

Which Idea of Europe is Worth Defending?

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Abstract: This paper is a critical examination of the current situation on Europe. It discusses the calls of left-liberals to rethink the values of Europe, then continues in discussing the rise of populism, explains its limits and shows why populism is never a solution to the deadlocks of contemporary capitalism. At the end, it briefly discusses what is in Europe that is worth defending and rethinking, reinventing.

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In January 2019, one of the most disgusting and misdirected public proclamations appeared in our media: a group of 30 writers, historians and Nobel laureates - Bernard-Henri Lévy, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, Mario Vargas Llosa, Adam Michnik... - published a manifesto in several newspapers all around Europe, including the Guardian in the UK. They claimed that Europe as an idea is “coming apart before our eyes”: “We must now will Europe or perish beneath the waves of populism,” they wrote. “We must rediscover political voluntarism or accept that resentment, hatred and their cortege of sad passions will surround and submerge us.”¹ This manifesto is deeply flawed: just carefully reading it makes it clear why populists are thriving. Its signatories – the flower of European liberal intelligence - ignore the unpleasant fact that the populists also present themselves as the saviors of Europe. The catch is, of course: which Europe?

In an interview on July 15 2018, just after attending a stormy meeting with the EU leaders, Trump mentioned European Union as the first in the line of “foes” of the US, ahead of Russia and China. Instead of condemning this claim as irrational (“Trump is treating the allies of the US worse than its enemies,” etc.), we should ask a simple question: what bothers Trump so much about EU? Which Europe is Trump talking about? When he was asked by journalists about immigrants flowing into Europe, he answered as it befits the anti-immigrant populist that he is: immigrants are tearing apart the fabric of European mores and ways of life, they pose a danger to European spiritual identity... in short, it was people like Orban or Salvini who were talking through him. One should never forget that they also want to defend Europe – Europe as part of a new world order whose contours were clearly discernible at the meeting of the heads of G20 in July 2019 in Osaka.

The surrounding events provided a sad view: Trump exchanging love messages with Kim Yong Un and inviting him to the White House, Putin jovially clapping hands with BMS, and so on, with Merkel and Tusk, the two voices of old European reason, marginalized and mostly ignored. This

¹ Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patriots-nationalist>

New World Order is very tolerant: they are all respecting each other, no one is imposing on others imperialist Eurocentrist notions like women's rights... This new spirit is best encapsulated by the interview Putin gave to Financial Times on the eve of the Osaka summit; in it he, as expected, lambasted the "liberal idea," claiming that it "outlived its purpose." Riding on the wave of the "public turned against immigration, open borders and multiculturalism", Putin's evisceration of liberalism "chimes with anti-establishment leaders from US president Donald Trump to Hungary's Viktor Orban, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and the Brexit insurgency in the UK. "[Liberals] cannot simply dictate anything to anyone just like they have been attempting to do over the recent decades," he said. Mr Putin branded Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to admit more than 1m refugees to Germany, mainly from war-ravaged Syria, as a "cardinal mistake". But he praised Donald Trump for trying to stop the flow of migrants and drugs from Mexico. "This liberal idea presupposes that nothing needs to be done. That migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants have to be protected." He added: "Every crime must have its punishment. The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population.""²

There is no surprise here, and the same holds for how Donald Tusk, the European Council president, reacted to Putin: "What I find really obsolete is authoritarianism, personality cults and the rule of oligarchs" – a toothless assertion of empty principles which avoids the roots of the crisis. Liberal optimists desperately cling to good signs here and there (the strong Leftist turn of the US younger generation; the fact that Trump got 3 million less votes than Clinton and that his victory was more the result of the manipulations with electoral districts; re-emergence of European liberal Left in countries like Slovakia...), but they are not strong to affect the basic global trend.

