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**European populism
in the 21st century:
The ideological background
of Syriza, Podemos and the
5 Star Movement**

INTRODUCTION

Since the outburst of the economic crisis in 2007-2008, populist parties of both right and left have seen their popularity rise in Europe (Lagurashvili 2016). In the last five years they have become a political force of relevance, one to be reckoned with, as they have started gaining seats in Parliament and their electoral base has expanded.

Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and the 5 Star Movement in Italy are among the largest of such formations in Europe, and tend to lean to the left; other large populist parties are instead more right-wing. The aim is to attempt to identify the ideological background, if any, of each of these parties. Many commentators have linked Podemos and Syriza to Argentinian political philosopher Ernesto Laclau, whose political theory explores the elements of populist political discourse in order to propose a doctrine of radical democracy that can offer an alternative to both orthodox Marxism and the New Left; the 5 Star Movement has, instead, been associated with Rousseau, mainly due to its support for direct democracy.

Through a test of these potential connections, a brief outlook of the cultural background of these parties will be provided. Interestingly, Laclau's theory will prove to be rather suitable to describe the features of almost any populist movement, including right-wing ones; and yet, we cannot say that each of these parties have equally taken inspiration from Laclau: the 5 Star Movement for instance, never mention Laclau as an intellectual reference. As for Rousseau, he does not appear to be any more than a symbol to the 5 Star, whose political programme has little to do with the philosopher from Geneva.

The first part of this work will briefly illustrate the various political tendencies that make up the radical left cluster of parties and movements. Using these cat-

egories, each party will be defined accordingly: Podemos and Syriza as populist socialist parties, the 5 Star as a social populist one. The second section will focus on Laclau's theory of populism; the third, fourth and fifth will analyse, respectively, Podemos, Syriza, and the 5 Star. Laclau's influence will appear to be stronger on Podemos than on Syriza, but arguably relevant in both cases; the 5 Star Movement, instead, do not seem to have drawn much inspiration from either figure. Finally, the sixth part will contain concluding remarks.

THE RADICAL LEFT FAMILY

It is generally accepted that these parties – Syriza and Podemos, and, to a lesser extent, M5S – belong to the “radical left” family, regardless of their populist tendencies. And yet, defining what radical left means today is paramount to understand whether populist parties can, too, be viewed as belonging to such a group: not everyone actually agrees on such a classification. For instance, conservative Marxists (Fagerholm 2016; Wsws 2015), who still maintain orthodox communist positions, criticize contemporary populist parties for their acceptance of capitalism and unwillingness to ground their political stances on class struggle. According to conservative Marxists, only orthodox communism can be defined as radical, or, indeed, as left. Claiming that only one's own movement can be properly defined as left, because it sticks to the letter of Marx's texts, is undoubtedly pretentious; it is true, however, that acceptance of capitalism and rebuttal of class struggle may leave one to wonder if it makes sense to define these parties as radical.

Andreas Fagerholm (2016), following Bobbio's observations, states that the left can be best defined in relation to its opposite, the right: the element that distinguishes the two is the different understanding of the concept of equality. Put simply, the left supports and promotes equality, while the right does not, arguing that, regardless of the [alleged] equal moral status of all human beings, societal relations have made them unequal.

As to radicalism, it is generally understood to be the “pursuit of a *root and branch* transformation of society” (Fagerholm 2016, 3); radical left parties are those trying to alter the socioeconomic structure of society by proposing an alternative societal arrangement. Their objective may be that of overthrowing capitalism, but not necessarily; what is always present is a critique of economic *élites*, and a “belittlement of *liberal* democracy (but not democracy *per se*)” (*ibidem*). These elements are typical of radical left parties and, moreover, distinguish them from non-radical left, or centre-left, ones. Already we could argue that, in terms of

political programme, Syriza, Podemos and the 5 Star Movement all belong to the radical left family, although to different degrees.

More in detail, the family of radical left parties is made up of 5 subgroups, according to Fagerholm (*ibidem*). First, conservative communists: these are orthodox Marxist-Leninist parties that wish to save “soviet revolutionary traditions”: the Kke in Greece and the Partido Comunista Portuges, Pcp, are of this kind. Second, reform communists, namely parties that have inherited at least part of the post-1968 “New Left” agenda: the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Prc) in Italy and the Spanish Communist Party (Pce) belong to this group. Third, democratic socialists, namely parties that support democratic, non-monistic and, sometimes, non-Marxist positions, while upholding a socialist restructuring of society – not to be confused with social-democracy, which is not a radical position. The Bloco de Esquerda (BE) in Portugal is an example of such a party. Fourth, populist socialist: these parties are similar to the third group – democratic socialists – but add to it an anti-*élite*, anti-establishment rhetoric: Syriza and Podemos are part of this group. Fifth, social populist parties: these are characterized by an “incoherent ideology that fuses left-wing with right-wing themes and are, hence, only rarely recognized as genuine left-wing parties (*ibidem*).” An example is Sinn Fein in Ireland, who, for instance, supports workers’ protection and the welfare state, while maintaining strong nationalist sentiments and mixed feelings about abortion.

