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THE RELIGIOSITY OF POPULISM: THE SANCTIFIED AND ABUSED POWER OF THE PEOPLE

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Abstract: Populism, irrespective of its form as a political movement or ideological phenomenon, often has certain semi-religious characteristics. This article explores the religiosity of populism from two perspectives: the sacredness of the people, and the messianic character of the populist leader. Even within quotidian politics, the concept of “the people” within the national borders is generally given a prominent position; but it takes on a transcendental character within the context of populism. Similar to the absence of God in the system of signifiers, in populism the people is also an “empty signifier”, equivocation on which is sanctified, and utilized for exclusionary purposes. Additionally, the people is often associated with a grassroots class, in many cases initiating an anti-intellectualist trend where “the people” are placed above secular, democratic political institutions. The leader, the other main actor in the various populist movements, is often seen as akin to a prophet who gives promises that outstrip reality and poses as a savior who will end all misfortune. The role of the populist leader can also be deemed religious, as he/she is described as the chosen one and often stands in direct relations of faith and love with each individual.

Key Words: Populism, the people, anti-intellectualism, the empty signifier, Demagogue, Prophecy.

1. Introduction

Although often used as a “pejorative label” (Jansen 2011, 77), it is hard to deny that populism can be attractive when it proclaims the interests of the lower class and aims at “redistribution of wealth” (Allcock 1971, 374). Yet the irony of populism, as a movement that stands for the ignored majority and yet often has very negative consequences for them, compels us to think and rethink its essence from various perspectives. One of the perplexing features of populist movements and ideologies is that, although they often unfold in a secular milieu, they have scarcely disguised religious connotations. As Goode points out, populism often relies on a “grass roots social gospel” (Goode 1993, 156); and as Williams and Alexander correctly claim, “religious language was interwoven in the ideological frames of Populist thought” (Williams and Alexander 1994, 1). Indeed, examples from the history of populist movements suggest that people follow the leader as ardently as any member of a religious cult. The language used in populist movements is often full of exaggerated symbols and mystified signification (Williams and Alexander 1994, 3). This calls for attention to the religiosity of populism, in order to reach an understanding of how this religiosity influences the direction of populist movements.

With the rise of both left-wing and right-wing populist movements worldwide, and especially their clear influence on recent electoral events, research has been exploring the phenomenon of populism from various aspects, including its political role, its tie with nationalism, and of course its relationship with religion. Recent work shows the factual association, especially from the electoral perspective, between populist parties and Christian parties in Europe (Van Kessel 2016). Many right-wing populist parties in Europe evoke allegedly traditional “Christian/Judaic/Humanistic” religious values when promoting anti-immigrant sentiments (Van Kessel 2016, 68). Other researchers have shed light on the threat that populist movements pose to religious freedom, where the populist ideology denies the need for an “open and inclusive” public space for religious discourse (Wolkenstein 2015, 121; March 2017, 293). Different religious institutions have mobilized clashing populist movements, sometimes within the national borders, which tests the ability of the modern state to address difficulties in the civil and religious identity of the “people” (O’Brien 2015, 344).

However, the above-mentioned ways of addressing the relation between religion and populism rely on a formal and institutional definition of religion which ignores the abundant emerging theories on civil religion or political religion, that confirm the existence of implicit religiosity beyond traditional institutionalized religions. Indeed, if one looks only at the institutional religions, Van Kessel admits, there is no

clear correlation between the policies advocated by the religious parties and populist ones. The populists do not “truly use religion” in their project, namely by trying to define themselves through certain religious belongings (Kessel 2016, 66). Yet, beyond the infrequent findings on the connection between a traditional religious conception and populism in the contemporary secularized world, as we mentioned before, religiosity implicitly reveals itself in populist movements. Andrew Arato maintains that some political concepts are “secularized theological ones” (Arato 2015, 31) and populism especially exhibits semi-religious traits. Investigating these traits and revealing the underlying religiosity of populist movements will not only expand the scope of the existing research on populism and religion, but may also uncover in certain respects how populist movements go wrong. The mystified agenda does not have respect for rationalized problem-solving political institutions, and so ends up claiming power bestowed in name of the sacred people, which is often abused.

