«The emperor wears no clothes!»: a *laclaudian* perspective on EUropopulism

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Abstract. The current paper consists of thought exercise that aims at challenging the *quasi*-universal assumption that only those opposing the multidimensional integration project underlying the construction and expansion of the European Union are populists. Analyzing the Europe Commission's president - Ursula von der Leyen - innaugural speech against the backdrop of Ernesto Laclau "On populist reason", this paper unveils traces of populism in the EU actions and discourse, only to confirm populism as a logic inherent to the political, rather than an ideology *per se*.

Keywords: Populism; European Union; Ursula von der Leyen; Laclau; Discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decades, the development of the European Union (hereafter, EU) has relied on discourses increasingly marked by a normative agenda centered on democracy and peace (Tocci, 2020). More often than not, through the self-appraisal of its own merits as pluralist and cosmopolitan beacon, the leading forces of the EU have dismissed all those struggling against the mainstream directives of the Union as *eurosceptics* (Schneider, 2019), accusing them of being *populists* (eg, Norris & Inglehart, 2019), disregard they stand on the Left (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2018) or the Right (Vieten & Poynting, 2016) of the political spectrum.

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As the up until recently undisputed, mainstream consensus around the liberal democratic model and cosmopolitan-oriented policies seems to be rapidly eroding (eg, Fukuyama, 2018), the question that remains to be asked is whether one can call the EU itself a populist too.

For the proponents of the EU, such possibility would pose it itself as a logical (almost offensive) impossibility, for their definition of populism relies on the anti-pluralist exclusion of given fringes of the *demos* by the *populists (*Müller, 2016*).* Being the EU defined as pluralist, democratic and inclusive structure how could it, then, be populist?!

In the following pages, through a thought experiment, I will search for an answer having as backdrop the consolidated - although not necessarily consensual - framework of Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005). Given the existing space constraints, I shall synecdochally critique the first speech of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (hereafter, UL)[2], before the European Parliament.

Fully embracing a *laclaudian* ontology, this otherwise narrow exercise - *vis-à-vis* the vast complexity of the European Union history and structure - is informed by the notion that discourses offer a "«meaningful» totality that transcends the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic" (Laclau, 1993), given that they are plentiful of "elements (...) [that] are over-determined (...) and saturated with surplus meaning" (Gaonkar, 2012), thus allowing one to retrieve significant pieces, which - once properly articulated - will satisfactory offer an accurate portrayal of the reality under scrutiny.

Even if Laclau's *oeuvre* is mainly dedicated to exploring the developments and possible pathways for counter-hegemonic movements, i.e. those moved by the wish to overturn the political circumstances they experience, this just adds a second layer of counter-intuitiveness to my essay. Altogether, this makes it more challenging, however it makes it even further promising *vis-à-vis* Laclau's work relevance for understanding populism as political logic.

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[2] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/president-elect-speech-original_en.pdf, accessed on May 26, 2020.

CONSTITUTING THE *EUROPEAN PEOPLE* PHASE 1: DEMARCATION FROM THE EXTERNAL OTHER

The 42 minute-long speech from UL before the European Parliament, in Strasbourg, on November 27, 2019, marked the *first day in the office* of the European Commission's new elected-president. Conventionally, this speech is held to present the priorities for the forthcoming term and the new European Commissioners. UL entirely lived up to the tradition.

Unsurprisingly, UL's speech dwelled upon the challenges for *Europe* and the *European people* (twice referred to as "European family" - pages 5 and 14)*,* taking as granted the existence of an *European identity* marked *inter alia* by: the aspiration of peace; cultural, political and economic inclusive and democratic diversity; the defense of international multilateralism; the promotion of sustainable growth; the mastery of new technologies; and the unquestionable rule of law. Just as any other identitarian construction, this process is only possible through a considerable degree of abstraction, in which "vagueness and indeterminacy", and the activation of "rhetorical devices" are outstanding *sine qua non* conditions[3] (Laclau, 2005: 67-69).

In line with that, the *European identity* - the constitution of the *European people*, if you will - relies on the "tension between the differential and the equivalential logics" (Laclau, *op. cit*: 70*)*. The former stands as a *negative* identity that underlines what is *not* considered acceptable as the part of the constitution of the *people* - also known as *constitutive exclusion* -, while the latter articulates its constitutive heterogeneous parts.