This is, roughly, the radical left family today. Of all groups, only the last, that of social populist parties, may pose some doubts over its leaning to the left; this however depends on specific circumstances, and policies, of the actual parties, and cannot be established in advance by a general definition. In any case, all these parties, with some reservations concerning the latter, promote equality, both formal and substantial, and are thus left-wing; in addition, they all reject the current socio-economic order and virtually support the introduction of an alternative system, and are thus radical.

For the purpose of this inquiry, the focus is chiefly on the last three groups, namely 1) democratic socialists, 2) populist socialists and 3) social populist. Even though populism is the object of research here, it is important to keep in mind that democratic socialism – not to be confused with social democracy – is the subgroup on the basis of which populist socialism, in particular, has developed. Indeed, both democratic socialists and populist socialists accept democratic methods while upholding a socialist restructuring of society.

With this classification at hand, the task is now to state which party is to be placed where. For now, it will suffice to state that Syriza and Podemos belong to the populist socialist subgroup – the fourth on the list –, while the 5 Star Movement is a social populist movement – fifth on the list.

As to the cultural aspect, some things have been briefly mentioned. In general, radical-left populist parties come from either the democratic socialist tradition or the reform Marxist one and, in particular, their sociopolitical culture has been heavily influenced from the intellectual and political confusion of the post 1989 world. Truly, a critical acceptance of capitalism and a rejection of orthodox Marxism are common elements that are shared with democratic socialism, but there is one crucial difference: populist-socialists believe that democratic socialism has failed to offer a concrete alternative to the current world order. These details should provide a rough picture of the context in which contemporary European populism has initially developed; they do not, however, shed light on the specifically theoretical elements that characterize these sorts of parties, if any, and thus do not tell us which political doctrine they are indebted to.

LACLAU'S THEORY OF POPULISM

A number of observers have pointed out that Syriza and Podemos are highly indebted, culturally, to the works of Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau (Hancox 2015, Tremlett 2015), who would often work with his wife, Chantal Mouffe, herself a political philosopher. Originally, they were both close to the Marxist Left, but soon became critical of its orthodoxy (Judis 2016). In their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, they review the history of socialist political strategy and reject the central role assigned to the working class and to class struggle in general, arguing that socialism need not necessarily be brought about by the clash between capitalism and the proletariat. In *On Populist Reason*, written by Laclau only, he counters the dominant understanding of populism as inherently negative, a deviation from standard political practice. Left-wing populism should be viewed, instead, as the legitimate heir of older non-communist left-wing parties; and this is indeed a salient element of their theory, namely, their support for democracy, even though described as a product of conflict rather than consensus – democracy is “antagonistic” (*ibidem*).

When Mouffe and Laclau published, in 1985, they hoped to offer an alternative to both the New Left which, they argued, had adopted a flawed strategy, and more typical Marxist parties, who centred their political struggle on the subversion of capitalism: their proposal was meant to be a new strategy for a “radical democracy”. A number of the radical left's positions of the time had left them unsatisfied, and whether it was Lenin's Jacobinism or Kautsky's economic determinism, they believed that the failures of socialism to date largely depended on the adoption

of wanting doctrines. Kautsky believed that this *bourgeois* stage of history was marked by the opposition between working class and capitalists, and that the working class would have eventually taken over society as a matter of historical determinism: the role of the working class was to follow such a tendency (Judis 2016). Laclau and Mouffe saw this “passive” approach as responsible in bringing about the right-wing totalitarianisms of the early twentieth century.

Lenin, on the other hand, viewed in the dynamism of the working class the driving revolutionary force and believed that a subversive socialist party would have succeeded in overthrowing the capitalist state. Lenin’s strategy, centred on the party’s fundamental role, is more akin to that of the French Jacobins (*ibidem*), and less grounded on historical/economic determinism. Neither his approach, however, brought about positive outcomes: on the contrary, it has led to the dictatorship of the party and then that of Stalin.

The first communist theorist that, according to Laclau and Mouffe, identified the most appropriate strategy for socialism to take over is Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci (1948) challenges the idea that revolution is the means that will lead socialism to power, and instead maintains that the current socioeconomic structure of society is to be overthrown through a “war of position”. The underlying rationale of Gramsci’s thought is that society’s *élites* enjoy what he calls a “hegemony”, especially in terms of political culture and leading world view. The working class, which should constitute a “historical bloc” with other weaker/non-establishment groups of society, must conduct a war of position in order to establish a new hegemony. The struggle, thus, has to focus on persuasion and conviction.

