Populist Use of Memory and Constitutionalism: Two Comments - I

By Patricia Chiantera-Stutte[*]

A. Introduction: is Populism a Latent Possibility of Democracy?

The reasons for the recent rise of Eastern European populism constitute a puzzling issue in political and scientific discussions. As Paul Blokker[1] shows, Eastern European populism can neither be seen as a mere reaction to communism, nor as the "natural" consequence of the transition from a socialist economy to a liberal market model of production. Nor is populism just another form of ethnic nationalism, developed in Eastern Europe and juxtaposed to civic nationalism. The strong dichotomy between an ethnocultural and exclusive nationalism and a civic and inclusive nationalism does not exist in these terms and is the product of a scientific bias, and not a product of empirical observation.

The different developments of nation-state formations in Central Europe and in Western Europe, *i.e.*, the fact that the Central European nations emerged out of the break up of empires in a relative recent time, while the nations characterised by "civic nationalism" developed long before and within already existing political boundaries, does not imply that the recent Eastern European populist movements are directly bound to the forms of nationalism which spread centuries ago.

In order to offer a scientific definition of populism, many researchers construct a general frame, which is able to explain populism not as an exceptional phenomenon, but as a possibility of democracy, or even as another interpretation of

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[1] See Paul Blokker's contribution in this issue.

it.[2] In this view, populism is read, as Margaret Canovan and Yves Mény do,[3] as a political style which aims at attacking the centre of the democratic system, by giving a different interpretation of the principle of the sovereignty of the people. Populism is based on the appeal to the power of the people in a plebiscitarian way, which evokes the image of direct democracy and the ideal of a continuous and deep link between the masses and their leaders, who personify the "people". In this aspect, populism is a latent possibility of the democratic form.[4] In particular, it stresses the "redemptive side of democracy", *i.e.*, the idea that "through political action, society can be transformed in the image of the political".[5]

From this perspective, populism is connoted by its function as a "thickening" of the social bond and a theoretical and general point of view is adopted; *i.e.*, a frame in which *any* form of populism can be investigated. [6]

It is necessary to consider populism neither as an exception, nor as a reaction to modernisation, and thus a heritage of the past that has to be cancelled in the present evolution. This argument is shown by the fact that populism is spread not only in "new" capitalist economies, those of Eastern Europe, but also in the most modernised and democratic European nations, such as France, Austria and Italy. Moreover, a deep investigation into populist movements shows that, far from being based only on tradition and on refusal of modernity, they combine modern and conservative elements in their political campaigns. The key feature of their success lies precisely in this mixture: the image of being new parties opposed to the old corrupt parties – one example is the Austrian *FPÖ* leader's representation of himself as the young man against old politicians, or the Italian *Lega Nord*'s secretary's attacks against old bureaucracies.[7]

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[2] See Margaret Canovan, *Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy*; Yves Mény/Yves Surel, *The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism*, both in: DEMOCRACIES AND THE POPULIST CHALLENGE 25 and 1 (YVES MÉNY/YVES SUREL, EDS., 2000); Blokker's contribution.

[3] Canovan; Mény/Surel (note 2).

[4] Margaret Canovan, *Trust the people! Populism and the two Faces of Democracy*, 47 POLITICAL STUDIES 5 (1999).

[5] GERARD DELANTY/PATRICK O'MAHONY, NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL THEORY. MODERNITY AND THE RECALCITRANCE OF THE NATION 6 (2002).

[6] See Blokker's contribution in this issue. Another concern for the research would be to find out how some forms of populism have developed in particular situations, appealing to particular histories and how they worked, *i.e.*, how *one sort* of populism succeeded.

[7] See Jack Hayward, *Populist Challenge to Elitist Democracy in Europe*, in: ELITISM, POPULISM, EUROPEAN POLITICS 10 (JACK HAYWARD, ED., 1996). For Haider and the Austrian FPÖ see: REINHARD HEINISCH, POPULISM, PROPORZ, PARIAH: AUSTRIA TURNS RIGHT 113 (2002); for Bossi and the Italian Northern League

B. Populism's Selective Memory

The starting question for the analysis of populism is why and in what way did populist movements gain more and more success in Western and in Eastern Europe during the nineties, *i.e.*, in a period of political collapse of the two ideological camps, contemporary to the building of a stronger European union? This question can only be answered if we analyse what these movements offer to their voters, *i.e.*, how they play their role as a "thickening" of the social bond.