In the case of the former, difference is attained in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, UL considers those who weren't affiliated to the EU - particularly those to the East - to be "out in the cold" (page 5), hence unable to pursue "our European path" (page 9). This is accompanied by the "need to strengthen our external borders", since, even if "Europe will always provide shelter to those who are in need of international protection", one should not forget that some people "have no right to stay", so EU must "ensure" they "return home" (page 12) - never *deporting people* has been so politely phrased! On the other hand, and in my view more significantly, the differentiation *vis-à-vis* the external Other is completed through the exaltation of EU as a world vanguard on several domains:

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[3] From a *laclaudian* standpoint there is nothing pejorative in this, acknowledging it only brings us close to realizing that populism, as a political logic, "is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such." (Laclau, 2005: 67)

addressing climate change, enhancing the digitalization of work and economy, ensuring the rule of law in "every country"[4], and on "great global issues" (pages 7, 9, 13, 14, respectively). Curiously enough, this differentiation is presented not as a vain urge for power, but rather as the response to a somewhat messianic call - "The world needs our leadership more than ever" (page 6); "We have the duty to act and the power to lead" (page 8) - or, as in the colonial past, to fulfil a self-proclaimed historical role of supremacy: "This is Europe's vocation"; "And once again Europe is already leading the way" (pages 7 and 8, respectively).

As for the latter, attempting to constitute what Laclau designates as *equivalential chain*, UL appeals to the "European values". There aren't much explicit elements to actually define what these values stand for[5], something to be expected from a *lacluadian* standpoint, given that the greater the heterogeneity, "the greater is the need for an emptier, thus more inclusive political subject to suture and articulate the unity amidst difference" (Gaonkar, *op. cit)*. This *emptiness drive* is all the more visible in the starting words of UL, as she defines what the European Union "has always meant":

> "It is not about parties or politics, rules or regulations, markets or currencies. It is ultimately – and above all else – about people and their aspirations. It is about people standing together. For their liberty, for their values, simply for a better future." (page 4)

Altogether, these elements constitute the "totality" allowing for the "differential ensemble" that "has to be present in each act of signification" (Laclau, *op. c*it: 67). In simpler terms, these are the necessary conditions for the EU to establish its *demos* and its borders - both empirically and normatively - *vis-à-vis* the exterior.

The last argument of this section - which could summarize all the former - relates to the erroneous overlap of Europe (the continent comprising 45 countries) and EU (the political structure with 27 member states). This overlap - which is clearly visible in UL's

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[4] Although in the present speech UL is not totally clear about what is the precise of meaning of ensuring the global respect for the rule of law never hesitating to "take all necessary measures" (page 13), some of her following speeches shed light on the European Commission's President ambition to constitute an army of the EU (DW, 2019), thereby converting the Union into a military superpower that is able to intervene in every part of the world, under the whatever justifications it deems appropriate - just like USA or NATO.

[5] On two occasions they are associated with the "rule of law" (pages 7 and 13), on other two they are presented as "solidarity" (5 and 12), and on another as "responsibility" (12).

speech when she refers to the European Parliament as "the heart of this European democracy", the place where "a fresh start for Europe" can be initiated (page 5) - allows an otherwise unexpected intersection of Laclau and Müller's views (an author who clearly stands in the front line of the defense of the EU against its *populist* challengers).

According to the latter: "Populism requires a *pars pro toto* argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense." (Müller, *op. cit*). In other words, what Müller (perhaps inadvertently) points out, is that the populist logic implies an arbitrary, rather than systematic *rationale*. Again, this allows a dialogue with the *laclaudian* equivalential logic, which - as I just pointed out - needs a high degree of emptiness to be attained.

In the case of the EU, this is unequivocally present in the intended and reiterated overlap of EU and Europe, for any empirical account is unapologetically left aside. Indeed, the extent to which this is done stretches even further, being visible in the ways the Union is open to negotiate its *totality*, particularly in the pathways for EU enlargement.

Insofar as this is now stands as a distant horizon, not too long ago, intense talks were held to have Turkey joining the EU. Curiously enough, Turkey is not only the illegitimate occupier of part of Cyprus - a EU member state (Wikipedia, s.d.) - , as it never had the political or cultural bounds to Europe of former colonial territories like, say, Morocco. However, the adherence of the latter was bluntly rejected for geographic reasons (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006), while the former, much weaker bounds and no substantially different geographical situation[6] notwithstanding, has been very close to actually joining the Union.