The majority of Gramsci’s ideas have been inherited by Laclau and Mouffe, in particular those of war of position, hegemony and historical bloc. They only disagree with Gramsci’s appraisal of the working class’s pivotal role, which he still maintained, and argue that a historical bloc of the left should gather different political forces and their different demands, each of which articulates a specific struggle. For this reason, socialism cannot be achieved through a single struggle between two classes over one specific demand, but must capture a variety of social circumstances and claims.

Laclau and Mouffe’s whole approach is underpinned by a more general criticism, which is directed against Marx’s theory of history. Namely, they reject the idea that the struggle between the *bourgeoisie* and the proletariat is the driving force of history (Tremlett 2015), which will necessarily lead to historical change and to the establishment of a socialist society. They believe, instead, that socialism should concern all aspects of society, and not merely the political one: rather than opposing anti-capitalism, they simply view it as one of the various demands that

some historic bloc may wish to see satisfied, in the wider context of a hegemonic struggle aimed at imposing radical democracy.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), Laclau and Mouffe elaborated a critique of orthodox Marxist concepts; the actual theory is contained in *On Populist Reason* (2005), conceived by Laclau only. The book responds to the need for socialism of finding an alternative unifying principle to that of class struggle and anti-capitalism that would reverse the tendency of social democratic parties of leaning towards the “third way”: left-wing populism constitutes such an alternative.

In this work, Laclau sets off by criticising the dominant understanding of populism. The underlying idea is that there is a general bias in contemporary societies towards populism (D'Eramo 2013): this is normally viewed as a deviation from the standard political, an expression of the most brutal forces that lie silent in society and find their ultimate political realization in the collective and resentful cry of the masses. This notion of populism is however misleading and artificial, for it has benefitted the ruling oligarchy in its contest with the masses. Laclau instead argues that populism is like a container of various popular demands and feelings that arise out of uncertain circumstances. Its immediate effect is that of separating two different groups, through the creation of an “internal antagonistic frontier” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 110, 131): the people on one side and the *élite* on the other. The specific way that a “populist” movement will come to have significance will then depend on the circumstances: this is what Laclau means by “container of empty signifiers (Laclau 2005, 129)”. But populism is, in its essence, the true nature of the political: it expresses the vagueness of the political and societal reality of the moment, while at the same time taking simplification to the extreme – and simplification is the quintessence of political discourse.

Laclau's theory is peculiar in two respects: on one hand, in its descriptive part, it captures a number of typical elements of populist movements, so that the majority of these may well be said to behave in “Laclauian” terms, insofar as they display those traits he singled out. The theory however owes much of its effectiveness to the intuition that a crucial aspect of populism is its lack of content, or, better, of a precise content, as this may change depending on circumstances. What defines populism, apart from the very lack of a precise content, is the kind of discourse, the behaviour: in other words, its external features, not theory. As a consequence, virtually any populist party can be viewed as “Laclauian”, not because they drew any inspiration from him, but merely because they behave like he described. All the parties that are analysed through this work can indeed be said to display Laclauian features.

On the other hand, Laclau maintains that, precisely because of its effectiveness, populism would be the best means to foster a socialist restructuring of society.

Socialism however cannot be pictured as the politicization of a single struggle, demand, or class: it is a sum of various demands, groups and struggles. The point is that even if we concede to the effectiveness of populism, nothing can guarantee it will be used to uphold socialism; indeed, Laclau's understanding of populism can very well describe many contemporary right-wing populist parties. Therefore, Laclau's theory is generally well-suited to accurately show the functioning of populist parties or movements; but while its descriptive part captures the nature of a true phenomenon, the normative part remains vague.

PODEMOS, LACLAU AND THE SPANISH CASE

Podemos, among the three, is the most consistent with Laclau's ideas, being the one where the link with the philosopher is strongest and most evident. Contrary to the leaders of Syriza and the 5 Star Movement, in fact, Iñigo Errejón, Podemos's chief theorist, explicitly mentions Laclau as his main intellectual reference, both in his doctoral thesis (Errejón 2011), and in various interviews (Judis 2016). Apart from the intellectual debt that Podemos owes to Laclau, which virtually places it in the "populist socialist" subgroup of the radical family, its actual programme is rather faithful to left libertarian ideals, and this constitutes further evidence such a grouping.

Podemos owes considerable part of its electoral success to the growing wave of dissatisfaction directed at austerity policies that have been implemented in Spain since 2010. This is no novelty and actually constitutes a common feature of all parties under scrutiny. In terms of composition, Podemos represents the merger of three rather distinct groups (Gomez-Reino and Llamazares 2015): Izquierda Anticapitalista, a Trotskyist radical left party; the 15M, a grassroots movement organized around a popular antiausterity protest, gathering different social groups; a group of political science students and researchers from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. Each of these elements contributed to the forming of Podemos's specific character: Izquierda Anticapitalista's legacy can be seen by Podemos's political programme, clearly leaning towards the left of the political spectrum; 15M is viewed as constituting the original popular base of Podemos, and anticipated its rhetoric of antagonism between the people and the caste; the Complutense scholars, finally, provided Podemos with its ideological content, with references to Laclau and to South American populist experiences. The latter is however the dominant component in terms of the ideological outlook of the party.