This paper therefore investigates the intrinsic religious characters of populist movements. Based upon recent work by Andrew Arato, we will argue that there is a similarity between the notion of the People in populism and of God in faith, both of which can be defined as the “empty signifier” (Arato 2015). We then turn to examine the other major actors in populist movements, the leaders, who give prophetic promises, whether in claiming political power or simply as regards electoral reasoning. In order to show that the leader mobilizes the people through religious affection, which effectuates his/her messianic position even in a secular context, we will review the messianic role of Mao ZeDong in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This specific historical phenomenon demonstrates that despite the political regime declaiming secularity, and denying or destroying traditional religion, the religiosity of populism is clearly to be seen.

2. Populism and the sacredness of the People

We first investigate religiosity as it is expressed in the conceptualization of the People within populist movements. From the classic analysis on populism, to contemporary discussions, there is no unified stance on how the People are identified in populism. According to J.B. Allcock, who contributed greatly to the early stages of the conceptualization of populism, the notion of populism and its emphasis on the people emerged from two sources: “radical rural politics” in the American mid-west, and the *narodnic* in Russia in the same era (Allcock 1971, 372). In these movements, the people are by default seen as the dominated lower class; and in specific social contexts the farmers, the rural population, and the non-intellectuals are seen as an antagonistic

force directed against the elites and the political institutions that they form. And in an earlier stage of the development of populism, the people is claimed to be a threat to the authority of law, excluding any possible role of the “people” in politics (Allcock 1971, 373).

One must accept that in the ancient times, politicians or rulers occasionally did claim the power of the people to govern a polity (a famous old Chinese saying gives an excellent analogy: while water can carry the boat, it can also overturn it), but in reality it was only the elites who made the decisions. It is only in the contemporary world that the importance of empowering the people and the value of “direct actions from the people” is proclaimed (Canovan 2002, 403). Although its positive role in the polity is recognized, the notion of the people remains complex, being intertwined with other less salubrious notions such as the *masses*, the *countrymen* (in the context of nationalism), and the *mob* in its defamatory form; each of these terms refers to certain salient features of the modern collectivity.

The notion of the *mass* has been discussed by scholars who have explored the social political essence of totalitarian regimes. *Countrymen* signifies a group of people identified through nationalism who are assigned “national privilege” (Calhoun 2017, 59), in order to exclude others seen as belonging outside the national border. The notion of the *mob* is more concerned with people who “live on the periphery” of the political world, who are politically indifferent (Arendt 1958, 311; Frunză 2013, 59). Yet having acknowledged this complexity, we will adhere to the notion of ‘the people’, for the reasons that, first of all, it is worth preserving the positive intentions of populism through using this more general and neutral notion; and secondly, we are exploring the religiosity of populism, and it is precisely the notion of the people that is often sanctified.

Across the whole spectrum of populism (from right wing to left), the people generally are seen as standing in opposition against the elites. No matter whether the peasant in the populist movement in Russia, the revolutionary in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or the Brexit voter, the ‘people’ derive solidarity through sharing similar life conditions, which are often seen as deprived in comparison to the lives of the elite. The elites, especially the educated intellectuals who not only control the economic life of the polity but also staff its political institutions, are often excluded from the collectivity of the people and are deemed as their ‘enemy’. This phenomenon exhibits the salient feature of populism, where the people are often in opposition to what elitism stands for, which easily becomes an objection to knowledge and rationality. In fact, in many cases, a populist ideology is combined with a certain anti-intellectualism, which in its turn inculcates a mystification that leaves room for magic and cults. As Laclau points out, “the hostility to the status quo, mistrust of traditional politicians leads populism to anti-intellectualism”, appealing to

emotions rather than rationality (Laclau 1977, 147).

As Colleen Shogan remarks, the anti-intellectualist trend needs to be understood through defining its opposite (Shogan 2007, 295), that is intellectualism. Intellectualism promotes not only the interest of the elites, but also rational discourse on social and political issues. To be specific, this rational discourse first of all follows reasoning that is based upon a proper representation of reality. In denying intellectualism, the populist movement not only criticizes the social inequality resulting from unbalanced power in society which favors the elites, but also “disparages the rational complexity” (Shogan 2007, 295). This can lead to a decline in concern for realism and an indulgence of irrational beliefs about social life. This is reflected in real historical instances throughout history, where people in populist movements have preferred instinctive and exaggerated facts rather than rationally acquired knowledge. For example, both in the American rural populism we mentioned above, and in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, democracy is proclaimed but the ‘structural conditions for democracy’ are denied (Allcock 1971, 373; Xu 2001, 121).