The only interesting feature of Putin's interview, the point at which one can feel how he really speaks from his heart, occurs when he solemnly declares his zero tolerance for spies who betrayed their country: "Treason is the gravest crime possible and traitors must be punished. I am not saying that the Salisbury incident is the way to do it /.../ but traitors must be punished." It is clear from this outburst that Putin has no personal sympathy for Snowden or Assange: he just helps them to annoy his enemies, and one can only imagine the fate of an eventual Russian Snowden or Assange. One can only wonder at some Western Leftists who continue to claim that, in spite of his socially-conservative stance, Putin still nonetheless poses an obstacle to the US world domination and should for this reason be viewed with sympathy

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² Available online at: <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

Every authentic Leftist should ferociously oppose the claim that treason (the betrayal of one's own nation-state) is the gravest crime possible: no, there are circumstances when such treason is the greatest act of ethical fidelity. Today, such treason is personified by names like Assange, Manning, and Snowden. The reason is today's global predicament with its three main apocalyptic threats (ecology, digital control, migrations). The moment we fully accept the fact that we live on a Spaceship Earth, the task that urgently imposes itself is that of civilizing civilizations themselves, of imposing universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities, a task rendered all the more difficult by the ongoing rise of sectarian religious and ethnic "heroic" violence and readiness to sacrifice oneself (and the world) for one's specific Cause. Reason thus compels us to commit treason here: to betray our Cause, to refuse to participate in the ongoing war games. If we really care for the fate of the people who compose our nation, our motto should be: America last, China last, Russia last... If by "pathology" we mean an unhealthy deviation which threatens our lives, the "X first" policy is the only true pathology today.

And this brings us back to the European emancipatory legacy which is incompatible with the "X first" policy and which bothers Trump as well as the European populists. It is the Europe of transnational unity, the Europe vaguely aware that, in order to cope with the challenges of our moment, we should move beyond the constraints of nation-states; the Europe which also desperately strives to somehow remain faithful to the old Enlightenment motto of solidarity with victims, the Europe aware of the fact that humanity is today One, that we are all on the same boat (or, as we say, on the same Spaceship Earth), so that other's misery is also our problem. We should mention here Peter Sloterdijk who noted that the struggle today is how to secure the survival of modern Europe's greatest economic-political achievement, the Social Democratic Welfare State. According to Sloterdijk, our reality is - in Europe, at least - "objective Social Democracy" as opposed to the "subjective" Social Democracy: one should distinguish between Social Democracy as the panoply of political parties and Social Democracy as the "formula of a system" which "precisely describes the political-economic order of things, which is defined by the modern state as the state of taxes, as infrastructure-state, as the state of the rule of law and, not last, as the social state and the therapy state": "We encounter everywhere a phenomenal and a structural Social Democracy, a manifest and a latent one, one which appears as a party and another one which is more or less irreversibly built into in the very definitions, functions, and procedures of the modern statehood as such."³

This Idea that underlies united Europe got corrupted, half-forgotten, and it is only in a moment of danger that we are compelled to return to

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³ Sloterdijk 2009.

this essential dimension of Europe, to its hidden potential. Europe lies in the great pincers between America on the one side and Russia on the other who both want to dismember it: both Trump and Putin support Brexit, they support euro-sceptics in every corner, from Poland to Italy. What is bothering them about Europe when we all know the misery of the EU which fails again and again at every test: from its inability to enact a consistent politics about immigrants to its miserable reaction to Trump's tariff war? It is obviously not this actually-existing Europe but the idea of Europe that kindles against all odds and becomes palpable in the moments of danger. The problem of Europe is to remain faithful to its emancipatory legacy threatened by the conservative-populist onslaught. In his Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, the great conservative T.S.Eliot remarked that there are moments when the only choice is the one between heresy and non-belief, when the only way to keep a religion alive is to perform a sectarian split from its main corpse. This is what has to be done today: the only way to really defeat populists and to redeem what is worth saving in liberal democracy is to perform a sectarian split from liberal democracy's main corpse. Sometimes, the only way to resolve a conflict is not to search for a compromise but to radicalize one's position.