The Universidad Complutense scholars – both Iglesias and Errejón come from this group - brought to Podemos the intellectual legacy of Laclau’s thought and the practical one of Latin American Populisms. The link between the two is clear: South American populisms are presented as a successful practical application of Laclau’s ideas who, in turn, are the ultimate source of ideological content for Podemos’s leaders, who mainly come from this group. Indeed, Iñigo Errejón, in his doctoral thesis *Evo Pueblo: la Hegemonía del Mas en Bolivia*, he applies the core of Laclau’s ideas to the analysis of the seizure of power of the Mas (Movimiento Al Socialismo) in Bolivia. In brief, the Mas has managed to capitalize on a fragmented political scenario where no group or movement could be said to be hegemonic. Mas and Evo Morales, its leader, gathered around the movement different elements of society – mainly indigenous and peasants, the majority of the Bolivian population –, each having its own demand. Morales however managed to create a unified bloc, which became “the people”, around the symbolic theme of preservation of natural resources, and found a common enemy in the white, industrial and capitalist *élite*. Once the Mas reached power, it filled the hegemonic vacuum that had always been present in Bolivia, thus establishing, finally, a hegemonic leadership. Through this work Errejón has sought to highlight how a consistent application – regardless of the intentionality of its leaders – of Laclau’s theory has brought the Mas to success.

Podemos is, in its own right, attempting to establish a hegemonic leadership in Spain, but a number of Laclauian elements are already easily identifiable. In the first place, Podemos has immediately exploited the transclass nature of the anti-austerity protests, which transcended the traditional political dimensions of left and right. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) had imagined, Podemos harnessed the emergence of an “internal antagonistic frontier” which eventually opposed the “people” from the “caste”. Such an internal frontier, according to Laclau, is paramount to defining the nature of the popular movement itself which, indeed, we can argue has been the case with Podemos, since it has constructed its very identity in open confrontation with a ruling *élite* unwilling to yield to their demands.

Second, Laclau’s mark on Podemos led the party to present itself as an alternative to the traditional left, as a popular movement encompassing a wider strata of the population. This operation of gathering multiple popular demands is a typical feature of Laclau’s populism which, as “container of empty signifiers”, may capture more effectively than other, more traditional political formations, the variety of a given social context, as its inherent ideological vagueness can more easily accommodate different social demands (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This operation of uniting various popular demands is facilitated by the

adoption of one key concept, or key claim, around which the whole movement is grounded: in Podemos's case, this is a cry to put an end to austerity. Indeed, the identification of the ruling political and economic *élites* with austerity policies, which ought to be overturned, are the bulk of Podemos's rhetoric.

Third, In Laclau's mind, radical democracy would transform standard political practice: political activities would not be carried out exclusively by the institutionalized, representative system, but through all sorts of channels that are provided for by society. In this respect, too, Podemos has shown consistency with Laclau's thought, as its presence has been felt well outside traditional political boundaries: thanks to the experience of the 15M, Podemos has started its existence as a grassroots movement, which was paramount for the mobilization of people in the squares. Podemos even brought TV use to a different level for Spanish standards: not only political debate has been carried out more effectively on TV than in Parliament (Hancox 2015; Toscano 2015; Barriere, Douglas and Robson 2015), but TV and media debates certified Pablo Iglesias's role as political pundit, and introduced to the wider public his political views. Furthermore, Podemos is present in the Spanish – and European – Parliament, which, albeit a more institutionalized means of representation, is still crucial for the political success of the party.

Through time, however, Podemos has undergone a few changes. After the Vinalegre congress in fall 2014, the party has undergone an organizational change: more centralization, greater importance of the leader, and, most importantly, the relative weight of Podemos's radical component has diminished, as it has been kept out of Parliament. This strategy responds to the new circumstances, which have marked Podemos's entry in Parliament and its new role as one of the major parties in Spain: Iglesias, supported by Errejón, has concluded that a more "institutional" outlook for Podemos would have helped it win Parliament and become Spain's leading party. This move seems yet not to be too consistent with Laclau's idea that a historical bloc of popular forces, different among each other in composition and demands, should unite against the establishment. Laclau, however, never said which specific demands should constitute the content of a populist discourse, precisely because its perk is that of adapting its message and its demands to the circumstances. Thus, if on one hand Iglesias has weakened the most radical and most left-wing elements of the party, especially those from Izquierda Anticapitalista (Kouvelakis, 2016), keeping them out of Parliament, on the other he has done so in order to be more appealing to moderate forces, so, in theory, it remains consistent with the idea of a party gathering different groups and different sets of demands.

