 [in Greek].

fall of the colonel's Junta in 1974. In a society stressed by the various crisis narratives and dismal predictions that followed the global financial breakdown of 2008, PASOK won the elections, gaining a rather impressive share of the vote, building its campaign around key signifiers such as a "better tomorrow", "a just society", "a new reborn and optimist Greece", "green growth", and so on. One of its main promises was a brave redistribution of wealth and a new fairer taxation system in favour of the lower and middle social strata. The then government of ND would claim that PASOK's programme was "deeply populist", demagogic and thus unattainable, since "structural adjustments" and "fiscal austerity" were needed to avert a looming recession. George Papandreou's now infamous answer was that "We have the money". It was the same George Papandreou some months later that, as the Greek prime minister would announce to the Greek people that, not only "we did not have the money", but also that the country was standing on the verge of a complete economic collapse. The EU and the IMF were called to the rescue and the rest is more or less already history (Fouskas and Dimoulas 2012). The bail-out agreement offered to Greece some days later would be publicly presented as *the only viable* and indisputable solution to the country's tragic situation. It was the turn of ND now —as the opposition— to react fiercely against the draconian austerity measures, but the government's response was that this was the only way to avoid a national destruction, rendering ND's disagreement *populist* and ultimately *anti-patriotic*.

In the government's discourse a rather simplistic schema soon appeared, employing now a re-signification of patriotism: Greece was under attack by the "speculative markets" and thus all Greeks should stand together and endure the assault by implementing a serious of harsh though *necessary* measures in order for the country to survive. This schema appears at first to be populist, or even nationalist-populist since it pitted the Greek people as nation against an exterior Other (the "markets", the "speculators"). Nevertheless, if one takes a closer look, s/he shall find that this discourse operated according to what Laclau and Mouffe call the "logic of difference" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), or in terms of what Rancière calls the logic of "police" (Rancière 2010: 36-37). It sought to absorb any division or conflict within the Greek society in a greater antagonism with what was exterior to the Greek people/nation. It thus performed a contradictory double gesture: *first*, it overlooked any division within the Greek people/society, since it supposed that despite the particular differences the Greek people could and

should be united against what appeared to be an attack from outside the nation (from the "speculators"); and *second*, it treated differentially the particular categories of the population, not by absorbing their demands, but by isolating, targeting and disarming each category through a top-down diffusion of stigmatization and *blame*. At first public sector employees where targeted for not being productive enough, then the so-called "closed professions" for distorting antagonism, then the public education system for not being competitive and connected to the market's needs, and so on. That would (and initially did) avert the formation of broader alliances and fronts consisting of heterogeneous social subjects —that is on the axis of equivalence— by turning the one category/class against the other.

The administration of the crisis was thus elevated to the status of the *ultimate national issue*, and the then government of PASOK would frequently stress that what was needed was a new "genuine patriotism" (see Papandreou 2011). Anyone that opposed the austerity agenda and the so called "troika"[11] was now simultaneously branded "*populist*" or an "*anti-patriot*". Discussion around possible alternatives was systematically suppressed, and when it was brought up it would immediately deteriorated in a monologue around mere economic necessity[12]. An undeclared "state of emergency" (Agamben 2005) would cast ever since its shadow over any possible alternative management of the crisis, paving the way for all kinds of deviations from democratic "normality" (the continuous violation of the Constitution, the effective suspension of social welfare and civil rights, assaults on freedom of speech and a unprecedented rise in police brutality paint the picture of an authoritarian shift in late post-democratic Greece).

[11] By the name "troika" goes the ad hoc mechanism responsible for supervising the policies that were implemented in Greece after the first bail-out agreement that is comprised of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

[12] To give just a hint of how restrictive the debate around the possible alternatives has become in Greece during the last years, the issue of exiting the euro zone is illustrative. The possiblility of a "Grexit" isn't put forth by any parliamentary political party since it has been equated to quasi hybris. At the same time one finds a huge relevant discussion in international academic and journalist circles that in Greece no one dares to open – not even the radical left opposition – except marginal political forces, few economists and intellectuals.