The underlying arbitrariness of EU's populist discourse becomes altogether more clear if one considers that territories as Reunion or Greenland (administrative extensions of France and Denmark, respectively, which stand on other parts of the world) are embraced as part of the *European people*. In this case, Müller's "*pars pro toto*" becomes a "*toto pro pars*", but the inversion of the author's synecdoche only sheds brighter light

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[6] The geographical argument that Turkey has a part of its territory within "european borders" is all too flawed. Who dictates where the geographical "borders" of Europe are? For reasons of space this is discussion is not possible here

on how, both in EU's discourse and *praxis*, moral reasoning overtly displaces the empirical.

CONSTITUTING THE *EUROPEAN PEOPLE* PHASE 2: EXPELLING THE INNER-OTHER

Be as it may, the aforementioned elements do not exhaust the pathways through which the *European identity* comes to be defined. The pursuit of the totality's constitution relies additionally - and more importantly - on the acknowledgement that the attainment of hegemony depends on the exclusion of something from within that very totality (Laclau, *op.* c*it*: 68).

Reading UL's speech - and having it against the backdrop of History -, I argue that it is the EU's entrenchment in the neoliberal paradigm that stands as a (potential) "particular difference, [that] assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality" (Laclau, *op.* c*it*: 68). As sequentially observed, the neoliberal logic is ubiquitous throughout the speech's 16 pages and, again, it is in the dialectic between equivalence and difference that hegemony arises.

First and foremost, market economy stands as the *nodal point* that explicitly brings together a series of domains (what Laclau calls *popular demands*). It is precisely through the marketization of these otherwise unmarketized domains that the constitution of a common framework (the *democratic demand*) emerges, providing the *people* an object to invest its affect (the lacanian *objet petit a*) - a *sine qua non* condition for the emergence of populism.

In UL's speech this takes places in the following manner: "open and fair trade" are considered "values"; climate change is addressed to enhance "competitiveness", through the transformation of the European Investment Bank into a "climate Bank"; technological advancement is driven by the ambition to stand as "competitive"; innovation is unsurprisingly justified by the need to surpass "our competitors"; "[q]uality jobs, equal opportunities, fair working conditions and inclusion" are contingent on the financial system; "sustainability" is - uncreatively! - presented as "competitive"; and the integration of immigrants is justified by being "in our interest" (pages 7 to 12). As in the examples provided by Laclau (*op, cit*: 88), also in this case, the ontology (neoliberalism) clearly engulfs any ontic attachment to the rhetorically proclaimed prioritization of the people's well being: "(...) in Europe we start with the human being" (page 9).

In fact, if ever there were any doubts on the EU *ethos*, UL clarifies: "our single market, our single currency" are "what makes us strong" (page 11). This synthesis is particularly important, because this completes the advent of an *equivalential chain* in UL's speech: she is precise about what the priorities are and through which institutions they are to be managed. In fact, this is even further specified when she praises the "flexibility" of the "Stability and Growth Pact" - something that is, actually, far from consensual (Wilkinson, 2019).

Secondly, as mentioned above, differentiation is just as important as equivalence. In this case the constitution of the *European identity* by the EU relies on the "differential cathexis" that stems from the "radical discontinuity between an object [market economy] and the one next to it [well being of the citizens]" (Laclau, *op. cit*: 119)[7].

While a superficial reading of UL's words could draw the reader to think there is only equivalence and not differentiation within the EU hegemony - "(...) in the last years, we had to focus on the here-and-now, managing crises after emergency, fighting to keep our unity and solidarity intact" (page 5) - reality is actually more complex.

Recapping History, we will find threats of expulsion of Greece from the EU (Jones, 2015) and high-rank officials of the EU slamming Southern European countries for spending their money in "wines and money" (Lynch & Hopkin, 2018). In both cases, the underlying *rationale* was that these countries' insistence on safeguarding part of its welfare systems was incompatible with the EU's "single market" and "currency".

These episodical events are anything but surprising. The neoliberal notion of market - a single one for the whole of the EU - is part of the Union's official DNA since, at least, 1993, when the Maastricht Treaty entered into to force. Considered as one of its "greatest achievements" (European Commission, s.d.), the notion of an unobstaculized market is a pre-condition for the adherence and permanence of any state.

