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Left-wing populism in the European periphery: the case of SYRIZA

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ABSTRACT Due to its electoral performance in the 2012 general elections, SYRIZA, a previously unknown Greek political formation of the radical left, gained unprecedented visibility within the European public sphere. How is this strong showing and the political message articulated by SYRIZA to be interpreted? Utilizing a discursive methodology, this paper puts to the test the two assumptions predominating in most available analyses, namely that SYRIZA articulates a populist rhetoric, that it constitutes a predominantly populist force; and, given the near-exclusive association of populism with extreme right-wing movements, that SYRIZA constitutes a populist danger for Europe. Our analysis concludes that SYRIZA's discourse is indeed a distinct articulation of left-wing populism. However, this by no means vindicates the second part of the prevailing wisdom: SYRIZA's portrayal as a dangerous force threatening fundamental European values. If, however, this is the case, then mainstream research orientations in the study of European populism may have to be reviewed.

Introduction

Due to its impressive electoral performance in the two general elections of May and June 2012, SYRIZA,¹ a previously unknown Greek political formation of the radical left, gained unprecedented visibility in a European public sphere anxiously following developments at one of the epicentres of its deep economic crisis. Within a very short period, SYRIZA managed to climb from 4.60% to 26.89% of the vote, performing an electoral leap rather unique in modern Greek, if not European, political history.² Hence, references to SYRIZA's dynamic and

the performance of its young leader, Alexis Tsipras, have become a constant theme in mainstream international media, from the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* to *Der Spiegel* and *CNN*, where Tsipras was presented as ‘Greece’s rising star.’³

How is this strong showing and the electoral appeal of the political message articulated by SYRIZA to be interpreted? And how is the challenge it poses to mainstream European policies to be assessed? The view that predominates in most analyses—both journalistic and academic, inside and outside Greece—is that SYRIZA constitutes a *populist* movement, articulating a *populist* rhetoric. For the *Guardian* reporter, Helena Smith, the leader of SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, is an ‘unabashed populist’⁴; in a similar vein, *Time* magazine follows Tsipras’s trajectory ‘from Communist Youth to anti-austerity populist,’⁵ while Joshua Chaffin, of the *Financial Times*, has maintained that ‘his populist tendencies suggest he was a keen student of [...] a corrupt era.’⁶ Indeed, the populist characterization of SYRIZA also seems to predominate among academic commentators. LSE Professor Kevin Featherstone has thus linked SYRIZA’s appeal to what Nikiforos Diamandouros has called the ‘underdog culture’: ‘Syriza is a manifestation of a deep-rooted Greek culture, the underdog culture of feeling threatened from outside. [...] [A culture that] is especially deep-rooted among the economically vulnerable who fear international competition and are ripe for *populist* leadership.’⁷

Given the near-exclusive association of populism with far-right, anti-European, economico-politically irresponsible and even extremist movements in the European context, this diagnosis of populism often extends into demonization, presenting SYRIZA’s challenge to neoliberal austerity policies as a *populist danger* for Europe and the European Union (EU). No wonder that in July 2012 *Der Spiegel* reserved a prominent place for Tsipras within ‘Europe’s Ten Most Dangerous Politicians’ precisely on those grounds: the subtitle indicating the overarching criterion of dangerousness in today’s Europe is revealing: ‘Reckless Rhetoric from Europe’s Populists.’⁸ And how else could it be, given that populism has been officially declared the main enemy of the EU establishment? Interestingly enough, back in May 2012, when *Time* magazine asked European Commission president Barroso ‘What concerns you most about Europe today?’ his answer was articulated along the same lines: ‘Probably the rise of some populist movements in the extremes of the political spectrum.’⁹ Driven by similar concerns and highlighting the lack of ‘clarity of purpose’ marking SYRIZA’s (populist) leadership, Featherstone also seemed very worried when asked to comment on the possibility of SYRIZA taking power: ‘If Syriza comes first, Europe should be very afraid: my expectation is that ... we would have chaos [...] There would be huge instability and uncertainty on international financial markets and frenzy [among EU leaders].’¹⁰

In this essay, we attempt to test this prevailing (journalistic as well as academic) assumption according to which SYRIZA constitutes a *populist* force. This issue cannot be adequately discussed and no consistent ‘verdict’ can be reached without a clear formulation of criteria, without, that is to say, a *rigorous theory of*

populism. In most available accounts, both journalistic and academic, the label ‘populist’ is applied in a manner that takes its meaning for granted and fails to provide any concrete and/or persuasive justification for its use. This is not the case only with regard to Tsipras and SYRIZA, but a systemic feature of the public debate around populism internationally. Surprisingly enough, it is also typical of the discussion around *Chavismo* in Venezuela.¹¹ Indeed—just as with Tsipras—‘many scholars, journalists and policy makers use the word populist to describe Chavez and his movement,’ however, ‘none of these observers really clarify the meaning of this term or why it applies to Chavez.’¹² We will claim that it is in discourse theory, in the analyses of populism initiated by the so-called Essex School,¹³ that one can locate the most methodologically consistent and theoretically supported formulation of such criteria; as a result it is by utilizing a series of discourse-theoretical tools that we will conduct our analysis. This is a move that becomes increasingly appealing even to analysts operating within more mainstream research paradigms; in Kirk Hawkins’s words:

Ironically, for better guidance we must turn to the constructivists and discourse theorists [...] including especially those who study populist discourse [...]. Their work here is much more advanced and provides most of the descriptive material we need to create a better definition and measurement of populism.¹⁴

Hence, the main argument put forward and substantiated in this paper, utilizing such a discursive framework, will be that SYRIZA’s discourse is indeed a populist discourse, a distinct articulation of left-wing populism. However, this by no means vindicates the second part of the prevailing wisdom: the virtual equation of SYRIZA with extreme right-wing populism and its portrayal as a dangerous, evil force putting at risk fundamental European values. That is important, from our perspective, neither in terms of the isolated assessment of a Greek political party nor, of course, as a defence of SYRIZA, something falling outside the scope of this analytical intervention; it becomes important because if this is the case, then mainstream research orientations in the study of European populism may have to be reviewed urgently.

Theorizing Populism: minimal criteria

By revisiting the existing literature, one is indeed quickly led to the realization that populism is a notoriously elusive and slippery concept. Although the object of sustained interest from the 1960s onwards, it has puzzled and still puzzles even its more thorough students. A pessimistic Margaret Canovan begins an influential article published in 1982, in which she summarizes the research strategies developed for the study of populism up to that time, by asking whether it is at all possible to find a ‘reasonably solid core of agreed meaning’ behind all uses of the category.¹⁵ Thirty years later, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser introduce their edited volume on *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, by pointing that during this period ‘the number of scholars of populism has increased manifold and we are probably even further from a definitional consensus within

the scholarly community.’ Can we identify, after all, ‘a central core present in all the manifestations of populism?’¹⁶ It is here that a significant paradox arises, marking both projects, with all their differences and the 30 years standing between them. Ironically, both Canovan and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser express their admiration for Laclau’s theory of populism,¹⁷ only to subsequently dismiss it for one or the other (marginal) reason. Nevertheless, in both cases, Laclau’s insights are eventually vindicated, albeit in a rather indirect way. Canovan, for example, returned to the issue a few years later only to corroborate Laclau’s position by adopting herself what she called a ‘structural’ approach, with the word ‘structural’ being virtually homologous to Laclau’s ‘discursive’:

Populism in modern democracies is best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society. [...] They involve some kind of revolt against the established structure of power in the name of the people.¹⁸

As in Canovan’s case, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser purport to put forward a *minimal* definition of populism and end up with something very close to Laclau’s (especially if one excludes the many adjectives embellishing their initial formulation): a political/discursive logic that considers society ultimately separated between two groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’ and that argues that politics should be an expression of the will of the people.¹⁹

A discursive approach emerges thus as the underlying, yet all too often marginalized, kernel of a minimal definition of populism, a position it can claim to have consistently occupied for the last three to four decades. Initiated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, discourse theory, the so-called Essex School, combines a theoretically sophisticated grasping of the processes through which social meaning is articulated with an emphasis on the political and often antagonistic character that different discourses acquire through their articulation around distinct nodal points (such as ‘the people’) and their differentiation from other discourses in a bid to hegemonize the public sphere and to influence decision-making. Here, the term ‘discourse’ does not refer merely to words and ideas, but denotes all ‘systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects’²⁰ through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers.