To see whether Podemos will remain faithful to Laclau and his radical populist appeal, that will depend a lot on the figure of Pablo Iglesias. Indeed, Laclau's container of empty signifiers need not necessarily be a discourse or a concept, but it may as well be a person (Barriere, Durgan and Robson 2015) who plays the role of uniting different popular demands and presenting them in a new form, that is convincing to the people. Partially, it seems that Iglesias may possess the qualities of a charismatic leader: according to Alberto Toscano (2015), he is much more pragmatic than Errejón, consistently with their two different roles, and is obsessed with victory: "The autonomy of politics as a moment of power and the seizure of an occasion is Iglesias's driving preoccupation, not the Laclauian populist hypothesis – though at times he echoes Errejón, populism appears in Iglesias more as an expedient discursive strategy, not as a theoretical commitment (*ibidem*).” If Iglesias can succeed in representing the people's struggle against the ruling *élite*, and in uniting different segments of the population under the anti-austerity motto, he may well be that charismatic figure that can serve as container of empty signifiers, attempting to impose a new hegemony. Importantly, this may occur independently of Iglesias's theoretical commitment to Laclau: insofar as the strategy is efficient, the content may vary.

SYRIZA

Like Podemos, Syriza's relevance rose only in recent years partly as a result of the economic crisis, which hit Greece unlike any other European country. Its connection with Laclau is however not as evident, if only because none of Syriza's members explicitly mentions him as intellectual mentor of the party, and there is no document, like Errejón's doctoral thesis, that can testify their deliberate intention to follow his thought. In spite of this, it is rather likely that a number of Syriza's members have been influenced by his ideas, as they were students at Essex University, where Laclau taught. Among these: Fotini Vaki, Rena Dourou, and Yanis Varoufakis (Howarth 2015), who was not however a student of Laclau's course, albeit they were both at Essex during the same period of time.

Links with Laclau can however be inferred, and there are plenty. Like Podemos, Syriza is the result of a merger of different political currents and factions: the number of single components, however, is much higher, reflecting Syriza's attempt to gather all the radical forces of the country, each carrying their specific demand, under one single "popular bloc", striving for hegemony. As a strategy, it appears consistent with Laclau's ideas.

The number of parties making up the coalition – Syriza means “coalition of the radical left” – is rather high, but the main currents inside Syriza come from a limited number of groups: Synaspismos, Syriza’s main component, whose members mostly come from the Kke, the Greek orthodox communist party; a number of “Trotskyist groups, Maoists, *altermondialistes*, [...] as well as the remnant eurocommunists, the Akoa (Kouvelakis 2016).” Albeit a number of Syriza’s most prominent figures, including Tsipras, come from the Kke component of Synaspismos, the main intellectual influence over the latter was Eurocommunism (*ibidem*). This was Syriza’s original composition in 2004, when it first formed; but in 2012 the party reorganized in the direction of deeper unity, and attracted former Pasok members and other figures coming from the old establishment of the socialist party. The role of social movements, even though present, was not as crucial: its origin is thus more “institutional”, if compared with Podemos and its strong grassroots base. This character is quite telling: on one hand, Syriza is not as committed as Podemos on the front of “radicalizing” democracy, spreading the debate through all possible channels, from TV and media to the squares. On the other, the single components of the coalition are more numerous and more heterogeneous among each other, which is consistent with Laclau’s idea of a populist front competing for hegemony.

Syriza, moreover, displays a number of additional elements that suggest a correspondence with Laclau’s theory: it has, like Podemos, harnessed the presence of the “internal antagonistic frontier”, dividing the people from the ruling *élite*; it has united its voters around one central theme, namely to put an end to austerity; and it has attempted to offer an alternative to the traditional left, presented as inefficient and corrupt. Finally, during the negotiations with the so-called Troika over Greece’s sovereign debt, Syriza, and in particular Varoufakis, lamented that representatives of European and Member States’ institutions treated Syriza as an outcast, politically destabilising, blindly radical and dangerously populist, somewhat confirming Laclau’s warning over the stigma that surrounds the mere word *populism*. This however is no novelty, but rather typical of the majority of radical or populist parties.

The party’s heterogeneity is further shown, for instance, by the figure of Varoufakis, an economist coming from the academic environment: Tsipras called him to serve as Finance Minister, mainly to conduct the negotiations with European institutions. Even though he attended Essex University, where Laclau taught, it is unclear how much he owes to the latter’s work (Marsden 2015; Dmitryev 2015). He claims Karl Marx and Margaret Thatcher are two of his main sources of inspiration (Varoufakis 2015, Dmitryev 2015). The former defined the content of his

political thought, and indeed he defines himself as an “erratic Marxist” (*ibidem*), while the latter helped him adjust his political goals: he does not aim at overthrowing capitalism, but at saving it, while waiting for the left to come up with a better alternative, which it has so far failed to do (Varoufakis 2016).