Back to the letter of the 30 liberal luminaries: what they refuse to admit is that the Europe whose disappearance they deplore is already irretrievably lost. The threat does not come from populism: populism is merely a reaction to the failure of the Europe's liberal establishment to remain faithful to Europe's emancipatory potentials, offering a false way out of ordinary people's troubles. So the only way to really defeat populism is to submit the liberal establishment itself, its actual politics, to a ruthless critique... However, a strong part of today's European Left offers its own version of this ruthless critique: Left populism. Will this work?

What makes today's racist populism so dangerous is not only its claim to represent ordinary people's real worries, but its democratic legitimization. This is how "Fascism which smells like democracy" operates today: it IS in some sense genuinely democratic, it stands for a new mode of functioning of democracy – to criticize it, one should criticize dangerous potentials that are inherent to democracy itself. So should the Left copy it to achieve the same success? The latest trend in the vagaries of Leftist politics is effectively a weird version of MeToo: the Left should learn from the rise of the Rightist populism, WeToo can play the populist game... We are repeatedly told that Left populism is de facto winning and it works – but where and how does it work? Everywhere where it became a serious force, from Latin America to Spain's Podemos, it stumbled upon a fatal limit.

According to Left populists, the main reason for the defeat of the Left is the non-combative stance of rational argumentation and lifeless universalism in theory epitomized by the names of Giddens, Beck, and Habermas. This post-political Third Way cannot combat in an efficient way the agonistic logic of Us against Them successfully mobilized by

anti-immigrant Rightist populists. Consequently, the way to combat this Rightist populism is to have a recourse to Left populism which, while retaining the basic populist coordinates (agonistic logic of Us against Them, of the "people" against a corrupted elite), fills them in with a Leftist content: Them are not poor refugees or immigrants but financial capital, technocratic state bureaucracy, etc. This populism moves beyond the old working class anti-capitalism, it tries to bring together a multiplicity of struggles from ecology to feminism, from the right to employment to free education and healthcare, etc., as Podemos is doing in Spain...

With regard to pragmatic dispassionate politics of rational compromise, one should first note that the ideology of neoliberalism (also in its liberal-Left version) is anything but "rational": it is EXTREMELY confrontational, it brutally excludes those who do not accept it as dangerous anti-democratic utopians, its expert knowledge is ideology at its purest, etc. The problems with the Third Way Left (which endorsed neoliberal economics) was not that it was too pragmatic-rational, but that it was precisely not truly rational – it was permeated by unprincipled pragmatism which in advance endorses the opponent's premises. Leftist politics today does not need (just) confrontational passion, it needs much more true cold rationality. Cold analysis and passionate struggle not only do not exclude each other, they need each other.

The formula of agonistic politicization, of passionate confrontation, directed against lifeless universalism, is precisely all too formal – it ignores the big question that lurks in the background: why did the Left abandon the agonistic logic of Us against Them decades ago? Was it not because of the deep structural changes in capitalism, changes which cannot be confronted by means of simple populist mobilization? The Left abandoned antagonistic confrontation because it failed in its struggle with capitalism, because it accepted the global triumph of capitalism. As Peter Mandelson said, in economy, we are all Thatcherites, so all that remains to the Left is the multiplicity of particular struggles: human rights, feminism, anti-racism, and specially multiculturalism. (It is interesting to note that Ernesto Laclau, the theoretical father of Left populism, first enthusiastically greeted Blair's Third Way politics - as a liberation from class essentialism, etc. -, and only later targeted it as the mode of non-antagonistic politics.

