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LEFT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

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“Populism” is a term that nobody wants for himself and is frequently given to another when, in political debate, there is no available argument left. It then turns into a disqualifying word that excludes “the other” from the democratic and respectable part of the public arena. It is, therefore, a common temptation to put this label upon very different political parties or movements, both right-wing and left-wing and to some forms of nationalism. In many instances the term may say more about the person using it, and more specifically, his/her fears. If somebody defines a right-wing movement as “populist”, it may well be that he/she is left-wing. The opposite is equally true.

Populism presents itself as the real, orthodox incarnation of popular will but makes itself unaccountable. If it is the exclusive representation of popular will, anything that opposes the populist movement opposes the popular will and must be barred. Populists from left and from right use “the people” as a pretext, but they don’t seem to believe in the people’s mature ability to freely and responsibly decide: they reserve for themselves the responsibility of the only authorized instance for interpreting the people’s will.

In its political philosophy, right-wing populism considers it fundamental to establish a sharp boundary between “we” and “the others”. Left wing populism traces the same boundary, but it frequently identifies “we” as “the people” and “the others” as “the ultraconservative reactionaries”. This could be seen as “political hooliganism” since populists fanatically defend their comrades / tribe as always totally right and declare that the “others” are systematically and completely wrong.

Language is very important in every political context, but especially for populists, and even more for left-wing populists; right-wing populists seem to be more relaxed in saying what they think. However, I remember when I ran for an election on the list of a left-wing coalition; I saw our support team preparing buses to take older people to voting points; in the bus, our people would give them the ballot paper of our coalition. “Isn’t this just how we criticize right-wingers, that this is manipulation of older people’s vote?” I cried. They calmly answered to me: “In no way: they *manipulate* ignorant old people; we *facilitate* the exercise of their vote”. A simple word changes everything and is useful for justifying anything.

Caesarism¹ is unavoidably linked to populism. Populism tends to concentrate moral authority and political power in a reduced number of persons, in a selected *elite* whose authority is unquestioned. Most of the time, this concentration of moral and effective power is offered to a single person who becomes, not only a leader, but also an icon and sometimes “the father” of the nation; this is the case of Stalin in Soviet Union, Mao Ze Dong in P. R. China, Fidel Castro in Cuba, Franco in Spain, Tito in Yugoslavia, Hoenecker in D. R. Germany, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Perón in Argentina... Sometimes the leader also becomes more

¹ A term used after Julius Caesar, a Roman general who had popular support and used it for eroding power from the Senate and concentrating it in himself. In continuation of this process, his heir, Caesar Augustus, imposed himself as the first emperor of Rome, was recognized as a god and had an altar in the *Forum* of Rome.

than just a human being: Lula de Silva, left-wing president of a democratic country like Brazil, said about himself: “I am not a human being anymore, I am an idea”². Some think that personality cults within populism are found mainly in right-wing regimes, but left-wing movements can be just as guilty, including in democratic countries (not just dictatorships).

Some populist movements substitute God by a god; that is the case with Hitler, Mao Ze Dong, Kim Il-sung in the past, but, more recently, followers of another left-wing leader, Hugo Chávez, recited a prayer that emulated the Lord’s prayer; it begins “Our Chávez, who is in Heaven [...] hallowed be your name”³.

Another relevant characteristic of populism is the *unresponsiveness of the leader: he is not accountable to anybody, apart from himself*, and he imposes himself over constitutional limits. In this aspect there is no distinction between right and left. We heard Franco saying “I am only accountable to God and history”, and many left-wing presidents in Latin America (Maduro, Correa, Morales, Ortega...) have insisted in perpetuating themselves in government by forcing serious modifications to national constitutions.