In its diachronic development, discourse theory has introduced a series of analytical and methodological tools in an attempt to capture both the representational and the affective aspect of identity formation. All that has been the result of a commitment to interdisciplinarity, enlisting a multitude of theoretical resources (from semiotics and deconstruction to post-analytical philosophy and psychoanalysis) in the service of recasting the Gramscian theory of hegemony. It is also crucial to note that the last two decades have signalled a significant increase in the empirical applications of this supposedly over-theoretical framework.²¹ Interestingly enough, populism has, already since the 1970s, been one of the main analytical *foci* of Laclau’s discourse analysis,²² to

which he has recently devoted a monograph²³; it has also been a central priority in debates within the Essex School at large.²⁴

Approaches to populism elaborated within a discursive framework or influenced by it have contributed two operational criteria promising to resolve the aforementioned definitional/analytical impasses. In particular, they highlight the importance of ascertaining whether a given discursive practice under examination is: (a) articulated around the nodal point ‘the people’ or other (non-populist or anti-populist) nodal points (class, nation, liberty, nature, etc.) and (b) to what extent the representation of society it offers is predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two main blocs: the establishment, the power bloc, versus the underdog, ‘the people’ (in opposition to dominant political discourses asserting the continuity of the social fabric and prioritizing non-antagonistic technocratic solutions). Obviously, and this needs to be sufficiently stressed, both indications need to be present for a discourse or a movement to be classified as ‘populist;’ otherwise no useful differential classification can emerge to the extent that far too many political discourses could be associated with only one of the two without, of course, being populist.²⁵ Now, the process through which populist discourse is articulated typically involves the establishment of linkages between a series of initially heterogeneous unsatisfied demands, which enter into relations of equivalence thus forming a collective identity around ‘the people’ and the leadership representing them. The equivalential linkage sublimating heterogeneity is achieved through the opposition towards a common enemy (the power bloc, the establishment) accused of frustrating the satisfaction of these demands in the first place. Last but not least, the resulting populist discursive articulation can acquire a hegemonic appeal through processes of affective investment.

Through the utilization of such relatively formal criteria, this discursive orientation offers the possibility of developing rigorous typologies of populist movements, identities and discourses. Thus, the articulatory nature of populist discourses and the flexibility of populist ideological articulations, both underlined by discourse theorists, can illuminate the paradox of antinomic formulations of populist ideology, from socialist-populist hybrids to be found in contemporary Latin America to the newfound contemporary grassroots populist movements in Egypt, the European periphery (Greece, Spain and Beppe Grillo’s Italy) and the US (Occupy Wall Street), to the paradoxical elitist populism characteristic of extreme right-wing movements in Europe.²⁶

Such a flexible yet rigorous conception of populism can also illuminate what still remains a major point of contention in the ongoing debate: the ambiguous relation between populism and democracy.²⁷ On the one hand, the particular ways through which some populist movements articulate their claims to represent ‘the people’—relying on charismatic leaders, fuelled by resentment, virtually bypassing the institutional framework of representative democracy and/or often containing an illiberal, anti-rights and nationalist potential²⁸—need to be taken very seriously into account. And yet such a picture cannot exhaust the immense variety of populist articulations. Indeed, by representing excluded groups, by putting forward an egalitarian agenda, other types of populism—combining the

formal populist core with the legacy of the radical democratic tradition—can also be seen as an integral part of democratic politics, as a source for the renewal of democratic institutions.²⁹ From this point of view, the more Western democracies turn to despotic, oligarchic forms of *governance*,³⁰ the more is populism likely to figure as a suitable vehicle for a sought after redemocratization.

Historical and political background: Populism in post-authoritarian Greece, 1974–2013

Having established our provisional theoretical basis and being endowed with a sufficiently flexible set of minimal criteria for researching populism, we can now turn to our case study. Obviously, Greece is no stranger to populism. The country's recent history, following the democratic transition marking the end of a seven-year military dictatorship (1967–1974) has been marked by populist movements of all kinds, ranging from the popular-democratic left to the religious far-right. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the political stage was dominated by PASOK's³¹ archetypal populism putting forward the demands of the so-called 'non-privileged'³² for social justice, popular sovereignty and national independence against an establishment accused of monopolizing political access and economic privilege in various ways since the end of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), often with the help of external powers (initially Britain and then the US). Andreas Papandreou's party enjoyed, as a result, an impressive march to power, achieving in the 1981 elections a remarkable 48.07% and establishing a long hold on Greek political culture.³³ During the 1990s PASOK gradually turned 'anti-populist' under the leadership of the 'modernizer' Costas Simitis, marking a remarkable shift 'from populism to modernization.'³⁴ Of course, this 'modernizing' turn of PASOK meant much more than a mere rhetorical shift, since from the mid-1990s it gradually embraced and implemented as a government (1996–2004) a whole new set of values and strategy, marking a passage from social democracy to social liberalism and even, subsequently, to a full embrace of neoliberalism under a virtual state of (economic) emergency after 2010.³⁵

Following this gradual but rather radical mutation in PASOK's sensitivities and discourse, the populist flag migrated from left to right. Thus, the last 13 years have seen at least two major populist incidents. When in 2000, Simitis's 'modernizing' government decided to delete a reference to religion from Greek identity cards, the decision triggered an unprecedented response on behalf of the Church of Greece, a reaction that polarized Greek society and dominated political life and media coverage for most of 2000 and 2001. The newly elected Archbishop Christodoulos led a campaign to oppose the decision, articulating a discourse that was marked by a clearly populist profile.³⁶ The second major populist incident came a few months after the dust had settled from Christodoulos' mobilizations and was associated with Giorgos Karatzaferis and his newly formed party LAOS.³⁷ No doubt, the signifier 'the people' constituted a central reference in LAOS's extreme right-wing discourse. In fact, the party's acronym, LAOS [λαός] means 'the people' in Greek

and thus even the name of the party coincided with its central reference; its discourse was also premised on a sharply antagonistic view of society.

However, today's re-emergence of 'populism' comes in a completely new context, indicating a new swing of the pendulum back to the left. After three years of extreme austerity measures and massive budget cuts, the country, which entered the Eurozone in 2001 and staged the Olympics in 2004 to huge international acclaim, is clearly facing one of the most difficult moments in its contemporary history. Within the context of the global economic crisis, its debt and deficit were overnight declared unsustainable and draconian austerity measures were demanded by the EU, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for a bailout agreement. The policies implemented induced an economic and social situation comparable only to the 1929 crash in the US: GDP contracted by 20% between 2008 and 2012 and unemployment soared to 27% with youth unemployment reaching 60%.³⁸ It was obviously impossible for the ensuing frustration, anger and despair to leave party identification and the political process untouched. The parties affected included those entrusted by the *troika*³⁹ to implement austerity policies, tough fiscal discipline, radical budget cuts, massive privatizations and structural reforms of the neoliberal type: initially George Papandreou's PASOK and then all the parties supporting the government under the technocrat Loucas Papademos, namely PASOK, Nea Dimokratia (ND)⁴⁰ and LAOS. All three of them saw their electoral support collapse in May 2012, with LAOS failing to make it into the new parliament, ND losing almost half of its voters and PASOK taking a harder hit and dropping from 43.92% to 13.18% of the vote (see Table 1).

Against this background, the Greek radical left, SYRIZA, led by its young political leader, Alexis Tsipras (aged 38), managed to appeal to and mobilize a noteworthy part of the voters. Initially, Tsipras's SYRIZA coalition received 16.79% of the vote, more than tripling its power. Those numbers would rise even

Table 1. Greek elections October 2009–May 2012–June 2012.