For instance, the aftermath of the international financial crisis - during which EU had already denied support to Iceland (Busch & Molendowski, 2011) - irrevocably deteriorated the Union's relations with the country, as the latter declined to accept the

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[7] Even if from a *laclaudian* angle this is not the strongest of arguments, I find it also significant that references to health, education, culture, poverty, decent wages, rights and freedoms, protection of nature (detached from climate change!), and democratic participation altogether in demarketized fashion account for no more than 2 of the 16 pages of the speech.

economic *diktats* of the former (BBC, 2013), eventually withdrawing its application for membership.

All things considered, the adherence to neoliberal thinking and *praxis* stands as a proxy for integrating EU's "totality". The reification of the differentiation from within is thus attained through the enforcement of market economy driven policies, absent of room for exploring alternative pathways. Interestingly, this is altogether more puzzling, given France and Germany's (arguably, EU leading powers) historical lean towards social-democratic approaches *vis-à-vis*, for example, their Atlantic preferential partner, the unstoppably neoliberal USA.

Wrapping up, it then becomes clear that the notion of *people* as hegemonic formation advanced by Laclau, in the case of the EU, relies on the submission to the "neoliberal Leviathan"[8]. To a large extent, that is the underlying meaning of EU's general insistence on the idea of economic "resilience" (Tocci, 2020) - present twice in UL's speech (both on page 11) -: member states are expected to comply with the neoliberal agenda, disregard the existing contingencies offered by circumstances at any given moment, otherwise they stop being welcome.

For all that has been said, the *European identity* stands as a true populist *empty signifier*: it entirely lives up to the need "to provide orientation and to secure consent", by offering a "condensed meaning" that is "partially fixed" (Gaonkar, *op cit*: 11), thus rendering it both vague and flexible enough to remain hegemonic, while, simultaneously, somewhat efficiently concealing the fact the actual backbone of the EU is its neoliberal agenda.

CONCLUSION

I have dedicated the first lines of the present essay to the establishment of a counter-intuitive - perhaps, to some, provocative - puzzle: can we call the EU populist? Before addressing the final remarks on the argument I have developed above, a clarification is in order: deeming the EU a structure which action and discourses are, to a large extent, driven by populism doesn't mean - in any possible manner - that those struggling against the EU are not populists *as well*!

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[8] A term coined by Callon & Latour (1981)

In fact, if I am to be consistent with the framework I have been making use of - Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* - I can but underline that, in the author's perspective, populism is inherent to the political. In other words, only in an "impossible world in which politics would have been entirely replaced by administration" could the trademarks of populism - imprecision and simplification - be totally absent (Laclau, *op cit*: 18). As I have pointed out above, this ontology clearly removes from populism the pejorative load it normally carries.

Once that is settled - and, above, empirically sustained - the present essay calls for a final reflection on the times we live:

As noted in UL's speech, the normative grounds of the EU - an *European identity* that brings all the European peoples together, the mission to spread democracy and peace throughout Europe and the world, etc. - are undoubtedly *prima facie* noble. However, the EU hegemony - which, as we have seen, stands as the hegemony of neoliberalism - has been and will continue to be unable to surpass the structural socio-economic inequalities within its member states, for neoliberalism essentially (although not exclusively) depends on it (Brown, 2015).

In my view, this means that the Europopulist insistence on the idea of constituting an *European identity* - as it is now, a shell for a ultra-neoliberal state - is instigating, rather than simmering down, the emergence of other populist forces, which narrative is based on racist and xenophobic standpoints. In other words, by attaching the *European identity* to the neoliberal domination, those at the head of the EU are paving the way for the rise of ethno-economic discourses and regressive traditionalist world views that endanger virtually all cultural, social, economic and political achievements accomplished over the last decades. One way or another - i.e., either by those xenophobic and elitist forces coming to power, or by those imposing the neoliberal dogmas curtailing democratic rights to preserve their hegemony in a technocratic way - the "monstrous offspring" (Brown, 2019) of neoliberalism seems to be at our doorstep.

All things considered, finding a democratic alternative for the peoples of Europe calls for a rupture of this hideous cycle. Paradoxical as it may sound, the first step might just be denouncing the populist nature of EU's discourse so that the *European identity* is released from the neoliberal load it has acquired over the last decades. Then, and probably only then, it will be clear that there is no contradiction between wanting a Europe of

justice, development and prosperity, and having strong bounds among the countries and the peoples of Europe.

Hence, the time has come to impersonate the *naïf* child in the tale of Hans Christian Andersen and unapologetically shout: "The emperor - European Union - wears no clothes!".

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