More interestingly, in the battle of interpretations of history and of semantics, left-wing authors and politicians have introduced a differentiation between “good Caesarism” and “bad Caesarism”, that is, populism and Caesarism are not a problem by themselves, the question is the goal they are used for; it is the goal that qualifies if populism or Caesarism is good or bad. Gramsci, a founder of PCI (the Italian Communist Party), clearly explained this idea in these terms:

“... although Caesarism always expresses the "arbitrary" solution –entrusted to a great personality– of a historical-political situation characterized by a balance of forces in a catastrophic perspective, it has not always the same historical significance. There can be a progressive Caesarism and a regressive Caesarism; and the exact meaning of each form of Caesarism can ultimately be reconstructed through concrete history and not through a sociological scheme. Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive forces to triumph, even with certain compromises and limitations of victory; it is regressive when their intervention helps the regressive forces to triumph, also in this case with certain compromises and limitations; these, however, have a different value, importance and meaning than in the previous case. Caesar and Napoleon I are examples of progressive Caesarism. Napoleon III and Bismark of regressive Caesarism”.⁴

Thus, many left-wing politicians are ready to justify Caesarism when it permits progressive, “decent” objectives, and easily condemn it when it serves to accomplish “reactionary, counter-revolutionary” objectives.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoQPn22S1MI> consulted on 6/May/18

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIGMhH27TCo> consulted on 6/May/18

⁴ GRAMSCI, A. *Notas sobre Maquiavelo, sobre la Política y sobre el Estado Moderno*. Ediciones Nueva Visión, Madrid, 1980, p. 71 [in Spanish]. The original in Italian: “*Note Sul Machiavelli Sulla Politica E Sullo Stato Moderno*”. [The quote has been translated into English by the author of this paper]

In this sense, populism distorts the description of political reality, conforming this account to its political interests, a kind of manipulation that is common to right and left. David Burt, a former Evangelical university leader, says that, in Iron Curtain times, he visited Poland. He took along several books, but the only one the customs officers confiscated from him was a book of European History; populists –both left-wing and right-wing– confiscate history, try to seize the political account and accommodate it to their agenda because it is foundational for legitimating their agenda and political actions.

Left wing populism in Europe. Two examples.

The term “populism” has the background of fascism in Europe in past century but, in the last seventy years, there have appeared more populist movements on the left than on the right; certainly, they have emerged mainly in Latin America, more than in Europe, but there are at least two clear European examples. SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

SYRIZA is a Greek political party that emerged from a coalition of Communist, Trotskyist, Socialist and other left parties. Its name is the acronym of “Coalition of the Radical Left”. In the European Parliament it is integrated into the GUE-NGL political group, which includes Socialist and Communist organizations. Some of its proposals are nationalization of strategic companies, including energy ones, confronting European austerity policies and imposing taxes of 75% on richer people. SYRIZA said it would suspend the repayment of Greece’s national debt, but, in the end, it accepted European repayment conditions; it also said Greece would leave NATO, but it has not. In 2015, in the midst of a deep political crisis, SYRIZA took over the Greek government.

What were the clues behind the success of SYRIZA? It emerged claiming to be a renewing socio-political movement in a context of old exhausted parties. SYRIZA got high support in Greece, but it became a reference point and reason for new hope for many people across Europe. SYRIZA presented itself as a complete alternative to the political system, not just a left-wing coalition; it is for this reason that it had the support of a broad scope of citizens, not only from the left, but also from the centre and the right. It succeeded in presenting itself as the incarnation of popular will, the only one with the legitimate right to represent this popular will, in opposition to all the rest of the parties, which were labelled as the expression of old corrupted politics. SYRIZA embodied one of the main characteristics of populism as referred to earlier.

This movement appeared as the resurrection of May ’68, but it has lost its strength with internal divisions and evident contradictions; for example, they insisted in keeping tax exemptions for big shipping companies, owned by multimillionaire bosses, while also supporting the maintenance of early retirements.⁵

SYRIZA’s leaders also used the populist use of differentiation between “we” and “the others”, doing so in two ways: first, as mentioned before, separating themselves, the “real representatives of the people”, from “oligarchic old parties”; and secondly, identifying

⁵ The German government said Europe would not support Greek retirement at 50 years old, while Germans could only retire more than a decade later.

another “others”, i.e., the European Union (EU). They presented this as a national threat, and when the EU began to consider *Grexit*, they translated it into a European (mainly German) phobia against Greece. SYRIZA fuelled a nationalistic revival in order to advantage itself; it demonstrated that bad, distorted nationalism may be used by the left.

When the EU established its conditions for rescue, the Greek government answered with a daring populist gamble: an immediate referendum. It was obvious people would say “No” and it was obvious too that their decision would be useless. Only a few days later, SYRIZA’s government accepted even harder conditions for rescue and so began to lose their moral authority. SYRIZA’s leaders cultivated in people a rejection against Europe and, in doing so, they gained enthusiastic popular support, but they were completely conscious they could not survive without Europe’s help. Their epic challenge led nowhere. Did they not know this would be the outcome in advance? It was real populism.