Parties	17 June 2012 (%)	6 May 2012 (%)	7 October 2009 (%)
New Democracy	29.66	18.85	33.47
SYRIZA	26.89	16.79	4.60
PASOK	12.28	13.18	43.92
Independent Greeks	7.51	10.62	–
KKE	4.50	8.48	7.54
Golden Dawn	6.92	6.97	0.29
Democratic Left	6.25	6.11	–
LAOS	1.58	2.89	5.63
Other	4.41	16.11	4.55

Source: Ministry of Interior (available at <http://ekloges.ypes.gr/>).

more in the elections of June, in which SYRIZA got 26.89% of the vote, continuing its upward dynamic (see Table 1).

One should bear in mind here that the radical left's dynamic was not self-generated, but probably fuelled by the massive anti-austerity popular movements already on the rise (from national strikes and mass demonstrations to solidarity movements). These included the so-called 'Aganaktismenoi' [*Αγανακτισμένοι*],⁴¹ which followed the demonstrations against austerity of its namesake 'Indignados' in Spain.⁴² Indeed SYRIZA was probably the only party to engage from the beginning with the protesters' demands and meet them out in the streets. It is there that a chain of equivalences started to be formed between different groups and demands through a shared opposition towards European and Greek political structures, later to be interpellated by SYRIZA as representing 'the people' against 'them.'

SYRIZA's programme, embracing most of the demands of the popular movements, was based on an alternative mixture of policies involving a break with the so-called 'Memorandum' (the loan agreement between Greece and its emergency lenders signed in April 2010) and the politics of austerity. SYRIZA called for a broad coalition that would lead to a left government bold enough to annul the 'Memorandum(s),' while supporting the country's place within the Eurozone (but 'not at all social costs'), raise taxation on big business, put the banking sector under public control, call a moratorium on debt repayment until Greek society got back on its feet and scrap salary cuts and emergency taxes. Such claims were stigmatized by the parties supporting austerity 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 an economic and social hell.

At any rate, both the unexpected electoral results achieved by SYRIZA and the need to oppose it radically were explained by mainstream media and by the three parties supporting the government formed after the June 2012 elections (ND, PASOK and DIMAR⁴³) with recourse to its *populist* message, a message supposed to be as dangerous as it is mesmerizing. Moving from the level of political antagonism and media reporting to that of theoretically informed political research, how can we assess SYRIZA's discourse? Using the two formal criteria outlined earlier, can we accept its populist characterization also dominating academic accounts, domestically and internationally? Furthermore, what would the implications of that be in terms of threatening or reactivating Greek and European democracy?

Tsipras's Populism: analysing the discourse of SYRIZA

In trying to determine whether or not the discourse of SYRIZA constitutes a populist discourse we shall utilize the discursive criteria formulated earlier. In this line of inquiry, our main research questions will be as follows: Is the discourse articulated recently by SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras a populist discourse? Does it fulfil the two criteria highlighted by Ernesto Laclau and other

contemporary political theorists, namely a central reference to ‘the people’ and an equivalential, antagonistic discursive logic?

The status of ‘the People’ in SYRIZA’s discourse

First of all, it is important to note that up to quite recently ‘the people’ in SYRIZA’s discourse did not occupy a central position; its presence was rather indirect, through synecdoche and metonymy. Signifiers such as ‘youth,’ ‘movements’ or simply ‘society’ were largely preferred; mass youth mobilizations against university reforms (2007) and a strong identification with social movement structures and activities thus overdetermined SYRIZA’s discourse. The unprecedented economic, social and political crisis in Greece has initiated, however, a twofold process that transformed both this discourse and its constituency. On the one hand, growing impoverishment, frustration and anger led large sections of voters to disidentify with their previous party preferences and enter a more fluid stage. On the other hand, when SYRIZA realized that it could potentially represent the majority of these subjects and groups (at least those entertaining more or less egalitarian sensitivities), it became clear that only one signifier from the semiotic *reservoir* of European political modernity and Greek history could establish such a relation of representation: the signifier ‘*λαός*,’ ‘the people.’ What allowed SYRIZA to jump from a marginal coalition of the left to a party close to seizing power seems to be precisely the acceptance of this task of representation.

What is the evidence on which we can substantiate this hypothesis? One can, perhaps, start from a mere enumeration of references to ‘the people’ in party discourse. A cursory glance at the party’s newspaper, *Avgi*, for example, quickly reveals that ‘the people’ has indeed emerged as one of the most frequent front-page references. Another illuminating illustration of SYRIZA’s ‘turn to the people’ can be found in the discourse of its leader. While in pre-election speeches for the parliamentary elections of 2009, Alexis Tsipras referred only a few times to ‘the people,’ during the two successive campaigns of 2012 (May and June) one encounters a completely different picture, where references to ‘the people’ appear even up to 50 times within a single speech. For example, if one examines Alexis Tsipras’ speech at the central electoral campaign rally of SYRIZA in Athens (Kotzia square) on the 29 September 2009, there are only five references to ‘the people.’⁴⁴ In sharp contrast, only three years later, at the central electoral campaign rally of SYRIZA in Omonia square on the 14 June 2012, one finds in Alexis Tsipras’ speech no less than 51 references to ‘the people’!⁴⁵ It thus becomes clear that we are dealing here with a case of ‘numerology’ not at all devoid of significance.

But it is not only a question of numerology, it is also—and primarily—a question of discursive articulation. Thus, in *Avgi*’s front-pages ‘the people’ often appear to ‘march to power’ along with the left, or rather precisely because of the projected rise of the left. Characteristic headlines include: ‘The People and the Left for the new Greece’ (5 May 2012), ‘Do not corrupt the mandate of the people’

(8 May 2012), ‘Victory for the Left, victory for the people’ (15 June 2012). ‘The people’ clearly functions as a privileged signifier here. But was this also the case in the past? Not in the least; indeed, if one goes back to the headlines of *Avgi* during the electoral campaigns of 2009, 2007 or 2004 no similar references to ‘the people’ are to be found in its headlines.

But let us examine in greater detail how the signifier ‘the people’ operates within Tsipras’s discourse. In some of his most typical populist moments Alexis Tsipras performs a virtual self-vanishing gesture presenting SYRIZA as an almost neutral multiplier of popular power: the people’s vote for SYRIZA is a vote that strengthens the people itself leading to a mirroring dialectic between the two. In Tsipras’s words,

[o]ur people, through their vote for SYRIZA-USF⁴⁶ will open the way for a great change in History. [...] Sunday is not just about a simple confrontation between SYRIZA and the political establishment of the Memorandum. [...] It is about an encounter of the people with their lives. An encounter of the people with their fate. [...] Between the Greece of the oligarchy and the Greece of Democracy. [...] The people unite with SYRIZA-USF.⁴⁷

In his speech, Tsipras is in effect echoing what is clearly stated in the electoral declaration of his party for the May 2012 general elections: ‘Now, the people are voting! Now, the people are seizing power!’⁴⁸ It is also noteworthy that, in another speech, Tsipras even reactivated memories of the populist 1970s and 1980s by speaking in the name of the ‘non-privileged’ [*μη-προνομιούχοι*], utilizing thus a highly charged signifier, the main synecdoche of ‘the people’ in Andreas Papandreu’s discourse during the years of PASOK’s populist hegemony.

It is already becoming clear, through such formulations, that the signifier ‘the people’ does not repeatedly appear in Tsipras and SYRIZA’s discourse as a ‘colourless’ cliché, as a neutral reference to the constitutional basis and legitimizing ideal of democracy; it clearly assumes the role of a privileged reference, a *nodal point* that overdetermines this discourse from beginning to end, fulfilling in this way the first criterion highlighted earlier.

Turning from the symbolic to the imaginary plane of representation, we encounter a very vivid, albeit fantasmatic, illustration of the privileged articulatory function of ‘the people’: the telling poster of one of SYRIZA’s constituent parties, reading: ‘THE PEOPLE CAN DO EVERYTHING. VOTE SYRIZA’ (poster of KOE for the elections of June 2012; see [Figure 1](#)).

Antagonism and the logic of equivalence

If, on the one hand, ‘the people’ clearly emerges, within the conjuncture of the crisis, as its nodal point, what is the discursive logic that governs SYRIZA’s discourse? We have already seen how populism typically represents the social field in dichotomic terms. The research question that follows is thus clear: is the discourse of Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA an antagonistic discourse incarnating an equivalential rationale?