Besides, no scientific analysis underpins the anti-intellectual populists’ aspirations to enhance the lives of the lower classes, the interests of the people being promoted only in the sense of affirming their sacred power, which does not necessarily lead to real betterment. Brexit is a recent pertinent case, where the winning of the referendum served only as a proof of the sanctification of the people’s political power, their instinctive decision-making failing to guarantee the utopian promises that were made. According to the *Guardian* newspaper, after Brexit, the employment rate in the UK began to fall and the number of people claiming unemployment benefit has risen (The Guardian 2016). As Peter Baehr remarks, “[T]he masses are loyal not to an interest but to the ‘fiction’” (Baehr 2007, 13) which is based roughly on a synchronized version of their own experience where the origin of fault is attributed to an imaginary enemy.

From the above analysis, then, one can conclude that due to the anti-intellectualist attitude of populism, the people in the populist ideology are not represented realistically but are imagined in an illusionary and mystified way (Giesen and Seyfert 2015, 112). This intention sanctifies the notion of ‘the People’, which becomes a quasi-religious notion. The absoluteness of the People makes it hard to discern who the ‘people’ actually are, and so difficult to effect a rational structured redistribution of interests among them. On an individual level, the transcendental sacredness of the category to which one suddenly finds one belongs disrupts the secular and rational pursuit of one’s own life, which sometimes results in a de-individualization process wherein individual welfare can be sacrificed. For instance, in the Cultural Revolution in China, to be part of the people was to ideologically follow the class struggle and rituals that take place in everyday life, but which did not contribute to the

betterment of one's life. The original aim of populism as pursuing happiness for each individual is twisted, and individual happiness becomes subservient to an exterior holiness.

On the level of inter-human relationships, the mutual redistribution of wealth and human responsibilities to each other are also reduced in importance during the process of sanctifying the People. This leads to the result of the authentic connections among individuals being terminated (Arendt 1958, 311). Furthermore, when responsible citizens come to see themselves as part of the People, they "have succumbed to apathy on a large scale" (Baehr 2007, 12). The absoluteness of the political power, which is often realized by "a reign of terror", eradicates "nonpolitical communal bonds" (Arendt 1958, 322). And this "reign of terror" encourages denunciation of human friendships and even family ties (Baehr 2007, 13). In this scenario, the notion of the People seems to be inviting and inclusive, but as András Bozóki points out, it is 'often used for exclusionary political purposes' (Bozóki 2015, 277).

To be more exact, the sacredness of the people in populism can also be understood through the famous claim by Ernesto Laclau, that the notion of the people functions as an 'empty signifier', similar to the absence of God in religion. Further developing the notion of empty signifier, Andrew Arato explains, one can see a clear association between populism and political theology, where God is replaced by the people, and a theological notion of the people is thereby created (Arato 2015, 31). To understand the notion of the people as an empty signifier, we first of all need to turn to the original meaning of the empty signifier from semantics, before turning to Laclau's utilization of the concept for understanding populism.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue a detailed reading of the notion of the empty signifier, which has undergone abundant discussion in recent years, and has attracted attention from scholars from social theory, philosophy, education, etc. It suffices to say that the notion of the empty signifier appears to address problems in signification which originate from works by scholars such as Mauss and Jakobson, but it is Lévi-Strauss who defined the problem in its most commonly acknowledged form (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994, 60). According to Lévi-Strauss, the elusive relation between signified and signifier can be more precisely seen as a symbolic value of *indéterminée de signification*, which is itself a 'void' of signification. Yet as it is void, and has no determinative meaning, it is susceptible to infinite meanings (Lévi-Strauss 1950, xliv, xlix).