SYRIZA’s experience left a bitter aftertaste: its complaints may have seemed right, but SYRIZA’s promises showed themselves to be just smoke as soon as its leaders became the government. Whether they agree or not with SYRIZA’s political programme, many sadly lost confidence in the attainability of deep political transformation. Scepticism gained ground in Europe’s collective heart. Bureaucracy and technocracy kept their place in the construction of the European Union, sweeping utopia away; this term lost its edifying sense as a model to pursue in practical political work, and returned to its worst sense as a definitely unattainable dream. Left wing populism is the most effective weapon against utopia.

In 2010, Stéphane Hessel, 93 years old, published “Time for Outrage!”⁶, a book that awakened many young people. In Spain, on 15th May 2011 a few dozen people installed a camp in a main square demanding real democracy. The movement speedily grew and spread as a popular movement (15-M) all over the country. Most parliamentary parties hurried to give their own answers to its claims, but all of them were denied the moral authority to give authoritative answers. All Spaniards wondered how this movement would continue its dynamics. In the end, a group of left-wing politicians took advantage of it and founded a party, “Podemos”⁷, a name that recalled Obama’s “Yes, we can”. It tries to hold onto the inheritance of the 15-M movement. Their leaders presented their programme as a “binding contract with citizens” and they demanded accountability from every public institution.

Podemos claimed to be the continuation of the 15-M popular movement, but in this process, the transversal identity of 15-M movement vanished and Podemos emerged as an extreme left-wing party. Its leaders say about the party that “its political program has nothing to do with Communism and nor is it extremist, its proposals are those of a Social-Democrat government”⁸; but, although it tries to present an image of transversality, as an “open structure, alive and changing, that is democratic and bound to citizens, where everyone may

⁶ HESSEL, S. *Time for Outrage! Indignez-vous!* Grand Central Publishing, Sep 20, 2011.

⁷ Translated as “We can”.

⁸ <https://es.scribd.com/document/316172805/Resumen-CORTO-Programa-Electoral-Podemos-para-las-Elecciones-Generales-del-26J> consulted on 31/July/18

participate”⁹, many of its policy proposals fit with the left. For example, it calls for the suppression of article 135 of the Spanish Constitution –an EU requirement– which imposes budgetary stability and the need to repay the national debt as a priority commitment. In fact, Podemos calls for the critical review of the debt before repaying it and, in any case, wants to restructure its payment. Podemos proposes nationalization of strategic companies, mainly energy ones. In the European Parliament it is integrated, as SYRIZA is, in the GUE-NGL group. The name of one of its most important internal organization is “Anti-capitalist Left” and some evidence links Podemos to *Chavism* of Venezuela. In 2018, a public poll showed that Podemos was perceived as the most extreme left wing Spanish organization¹⁰.

Podemos presents itself as different from other parties, and disqualifies the rest of the parties altogether as “*la casta*” (caste); this term refers to a collective that puts itself over other citizens, dominating over them. In this sense, Podemos tries to pick up the popular claim for a deeper, direct and accountable democratic development and for the rule of ethics in politics. This organization presents itself as the incarnation of real popular will in opposition to the rest, a characteristic of populism, as noted before.

Another characteristic mentioned earlier soon appeared; Caesarism. The party was conceived as a movement whose power dynamics were rooted in popular bases, but in fact the top leadership began to impose its will and to eliminate all internal dissent, the quoted excuse being “the need to preserve unity”. Additionally, several dubious financial transactions have been discovered, which demonstrates that Podemos is not immune to the very same sins of “*la casta*”. Finally, Podemos leaders have shown clear links to Latin America left-wing populist movements and, in fact, they refuse to condemn obvious abuses against democratic liberties and rights in countries like Venezuela.

Is there a place for Christians inside these parties?

Other similar political parties are arising in other parts of Europe, so it is important to ask ourselves if there is place for a Christian to engage in political parties like these.

These parties have something that can be quite attractive to Christians: they present a complete counter-opinion to normal politics, and because of our distinctive nature as children of God’s Kingdom, Christians can identify with this attitude.