Social reactions and pressures from the EU

By the spring of 2011 the Greek society would already look like a cauldron ready to explode (Kouvelakis 2011). An unprecedented GDP contraction, massive salary and pension cuts, along with soaring unemployment painted the picture of a society on the verge of humanitarian crisis and a political system before major realignment. Naturally enough, the months that followed the first austerity package in 2010 witnessed various forms of massive collective action and mobilizations against the politics of austerity. From numerous national strikes and mass demonstrations, to solidarity movements, public building occupations and encampments, one could easily see that the measures taken by the government did not enjoy popular consent. After all they were clearly ineffective. Probably the most salient movement of that period —and certainly the most massive—, a movement that embraced a vast multiplicity of individuals and collectivities, was the one of the so-called *aganaktismenoi* that followed the demonstrations against austerity of the namesake "*Indignados*" in Spain (May 2011). The *aganaktismenoi* can be seen here as a democratic grass-roots populist movement. It articulated a multiplicity of demands and subjects that were demonstrating against the status quo in the name of "the people". In Rancièrian terms, the *aganaktismenoi* can be seen as a partial incarnation of "the people": the outcasts of the crisis that were claiming an equal part, the ones without a voice that wanted to be heard (see Prentoulis and Thomassen 2012, Katsambekis 2014). So, how did the Greek and European elites react, responding to massive social unrest?

With society boiling and the Greek opposition (ND) seeming unwilling to explicitly back-up the austerity programme, the EU was rather worried. A few days after the first impressive gathering of the *aganaktismenoi* outside the Greek parliament the Greek party leaders would meet to discuss a possible agreement on a new set of harsh austerity measures to be passed by the government. After their failure to reach an agreement the following statement appeared and was widely reproduced in the Greek and international media:

> "[The Commission] regrets the failure of Greek party leaders to reach consensus on economic adjustment to overcome the current debt crisis (...) We expect that the efforts towards a cross-party agree-

> ment to support the EU-IMF programme will continue. An agreement has to be found soon. Time is running out (...) It is essential for the recovery of the Greek economy that all Greek parties, including the opposition parties, adopt a constructive attitude and support the EU-IMF programme and its implementation (...) The magnitude of the challenge is a test to the Greek society as a whole and therefore requires a contribution by all parties and all citizens" (*The Telegraph* 2011).

These are the words of EU economic affairs commissioner, Olli Rehn. What Rehn practically stresses here is that dispute and disagreement on the policies which should be followed on the occasion of Greece's crisis is *not desirable* and might even be *dangerous* for the very country's future. The Greek party leaders should thus urgently reach a consensus setting aside their varying views and political ideologies because, when dealing with a crisis as critical as this one, the choices are very limited, if not absent. Indeed, what is striking in this announcement is its insistence on eliminating any political opposition in the country's political landscape (which, of course, means the elimination of politics *tout court*). It calls for consensus and cross-party agreement and emphatically repeats that "*all* Greek parties, including the opposition parties" should consent to what is presented as "constructive attitude". It is clear that the moment of "consensus", that usually appeared in the Commission's discourse as advice or wishful thinking, now appears as *row blackmail*: "either you all consent, or you do not see another installment and you go bankrupt". That is the rationale behind these words, clearly reflected in the alarming "*time is running out*". Support of the EU-IMF programme, that by then already malfunctioned, appears as *necessary*, and "consensus" as the only "constructive attitude", while disagreement between political parties is effectively suppressed.

What is immediately marginalized in such logic is not only political disagreement as such, but also the very possibility of "the people" as electorate to express their disagreement through their democratically elected representatives. If every political party in the parliament perforce agrees on the same plan and the same policies that are presented as an objective "necessity" —and not as a political choice among other possible ones— then, along with disagreement, "the people" vanishes too, as its choices are effectively cancelled. It doesn't matter if one votes for left-wing or right-wing

parties, since —when properly disciplined by the EU and the IMF— they will probably both implement the same programme.

The European Commission's demand that all Greek political parties consent on the bailout terms and pledge to continue on the same track, came a few days after the Eurogroup required that the Greek opposition should provide written commitment to the country's bailout plan for the flow of emergency borrowing to continue. Even the German chancellor, Angela Merkel herself, would personally put pressure on the then Greek opposition leader, Antonis Samaras, to back-up the austerity package, and thus "fulfil [his] historic responsibilities" (Hewitt 2011). At the same time, in Greece, voices were heard in the mainstream media and among pro-austerity MP's calling the politicians to step aside and give their place to the "technocrats". The managing-editor of one of Greece's leading newspapers would directly ask of the politicians

> "to step aside for a while, and give place to *those who know* practical solutions to do the job (...) Besides, today's politicians can become the best advisors on how a serious technocrat can manage the great obstacles before the recovery of the country: the partisan mechanisms, the trade unionists, the media and the interests" (Papachelas 2011, my emphasis).