Thus, the next question is: what is a thickening of social bond? This function was traditionally appropriated by religion – as the word "religion" says, "unite together". Indeed, the object of religion is the community itself, the social bond, which is reinforced and renewed in the rituals: God is society in the first forms of religion, as Émile Durkheim stated.[8]

In the interpretation elaborated by Jean Jacques Rousseau, and quoted by Durkheim, religion was a "civic" religion, whose centre was the political community, which gives sovereignty to itself. The cult is connoted in this perspective by national rituals, which celebrate the nation and its citizens.
The creation of a civic religion was also one of the political priorities of Italian fascism[9] and a corner stone of the philosophy of one of its main intellectuals, Giovanni Gentile, who based his understanding of the state on the acknowledgement of the superiority of the "us", the community, over the individual.[10] Interestingly, if we go back to one of the first forms of populism, we find Italian fascism, whose ideology was based on the spirituality of the social bond, and on the importance of stressing a history, a tradition.

As a matter of fact, religion, even in its political form, is about the transmission of traditions, about rituals, myths, and processes of remembering and forgetting.

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see: Hans-Georg Betz, *Against Rome. The Lega Nord*, in: THE NEW POLITICS OF THE RIGHT. NEO-POPULIST PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS IN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRACIES 45 (HANS-GEORG BETZ/STEFAN IMMERFALL, EDS., 1998).

[8] LES FORMES ELEMENTAIRES DE LA VIE RELIGIEUSE: LE SYSTEME TOTEMIQUE EN AUSTRALIE (1912) [English translation: THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE (1995)].

[9] See EMILIO GENTILE, IL CULTO DEL LITTORIO (1993).

[10] On Giovanni Gentile and fascism, see amongst others: GENNARO SASSO, LE DUE ITALIE DI GIOVANNI GENTILE (1998); GABRIELE TURI, GIOVANNI GENTILE. UNA BIOGRAFIA (1995); SERGIO ROMANO, GIOVANNI GENTILE. UN FILOSOFO AL POTERE NEGLI ANNI DEL REGIME (2004).

As Bo Stråth writes,[11] national identity is based on a double process of remembering and forgetting, in order to define, limit, and constitute a political community. Consequently, when we investigate the new political processes in a historical perspective, we should not use a positivist approach, but should use a hermeneutic one, instead: we are not looking for the truth, for the facts, but for the historical processes which constitute and give validity – *geltend machen* – to the truth, in a foucaultian way.[12]

When we use the hermeneutic approach, we notice that populism is about constructing and using a past – just as European Union is about forgetting and remembering. We could define this phenomenon as a sort of "selective memory", which is used by institutions as well as by individuals, and which is very often directly decided by political agencies in order to consolidate the social bond.[13] Populist movements use images of the past in order to cement the community. This function is accomplished, for example, by the idea of *Mitteleuropa* diffused by the intellectual circles close to the Austrian *FPÖ*,[14] or by the invention of the so-called *Padania* – a North Italian area, whose inhabitants are supposed to have a superior work ethic – by the *Lega Nord*,[15] or by the invention of *Pannonia* created by the *MIEP* in Hungary.[16] In all these cases, we cannot speak of a false use of memory, but only of a selective memory.

Paul Taggart defines the core ideology of populism through its idea of heartland:

> "*…the construction of an ideal world but, unlike utopian conceptions,...constructed retrospectively*".[17]

In other words, populist leaders create a heartland through the selection of a history. Jorg Haider and the *FPÖ* intellectuals do not invent a racist and exclusionary idea of *Mitteleuropa*, they just stress an exclusionary idea of it, which is

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[11] Bo Stråth, *Introduction*, in: MYTH AND MEMORY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY, HISTORICAL PATTERNS IN EUROPE AND BEYOND 19 (BO STRÅTH, ED., 2000).