At the same time, we cannot expect to find a political party that completely and exhaustively fulfils all our expectations as Christians. Political parties are not churches, they are instruments of the general organising of politics, which has its place as a part of the common grace of God towards a fallen world. A political party defends a code of shared objectives, and every Christian must understand that he/she will earnestly adhere to some of those objectives, accept others, and tolerate other objectives as the unavoidable “least worse,”

⁹ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=349010278589051&id=269212336568846 consulted on 31/July/18

¹⁰ http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es3080mar_A.pdf p. 17, consulted on 31/July/18

similar perhaps to how Moses permitted issuing a divorce, “tolerating” it as the “least worse”¹¹ for ordaining social life in Israel.

Thus, there is no party to which we will definitely agree in every aspect. The question is: Do we feel right inside the party, with our conscience not forced? And, as to the “least worse”, the nub of the matter is: Is it really fundamental to the political manifesto of the party?

Another factor to consider is that we Evangelicals have a clear commitment to truth and freedom of speech; we do not accept compromises in these matters. We must remember the verse “Buy the truth, and do not sell it”¹², being prepared to pay a high cost for the truth and avoiding the temptation of justifying corrupt means. The “right ends” are not worth it if the truth is sold out. So, we must be clear if the political party freely permits us to act according to these commitments or not, and which price we may pay for it within this party. Consequently, it is possible to assess if it is worth beginning to work inside a particular party or not.

Another question to consider is if there is place for dissent and the open expression of it or not. It is normal to find reasons for disagreement with the political programme and actions of any party; that is not the problem. The question is whether one can survive inside the party after making our dissent openly known, or not?

Finally, we must ask: Is the party infected by authoritarian leadership? The Christian worldview and our personal, vital experience are in no way compatible with this.

Taking all these aspects in mind, we must responsibly decide before the Lord if there is place for us in one of these political parties, or not.

What should we do?

Populism is an answer to the fading away of identity and to the loss of values and moral authority in Europe. Ideological debate is languishing and bureaucracy is substituting political decisions; the debate of values is being removed from the public arena, our freedom to decide our common goals is being lost. Our children could suffer new soft forms of totalitarianism and dissent could be abolished. Action is needed!

Our Christian worldview is the most effective instrument against the “political hooliganism” of populism, which imposes antidemocratic boundaries between “we” and “the others”, “the people” and “the ultraconservative reactionaries”. The Bible states that there are no boundaries between “good persons” and “bad persons”, since all of us are sinners, “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”¹³ and all of us need to be redeemed by grace and faith alone; the Bible declares us all equal in our sin and guilt, and in our equally common need of redemption and salvation; it is the most democratic description of humankind. The fundamental democratic principles of accountability, checks and balances, and separation of powers were established by our Evangelical / Protestant ancestors, bearing

¹¹ Matthew 19.7-8

¹² Proverbs 23.23.

¹³ Romans 3.23

in mind the basic concept of the integral corruption of all human beings with no exception, a clear biblical concept.¹⁴

We Evangelicals, treasure the biblical principle of the universal priesthood of all believers. In my home we have a single leaf of a Bible of Geneva five hundreds old; it contains the well-known text of Joshua 24.15 and in the margin there is a comment saying: "If all the world would go from God, yet every one of us particularly is bound to cleave unto Him". We Evangelicals, do not recognize any absolute authority apart from God; from the very beginning we have rejected authoritarianism and have often paid a high price for defending individual liberties and the right to dissent. Evangelicals, because of our worldview and our own vital personal experience, are the stone in the shoe of populism, totalitarianism and Caesarism. Max Weber plainly explained it when he noted that Protestant nations have been significantly more immune to populism¹⁵:

"... the belief that the Christian proved [...] his state of grace by action *in majorem Dei gloriam* was decisive, and the sharp condemnation of idolatry of the flesh and of all dependence on personal relations to other men was bound unperceived to direct this energy into the field of objective (impersonal) activity. The Christian who took the proof of his state of grace seriously acted in the service of God's ends, and these could only be impersonal. Every purely emotional, that is not rationally motivated, personal relation of man to man easily fell in the Puritan, as in every ascetic ethic, under the suspicion of idolatry of the flesh. The Calvinist was fascinated by the idea that God in creating the world, including the order of society, must have willed things to be objectively purposeful as a means of adding to His glory; not the flesh for its own sake, but the organization of the things of the flesh under His will. The active energies of the elect, liberated by the doctrine of predestination, thus flowed into the struggle to rationalize the world. Especially the idea that the public welfare, or as Baxter (Christian Directory, IV, p. 262) puts it, quite in the sense of later liberal rationalism, "The good of the many" (with a somewhat forced reference to Rom 9. 3), was to be preferred to any personal or private good of the individual, followed, although not in itself new, for Puritanism from the repudiation of idolatry of the flesh. The traditional American objection to performing personal service is probably connected, besides the other important causes resulting from democratic feelings, at least indirectly with that tradition. Similarly, the relative immunity of formerly Puritan peoples to Caesarism, and, in general, the subjectively free attitude of the English to their great statesmen as compared with many things which we have experienced since 1878 in Germany