According to this widespread view, the "technocrats" appear as "those who know better", those who are "serious", while anything that entails elements of collective democratic practices, like political parties or the trade unions, are considered as "obstacles" that stand in the way of salvation and recovery.

Expressions of this newfound post-political cynicism would yet again be revealed when the then Greek Prime Minister, George Papandreou, expressed his intention to give "voice to the people" and call for a referendum on the new EU-IMF bailout deal on October 2011. The reaction of the "markets" was immediate as stock markets plunged, causing waves of anxiety among European leaders. The Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt in true Thatcherite style wondered: "I truly fail to understand what Greece intends to have a referendum about. Are there any real options?"[13] Bildt's tweet reflected what

[13] Carl Bildt's twitter page: https://twitter.com/carlbildt/status/131148313528512512 [accessed March 2013].

almost every European leader was thinking at the time: "how can a prime minister want the opinion of the people in such troubled times of crisis?" The "people" are seen again as ignorant masses and as such bound to make the wrong choices, echoing what Balibar (1997) had so eloquently described as "fear of the masses", which is characteristic of past centuries. A few days after Papandreou's announcement, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy would publicly humiliate him at the G20 summit in Cannes and force him to cancel the referendum. Now heavy pressure was put on the Greek opposition and ND that was forced to accept and support the new loan agreement. So, despite ND's first, rather superficial, disagreements to the bail-out plan the two then major political parties reached a consensus around what was described as a "responsible attitude for the nation".

The Commission's pleas for consensus would then be fully realized as the two parties, PASOK and ND, along with the smaller far-right party LAOS, would form a coalition government under the ex-central banker, unelected Prime Minister Lucas Papademos. Now, the already blurred divide between the mainstream centre-left and centre-right would completely disappear. It is indeed rather striking in this case that the European Union strongly encouraged such a political alliance with a xenophobic extreme right party —very often also described as populist—, while some years earlier it imposed diplomatic sanctions on a member state, namely Austria, in response to the participation of Jörg Haider's extreme right-wing populist FPÖ (Freedom Party) in the Austrian government. A conclusion to be drawn here is that post-democracy's emphasis on economic necessity is likely to translate into a cynical "political pragmatism" that is particularly dangerous for democracy and even leads to coalitions with the populist "devil".

Indeed, LAOS is a political party that belongs to the broader family of far-right xenophobic neopopulist parties in Europe (see Mudde 2007), a political party that since its establishment in September 2000 was dismissed as either "extremist" or "populist", even "neo-fascist" by mainstream political parties. And yet it became overnight a "reliable political partner" and a "responsible ally", as long as it would support the austerity agenda. It seems here that 'populism' appears to be dangerous (for the "antipopulist" elites) only under certain conditions: *only as long as it poses a substantial threat to the established power bloc*. As long as it is no longer considered to be an opposing political force, a "threat" that challenges a given constellation of power, it can become an equal and "responsible" ally.

It was around the same days that the EU encouraged the formation of a similar government in Italy under the also unelected technocrat Mario Monti[14]. As the European and international press described it, the EU saw these governments as the best way to "*calm the markets*" (*Guardian* 2011) that now appeared as quasi living entities: they worried, they issued warnings, they expressed their dissatisfaction with current policies, and so on (Žižek 2012: 14). The elevation of the markets' logic to an ultimate criterion that supplants popular sovereignty —especially in times of crisis— was described by Colin Crouch ten years ago on the occasion of the American presidential elections in 2000

> "where there was almost irrefutable evidence of serious ballot-rigging in Florida, a result which was decisive to the victory of George W. Bush, the brother of the state's governor. Apart from some demonstrations among Black Americans, there were very few expressions of outrage at tampering with the democratic process. The prevailing mood seemed to be that achieving an outcome —any outcome— was important to restore confidence to the stock markets, and that was more important than ensuring that the verdict of the majority was truly discovered" (Crouch 2004: 2).