Figure 1. KOE poster for the June 2012 elections.

SYRIZA's main slogan for the campaign of the May 2012 elections gives a first revealing answer: 'They decided without us, we're moving on without them' (see Figure 2). This slogan, along with other similar ones, aimed to capture popular sentiments of frustration and anger against the harsh austerity measures; at the same time, it purported to point to an alternative path, building on popular hope for something better, something 'new,' for an alternative. It functioned as a discursive tool to establish 'chains of equivalence' among heterogeneous frustrated subjects, identities, demands and interests by establishing and/or highlighting their opposition to a common 'other': the 'enemy of the people,' that is the 'pro-austerity forces,' the 'memorandum,' the 'troika' and so on; in this discourse, all these forces, also organized through an equavalential logic, were presented as distinct but interrelated moments of the 'establishment.' SYRIZA's discourse thus divided the social space into two opposing camps: 'them' (the 'establishment,' the 'elite') and 'us' ('the people'), power and the underdog, the elite and the non-privileged, those 'up' and the others 'down.'

Another slogan from SYRIZA's campaign for May's elections formulated the same political logic in even more unequivocal terms: 'it is either us or them: together we can overthrow them.'⁴⁹ In this way, drawing a deep antagonistic/

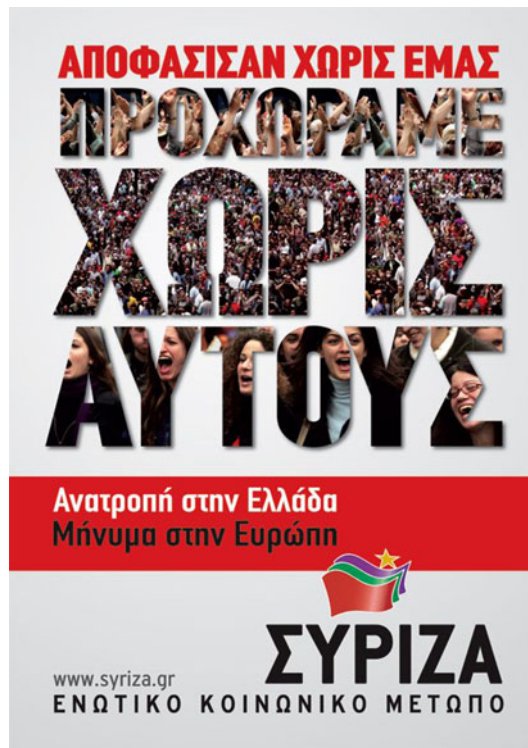


Figure 2. SYRIZA poster for the May 2012 elections.

dividing line, SYRIZA's slogans pointed to the democratic deficit in Greece, to the gap between the people which is supposed to decide and the ones that actually decided 'without the people.' The 'either us or them' slogan (see Figure 3) designates the fundamental opposition between the two opposing camps, between the two identities, positing the one ('them') as radically antagonistic to the other ('us').

Overall, SYRIZA's discourse is clearly organized on the basis of an antagonistic schema, with the pattern '*us/the people* against *them/the establishment*' being the dominant one. It constructs thus two chains of equivalences opposing one another: 'us,' the people that are hit by austerity policies, and 'them,' the political establishment that implements the policies dictated by the so-called 'troika.'

But who are 'they' and who are 'we'? Let us start with 'them.' First of all, the enemy in SYRIZA's discourse is clearly those forces which, throughout the past years, have been dictating and implementing austerity policies leading to unprecedented levels of recession, unemployment and poverty. Two distinct levels can be observed here: on the *first level*, specific political forces within the country are targeted (ND, PASOK, DIMAR, LAOS)⁵⁰; on the *second level*, that of an



Figure 3. SYRIZA poster for the May 2012 elections.

ongoing ‘war of positions,’ a broader confrontation is staged, where the enemy is *neoliberalism* and its advocates (international financial institutions like the IMF and the current leadership of the EU). It is in the context of this second level that one should also assess the recent visit of Tsipras to left-wing Latin American governments. For Tsipras and SYRIZA ‘[today’s] Europe is on edge. Two worlds collide. On one side stand the productive forces of democracy, the people fighting to create a society of justice, equality and freedom. On the other side, a neoliberal biopolitical project unfolds.’⁵¹ There are various operations in SYRIZA’s discourse through which those two levels are linked. The most telling one was the pun often used by Tsipras about ‘troika *exoterikou*—troika *esoterikou*’ (external troika—internal troika)⁵² where the three-party coalition government between ND, PASOK and DIMAR was effectively equated with the country’s emergency lenders, the EC, the ECB and the IMF.

And what about the ‘we,’ that is ‘the people’ that SYRIZA calls upon? Tsipras, in his own words, is addressing

every democratic citizen. All those that until 2009 have been fighting and voting for PASOK. [...] the common conservative voter that gasps under the Memorandum. [...] We are [also] addressing the leftists and the communists [...] Only the establishment [...] is profiting from the divisions in the Left, not our people [...] Finally, we are addressing the men and the women, the youth, all those that cannot make up their mind, that are still puzzled over their vote, those who believe that the elections have nothing to do with them, and we say: Do not let the others speak in your place.⁵³

The various subjects named earlier form a broad popular alliance, not on the basis of a common positive characteristic, of some sort of pre-existing essentialist unity, but on the basis of *sharing a lack that pervades them all*⁵⁴; it is this negative commonality that is supposed to unite them in a bid to overcome the existing order. This flexible ‘lack’ can correspond to a variety of different empirical situations; it can acquire different meanings depending on what exactly

heterogeneous individual or collective subjects have lost in the years of the crisis, be it salary or pension cuts, their works, health insurance and so on. It is also clear that ‘the people’ here are not invoked in a way that excludes plurality and social heterogeneity for the sake of a homogenizing ‘unity.’ It is a common democratic struggle that is supposed to hold the various subjects together, orienting their action towards a common cause: the overthrowing of two-partyism and austerity policies. In this sense, this seems to be an open-ended chain of equivalence, avoiding the limitations typical of right-wing populism. In fact, it is crucial to stress here that since its constitution SYRIZA has been one of the most consistent advocates of the immigrants’ equal rights and their full inclusion in Greek society. The same applies to gender equality and LGBT rights⁵⁵; although other political parties and specific politicians have also been favourable towards gay/LGBT rights, namely PASOK under Giorgos Papandreou and DIMAR, SYRIZA seems to be the main parliamentary party officially supporting the right to gay marriage.⁵⁶ In this sense, SYRIZA’s populism could also be described as an ‘inclusionary populism,’ as defined by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser.⁵⁷

SYRIZA, in other words, interpellates a (political) subject tightly bound to collective action and a project of self-emancipation through a linkage established in terms of a shared lack/frustration attributed to the action of a clearly delimited enemy, both external and internal. This is a process of creation that clearly relies on the dichotomization of social and political space and on privileging the signifier ‘the people’ as the proper name of this emerging collective subjectivity. Both these aspects have been established by our discourse-theoretical analysis of material from Tsipras and SYRIZA. In short, an analysis utilizing the minimal criteria formulated previously seems to substantiate the populist characterization of SYRIZA’s discourse. Further research in the future will also be in a better position to assess its long-term appeal and its ability to create deep affective bonds, none of which can be taken for granted. Indeed, SYRIZA is currently embarked on a rather bumpy process of becoming a unified party within an extremely volatile political environment; it is currently unclear what the impact of this process will be in terms of its internal coherence, its electoral appeal and its future dynamic. At the same time, and ‘despite its newly pivotal position in the Greek political order,’ it also remains unclear whether SYRIZA has ‘the quality of political personnel, the strategic perspicacity, or the alliances inside and outside of Greece that would be required to deal successfully with the current crisis. Within SYRIZA itself doubts and debate about its current status can be heard.’⁵⁸

All that, of course, does not mean that SYRIZA would accept the label ‘populist.’ To the contrary, SYRIZA is reluctant to positively embrace ‘populism’ and is often anxious to return such characterizations back to its political opponents. Obviously, this seems like the reasonable thing to do in a country where ‘populism’ has been associated with demagogy, irrationalism, clientelism, corruption and virtually any other existing political pathology. In other countries, where populism does not carry the ‘stigma’ of such heavy negative historical connotations it is more likely to see politicians embrace ‘populism’ directly. A case in point is that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of *Parti de gauche* and *Front*

de gauche in France, a fellow-traveller and international supporter of Tsipras and SYRIZA. Mélenchon, when told that he had been denounced as ‘populist,’ did not hesitate to respond: ‘Me, a populist? I accept it!’⁵⁹ Last but not least, some members of SYRIZA still remain attached to the Marxian notion of ‘class’ as privileged signifier, thus viewing ‘the people’ as a reformist trap, although increasingly ‘class’ takes on broader popular connotations.