Podemos undoubtedly stands for populism at its best: against the arrogant Politically Correct intellectual elites which despise the "narrowness" of the ordinary people considered "stupid" for "voting against their interests," its organizing principle is to listen to and organize those "from below" against those "from above," beyond all traditional Left and Right models. The idea is that the starting point of emancipatory politics should be the concrete experience of the suffering and injustices of ordinary people in their local life-world (home quarter, workplace, etc.), not abstract visions of a future Communist

or whatsoever society. (Although the new digital media seem to open up the space for new communities, the difference between these new communities and the old life-world communities is crucial: these old communities are not chosen, I am born into them, they form the very space of my socialization, while the new (digital) communities include me into a specific domain defined by my interests and thus depending on my choice. Far from making the old “spontaneous” communities deficient, the fact that they do not rely on my free choice makes them superior with regard to the new digital communities since they compel me to find my way into a pre-existing not-chosen life-world in which I encounter (and have to learn to deal with) real differences, while the new digital communities depending on my choice sustain the ideological myth of the individual who somehow pre-exists a communal life and is free to choose it.) While this approach undoubtedly contains a (very big) grain of truth, its problem is that, to put it bluntly, not only, as Laclau liked to emphasize, society doesn’t exist, but “people” also doesn’t exist.

This thesis is not to be taken as an abstract theoretical statement about the inconsistency that traverse the social body: it refers to a quite concrete, even experiential, fact. “People” is a false name for the social totality – in our global capitalism, totality is “abstract,” invisible, there is no way to ground it in concrete life-worlds. In other words, in today global capitalist universe, a “concrete experience” of being a member of a particular life-world with its customs, living links, forms of solidarity, etc., is already something “abstract” in the strict sense of a particular experience which obliterates the thick network of financial, social, etc., processes which rule and regulate this concrete particular world. Here Podemos will encounter problems if it will at some point take power: what specific economic measures (beyond the standard Keynesian bag of tricks) will it enact to limit the power of the capital?

Both traps are to be avoided here: the false radicalism (“what really matters is the abolition of liberal-parliamentary capitalism, all other fights are secondary”), as well as the false gradualism (“now we fight against military dictatorship and for simple democracy, forget your Socialist dreams, this comes later – maybe...”). When we have to deal with a specific struggle, the key question is: how will our engagement in it or disengagement from it affect other struggles? The general rule is that, when a revolt begins against an oppressive half-democratic regime, as was the case in the Middle East in 2011, it is easy to mobilize large crowds with slogans which one cannot but characterize as crowd pleasers – for democracy, against corruption, etc. But then we gradually approach more difficult choices: when our revolt succeeds in its direct goal, we come to realize that what really bothered us (our un-freedom, humiliation, social corruption, lack of prospect of a decent life) goes on in a new guise. In Egypt, protesters succeeded to get rid of the oppressive Mubarak regime, but corruption remained, and the prospect of a decent life moved even further away. After the overthrow of an

authoritarian regime, the last vestiges of patriarchal care for the poor can fall away, so that the newly gained freedom is de facto reduced to the freedom to choose the preferred form of one’s misery – the majority not only remains poor, but, to add insult to injury, it is being told that, since they are now free, poverty is their own responsibility. In such a predicament, we have to admit that there was a flaw in our goal itself, that this goal was not specific enough - say, that standard political democracy can also serve as the very form of un-freedom: political freedom can easily provide the legal frame for economic slavery, with the underprivileged “freely” selling themselves into servitude. We are thus brought to demand more than just political democracy: we have to admit that what we first took as the failure to fully realize a noble principle (of democratic freedom) is a failure inherent to this principle itself – understanding this is the big step of political pedagogy.