[12] See MICHEL FOUCAULT, THE ARCHEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE (1972).

[13] See MARY DOUGLAS, HOW INSTITUTIONS THINK (1986).

[14] See Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, *The Ambiguous Heritage of Mitteleuropa*, 14:3 LAW AND CRITIQUE 325 2003.

[15] See ROBERTO BIORCIO, LA PADANIA PROMESSA. LA STORIA, LE IDEE E LA LOGICA D'AZIONE DELLA LEGA NORD (1997).

[16] Patricia Chiantera-Stutte/Andrea Petö, *Cultures of Populism and the Political Right in Central Europe*, 5:4 CLCWEB COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CULTURE (2003), http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/.

[17] Paul Taggart, *Populism and the pathology of representative Politics*, in: MÉNY/SUREL (note 2), 67.

already in existence;[18] Umberto Bossi does not invent the civic qualities of Northern Italians, he underlines old stereotypes.

Another important issue concerning populism is the sensitiveness of voters to a special kind of imagery: Bossi obtained his success because he stressed stereotypes that were already diffused in the public opinion; the same. Thus, we should be careful in giving the impression that populist leaders are so skilled and so powerful that they "invent" traditions and persuade people that these traditions exist. They are political leaders, not Gods.[19]

However, remembering the past is not just a corner stone of the creation of a "heartland". Populist leaders also engender a process of forgetting, as is shown by Haider's deliberate forgetting of National Socialist crimes,[20] or by Bossi's apparently "naïve" use of racial stereotypes.[21]

C. Can the European Union Tame Populism?

One final question still needs to be answered: why should we care about populism? Is it not a recent phenomenon, which is bound to be tamed by "good" democratic European traditions and by the reinforcement of the institutions of the European Union?

As we have seen, many political scientists explain that we should worry about it because populism is a possibility of democracy. I would add a further possible explanation. If we accept that political mobilisation is attained through "politics of identity",[22] that the appeal to the masses is strengthened if it is based on the consolidation of a community, on the definition of a "us" against "them", and if we

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[18] For the dichotomy between a liberal and an exclusionary idea of Mitteleuropa see Wolfgang Mommsen, *Die Mitteleuropaidee und die Mitteleuropaplanungen im Deutschen Reich vor und während des ersten Weltkrieges*, in: MITTELEUROPAKONZEPTIONEN IN DER ERSTEN HÄLFTE DES 20. JAHRHUNDERTS 3 (RICHARD GEORG PLASCHKA/HORST HASELSTEINER ET AL., EDS., 1995); See, also, Chiantera-Stutte (note 14).

[19] An interesting research would be one that could investigate this phenomenon: the selection of histories by populism and the use of traditions in the political agenda and debates.

[20] See RUTH WODAK/ANTON PELINKA, THE HAIDER PHENOMENON IN AUSTRIA (2002).

[21] See MARGARITA GOMEZ-REINO, ETHNICITY AND NATIONALISM IN ITALIAN POLITICS (2002).

[22] For the recent debate on the politics of identity, see MICHAEL KENNY, THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY, LIBERAL POLITICAL THEORIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF DIFFERENCE (2004); for the politics of identity and the Northern League see: OLIVER SCHMIDTKE, POLITICS OF IDENTITY. ETHNICITIES, TERRITORIES AND THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE IN NORTHERN ITALIAN SOCIETY (1996).

also accept that this "politics of identity" is, in many cases, determined by history and traditions, we may also think the even the European Union needs to engender a process of identification of the "citizen to Europe".

The European Union has already made use of its selective memory and it feels the need to create a "history" in order to build a strong feeling of belonging for its citizens. Its memory is based on the rejection of racism, on the trauma of the Second World War, and the resolve that, as Theodor Adorno stated, "Auschwitz will not happen again".[23]

The necessity to create a European identity is seen as the main problem for the EU:[24] all nations have a history which, in one way or another, can be used in political struggles, can be questioned and be modified, but cannot be cancelled. The EU is lacking such "material", such a background upon which the desired feeling of belonging can be built. Even the use of class conflicts, which could orient and lead the formation of a complex identity background, seems to fail.[25]

Nevertheless, national politics in Europe is becoming more and more European: the deepening and enlargement of the EU increasingly determine more and more decisions at national level. These two facts, *i.e.*, on the one hand, the difficulty to engender identity politics, and, on the other, the real increase in the power of the EU at national level, dramatically characterise the international political life.