In this sense, the empty signifier (also named the zero signifier) can be seen as a floating signifier wherein infinite meanings can all be signified momentarily. Thus, although the empty signifier literally means a signifier with an absence of meaning, it is in fact a signifier with many indefinite meanings. The empty signifier thus offers us a profound way to perceive key socio-political phenomena. For Laclau, the empty signifier

should not be seen simply as “a signifier without signified”, but as “a void within signification”, which indicates a transcendence beyond the simple “emptiness/fullness” distinction (Laclau 2005, 105). This is to say, the depiction of the notion of people through the claim of the empty signifier does not render the notion of the *people* meaningless; rather, it shows that the notion of the people in populism has a merely symbolic unity, without a definite identity. The people are seen as being bound together in solidarity through their unfulfilled demands and their antagonistic stance against the elite. But in certain sense real solidarity is absent, since the signifier has a floating meaning that assumes a loose connection between any groups, even those with contradictory features (Laclau 1997, 306; Giesen and Seyfert 2015, 112).

The absence of a real signified in the signification of the people, and its capacity to accommodate contradictory meanings, reveal a keen similarity to the manner of signification of the term ‘God’. As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney makes clear, in semantics God is designated ‘a zero signifier’, a ‘verbal, spatial and temporal absence’ (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994, 68). This absence attributes a transcendental status to the divine. Likewise, the People in populism are assigned absoluteness, this being an inviting void which transcends normative language. Indeed, we also observe the power bestowed on the notion of People being abused in the same way as the name of God in theocracy. Throughout political history, authorities have made claims in the name of God, or in the name of the People, which have exploited the void which these words create, and which at times have led to dictatorship and totalitarianism.

Similar to theocracy, the shifts of power enabled by the empty signification of the People draws our attention to the ‘dominant authority figure’ who occupies this empty power space, while pretending to be its source (Robert 2015, 684). Populist movements are very often connected to totalitarian regimes or demagogic leaders, where the power of the people is eventually abused. The complex relationship between the populist leader and the people hides the fact that populism does not “reflect the pure and undiluted will of the people”, but is a projection of this imagined will onto a prophet, who is given a messianic task. And yet more importantly, the messianic task is to destroy the old, unfortunate, world, which has even more risky consequences. Next, we examine in detail the religious role of the populist leader, who is often seen as a messiah to the people.

3. The Populist leader and his/her messianic role

As pointed out above, the empty signification of the people’s power needs a projection, which is often a projection onto an individual who becomes the dominant leader of the populist movement. The religiosity of

populist movements is accomplished by the quasi-divine position of the populist leader(s) and the supreme power they are handed. The populist leader, instead of leading a political institution and being a part of a constitution that deals with issues through rational calculation, “resort to beliefs and emotions, to ritual and symbolic translations of togetherness” (Canovan 2002, 404). Populist leaders are believed to enable changes that exhaust history, especially in time of “change, instability and crisis” (Canovan 2002, 404). This is to say, they are given a messianic task, where the possibility of dramatic change is demanded, and where a destruction of the old world is sometimes thought inevitable. As already noted, the contradictory facts of the prophetic role of Mao Zedong and the populist movement he led, which aimed at destroying religion, reveal the fundamental religiosity of the populist movement and its tragic fate.

Meisner Maurice correctly points out that the personal cult of the populist leader elevates the leader above any political party, such that he or she is seen as ‘bypassing formal political institutions’ and communicating with the mass directly (Maurice 1982, 156). The charismatic leader claims to attend to people’s wills “beyond parliament and parties” (Stanton 2016, 354). One can observe that the rise of the populist leader to occupy the void of the supreme power of the people often manifests a common character. First, as Hannah Arendt claims, the populist leaders are often popular with the people, being aware of what people want and what they are capable of doing (Arendt 1952, 306). It is undeniable that the people have supported their leaders in populist moments, even when the political orders have been frankly evil. This is because there is a symbiotic relation between the leader and his/her people, where the will of the leader and the will of the people are hardly discernable from one another. Secondly, dramatic social change is eagerly expected, but the future vision is not made clear to the people or indeed to the previous political regime. This scenario leaves an open space for prophetic visions, which enables the populist leader’s vision of the future to gain its messianic characteristics. Thirdly, there is often a tension between the leader and the elites, such that the leader appeals directly to the people, bypassing the mediating role of the political institutions which are often staffed by the elites.