This brings us back to the fateful limit of populism. Laclau insisted on the necessity to construct some figure of Enemy as immanent to populism – it is not its weakness, but the resource of its strength. Left populism should construct a different figure of the Enemy, not the threatening racial Other (immigrant, Jew, Muslim...) but the financial elites, fundamentalists, and other “usual suspects” of the progressives. This urge to construct the Enemy is another fatal limitation of populism: today, the ultimate “enemy” is not a concrete social agent but in some sense the system itself, a certain functioning of the system which cannot be easily located into agents. Years ago, Alain Badiou wrote that one doesn’t fight capitalism but its concrete agents – but therein resides the problem since the true target IS capitalism. Today, it seems easy to say that the Enemy is neo-Fascist anti-immigrant nationalism or, in the US, Trump. But the fact remains that the rise of Trump is ultimately the effect of the failure of liberal-democratic consensus, so although one should, of course, not exclude new forms of “anti-Fascist” alliances with the latter, this consensus remains THE thing to be changed. So was I wrong when, in two interviews before the US presidential elections, I preferred Trump to Clinton? No, events which followed proved me right: the victory of Trump threw the establishment into a crisis and opened up the way for the rise of the Left wing of the Democratic Party. If the Trumpian excesses will not mobilize the US Left, then the battle is really lost.

It is because of their focus on concrete enemies that Left populists seem to privilege national sovereignty, the strong nation state, as a defense against global capital (even Auferstehen in Germany basically follows this path). In this way, most of them not only (by definition) endorse populism but even nationalism, presenting their struggle as a defense against international financial capital. Some Left populists in the US already used the term “national socialism”⁴; while, of course,

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4 It happened at the conference of the Union for Radical Economics at Amherst, Massachusetts, in September 2018.

it would be stupid and unfair to claim that they are closet Nazis, one should nonetheless insist that internationalism is a key component of any project of radical emancipation. Whatever critical remarks one sustains against Varoufakis's DIEM, DIEM at least sees clearly that resistance against global capital has to be itself global, a new form of universalism. There definitely are enemies and the topic of conspiracies is not to be simply dismissed. Years ago, Fred Jameson perspicuously noted that in today's global capitalism, things happen which cannot be explained by a reference to some anonymous "logic of the capital" – for example, now we know that the financial meltdown of 2008 was the result of a well-planned "conspiracy" of some financial circles. However, the true task of social analysis still remains to explain how contemporary capitalism opened up the space for such "conspiratorial" interventions. This is also why reference to "greed" and the appeal to capitalists to show social solidarity and responsibility are misplaced: "greed" (search for profit) IS what motivates capitalist expansion, the wager of capitalism IS that acting out of individual greed will contribute to the common good. So, again, instead of focusing on individual greed and approach the problem of growing inequality in moralist terms, the task is to change the system so that it will no longer allow or even solicit "greedy" acting.

The problem we are facing here is best exemplified by what took place a couple of years ago in Croatia. Two public protest gatherings were announced: trade unions called for a protest against the exploding unemployment and poverty (felt very much by ordinary people); Rightist nationalist announced a gathering in order to protest the re-introduction of the official status of Cyrillic writing in Vukovar (because of the Serb minority there). To the first gathering, a couple of hundred people came, and to the second gathering, over one hundred of thousand people came. Poverty was experienced as a daily life problems much more than the Cyrillic threat by ordinary people, and the rhetoric of trade unions didn't lack passion and confrontational spirit, but... One has to accept that some kind of extra-strong economy of jouissance is at work in the identification with one's own "way of life," some core of the Real which is very difficult to rearticulate symbolically. Recall Lenin's shock at the patriotic reaction of Social-Democrats to the outburst of the WWI – people are ready to suffer for their way of life, up to today's refugees who are not ready to "integrate." In short, there are two Reals (the real of capital, the real of ethnic identification) which cannot be dissolved into fluid elements of symbolic hegemony.