The 2004 elections for the European Parliament show the growth of a sceptical attitude towards the EU that could be related to this uncertain political constellation. The question is: what can a populist party offer to the national citizens in the political campaigns at EU level?
Many economic factors have caused this euro-scepticism; some eurosceptic parties won on issues such as the fights against bureaucracy and technocracy and the control on the EP members (such as the *Liste Martin* in Austria).

Why do not people accept the bureaucracy and the technocracy at EP level? Why do they increasingly feel that EP members are distant, do not care about them, and

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[23] See Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung nach Auschwitz* (1966) and *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (1969), both from ERZIEHUNG ZUR MÜNDIGKEIT (1970).

[24] See, amongst many others, the "optimistic" view expressed by Ulrich Haltern, *Das Janusgesicht der Unionsbürgerschaft*, 11:1 SCHWEIZERISCHE ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR POLITIKWISSENSCHAFT (forthcoming, 2005), contra: Philippe Schmitter, *Is it really possibile to democratize the Euro-Polity?*, WP ARENA n. 10 (1996).

[25] Claus Offe, *The democratic Welfare State: a European Regime under the Strain of European Integration*, POLITICAL SCIENCE SERIES No. 68 (2000).

that the European Parliament does not have any relationship with the "real" people? These are issues that the populist leaders exploit and address in their political campaigns: in their opinion, the EU cannot and will not give an answer to the real problems that citizens have, because it does not have any contact with them and does not share their interests. In populist discourses, the EP is just an assembly of technocrats; it is an abstraction. Only states – or regions – are the ethnic basis of the political community. In this interpretation, the "people" are, first of all, the "us" against them, an "us" that is dense with history and traditions which must not be lost or questioned by the "abstract" EU.[26]

One last point to ask is, if all political forces make use of a selective memory, why should we choose to opt *for* the EU? I think that I can only answer this question as a moral person. I would say, quoting Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, that:

> "Today we know, that many political traditions, that claim an authority in the light of their natural origin, have been "invented". In front of this, a European identity, which would be born in the light of the public opinion, would be "constructed" from the beginning. But only one tradition, which is willingly constructed, could be lacking the agreement. The political moral will, which emerges in the hermeneutic process of self-understanding, is not arbitrary. The difference between the heritage, that we claim, and that one, that we want to refuse, deserves so much respect than the decision about the interpretation, through which we appropriate that heritage. Historical experiences apply only for a conscious appropriation; without a conscious appropriation they would not get any power of identity building."[27]

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[26] One example of this kind of rhetoric is the 2004 Northern League's Programme for the EP: Programma della Lega per le elezioni europee 2004, in: http://www.leganord.org/a_1_elezioni_2004.htm (June 2004).

[27] "Heute wissen wir, daß viele politische Traditionen, die im Scheine ihrer Naturwüchsigkeit Autorität heischen, "erfunden" worden sind. Demgegenüber hätte eine europäische Identität, die im Licht der Öffentlichkeit geboren würde, etwas Konstruiertes von Anfang an. Aber nur ein aus Willkür Konstruiertes trüge den Makel der Beliebigkeit. Der politisch-ethische Wille, der sich in der Hermeneutik von Selbstverständigungsprozessen zur Geltung bringt, ist nicht Willkür. Die Unterscheidung zwischen dem Erbe, das wir antreten, und dem, welches wir zurückweisen wollen, verlangt ebensoviel Umsicht wie die Entscheidung über die Lesart, in der wir es uns aneignen. Historische Erfahrungen kandidieren nur für eine bewußte Aneignung, ohne die sie eine identitätsbildende Kraft nicht erlangen." J. Habermas/J. Derrida, *Nach dem Krieg: die Wiedergeburt Europas*, FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG, 31 May 2003 (translation by the author).