

The post „On “Authoritarian Populism” by Stuart Hall finished with the statement that Hall had learned much from Ernesto Laclau, especially from “Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory“. This brought us to a re-reading of texts by Laclau¹. In **Towards a theory of populism** (1977), Laclau explained populism as „a concept both elusive and recurrent“ (111) and concluded:

“(1) the 'people'/power bloc contradiction is an antagonism whose intelligibility depends not on the relations of production but the complex of political and ideological relations of domination constituting a determinate social formation;
(2) if the dominant contradiction at the level of the mode of production constitutes the specific domain of class struggle, the dominant contradiction at the level of a concrete social formation constitutes the specific domain of the popular-democratic struggle;
(3) ... as class struggle takes priority over popular-democratic struggle, the latter only exists articulated with class projects. But, in turn, as political and ideological class struggle takes place on a terrain constituted by non-class interpellations and contradictions, this struggle can only consist of antagonistic projects for the articulation of those non-class interpellations and contradictions.“ (127)

But „'Populism' arises in a specific ideological domain: that constituted by the double articulation of political discourse. The dialectical tension between 'the people' and classes determines the *form* of ideology, both among dominant and dominated sectors. The '*metamorphoses*' of 'the people' consist in its various form of articulation with classes. To the extent that 'the people' and classes constitute poles of contradictions which are different but equally constitutive of political discourse they are both present in it. But whilst the class contradiction determines the articulating principle of that discourse, lending it its specific singularity in a determinate ideological domain, the first contradiction represents an abstract moment which can be articulated to the most divergent class discourses.“ (147)

„Classes only exist as hegemonic forces to the extent that they can articulate popular interpellations to their own discourse. For the dominant classes this articulation consists ... in a neutralisation of 'the people'. For the dominated classes to win hegemony, they must precipitate a crisis in the dominant ideological discourse and reduce its articulating principles to vacuous entelechies without any connotative power over popular interpellations. For this, they must develop the implicit antagonism of the latter to the point where 'the people' is the completely unassimilable by any fraction of the power bloc ...

Classes cannot assert their hegemony without articulating the people in their discourse; and the specific form if this articulation in the case of a class which seeks to confront the power bloc as a whole, in order to assert hegemony, will be populism.“ (147-148).

More than 15 years later, Laclau wanted to „advance three theoretical propositions: (1) that to think the specificity of populism requires starting the analysis from units smaller than the group (whether at the political or at the ideological level);

(2) that populism is an ontological and not an ontic category – i.e. its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular mode of articulation of whatever social, political or ideological contents;
(3) that that articulating form, apart from its contents, produces structuring effects which primarily manifest themselves at the level of the modes of representation.“ (153)

Laclau wanted to make us recognise two aspects of the same condition for the emergence of a populist rupture: „the dichotomisation of the social space through the creation of an internal frontier, and the construction of an equivalential chain between unfulfilled demands.“ (156) Here the equivalential chain has an „anti-institutional character: it subverts the particularistic,

¹Here we use Ernesto Laclau, Post-Marxism, populism and critique, Edited by David Howarth, Routledge 2015, Oxon and New York

differential character of demands.“ (156)

Ultimately, „there is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy ...“. But „the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic demands which assume the function of universal representation ... „The so-called 'poverty' of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy.“ And there are two other important considerations: „... the particular kind of distortion that the equivalential logics introduce into the construction of the 'people' and 'power' as antagonistic poles.“ (157)

The question: „to what extent is a movement populist? ... is identical to this other one: to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse? (161)

While reflecting all this, David Howarth wrote: „Laclau seeks to construct a theory of populism that focuses on the construction of equivalential linkages between dispersed social and political demands, in which the latter requires the production of specific means of representation – 'floating' and 'empty' signifiers – that can serve as points of subjective identification ... In this conception, ... populist discourse and practical speaks ... directly to the political dimension of social relations ... The logic of populism captures the practices through which society is divided into opposed camps in the endless struggle for hegemony ... A populist politics ... involves the construction of a collective agency or project ... through the drawing of a political frontier between a 'we' and a 'they' within a social formation ...“ (13) So it uses discourses „to construct and naturalize a certain meaning of 'the people' ... The establishment of this political boundary, which divides the people from its 'other', is grounded on the creation of equivalential relations between particular social demands, which are linked together in a more univalistic, populist discourse ... Thus populist discourses invariably speak in the name of 'the people', 'the nation' ... and their theoretic seeks to galvanize a common set of values, beliefs and symbols which can advance the interest of such collective subjects. The identity of the demands that constitute a populist movement thus depends upon the hegemonic practices that confer meaning in a particular historical context ... The construction of a people requires the production of empty signifiers – symbols that can unite heterogeneous elements into a singular identity by standing for a community's 'absent fullness' – which in populist discourses tends to be invested in the name and body of particular political leaders ... Laclau goes on to stress the force of a subject's attachments to particular signifiers by reference to the role of what he calls 'radical investment' ...“ (13-14)