How are we to mobilize "our" people to fight for the rights of the refugees and immigrants? In principle, the answer is easy: we should strive to articulate a new ideological space in which the struggle for refugees will be combined with the feminist struggle, ecological struggle, etc. However, such an easy way out is purely rhetorical and runs against the (ideologically determined, of course) "experience" which is very difficult to undo. More profoundly, the catch is that today's

constellation doesn't allow for a direct link between program and the direct experience of "real people." The basic premise of classic Marxism is that, with the central role of the proletariat, humanity found itself in a unique situation in which the deepest theoretical insight found an echo in the most concrete experience of exploitation and alienation – it is, however, deeply questionable if, in today's complex situation, a similar strategy is feasible. Left populists would, of course, insist that this is precisely why we should abandon the Marxist reliance of proletariat as the privileged emancipatory subject and engage in a long and difficult work of constructing new hegemonic "chains of equivalences" without any guarantee of success (there is no assurance that feminist struggle, struggle for freedom, and struggle for the rights immigrants will coalesce in one big Struggle). My point is, however, that even this solution is too abstract and formal. Left populists remind me of a doctor who, when asked by the worried patient what to do, tells him: "Go and see a doctor!" The true problem is not one of formal procedure – a pragmatic search for unity versus antagonist confrontation – but a substantial one: how to strike back at global capital? Do we have an alternative to the global capitalist system? Can we even imagine today an authentic Communist power? What we get is disaster (Venezuela), capitulation (Greece), or a controlled full return to capitalism (China, Vietnam).

So what happens with populist passion here? It disappears, and it has to disappear. When populism takes power, the choice is, to designate it with names, Maduro (passage from genuine populism into its authoritarian version with social decay) or Deng Hsiao-Ping (authoritarian-capitalist normalization, ideological return to Confucius). Populism thrives in a state of emergency, it by definition cannot last. It needs the figure of an external enemy - let us take Laclau's own precise analysis of why one should count Chartism as populism:

Its dominant leitmotiv is to situate the evils of society not in something that is inherent in the economic system, but quite the opposite: in the abuse of power by parasitic and speculative groups which have control of political power – 'old corruption,' in Cobbett's words. /.../ It was for this reason that the feature most strongly picked out in the ruling class was its idleness and parasitism.⁵

In other words, for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it (financial manipulators, not capitalists as such, etc.); not a fatal flaw inscribed into the structure as such, but an element that doesn't play its role within the structure properly. For a Marxist, on the contrary (like for a Freudian), the pathological (deviating misbehavior of some elements) is the symptom

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5 Laclau 2005, p.90

of the normal, an indicator of what is wrong in the very structure that is threatened with “pathological” outbursts: for Marx, economic crises are the key to understanding the “normal” functioning of capitalism; for Freud, pathological phenomena like hysterical outbursts provide the key to the constitution (and hidden antagonisms that sustain the functioning) of a “normal” subject. That’s why populism tends to be nationalist, it calls for people’ unity against the (external) enemy, while Marxism focuses on the inner split that cuts across each community and calls for, international solidarity because we all traversed by this split.

The hard fact to accept is that “ordinary people” do NOT “know,” they possess no authentic insight or experience, they are no less confused and disoriented as all others are. I remember, in the debate after a talk of mine, a brief exchange with a supporter of Podemos who reacted to my claim that the demands of Podemos (getting rid of corrupted power structures, authentic democracy which is rooted in people’s actual interests and worries) without any precise ideas of how to reorganize society - he replied: “But this is not a reproach since Podemos wants just this: not another system but a democratic system that would actually be what it claims to be!” In short, Podemos wanted the existing system without its symptoms, to which one should retort that it’s OK to begin with this, but then sooner or later comes the moment when we are forced to realize that symptoms (corruption, failure, etc.) are part of the system, so that in order to get rid of the symptoms we have to change the system itself.

One of the versions of radical politics today is waiting for a catastrophe: many of my radical friends are telling me privately that only a big ecological catastrophe, economic meltdown, or war can mobilize the people to work for radical change. But is this very stance of waiting for a catastrophe not already is a catastrophe, an admission of utter defeat? In order to find a proper orientation in this conundrum, one should become aware of the fateful limitation of the politics of interests. Parties like die Linke in Germany effectively represent the interests of their working class constituency – better healthcare and retirement conditions, higher wages, etc.; this puts them automatically within the confines of the existing system, and is therefore not enough for authentic emancipation. Interests are not to be just followed, they have to be redefined with regard to ideas which cannot be reduced to interests.