Researching European Populism(s)

As we have seen, a discourse-theoretical orientation can indeed remedy the lack of established definitional criteria by bringing to the fore and substantiating further an implicit consensus spanning more than 30 years of research on populism. Utilizing these criteria we have reached an informed conclusion regarding the profile of SYRIZA’s discourse: it does seem to constitute a populist discourse, a distinct articulation of left-wing populism. However, does this conclusion vindicate by extension the second part of the prevailing wisdom? Does it justify the virtual equation of SYRIZA with extreme right-wing populism and its portrayal as a dangerous, evil force posing a risk to democracy?

Two distinct issues arise here. One concerns the particular empirical case: how does SYRIZA’s discourse compare with that of the extreme right in Greece and Europe? In the age of crisis, the populism/anti-populism divide is marked by a new twist, with left-wing politics actively endorsing the populist path, articulating a type of populist discourse that, at least at first, seems very different from its extreme right-wing variants. As we have already seen, this is the case with SYRIZA, judged on the basis of its inclusive social profile. However, even if we clearly have to do with antithetical political orientations, is there something equally dangerous and anti-democratic in the populism they seem to share? The second issue is of a much broader relevance. Many analyses of populism conducted within the European context seem to suffer from an exclusive euro-centric analytical focus that equates populism with the extreme right.⁶⁰ Today, however, evidence mounts that this picture may be seriously outdated and that mainstream research orientations in the study of European populism may have to be reviewed. In fact, it may even be the case that the use of the category ‘populism’ to describe the extreme right might ultimately be misleading. Let us then examine these two issues in turn.

Populism, anti-populism and crisis

The association between periods of crisis and the development of populist reactions has been well documented in the literature.⁶¹ The current global conjuncture is no exception. It is in this particular context that we see a new European picture developing: whoever resists the austerity agenda is discredited and denounced as an *irresponsible populist*. Most importantly, this is a strategy increasingly targeting the Left. That is especially the case in Europe, where the crisis has so far failed to produce institutional alternatives in mainstream political

arenas (in contrast to what happened, for example, in Latin America, irrespective of how one is to evaluate this difference). What it has produced, nevertheless, is the proliferation of new types of ‘anti-populist’ discourses aiming at the discursive policing and the political marginalization of emerging protest movements against the politics of austerity, especially in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal. 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”.’⁶² Jacques Rancière had already highlighted that here populism seems to be 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.’⁶³

The Greek experience is, once more, illuminating in this respect: what has lately emerged as the central discursive/ideological cleavage in Greek politics is without any exaggeration the opposition between populist and anti-populist tendencies, where the accusation of ‘populism’ is used to discredit any political forces resisting austerity measures and defending democratic and social rights and especially SYRIZA, with all its references to ‘the people’ and its rejection of hegemonic solutions to the crisis. Indeed, accusations against SYRIZA by mainstream politicians and media are now a constant. SYRIZA is portrayed in this context as dangerously populist, a defender of the ‘drachma lobby,’ anti-EU and anti-NATO, as a party that ‘flirts with violence’ if not fomenting ultra-leftist terrorism⁶⁴; in short, the picture painted is that of a political force incompatible with political stability and, most important, hostile to European democratic values.

The problem here is that, within the post-1974 Greek context, hostility to democracy is predominantly associated with the extreme right. And yet, when the demonization of SYRIZA is challenged on the basis of the antithetical political orientations between the left and the authoritarian extreme right, the standard answer on behalf of what in Greece goes under the name of the ‘theory of the extremes’ is that there is something equally dangerous for democracy in the *extremist populism* they both share. Furthermore, far from constituting a Greek peculiarity, such a strong association between populism and extremism—formulated on the basis of the European extreme right—does indeed dominate the European public sphere (political and academic). When Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras declares that ‘We will not allow the appearance of extremists and populists. We love our country too much to let such phenomena occur,’⁶⁵ he seems to be in line not only with Barroso’s position—cited in our introduction and expressing the EU political mainstream—but also with the predominant research orientation in the European context. In fact, it has now become commonplace to study populism and extremism together. In some cases, a distinct fusion of ‘extremist populism’ or ‘extremist populist parties’ is posited⁶⁶; in other cases, even when populism and extremism are clearly differentiated, the degree of crossover between the two remains an issue.⁶⁷ At any rate, having established and naturalized such an essential link between extremism and populism, it is only one step from applying it to political actors that have nothing in common with

extremism or the far right, but are nonetheless treated as ‘dangerous.’⁶⁸ Thus, comparisons between SYRIZA and the Golden Dawn gradually emerge under the convenient banner of populism: ‘austerity policies promoted by the EU have facilitated the electoral rise of both leftist populism (SYRIZA) and rightist populism (Golden Dawn).’⁶⁹

Is this, however, the case? Are such comparisons justified?⁷⁰ It is clear that in the context of SYRIZA’s discourse, ‘the people’ is called upon to participate actively in a common project for radical democratic change, a project of self-fulfilment and emancipation. As we have also seen, unlike the ‘people’ of the extreme right, the ‘people’ of the left is presented as a plural, inclusive and active subject unbound by ethnic, racial, sexual, gender or other restrictions; a subject envisaged as acting on initiative and directly intervening in common matters, a subject that does not wait to be led or saved by anyone. Alexis Tsipras has made that very clear in a recent interview for *Unfollow* magazine:

Many things have to change in the people’s perception on how we are to overcome the crisis. Because I see that there is certainty amongst the people that we are coming [...] within a logic of assignment. I’m assigning this task to you to save us. I’m sitting on the couch. You can save us. [...] That’s completely wrong and that is the big challenge for us. To change this attitude of the people.⁷¹

It is characteristic that the magazine conducting the interview cited earlier displayed Tsipras on its cover with the title ‘HE WON’T SAVE YOU. *What are you going to do?*’ Only one month later, on the cover of the next issue, we see the leader of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party with a very different title: ‘HE WILL SAVE YOU. *Do nothing.*’⁷² The antithesis is more than clear and the meaning of the two captions more than obvious, contrasting the two types of ‘populism,’ the two very different interpellations of the ‘people’: the first future-oriented, active, inclusive, democratic and emancipatory; the second passive, anti-democratic and authoritarian.⁷³

Given this stark contrast, the task ahead, in terms of research strategies, would perhaps be to register the development in Europe of *inclusionary* populisms, reclaiming ‘the people’ from extreme right-wing associations and reactivating its potential not as a threat but as a potential corrective to the oligarchic mutations of the democratic legacy of political modernity. From that point of view, SYRIZA’s populist profile seems to destabilize the neat geographical differentiation introduced by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser between Latin American and European populisms on the basis of the predominantly *inclusionary* character of the first and the *exclusionary* character of the second. The deep and unpredictable effects of the European crisis seem to complicate this picture in a very dynamic way, detaching that extremely useful inclusionary/exclusionary distinction from any fixed geographical reference.