The difference between the American elections of 2000 and the imposition of the Papademos government in Greece is that, while in the first case popular reaction was only marginal and halfhearted, in the second case popular reaction was already at a historic high with hundreds of thousands rallying and camping in the streets and squares all over Greece for months. The cynical reaction of the Greek political elite to the mobilizations was again graphically illustrated in the words of the vice president of the government, Theodoros Pagalos, who described the protesters as "either fascists, either communists, or just *assholes*" (sic)[15].

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[14] In the case of Italy, the populist boogieman for Europe is Beppe Grillo and the Five Star Movement that rejects the established political system and claims power to be given back to the people. It will be really interesting to see what happens if in the future Grillo changes his mind and compromises with the austerity agenda. Wouldn't he then simultaneously be branded a "responsible" leader and a "reliable" European ally?

[15] Interview for Canal 5, in November 30, 2011.

The retreat from referendum in Greece and the immediate imposition of technocratic governments under unelected "experts" in Greece and Italy —acts that clearly suspended democratic politics— soon sounded the alarm among high-profile European intellectuals. One of the first to react across a rather numb European public sphere was Jürgen Habermas, who noted that

> "the Greek disaster should act as a warning against the post-democratic strategy adopted by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. The concentration of power in the hands of an inner circle of government leaders who impose their agreements on national parliaments is not the way forward" (Habermas 2011a).

A few days later he would again express his concern that the European project would transform "into its opposite. The first transnational democracy would become an especially effective, because disguised, arrangement for exercising a kind of post-democratic rule" (Habermas 2011b).

The formation of the coalition government under Papademos would further sharpen post-democratic tendencies within the Greek political system, leading it to new (antidemocratic) extremes. The then minister of education Anna Diamantopoulou proposed that the government of technocrats under Papademos "should (…) become one of national salvation; without time limits, with the possibility to reshuffle, *consisting of few politicians and the best [aristoi] of the Greeks*". And even if that could not be achieved, Diamantopoulou insisted that "[t]he next government, whatever the elections result might be, should be one of programmatic consensus and with a prime minister like Papademos (…) Conducting national elections soon (…) would be a temporary victory of populism, of the anti-reformist forces which are gathering forces" (Diamantopoulou 2012, my emphasis).

What is evident in public interventions like the above mentioned —coming from highly influential individuals and strongly supported among MPs and ministers at the time— is at first a distrust of the democratic electoral process and second what we have referred to as the "*logic of the arkhè*" (Rancière 2010: 27-44). In this case we do not just slip beyond democracy, but we are drawn back to pre-democratic logics. Interestingly enough, Diamantopoulou calls upon one of the most prominent anti-democratic historical figures, Plato, to justify her call for this new aristocracy that

she describes as the most suitable solution for Greece. In her view, popular sovereignty and democratic elections must be suspended and the "*aristoi*" should take charge in order to solve the country's problems. It seems that both "post-democracy" and "elitism" would be just euphemisms for what we are truly facing in *aristocratic* claims to power like this one.

The elections of 2012 and the rise of the (populist) radical left

Despite the various attempts of the Papademos government to declare itself a government of "national salvation" and continue functioning without time limits, national elections were held in May 2012. Against the "antipopulist" hysteria (or maybe partly because of it) and a prevailing xenophobic agenda put forth by both PASOK and ND, a Greek radical left coalition, SYRIZA[16], previously just struggling to enter the parliament, managed to persuade and affectively mobilize a noteworthy part of the voters. By addressing "the people", through a discourse which articulated a plurality of demands against the local and European elites and their policies of extreme austerity, a discourse that was indeed a populist one (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), SYRIZA received an impressive 16.78% of the vote and more than tripled its power. These numbers would rise even more in the elections of June 2012, where SYRIZA got 26.89% of the vote continuing its impressive upward dynamic.