We could thus say that Syriza is consistent with Laclau in *spirit*, as shown by its moves in the Greek political arena, but how much of its programme has been intentionally shaped so as to match Laclau’s doctrine, that we do not know. What we do know, instead, is that, considering the political and intellectual origin of Syriza’s components, Syriza is a populist socialist party, the fourth on Fagerholm’s list. The merger of former members of the Greek communist party with Eurocommunists and Social Democrats from Pasok, Feminists and Greens definitely marks its departure from both orthodox communists and reform communists (Syriza 2015); its populist approach, on the other hand, distinguishes it from traditional democratic socialism. Finally, lying clearly on the left of the political spectrum, it belongs to the populist socialist group, and not to the social populist one, whose ideology appears to shift between right and left. Syriza’s belonging to the populist socialist subgroup and, more in general, to the radical left family, has however been recently challenged, mainly by orthodox communists.

This criticism should however be viewed as internal to the radical family, for it stigmatizes Syriza – and indeed other populist socialist parties – for not being anti-capitalist, or not centred enough on class struggle and on revolution (Wsws 2015). For these reasons, the criticism goes, these parties should not be labelled as left, but, at best, as “pseudo-left”. As we have seen, the radical family comprises parties or groups that are neither communist, nor anticapitalist: truly, even a group that swings between left and right, such as the social populist, may be viewed as radical. The communist claim to represent the only true left is the only true content of this criticism, which shall therefore be dismissed.

One last remark on Syriza’s recent developments. After the party was forced to accept the memorandum imposed by the EU in late spring 2015, it has undergone internal turmoil: rejecting the EU memorandum was the chief reason for which Syriza was elected and the crucial element in its political programme. As a consequence, many MPs left Syriza which resulted in it being much less aligned with the radical left than it was before. On the other hand however, its populist element has remained intact: it must be recalled that, since it became the majority party in Greece in January 2015, Syriza has governed in coalition with the Independent Greeks, a right-wing populist party. The two parties remained together during the September 2015 election, and they are governing together at the moment. In

spite of having different positions on a number of topics, they agree on the main demand of their programme: to put an end to austerity.

Syriza's present situation, in sum, is rather unique: it has built its fortunes on antiausterity positions, and has highlighted its leaning towards the left, in terms of political culture, programme and membership. More than Podemos, however, it has bent to more traditional party dynamics, such as forging alliances out of need with ideologically different factions. This move however, which has appalled the most leftist of commentators (Wsws 2015), seems to be rather consistent with Laclau's intuition that alliances of very different groups may well be possible and effective, provided that these agree on a minimum of shared objectives and demands. Considering that both parties agreed on ending austerity, and that accepting the memorandum has emptied their programme of significance, it seems that Syriza has now to agree on a new "key concept", or final objective, in order to reaffirm its identity as an antiestablishment party.

THE 5 STAR MOVEMENT

The Italian 5 Star Movement, in terms of ideology, is the hardest to assess. Partially this depends on the Movement's view of traditional party politics, which are deemed to be corrupt and inefficient: for this reason, the traditional dimensions of left and right are rejected. In addition, the party is truly novel, in the sense that, regardless of previous political affiliations of its members, it has attempted to do away with any competing political culture. As a result, the party's position on the right-left spectrum is less defined than that of the other two, even though it arguably leans slightly to the left, and the party can most sensibly be defined as "social populist", the fifth subgroup of Fagerholm's list.

In general, the Movement's political attitude can be defined as populist, and indeed it appears to reflect many points of Laclau's theory, in that it 1) draws a line between the "people" and the "caste", 2) its main political stances on pivotal issues are often vague and unclear (Perazzoli 2013), 3) it purports to be an alternative to both the right and the traditional left, by now identified with the "caste" in general. Indeed, its supporters come from both the right and the left, and the Movement itself declares to stand nowhere on the left-right spectrum – it stays with the citizens. 4) It makes use of a revolutionary rhetoric and aggressive language and, even though its classification as an "antisystem" political organization is subject to debate, it definitely displays a number of features that are typical of political movements of this kind.

Two elements stand out: the 5 Star's peculiar understanding of political alliances and coalitions, which they reject altogether (Barbacetto 2015); the crucial role that it attributes to the internet as the most appropriate *forum* where democratic political activity can take place. Concerning the first point, the refusal to forge alliances, the 5 Star do not seem to be too consistent with Laclau, nor with Gramsci for that matter. Instead of trying to construct a "historical bloc" of the left, gathering various demands and uniting them in a single struggle for hegemony, the 5 Star have decided to do away with the traditional concepts of right and left, and to present themselves as the true depository of all instances of the "honest" portion of the population. There is no need, thus, to compromise their own position through alliances, for their apparent lack of political affiliation on the right-left spectrum would arguably accommodate every reasonable political demand. Moreover, alliances would amount to a concession to traditional party politics, which the 5 Star so strongly despise.