Beyond Euro-centrism

However, the contrast between left-wing and extreme right-wing populism in crisis-ridden Greece also touches on a broader question that needs to be debated urgently. Simply put, our main fear is that many of the existing analyses suffer from a certain euro-centrism that reduces the conceptual spectrum covered by the category ‘populism’ in its global use to a very particular European experience—extreme right-wing xenophobic movements and parties—and then essentializes the resulting association, overextending the application of this contingent European meaning and elevating it into a universal and trans-historical criterion. It is, perhaps, time to take seriously into account the complexity and historical/political variability of populism(s) as well as its progressive democratic potential, a potential most visibly present in aspects of contemporary Latin American experience⁷⁴ as well as in the slow but dynamic emergence of left-wing populism (s) within the context of the European crisis, such as the one articulated by SYRIZA. Indeed, as Ernesto Laclau has put it, populism ‘is not a fixed constellation but a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses.’⁷⁵ Citing Yves Surel, he concludes that:

Against the idea according to which populism would represent a stable and coherent trend typical of the new radical Right, we want to defend the idea that it is less of a political family than a dimension of the discursive and normative register adopted by political actors.⁷⁶

Hence, the immense plurality of populist hybrids in the global environment: democratic/anti-democratic, institutional/anti-institutional, refined/vulgar, agonistic/antagonistic, in the streets/in power, top-down/bottom-up, etc.

If such considerations put in doubt the *exclusive* association between ‘populism’ and the extreme right that dominates European approaches, the association itself should also be carefully re-examined. Indeed, is the category of ‘populism’ the most suitable way to conceptualize the extreme right? If, that is to say, what we are currently facing is the pan-European rise of a nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary and, very often, violent extreme right, is the concept of ‘populism’ the proper theoretico-political instrument through which the problem should be perceived, categorized and debated? What if, falling victim to the aforementioned overextension of our past European experience and its representation, we often use the category ‘populism’ to describe political forces, actors and discourses in which the role of ‘the people’ is only secondary or peripheral and where, in many cases, the reference is simply opportunistic? For example, is not it a euphemism—obeying a certain type of pro-European *political correctness*—to use ‘populist’ to refer to forces that are outright racist, chauvinist or even fascist or neo-Nazi, like the Greek Golden Dawn?⁷⁷ What seems to be needed is a willingness to move beyond such undue ‘politeness’ and apply a rigorous framework for the analysis and evaluation of such political discourses.

Once more, a crucial test to help us in this exploration is offered by the discursive approach outlined earlier. Thus, we should always ask where reference to ‘the people’ is located within a given discourse: does it function as the nodal

point, as a central point of reference? Or is it located at the periphery of the discursive structure under examination? If the aim of European right-wing populism is to defend and reassert *nation* and *race*, then maybe we are dealing with primarily ‘nationalist’ and ‘racist’ discourses where references to ‘the people’ are only peripheral and/or secondary.

In fact, in addition to being of peripheral importance, ‘the people’ of the extreme right is often of a very particular type that creates considerable distance from the global populist canon. This is because it has to coincide with strongly hierarchical and elitist visions of society. In a recent extensive survey of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany, Caiani and Della Porta have observed that ‘the people’ are very often referred to: ‘They are defined as suffering from the misdeeds of the elite, and in need of protection by the extreme right itself.’ However, the prognosis here ‘is not to return the power to the people, but to advocate it to an exclusive (more or less heroic) elite,’ something often missed in the mainstream euro-centric analyses of populism.⁷⁸ This clearly points to ‘some tensions in the conceptualization of populism when applied to the extreme right.’⁷⁹ In addition, as Torcuato di Tella has put it, such ‘radical nationalist’ or ‘radical Right’ forces, which ‘are often branded populist, should [...] be put in a different category, because they are not aimed against the dominant groups but rather against the underprivileged ones they see as threatening.’⁸⁰

Conclusion

Researching the political effects of the global crisis, we have focused on the unexpected electoral advance of a relatively unknown left-wing political formation in Greece. In particular, we have tried to test the two most common assumptions to be found in both journalistic and academic analyses of SYRIZA’s performance, domestically and internationally: first of all, that SYRIZA constitutes a *populist* force, that its appeal is due to its *populist* discourse, and, secondly, and given the almost exclusive association of populism with extreme right-wing movements in the European context, that SYRIZA poses a *populist danger* to European values. Obviously, it is impossible to research seriously the alleged populist character of SYRIZA and to reach a conclusion on these two issues without a clear formulation of criteria, without, that is to say, a sophisticated and operational *theory of populism*. Taking into account a diachronic but underestimated tendency in existing literature, we have adopted the minimal criteria put forward by Laclau’s discursive theory of populism. Of analytical priority here is to ascertain whether a given discursive practice under examination is (1) articulated around the nodal point ‘the people’ or other (non-populist or anti-populist) nodal points, *and* (2) to what extent the representation of society it offers is predominantly antagonistic, dividing society into two main blocs: the establishment, the power bloc, versus the underdog, ‘the people.’

After framing recent economic and political events within Greece’s predominantly populist political culture in the post-authoritarian era (1974–2013), we then embarked on a detailed examination of Tsipras’s and SYRIZA’s

discourse before and after the 2012 elections. Not only has the signifier ‘the people’ emerged, during this period, as a privileged reference, a *nodal point* that overdetermines this discourse from beginning to end, fulfilling in this way the first criterion put forward by discourse theory; at the same time, SYRIZA’s discourse was clearly articulated on the basis of a dichotomous, equivalential schema, with the antagonistic pattern ‘*us/the people* against *them/the establishment*’ being the dominant one. On both counts then, one can consistently conclude that SYRIZA’s discourse is a populist one.

And yet, does this conclusion vindicate by extension the second assumption of the prevailing wisdom? The virtual equation of SYRIZA with extreme right-wing populism and its portrayal as a dangerous political force threatening democracy? A set of different concerns are at issue here. As far as our empirical case is concerned, the content of SYRIZA’s discourse could not be furthest from extreme right-wing rhetoric. However, even if we clearly have to do with antithetical political orientations, is there something common in the populism they seem to espouse? Evidence points to the contrary, to two very different conceptualizations of the ‘people’ circulating in the Greek public sphere: the first, put forward by SYRIZA, seems to be active, inclusive, democratic and emancipatory; the second, characteristic of extreme or extremist right-wing parties like Golden Dawn, is passive, racially and ethnically pure, anti-democratic and authoritarian.⁸¹ Given this contrast, the preceding analysis of the SYRIZA case calls us to register the development in Europe of inclusionary populisms, reclaiming ‘the people’ from extreme right-wing associations and reactivating its potential not as an enemy but rather as an ally of democracy in times of economic and political crisis.⁸² This registering would require a change of perspective beyond an exclusive analytical focus equating populism with the extreme right. Such an association is contradicted today by the proliferation of left-wing populism(s) both inside (for example, in Greece) and outside Europe (for example, in Latin America). On the one hand, then, a mounting body of evidence seems to suggest that the old picture may be in need of serious review, while, on the other, it can also be persuasively argued that ‘populism’ may not be the most appropriate conceptual tool to conceptualize political movements that are outright nationalist, racist and fascist.

Notes and References*

1. SYRIZA 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 in 1968.
2. Only to be repeated a few months later by Beppe Grillo’s *Five Star Movement* in the February 2013 Italian elections.
3. J. Kakissis, ‘The Greece that can say “no!”’, *Time*, 179(23) (2012), pp. 24–27; H. Smith, ‘Greek elections: Alexis Tsipras—kingmaker or deal breaker?’ *The Guardian*, 11 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/GX1wD>; R. Donadio and L. Alderman, ‘Rising Greek political star, foe of austerity, puts Europe on edge’, *New York Times*, 18 May 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/hi8jB>; J. Defterios, ‘Lunch with Alexis Tsipras, Greece’s rising star’, *CNN*, 4 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/9UQGf>
4. H. Smith, ‘Greece to hold fresh elections as unity talks fail’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/dzDc1>