The supposed political power of the People is thus transposed to a singular person – the leader (Baehr 2007, 14) – who seemingly brings a moment of solidarity and engenders “a shared project” (Robert 2015, 684). In populist movements, as Hannah Arendt stressed, people are not organized through social classes (Baehr 2007, 17); yet there always seems to be solidarity among people in such movements. The populist leader offers the possibility of a “symbolic unification” (Arditi 2010, 490), where, instead of being organized through political institutions, people form a strong attachment to the leader. Benjamin Arditi correctly explicates the process of the populist leader becoming a quasi-religious figure: firstly,

they become infallible, and their instinct is “beyond good and evil”; soon, to challenge the leader becomes a matter of treason, which leads to exclusion and oppression of the dissidents (Arditi 2010, 490).

These characteristics of the populist leader fit exactly the history of the Chinese populist movement: the Chinese Cultural Revolution. According to Maurice, in many of the communist revolutions, a certain concurrence can be observed between Marxism and populism. Compared to countries such as Russia where populist trends developed before the growth of communism, and were gradually replaced by it, in China the two trends developed almost simultaneously (Maurice 1982, 95). This is to say, populism developed at the same time as Mao was leading a communist revolution. Indeed, from the very beginning of the revolution, Mao constantly praised “the inherent potentiality of the people” which to Maurice is clearly a populist belief.

Mao’s hostility towards any form of bureaucracy is another important proof of his populist stance, which was manifest throughout his reign (Maurice 1982, 96). It became acceptable to Mao to invoke a constant revolution from below, even at the price of economic development. It is exactly this preference for the potentiality of the people over institutional democracy, even the party, which led to his direct communication with the people or an alliance with the people against the bureaucracy, which serves as the foundation for the establishment of his personal cult during the Cultural Revolution. Next, we will investigate this personal cult, setting out the rituals involved therein which demonstrate its religiosity.

Although China has always been seen as a secular country, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was to certain extent composed of rituals with religious characteristics. To be more exact, even though the Chinese polity has never been a theocracy in contrast to the broadly secular regimes of the West (Eistenstadt 1955, 16), there have always been important folk religions among the grassroots communities who were the main force in the revolution. Many events during the revolution are described by the Communist Party in a tone of religiosity—the long march, for instance, is described in a narrative like the “biblical tales of Moses and Exodus” (Maurice 1982, 157). The core of this religiosity is definitely the cult of Mao and the rituals deriving from it.

According to Zuo Jiping, the cult of Mao was established first of all with the clearing out of the old religious elements in the grassroots communities, especially the rural communities. As we mentioned above, no official religion has dominated Chinese society, but there are a many religious elements, labeled as “Four Olds (old ideas, old values, old customs, old traditions)”, which now are referred to merely as superstitions. Yet these superstitions were not eliminated along with the elimination of the old forms, but in fact gave way to belief in a religiosity (or new superstition) “centered around Mao” (Zuo 1991, 101). Zuo vividly depicts the cult phenomenon that emerged in the summer of 1966, where

people marched with banners inscribed with “Long live chairman Mao” or “Be ready to die for Chairman Mao” (Zuo 1991, 101). The cult cumulated in rituals that concerned Mao or faith in Mao stretching over all aspects of life. From the economy to the media, from art to education, all social events contain a reference to Mao: production of metal was for making more badges of Mao; the press distributed Mao’s writings “free of charge to the entire population” (Zuo 1991, 101). In art, songs were written as psalms about Mao’s greatness, and in school, children learned Mao’s thoughts from the “Little Red Book”, seen as the primary source of knowledge which would “save them from all the trouble” (Zuo 1991, 104).

These phenomena plainly show that the relationship between the leader Mao and the people is not only political, but rather a relation with a clear religious connotation, where the leader is clearly equated with the chosen one, the object of faith. The ascribed magic power that provokes messianic expectations is maintained by the messianic vision espoused by Mao. As an important part of the enabling of a spreading belief in his messianic status, Mao continuously asserted his vision for Chinese society throughout the revolution and in the post-revolution era. We should admit, of course, that there is an evolution of Mao’s vision chronologically: in the beginning of the revolution, Mao’s vision for the upcoming challenge in the revolution was insightful and concrete, and was praised as brilliant and effective. This vision advanced the revolution and is exactly the reason for his rising power in the party. Scholars have admitted that during the war years the vision remained inspiring, but mainly as regards a ‘more mundane and practical realm (Schwartz 1952, 189).