As to the internet, it has been described by Movement, supporters as the arena where all citizens can debate, take part and contribute to the decision-making activity of the polity. It could thus constitute the most appropriate place for the formation of a "general will", whereby a contemporary, high-tech form of direct democracy could be realized (Perazzoli 2013). These elements have led observers to link the Movement's principles to Rousseau's political philosophy. Indeed, not only the reference to direct democracy recalls Rousseau, but their aversion for party politics appears similar to how Rousseau viewed political factions as a potential obstacle to the effective formation of a general will. Their aim is, in fact, to construct a movement that is not positioned anywhere on the right-wing dimension, but that would attract anyone who, like them, proves to be honest: mainly, the ordinary citizen. Thus, the internet as the *forum* for direct democracy, and a sort of anti-establishment universalism: these elements have often been associated with Rousseau's vision of the state.

Those highlighting the connection between Rousseau and the 5 Star usually present two different sorts of arguments: right wing journalists and politicians single out Rousseau as the source of Grillo's despotism and apparent authoritarianism; left-wing observers point out that the 5 Star's focus on direct democracy, on the rejection of the party system and on the principle of imperative mandate, may be ideas adapted from Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762).

As to the right-wing critique, it views Rousseau as the father of modern totalitarianism, and thus the connection with the 5 Star only proves the latter's authoritarian tendencies (Gurrado 2016). The main point of the argument is that by adopting Rousseau's political vision, it is not fully clear what would be of those

who disagree with the General Will. Many critics believe that what is implied is that there would actually be no room for disagreement, in a typically authoritarian fashion (Macioce 2015; Gonzato 2016). Since Grillo has indeed expelled from his party (which he refrains from calling “party”) those offering alternative views, the link with this understanding of Rousseau’s work aims at showing how direct democracy is in fact a veil to hide more subtle forms of authoritarianism.

Others have seen similarities between Grillo’s, or Casaleggio’s, attitude and Rousseau’s figure of the legislator. Even though, as admitted by Bertram (2010), “the figure of the legislator is a puzzle,” he is presented as being needed when citizens lack the moral qualities to produce good laws; he is a sort of *deus ex machina* that injects life to the new polity by putting it on the right moral tracks. Regardless of the questions that may legitimately arise around this figure, Federico Gonzato (2016) promptly equates Rousseau’s legislator to either Grillo or Casaleggio’s son, Davide. Again, Gonzato probably makes this association as Rousseau’s legislator was authorized to “persuade [citizens] by non-rational means to legislate in their own best interest”; this means, in other words, coercing individuals to understand and accept the general will, approach that Grillo often seems happy to apply to his fellow party members.

The left-wing critique attempts instead to assess whether certain elements of the Five Star can truly be traced back to Rousseau and, if so, whether the 5 Star are consistent with his thought.

Some years ago Casaleggio (Cecere 2013) explained how the Five Star’s support for direct democracy, and its rejection of representation, find their root in Rousseau’s Social Contract. While it is true that Rousseau had little sympathy for representative politics (*ibidem*), he did however concede that it may have been an appropriate tool for administration, at least sometimes. Rousseau’s claim is sound if we consider the reasoning that grounds it: the sovereign is a different entity from the government. The former refers to the population as a whole, who is entitled to debate, make and vote the laws of the state, and cannot be represented; the latter, government, is made up of a restricted number of people who issue decrees, not laws, on day-to-day administrative activities, and can indeed be represented. If we follow Bertram, we can imagine the “laws [...] conceived of as the people setting a constitutional framework for society, with the government decrees comprising the more normal business of legislation (Bertram 2010)”; this picture is not so different from that of a contemporary representative democracy. Clearly, however, neither Casaleggio nor other members of the Movement have fully grasped what Rousseau meant to say.

Additionally, the Five Star Movement is known to support the imperative mandate for MPs and the popular referendum; these two are presented as quint-

essential elements of a more direct form of democracy. Whether it so or not, Rousseau would have hardly supported either practice. Actually, Rousseau (1762) maintained that government should be elected by *ad hoc* commissions, which shall in turn be elected by the population; both government and commissions can, however, be revoked anytime if the people deem it necessary. This is what probably led commentators to deem Rousseau to be committed to the imperative mandate, which is a mistake though. For the sake of clarity, imperative mandate means that a public official is elected under the condition that he will perform a certain action; in case he fails to do so, he has to leave office.