5. Kakassis, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3.
6. J. Chaffin, 'Return to Greece's past a radical mistake', *Financial Times*, 5 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/ZhXSD>
7. K. Featherstone in Smith, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4 (emphasis added); also see A. Doxiadis and M. Matsaganis, *National Populism and Xenophobia in Greece* (Counterpoint, 2012), available at <http://goo.gl/L7Pz7>; Y. Voulgaris, 'The radical conservatism of SYRIZA', *Ta Nea*, 8 December 2012*; N. Marantzidis, 'The year that populism almost destroyed us', *Kathimerini*, 30 December 2012*; A.-S. Chrysogelos, 'The evolution of the "populist potential" in European politics: from new right radicalism to antisystem populism', *European View*, 12 (2013), pp. 75–83.
8. *Der Spiegel*, 'Photogallery', 8 July 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/nRXEi>
9. L. Cendrowicz, '10 questions with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso', *Time*, 21 May 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/h1Plh>
10. K. Featherstone in Smith, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4; The choreography of events in and around Greece is so fast moving, that only a few months later (14 March 2013) Featherstone hosted a lecture by Tsipras, now leader of the parliamentary opposition, at the Hellenic Observatory of the LSE.
11. R. Brading, *Populism in Venezuela* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 4.
12. K. Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 6.
13. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); D. Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); J. Townshend, 'Discourse theory and political analysis: a new paradigm from the Essex School?' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5(1) (2003), pp. 129–142; J. Townshend, 'Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic project: the story so far', *Political Studies*, 52(2) (2004), pp. 269–288.
14. Hawkins, *op. cit.*, Ref. 12, p. 10.
15. M. Canovan, *Populism* (London: Junction Books, 1981), p. 544.
16. C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds), 'Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis', *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), p. 4.
17. Canovan, *op. cit.*, Ref. 15, p. 549; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 16, p. 6.
18. Canovan, 'Trust the people! populism and the two faces of democracy', *Political Studies*, 47(1) (1999), p. 3.
19. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 16, p. 8. We are merely enacting here the exclusion of adjectives they themselves demand from other definitions, like the one of democracy, 'nothing more, nothing less' (p. 10).
20. D. Howarth and Y. Stavrakakis, 'Introducing discourse theory and political analysis', in D. Howarth, A. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (Eds) *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press – St Martin's Press), pp. 3–4.
21. E. Laclau, *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994); Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis, *op. cit.*, Ref. 20; D. Howarth and J. Torfing, *Discourse Theory in European Politics* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005).
22. E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977); E. Laclau, 'Populist rupture and discourse', *Screen Education*, 34 (1980), pp. 87–93.
23. E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).
24. F. Panizza (Ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005); Y. Stavrakakis, 'Antinomies of formalism: Laclau's theory of populism and the lessons from religious populism in Greece', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3) (2004), pp. 253–267; Y. Stavrakakis, 'Religion and populism in contemporary Greece', in Panizza (Ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 224–249; B. Ardití, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
25. Paradoxically, in the latest reformulations of his theory, Laclau (*op. cit.*, Ref. 23) himself seems to have shifted his position as far as the first criterion is concerned: populism becomes synonymous with politics and any signifier can potentially become the nodal point of a populist discourse. If, however, this is the case, then how can we conceptually account for the difference between an antagonistic discourse articulated around 'the people' and any other such discourse? In other words, the risk here is to loose the conceptual particularity and operativity of 'populism' as a tool for concrete political analysis (Stavrakakis, 'Antinomies of Formalism', *op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 263) and thus to weaken the empirical applicability of this whole approach (Mudde and Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 16, pp. 6–7). It is clear that this move needs to be resisted.
26. G. Lievesley and S. Ludlam, *Latin America: Experiments in Radical Social Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2009), p. 17; F. Panizza, *Contemporary Latin America: Development and Democracy Beyond the Washington Consensus. The Rise of the Left* (London: Zed Books, 2009), p. 178; C. Mouffe, *The Democratic*

- Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); P. de Vos, 'The sacralisation of consensus and the rise of right-wing populism in Flanders', *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 7 (2002), pp. 3–29.
27. Y. Mény and Y. Surel (Eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).
 28. P. Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000).
 29. Canovan, *op. cit.*, Ref. 18.
 30. Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe have discussed this development under the rubric of *post-democracy*. See Mouffe, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26; C. Crouch, *Post-democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); J. Rancière, *The Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006); Y. Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 254–285.
 31. 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.
 32. The equivalent of Juan Peron's 'descamisados'.
 33. C. Lyrintzis, 'The power of populism: the Greek case', *European Journal of Political Research*, 15(6) (1987), pp. 667–686; N. Diamandouros, 'Cultural dualism and political change in post-authoritarian Greece', *ESTUDIOS Working Papers 50* (1994); N. Demertzis (Ed.), *Greek Political Culture Today* (Athens: Odysseas, 1994)*; M. Spourdalakis, *The Rise of the Greek Socialist Party* (London: Routledge, 1988).
 34. C. Lyrintzis, 'The changing party system: stable democracy, contested "modernisation"', *West European Politics*, 28(2) (2005), pp. 249–252.
 35. C. Lyrintzis, 'Greek politics in the era of economic crisis: reassessing causes and effects', *Hellenic Observatory Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe*, 45 (2011), p. 16.
 36. Y. Stavrakakis, 'Religious populism and political culture: the Greek case', *South European Society and Politics* 7(3) (2003), pp. 29–52; Stavrakakis, 'Antinomies of Formalism', *op. cit.*, Ref. 24; Stavrakakis, 'Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece', *op. cit.*, Ref. 24.
 37. LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) is a political party founded in 2000 by an ousted Nea Dimokratia (ND) MP. It is a party ideologically similar in many ways to other European extreme-right, neo-populist forces such as the *Front National* in France or the FPÖ of Haider in Austria.
 38. ELSTAT, *The Greek Economy*, 22 March 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/zkuHD>; Eurostat, 'Euro area unemployment rate at 11.9%', *euroindicators*, STAT/13/31, 1 March 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/Lajnh>
 39. A word that signifies both the three organizations overseeing Greece's 'bailout agreement' since 2010 (the European Commission (EC), ECB and IMF) as well as the representations of functionaries belonging to them, who visit the country every few months to assess 'progress' and release tranches of funding.
 40. Founded in 1974 by Konstantinos Karamanlis, ND is a centre-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. In autumn 2011 it performed a political U-turn overnight from 'anti-austerity' and 'anti-memorandum' to 'pro-memorandum' and 'pro-austerity' to participate in the coalition government under Papademos, something that cost it an unprecedented loss of supporters.
 41. The 'Outraged' or 'Indignants'.
 42. See M. Prentoulis and L. Thomassen, 'Political theory in the square: protest, representation and subjectification', *Contemporary Political Theory* 12(3) (2013), pp. 166–184.
 43. DIMAR (Democratic Left) is a pro-European reformist social-democratic party created by Fotis Kouvelis in 2010 following a split of Synaspismos (the main constituent of SYRIZA). Most of its political cadres and voters came from the centre-left of Synaspismos and PASOK.
 44. A. Tsipras, 'Speech at the central pre-election rally of SYRIZA in Athens (Kotzia Square)', 29 September 2009, available at <http://goo.gl/v2W51>*
 45. A. Tsipras, 'Speech at the central pre-election rally of SYRIZA in Athens (Omonia Square)', 14 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/v2Pce>*
 46. In the elections of May 2012 SYRIZA was renamed as SYRIZA-Unitary Social Front (USF).
 47. Tsipras, *op. cit.*, Ref. 45.
 48. SYRIZA, *Electoral Declaration*, April-May 2012, p. 6, available at <http://goo.gl/trDaz>*
 49. SYRIZA, *Joint Declaration of Positions*, 3 April 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/mzWFY>*
 50. Those political forces also go by the name 'mnimoniakoi' (meaning the ones who voted and supported the 'Memorandum').
 51. A. Tsipras, 'Public talk by Alexis Tsipras for SYRIZA London', 15 March 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/kSGs9>
 52. Tsipras, *Ibid.*
 53. A. Tsipras, 'Speech at the central pre-election rally of SYRIZA in Athens (Omonia Square)', 3 May 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/c9YUj>*