This is why we witness again and again the paradox of how the Rightist populists, when they get in power, sometimes impose measures which are effectively in workers’ interests, as is the case in Poland where PiS (Law and Justice, the ruling Rightist-populist party) has managed to enact the largest social transfers in Poland’s contemporary history. PiS did what Marine le Pen also promises to do in France: a combination of anti-austerity measures (social transfers no Leftist party dares to consider) plus the promise of order and security that asserts national identity and deals with the immigrant threat – who can beat this

combination which directly addresses the two big worries of ordinary people? We can discern at the horizon a weirdly perverted situation in which the official “Left” is enforcing the austerity politics (while advocating multicultural etc. rights) while the populist Right is pursuing anti-austerity measures to help the poor (while pursuing the xenophobic nationalist agenda) – the latest figure of what Hegel described as die verkehrte Welt, the topsy-turvy world... The obvious (not only) populist reaction to this is: should we not reestablish the “normal” state, i.e., should the Left not enact the anti-austerity measures that the populist Right is enacting, just without the accompanying racist-nationalist baggage? “Logical” as it may sound, this, precisely, is what cannot be done: the Right can do it precisely BECAUSE its anti-austerity measures are accompanied by racist-nationalist ideology, this ideological coating is what makes anti-austerity acceptable.

Populism ultimately NEVER works. In its Rightist version, it cheats by definition: it constructs a false figure of the enemy – false in the sense that it obfuscates the basic social antagonism (“Jew” instead of “capital,” etc.) and, in this way, its populist rhetoric serves the very financial elites it pretends to oppose. In its Left version, it’s false in a more complex Kantian sense. In a vague but pertinent homology, we can say that the construction of the Enemy in an antagonistic relation plays the role of Kant’s schematism: it allows us to translate theoretical insight (awareness of abstract social contradictions) into practico-political engagement. This is how we should read Badiou’s already-mentioned statement that “one cannot fight capitalism”: one should “schematize” our fight into activity against concrete actors who work like the exposed agents of capitalism. However, the basic wager of Marxism is precisely that such a personalization into an actual enemy is wrong – if it is necessary, it is a kind of necessary structural illusion. So does this mean that Marxist politics should permanently manipulate its followers (and itself), acting in a way it knows it is misleading? Marxist engagement is condemned to this immanent tension which cannot be resolved by claiming that now we fight the Enemy and later we will move to the more fundamental overhaul of the system itself. Left populism stumbles upon the limit of fighting the Enemy the moment it takes power.

In a situation like today’s, Left populism’s fatal flaw is clearly visible: its weakness is precisely what appears to its partisans as its strength, namely the construction of the figure of Enemy and the focus on the struggle against it. What is needed today are above all positive visions of how to confront our problems – the threat of ecological catastrophes, the destabilizing implications of global capitalism, the traps of the digitalization of our minds... In other words, what is needed is not just to fight big financial institutions but to envisage new modes of financial politics, to provide feasible answers to the question: OK, so how would you organize finances if you gain power? It’s not just to fight against walls and for open borders but to envisage new social and economic

models which would no longer generate refugees. Today, more than ever, our system is approaching such a deep crisis that we can no longer just bombard it with our demands, expecting that it will somehow manage to meet them while continuing to smoothly function.

Instead of just focusing on antagonism, it is therefore crucial for a Leftist government today to define a role for the private sector, to offer the private sector precise conditions under which it can operate. As long as (at least a good part of) the private sector is needed for the smooth functioning of our societies, one should not just antagonize it but also propose a positive vision of its role. Social Democracy at its best was doing exactly this.