¹⁴ The source of many of these principles is wrongly attributed to the French Revolution; they were mainly originated in a Protestant environment, especially in North America (see, for example, Virginia's Declaration). French philosopher Montesquieu grew up in a Protestant family. It is for this reason, that these principles are better understood and implemented in Northern Europe than in Southern Europe; democracy needs specific collective *ethos* and *ethics*.

¹⁵ Of course, he didn't live to see the outstanding exception of Germany in the last century. However, it is clear that Hitler, to engage the nation in his populist Caesarism, needed first to substitute Protestantism by a new religion, that is, a pagan cult centred on himself; this was the reason for which he was so hard in persecuting all kinds of dissent in the Church (remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer); otherwise, he would never have been able to subject the country to Nazism. Nazism was established because most German Protestants stopped protesting.

positively and negatively. On the one hand, there is a greater willingness to give the great man his due, but, on the other, a repudiation of all hysterical idolization of him and of the naïve idea that political obedience could be due anyone from thankfulness.”¹⁶

An Evangelical biblical worldview reject totalitarianism which imposes on us what is orthodox and what is not, what is progressive and what is not, what we may think and what we may not, what we are allowed to teach and express and what not. We rebelled against Roman Catholic dogmatism and we must rise again in rebellion against any populist dogmatism.

Our best weapons are our values, our biblical worldview; they are the main adversary of modern European populism. In face of the appropriation of popular will, we will restore personal free enquiry and the leading role of civil society; in face of unique thought we will present the right to dissent; in face of the monolithic catechism of dogmatic populism we will present diversity in which we Protestants, are used to living; in face of Caesarism we will promote the universal priesthood of all believers; in face of the lack of accountability we will present the biblical concept of authority, where the first is the last and is also the server; in face of the boundaries between “we” and “the others” and “political hooliganism”, we will make clear that all of us are equally sinful human beings that need common grace measures. All of these items have their own political correlates: we will offer an alternative vision for the building of the European Union, more respectful of minorities and dissenters, more rooted in responsible and informed citizens than in autocratic oligarchies, more respectful of the maturity of people, more focused on civil society than on bureaucracy, more on natural nations than on hegemonic states, with a new way of making politics, more based upon dialogue than on co-opting, with more frequent use of instruments of direct democracy and of checks and balances and demanding a leadership which is more and more accountable to their electors; in sum, a more biblical Europe, a more democratic Europe.

It is for these reasons that I propose that our answer to populism should not be retreating into private faith, understanding that our Christian values are too high for being translated to politics. If we consider that Christian morality is virtually impossible to translate into a political programme, we will become irrelevant and we will limit the efficiency of our salt. It is not wise to confront right-wing populists by telling them that they are usurping Christian faith and values, only to present a programme of Christian values and policies that are only suitable for an unattainable heavenly utopia; should we do so, we would be making the job for the alternative populism, the left-wing version, no less dangerous for democracy. We must present the Gospel in the public arena and offer its message as a powerful instrument of political freedom in a Europe that is renouncing Christian values and is falling into the arms of new populisms. Europe urgently needs people who do not accept that this is the unavoidable fate of this part of the world, a people that present a whole transforming alternative. It is because we are Protestants that we must *protest*, and Europe urgently needs people that *protest*.

¹⁶ WEBER, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge Classics, London, 2001, p. 182 (footnote #30 of chapter 4 –footnotes in Weber are larger than the text itself–)

Our Evangelical faith is not only a possible answer to European populism: it is the most effective political alternative to it. If we don't put it in practice now, we will have to teach our children how to survive underground tomorrow because of totalitarianism.