54. E. Laclau, 'Populism: what's in a name', in Panizza, *op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 38.
55. See SYRIZA, *op. cit.*, Ref. 49; SYRIZA, *op. cit.*, Ref. 48.
56. SYRIZA, *Political Programme of SYRIZA-USF for the elections of May 6th 2012* (2012), available at http://goo.gl/Tfyw2*; Synaspismos, *5th Congress Political Resolution* (2008), p. 21, available at http://goo.gl/OCT2D*
57. C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America', *Government and Opposition*, 48(2) (2013), pp. 147–174.
58. G. Moschonas, 'A new left in Greece: PASOK's fall and SYRIZA's rise', *Dissent*, 60(4) (2013), p. 36.
59. T. Dupont, 'Mélénchon: "Populiste, moi? J' assume!"', *L' Express*, 16 September 2010, available at <http://goo.gl/MEdWs>. Indeed, as Chantal Mouffe has recently observed:
- Mélénchon and Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, are often accused of being 'populist'. Far from being a ground for critique, this should be seen as a virtue. The aim of a left popular movement should be to mobilize passions towards the construction of a 'people' so as to bring about a progressive 'collective will'. A 'people' can, of course, be constructed in different ways, some of which are incompatible with a leftwing project. It all depends on how the adversary is defined. Whereas for right-wing populism the adversary is identified with immigrants or Muslims, the adversary for a left-wing populist movement should be constituted by the configuration of forces that sustains neo-liberal hegemony. (C. Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 123).
60. W. Baier, 'Right-wing populism in Europe', *Transform!* 9 (2011), pp. 128–131; H. G. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); E. Meijers, *Populism in Europe* (Vienna: Green European Foundation, 2011).
61. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23, 132, 137, 177; Taggart, *op. cit.*, Ref. 28, pp. 2, 4–5, 93–94, 117; Hawkins, *op. cit.*, Ref. 12, pp. 6, 8, 14, 33, 40, 87, 94. This, of course, does not mean that populism manifests itself only in times of crisis, but merely that the existence of a systemic crisis usually favours its rise. In other words, we can see the association between crisis and populism as 'a rough tendency or correlation, not a definitional requirement or essential criterion' (A. Knight, 'Populism and neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30(2) (1998), p. 227); also see C. de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), pp. 115–119.
62. Halimi, 'Un raisonnement de fou', *Le monde diplomatique* (June 2011).
63. Rancière, *op. cit.*, Ref. 30, p. 80.
64. Smith, *op. cit.*, Ref. 4; S. Goutzanis, 'Samaras to FT: "Give your instructions elsewhere"', *Proto Thema online*, 15 June 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/T0WSy>; 'Coalition leaders opt for common front after spate of violent attacks', *Kathimerini*, 15 January 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/NVVali>
65. M. Pollatos, 'Samaras from Brussels against extremists and populists', 15 October 2013, available at <http://www.protothema.gr/news-in-english/article/319690/samaras-from-brussels-against-extremists-and-populists/>
66. M. Goodwin, *Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe* (London: Chatham House, 2011). Also see R. Gerodimos, 'The ideology of far left populism in Greece', *Political Studies*, advance online version (2013), available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9248.12079/pdf>
67. A. Painter, *Democratic Stress, the Populist Signal and the Extremist Threat* (London: Policy Network, 2013).
68. M. Marley, 'European leaders must be wary of rising Eurosceptic populism from both and left and right' (2012), available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/03/26/eurosceptic-populists/>
69. K. Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Populism, its opposites, and its contentious relationship with democracy' (2013), available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/crist%C3%B3bal-rovira-kaltwasser/populism-itsopposites-and-its-contentious-relationships>
70. Needless to say, the repercussions of such associations can exceed the level of academic analysis and political competition. Indeed, members of SYRIZA's twin party in Germany, *Die Linke*, had been for many years under surveillance from the *Office for the Protection of the Constitution*, which targets extremist anti-constitutional activities. When he was interior minister, Wolfgang Schäuble had also highlighted *Die Linke* as a potential extremist threat that needs to be monitored, alongside Islamic fundamentalists and neo-Nazis (see 'Schäuble: Islamists top threat to Germany', 15 May 2008, available at <http://www.thelocal.de/20080515/11889>). Following a legal challenge from the former vice-chairman of *Die Linke*, Bodo Ramelow, the Federal Constitutional Court has very recently declared the observation of Ramelow's activities as a violation of his constitutional rights and his independent mandate as parliamentarian (Federal Constitutional Court—Press Office, 'Observation of Parliamentarians by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution is

- Subject to Strict Proportionality Requirements’, Press release no. 60/2013 of 9 October 2013, available at <https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/en/press/bvg13-060en.html>).
71. A. Tsipras, ‘They aren’t done with us. they see us in their sleep’, Interview to *Unfollow*, 9 September 2012, p. 48.
 72. *Unfollow*, 10 October 2012. The Golden Dawn emerged in the mid-1980s as an extremist, militaristic, neo-Nazi organization. Since its foundation it remained at the margins of the political system and many of its members have been associated with violent activities against immigrants, leftists and anarchists. It gained momentum during the peak of the Greek crisis in 2012 and eventually entered the parliament after receiving a significant 6.92% of the vote in the June elections. See Psarras, *The Black Bible of the Golden Dawn* (Athens: Polis, 2012).*
 73. In fact, it may be the case that there is increasingly a fertile soil for the rise of leftist (inclusionary) populist forces in those European countries that have been severely hit by the current economic crisis (e.g. Greece and the so-called PIIGS [Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain]), while the chances are that this is not equally the case with other European countries that have avoided the worst.
 74. See, in this respect, S. Gratius, ‘The “third wave of populism” in Latin America’, *FRIDE Working Papers* 45 (2007); P. Barrett, D. Chavez and C. Rodriguez-Garavito, *The New Latin American Left* (London: Pluto Books, 2008); G. Lievsley and S. Ludlam (Eds), *Latin America: Experiments in Radical Social Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2009); Panizza, *op. cit.*, Ref. 24; Panizza, *op. cit.*, Ref. 26; Brading, *op. cit.*, Ref. 11. However, there are no guarantees here: our argument is not that left-wing populism inevitably has a positive impact on democracy; it is rather that its impact (negative or positive or both) cannot be predetermined in advance and certainly should not be *a priori* dismissed as negative. As is the case with all populism(s), Latin American populism(s) remain an ambivalent phenomenon, having historically functioned ‘both [as] a threat to and [as] a corrective for democracy’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 57, p. 168). For a recent critique of populism’s ‘competitive authoritarian’ tendencies see Levitsky and Loxton, ‘Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes’, *Democratization*, 20(1) (2013), pp. 107–136. Needless to say, the virtually progressive legacy of populist politics is not confined to Latin America, but has surfaced in a variety of geographical and historical contexts, including the US. See, in this respect, among others, N. Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962) and L. Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
 75. Laclau, *op. cit.*, Ref. 23, p. 176.
 76. Surel in Laclau, *ibid.*
 77. M. Fiorese, ‘Golden Dawn: rise of populism in Greece’, *Europe Inside*, 27 November 2012, available at <http://goo.gl/YmWUm>; A. Papachelas, ‘On a dangerous path’, *Kathimerini*, 19 May 2013, available at <http://goo.gl/vDyfw>; Doxiadis and Matsaganis, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7.
 78. M. Caiani and D. Della Porta, ‘The elitist populism of the extreme right’, *Acta Politica*, 46 (2011), p. 197.
 79. *Ibid.*, 198.
 80. T. di Tella, ‘Populism into the twenty-first century’, *Government and Opposition*, 32(2) (1997), p. 190.
 81. If the justification of lumping together SYRIZA and Golden Dawn under the banner of extremist populism turns out to be rather unfounded (also see, in this respect, L. Phillips, ‘Kick ’em all out? Anti-politics and post-democracy in the European Union’, *Statewatch*, 23(1) (2013), pp. 9–20, available at <http://www.andereuropa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/statewatch-journal-vol23n1-march-2013.pdf#page=9>), further research is required on the relationship between SYRIZA and a populist-nationalist party of the Right, ANEL (Independent Greeks), a political party that was created by a former MP of ND, literary overnight, on 24 February 2012, and achieved 10.62% in May and 7.51% in the consecutive elections of June 2012 (see Table 1). This is justified not only on the basis of its strong ‘anti-memorandum’ stance and anti-elitist discourse, but also because SYRIZA itself officially keeps an open door to a potential collaboration with ANEL in the future, at least at the local or peripheral level, a clear indication of the difficulties involved in its coalition strategy.
 82. Overall, to return to the opening paragraphs of this essay, even if SYRIZA eventually proves to be ‘incompetent’, ‘irresponsible’ or even ‘dangerous’, that is not likely to be a result of its populism.

*Sources in Greek are included with a translated title and marked with an asterisk.