However, with the growth of the populist movement, Mao’s vision for the communist society turned from addressing practical problems to provoking the emotions of the people whose support was urgently needed. For example, not only did he praise the potentiality of the people as we mentioned above, he also set out a vision about the future based on what that tremendous potentiality may achieve: the future communist Chinese society will be “the most perfect, the most progressive, the most revolutionary, and the most rational system ever since human history began” (Mao Zedong 1954, 43). The perfection of the vision also shows its emptiness, this being a vision which caters to instinctive passion rather than rational reflection (Maurice 1982, 161).

In the immediate post-revolutionary era, when the triumph of the revolution was celebrated, Mao’s vision was pertinent to the Marxist teachings of a “classless society”, and for the time being the “building of a strong state” was the clear goal of all (Mao 1958, 66). After the establishment of the new state, until the Great Leap, the vision’s magical capacity to evoke positivity kept on growing. However, the failure of this over-positive vision quickly turned into a more apocalyptic picture. Especially in his philosophical writings around the period of the Cultural

Revolution, when discussing the new era Mao sets out a prophetic vision which is based upon the constant destruction of the old world. He begins to claim that “disequilibrium is normal and absolute” (Mao 1958, 66), which endorses chaos in society rather than stability. Maurice describes Mao’s vision now as a dystopian moment, which is primarily “ahistorical” (Maurice 1982, 184). At this time, Mao is no longer giving prophecies about a better society, but rather about ‘the end of history’, a society which claims legitimacy through being new instead of being better. Mao dismisses the importance of goals such as economic improvement or any other good features of a society. His messianic vision functions as a way to destroy normal people’s desires for a better life, and also to provide a certain sanctioning of violence. As Maurice insightfully concludes, it is through prophesying the ‘eternal struggle’ that Mao is able to make his vision immune to critique, which constantly stimulates violence. The uncertainty created by this prophecy gave him the opportunity to continue the cult of his heroism, which maintains his God-like status.

From the above example, we can conclude that the cult of populist leader as a messianic figure in the end becomes a tool for the leader to advance his/her power. And when the prophet begins to fail, an apocalyptic picture is often asserted so that this power can be maintained, but now bound up in destructive passions where the real voice of the people is buried.

4. Conclusion: Abused religiosity

Thus we have seen that the religiosity of populism can be discerned through locating the two main components of the populist movement, the people and the leader, which are sanctified and assigned the status of absoluteness. With the magic power gained in the populist movement, many of the common-sense boundaries of social life are transgressed. The voice of the people no doubt needs to be heard, but populism has not shown itself the correct path to promote equality or a more open society. In this paper we have explained that the religiosity of populism has not contributed positively to the life of people. The confusion of religiosity and politics seems to help people gain political power; however, at the same time, the political power is not practiced rationally, and is very often abused by the populist leader.

It can be seen more exactly that the absoluteness of the power is objectified in the movement, and becomes a dominating power that oppresses people rather than liberating them. Thus we can tentatively point out a fundamental problem with this way of empowering the people, which is that the objective and transcendental identity ascribed to the people denies the reality of human relations. There is no real individuality that enables people to face each other in the process of addressing social

problems, and they turn rather to a leader while being indifferent to their neighbors. It is only when family relations and meetings between strangers are not subordinated to transcendental absolute political power, that the voice of people, with its rationality and ethical responsibility, can be heard. It is important for us thus to turn to Emmanuel Levinas to counter the religiosity of populism through recalling what he promotes as the “Wirklichkeit” of human relations (Levinas 1999, 116). Through this, Levinas draws us back from the indifference and other-worldliness of the populist ideology, to show the essential way of seeing the human being: not as a “will to power” but a “with each other”, or more exactly a “for each other” (Levinas 1999, 116). It is only through opening to our neighbor in a sincere way, that the voice of the people can have a real signification in our society.

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