This dynamic did not come out of the blue. SYRIZA was probably the only party that had engaged with the demands of the *aganaktismenoi* and met them out in the streets. Its programme, embracing most of the demands of the popular movements, was based on an alternative mixture of policies involving a radical break with the politics of austerity. SYRIZA called for a broad coalition (a "left front") that would lead to a "government of the Left" bold enough to annul the "Memorandum(s)", while supporting the country's place within the Eurozone (but "not at all social cost"), raise taxa-

[16] SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) was initially founded as an electoral coalition of radical left political parties and extra-parliamentarian organizations in 2004. Its main constituent, Synaspismos (founded in 1992), originates in the Greek eurocommunist tradition, which acquired a distinct presence following a major split in the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in 1968. SYRIZA dissolved its participating constituents and became a unified party in July 2013.

tion on big business, put the banking sector under public control, call a moratorium on debt repayment until Greek society gets back on its feet, scrap salary cuts and emergency taxes. Such claims were again stigmatized by the parties supporting austerity, European officials and media as outrageously populist and unattainable, even unthinkable; as a policy that would certainly lead the country out of the Eurozone, if not out of the EU altogether, and from there to a real economic and social hell.

Thus, as a reaction to SYRIZA's proposals, a quasi-apocalyptic discourse, marked by a strong antipopulist emphasis, was articulated mainly by ND, PASOK, and secondly by DIMAR[17] and a large part of mainstream media. It was often argued that if SYRIZA came to power and tried to implement its programme, Greece would face total economic and social destruction, it would default on its debt and the army would have to intervene to protect the banks, the super markets would be emptied by panicked citizens, it would be ostracized by the international community and face geopolitical insecurity, even the danger of a military coup and a new civil war. Both the impressive electoral results achieved by SYRIZA and the need to radically oppose it are explained by mainstream media and by the three parties supporting the governments formed after the June 2012 elections with recourse to its populist message, a message that is supposed to be as dangerous as it is mesmerizing.

In their effort to demonize SYRIZA's alternative project the mainstream parties and their organic intellectuals would now utilize what can be called "theory of the extremes", equating the radical left with the neo-Nazi extremism of the Golden Dawn[18], an openly neo-Nazi party that made it for the first time in the parliament with an impressive 6.92%. Bound by their post-democratic rejection of any disagreement they ended up legitimizing the most extremist far-right party that has ever entered the parliament in Greece's democratic history by equating it to a long standing demo-

[17] DIMAR (Democratic Left) is a pro-European reformist and moderate social-democratic party created by Fotis Kouvelis in 2010 from a split of Synaspismos (the main constituent of SYRIZA).

[18] The Golden Dawn in an extremist neo-Nazi party founded in 1985. It was a fringe political party that until the 2012 elections never achieved to enter the parliament. It gained momentum right after the Papademos government was appointed and recorded its first peak in the opinion polls after the second "memorandum" was voted in the Greek parliament (see Mavris 2013).

cratic political force of the left. It seems then that "[t]he categorization of the extreme right as 'populist'" aimed "above all [to] (…) discredit both the left and the popular classes themselves" (Marlière 2013, see also Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2013).

Concluding remarks

As I tried to show, the *antipopulist* "state of exception" that the Greek and European political elites have imposed in the last years in their effort to implement a series of harsh and unpopular austerity measures, has led to the articulation of a political discourse that rejects disagreement and democratic dissent as virtually harmful to the "nation's salvation". In this context, popular will was effectively trampled in the name of "economic necessity" and almost any opposition was simultaneously branded "populist" and sometimes "anti-patriotic". Even national elections were dismissed by top ministers of the interim government as dangerous "populism" and the unelected "*aristoi*" were called to the rescue of the country. Their view was that the government of technocrats should extend its life for as long as it was necessary for the country to exit the crisis. In their effort to police and discipline the public sphere the media were consequently flooded with versions of the Thatcherite "*there is no alternative*" doctrine, which sought to impose an "emergency consensus".

But the discourse of "consensus" (Rancière 1999: 95-121) isn't worth the name, since it inevitably creates new frontiers (Mouffe 2005a). In its paradoxical denial of cleavages and divisions it establishes new ones that often manifest in post-political, if not anti-political terrains. Hence, "consensus" on the austerity agenda becomes the equivalent of common sense, a synonym for rationality, thus rendering any critical voice ultimately irrational and nonsensical. In this context, today's battle as often represented by European politicians and the hegemonic media "is one between those 'responsible' forces advocating and enforcing austerity and those 'irresponsible' ones risking debt increases and public spending" (Stavrakakis 2012: 2289). Disagreement and critique in these terms cannot be directly recognized and legitimized in public debate, since the prevailing neoliberal *doxa* effectively denies any alternative, rendering it a priori "irresponsible", "populist" or simply unattainable. Hence anyone that speaks in the name of, or calls upon "the people" and their dissent can be easily dismissed as an "irre-

sponsible 'populist'" or a mere "demagogue", and certainly "irrational". Indeed the political battle in Greece as described by the governing elites and the dominant media in the past few years is articulated across these lines and can be put as simple as that: "*enlightened rationalism* versus *destructive populism*"[19]. This restrictive dualism leaves no place for meaningful political debate and disagreement and could ultimately fuel alarming reactions against both democracy and the European project.