The obvious Left-populist counter-argument is here, of course: but is not the fact that Left populism does not provide a detailed vision of the alternative society precisely its advantage? Such an openness is what characterizes a radical-democratic struggle: there are no prescriptions decided in advanced, re-arrangements are going on all the time with short-term goals shifting... Again, this smooth reply is all too easy, it obfuscates the fact that the “openness” of the Left-populist struggle is based on a retreat, on avoiding the key problem of capitalism.

We should therefore give the populist protests (like those of the Yellow Vests in France) a conditional YES – conditional since it is clear that Left populism does not provide a feasible alternative to the system. That is to say, let's imagine that the protesters somehow win, take power and act within the coordinates of the existing system (like Syriza did in Greece) – what would have happened then? Probably some kind of economic catastrophe. This doesn't mean that we simply need a different socio-economic system, a system which would be able to meet the protesters' demands: the process of radical transformation would also give rise to different demands and expectations. Say, with regard to fuel costs, what is really needed is not just cheap fuel, the true goal is to diminish our dependency on oil for ecological reasons, to change not only our transportation but our entire way of life. The same holds for lower taxes plus better healthcare and education: the whole paradigm will have to change.

The same holds for our big ethico-political problem: how to deal with the flow of refugees? The solution is not to just open the borders to all who want to come in, and to ground this openness in our generalized guilt (“our colonization is our greatest crime which we will have to repay forever”). If we remain at this level, we serve perfectly the interests of those in power who foment the conflict between immigrants and the local working class (which feels threatened by them) and retain their superior moral stance. (The moment one begins to think in this direction, the Politically Correct Left instantly cries Fascism – see the ferocious attacks on Angela Nagle for her outstanding essay “The Left Case

against Open Borders”⁶.) The “contradiction” between advocates of open borders and populist anti-immigrants is a false “secondary contradiction” whose ultimate function is to obfuscate the need to change the system itself: the entire international economic system which, in its present form, gives rise to refugees.⁷

The stance of generalized guilt provides a clinically perfect example of the superego paradox confirmed by how the fundamentalist immigrants react to left-liberal guilt feeling: the more European Left liberals admit responsibility for the situation which creates refugees, and the more they demand that we should abolish all walls and open our gates to immigrants, the more they are despised by fundamentalist immigrants. There is no gratitude in it – the more we give, the more we are reproached that we did not give enough. It is significant that the countries that are most attacked are not those with an open anti-immigrant stance (Hungary, Poland...) but precisely those which are the most open one. Sweden is reproached that it doesn't really want to integrate immigrants, and every detail is seized upon as a proof of its hypocrisy (“You see, they still serve pork at meals in the schools! They still allow their girls to dress provocatively! They still don't want to integrate elements of sharia in their legal system!”), while every demand for symmetry (but where are new Christian churches in Muslim countries with a Christian minority?) is flatly rejected as European cultural imperialism. Crusades are mentioned all the time, while the Muslim occupation of large parts of Europe is treated as normal. The underlying premise is that a kind of radical sin (of colonization) is inscribed into the very existence of Europe, a sin incomparable with others, so that our debt to others cannot ever be repaid. However, beneath this premise it is easy to discern its opposite, the stance of scorn - they loath us for our guilt and responsibility, they perceive it as a sign of our weakness, of our lack of self-respect and trust in ourselves. The ultimate irony is that some Europeans then perceive such an aggressive stance as the Muslim “vitality” and contrast it to Europe's “exhaustion” – again turning this into the argument that we need the influx of foreign blood to regain our vitality... We in Europe will only regain the respect of others by learning to impose limits, to fully help others not from a position of guilt and weakness but from a position of strength.

Paradoxically, the basic problem with today's European Left is thus not that it remains too “Eurocentrist” but that it is not “Eurocentrist” enough.

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6 See <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2018/11/the-left-case-against-open-borders/>

7 Incidentally, the weirdest argument for open borders is: “Europe needs immigrant workers for its economy to continue to expand... ” - WHICH Europe? Capitalist Europe, capitalism needs them for its expanded reproduction.

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