As we noted above, Rousseau distinguishes the sovereign/people from government: the latter has to run the administrative day-to-day activities and does not issue laws, but decrees. On the other hand, the sovereign designs the constitutional framework of society and issues laws, which must always be respected by government, because laws coming from the sovereign are nothing but the general will of the people, which its commissaries – government – cannot but respect. In other words, one thing is to say that government must always comply with the basic principles of society, or with its constitutional framework, or with the General Will; quite another is to say that Rousseau is committed to the imperative mandate, which he is not. Moreover, we must recall that the 5 Star support the imperative mandate for Parliamentary deputies, which represent the legislative body. The legislative, according to Rousseau, is the Sovereign, i.e. the people, and it cannot be represented, so: it does not really make sense to talk about imperative mandate for a non-representative body. Indeed, Rousseau said that *government* and *commissions* may be revoked, not the *legislative*. Additionally, Rousseau puts a lot of emphasis on the role of deliberation, which is crucial in order to reach the general will; it is thus hard to imagine him supporting the imperative mandate, because it challenges the idea that laws should be formed through a process of deliberation: if I have to vote something on pain of losing my job, there is little to deliberate on.

The stress Rousseau puts on deliberation, moreover, seems not to be consistent with support for referendums: referendums challenge deliberation, in that political agency is reduced to a yes/no vote. It is thus very unlikely that Rousseau would have favoured them. Recall that in Rousseau's view, it is the sovereign/people who make laws, not government; in our days, the only way through which the people can directly make laws is through a referendum, so this may have led to confusion. Rousseau merely meant to say that it is the people who issue laws, and not government, who issues decrees.

In sum, the Five Star are definitely populist, and their attitude reflects a good deal of Laclau's concepts, but this should not lead to see them as inspired by him.

In terms of ideological content, that of the Five Star Movement is rather vague and scarce. Even Rousseau, as Lorenzo Mosca (2016) argued, “is but a symbol”, used to ideally connect the Five Star with the philosopher of direct democracy. In addition, its political programme contains a number of peculiar stances: for instance, it supports a basic citizenship’s income, but has restrictive views on immigration. It is hard, therefore, to define the movement as either a left or right wing political entity. It would seem more appropriate to define them as a social populist group.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have seen that Laclau’s theory can accurately describe the strategy of each of these parties. As he had imagined, all parties have built part of their success on the widening of an “internal antagonistic frontier” that has formed in European societies, dividing the people from the élites. All parties, moreover, present themselves as an alternative to more traditional political groups: Syriza and Podemos are an alternative to both social democracy and the traditional left; the 5 Star presents itself as a political revolution, which has overcome the traditional political concepts of right and left, and will found a new society based on direct democracy. Finally, in terms of membership and political programme, all parties can be said to be a synthesis of various political demands and different social groups.

In general, the former political culture of party members has contributed heavily to the specific positions of each party on the left-right spectrum. Podemos, whose members came, in part, from Izquierda Anticapitalista and the 15M movement, maintains leftist-libertarian policies; Syriza, whose members come from the Kke but have been fed with Eurocommunism, seems to be more typically socialist. The 5 Star Movement, who do not refer to any preceding political culture, are harder to define, and for this reason should be viewed as a social populist group, whose positions are vague and whose cultural content is little defined.

Of these groups, only the former two present a connection with Laclau. In the case of Podemos, the connection is evident: Errejon has, in his doctoral thesis, taken the Bolivian Mas as an example of how effective Laclau’s doctrine is; Errejon is truly following Laclau’s concepts when elaborating Podemos’s political strategy, and Laclau’s figure as mentor can hardly be disputed. As for Syriza, the connection is lighter for, even though a few of its members have attended Essex University, there is no clear evidence that they intended to shape the party according to his ideas. Moreover, as we have seen, Syriza has a more traditional party structure, as shown by its alliances and by the presence in its ranks of people coming from the

old establishment. The connection with Laclau however remains, as Syriza's attitude and strategy can be said to correspond to Laclau's design, and surely they do not deny their belonging to the radical left.

The Five Star, instead, present no real connection with either Laclau or Rousseau. True, some of their features can be said to recall Laclau's theory, and their constant reference to direct democracy may remind of Rousseau, but there is little more than this, insofar as theory is concerned.

To conclude, as we have seen in the introduction, Laclau's theory proves to be very useful in capturing the essential features of populist parties and movements, for it has singled out the vagueness of populism as its crucial element, and its adaptability to different sorts of contents and demands. However, it is precisely this vagueness that seems problematic: it helps a lot in the task of description, but it can accommodate any kind of content, from those of Podemos and Syriza, to Berlusconi's and Trump's. What remains to be seen, moreover, is whether populist discourse is effective *per se*, or whether it merely exploits periods of uncertainty and successfully rides the wave of widespread popular dissatisfaction.

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