"Antipopulism" emerges in this way as a distinct discursive repertoire, or even a "political weapon" aiming at the discrediting of disagreement and the marginalization of "the people" and the democratic dissent. In this sense, antipopulism constitutes an under-researched area within the field of populism and democracy that needs to be dealt with in its own right. To be more precise, in the Greek context, antipopulism operated as a proper Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 1971) for the governing elites; as a way to discipline a public sphere on the lookout for alternatives and constantly seeking a better way out of the socio-economic impasse. And indeed, as I have shown, European institutions have their own part in this antipopulist post-democratic frenzy. As a result the people are caught in a deadlock: on the one hand, there is an austerity agenda which is only bound to inflict more pain on the already aching social body. On the other hand, the available anti-austerity alternatives are effectively excluded from the public sphere, stigmatized as "destructive populism". But by not allowing for popular dissent to manifest itself in a political way through an open and agonistic public sphere (Mouffe 2005c), and by demonizing any anti-austerity or post-capitalist alternative, the "emergency consensus" is pushing frustrated subjects to radically oppose the political system and express themselves in truly radical or even extremist ways. It is in this context that we should assess both the emergence of new terrorism, the impressive rise of the once fringe neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn and the spread of violence. SYRIZA's dynamic should also be assessed within this context, as it articulates antisystemic (and indeed populist) elements in its discourse, but with the very crucial difference that —like the movement of the *aganaktismenoi*— SYRIZA seems to aim at the reinvigoration and radicalization of democracy and not its dismissal.

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[19] This formulation belongs to the former minister of health and prominent PASOK MP Andreas Loverdos (2012) and is widely reproduced in the dominant media and among certain mainstream intellectuals.

Post-scriptum

We know that "democracy" is a name invented by its opponents to signify the chaos that the rule by the ignorant masses would entail. Could it be that today, with democracy (as a reference) and "democratic" rhetoric reigning unchallenged —in a world less and less democratic—, "populism" designates more or less the same fear? A new "fear of the masses"? Let's leave this as an open hypothesis for further investigation.

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Resumen

El propósito del artículo es investigar el "antipopulismo" como un repertorio discursivo diferenciado que marginaliza a "el pueblo" como la piedra angular legitimadora de la democracia. Luego de dar cuenta de la transición postdemocrática en curso en Grecia desde la mitad de los 90, ahondo en lo que puede describirse como la división ideológica-política "populismo/antipopulismo" tal como se ha manifestado en el sistema político griego, y también a nivel europeo, en los últimos años y especialmente en la crisis en curso. La principal hipótesis es que el "anti-populismo" puede ser visto como un aspecto crucial de la postdemocracia, introduciendo lo que puede ser descripto como un peculiar Aparato Ideológico del Estado en el sentido althusseriano; una manera de marginalizar el desacuerdo y los disensos democráticos y de disciplinar la esfera pública en una época dominada por la virtud tecnocrática, el conocimiento experto y los "consensos políticos".

Palabras clave

pueblo - populismo - antipopulismo - postdemocracia - Grecia

Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate "anti-populism" as a distinct discursive repertoire that marginalizes "the people" as the legitimizing cornerstone of democracy. After providing an account of the Greek post-democratic transition from the mid-nineties onwards, I will then delve into what could be described as the "populism/anti-populism" ideologico-political divide, as it manifests in the Greek political system and also on the European level during the past few years, and especially within the ongoing crisis. The main hypothesis is that "anti-populism" can be seen as a crucial aspect of post-democracy, introducing what could be described as a peculiar Ideological State Apparatus in the Althusserian sense; a way to marginalize disagreement and democratic dissensus and discipline a public sphere in an age dominated by technocratic virtue, expert knowledge and 'consensus politics'.

Key words

the people - populism - anti-populism - post-democracy - Greece