The populist era

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Today's central political demand is the self-determination and protection of territorial communities amidst the chaos of a failing neoliberal globalisation.

Since the Brexit vote and Trump's election as president of the US, it has become ever more clear that we are standing at a historical crossroads - one of those once-in-a-generation moments in which, in Hegel's words, 'the gradual crumbling' of the established order is 'cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world'.[1] The recent string of electoral victories for right-wing populist formations and candidates has not just made it clear that the neoliberal order is collapsing; it is also a signal that we are entering a new world, a new historical epoch, whose features - only half-illuminated by the flames in which the husk of neoliberal globalisation is being devoured - are significantly different from the world to which we have become accustomed in recent decades.

What is the nature of this new world? Does it give us cause for hope as well as fear? Is the much discussed populism that is emerging from the ruins of the neoliberal order simply a right-wing phenomenon, as it may seem given the prominence gained by the politics of hate of Trump and Le Pen? Or does it also bring its own possibilities for emancipation, as is suggested by left-wing populists such as Bernie Sanders in the US and Podemos in Spain?

To understand the present historical conjuncture we need to look at it as a time of transition between two different political eras, an interregnum, in which 'the old is dying, and the new cannot be born', to use the words of Antonio Gramsci that are so frequently quoted these days.[2] The old that is dying is in this case the neoliberal era; while the new period that is gradually coming to light amidst painful travails is the populist era - one in which populism is going to become the dominant political

narrative on both the right and the left, given that the neoliberal centre can no longer hold.

The financial crash of 2007-8 - the turning point for contemporary history - has not only led to widespread economic hardship. It has been a fatal wound to the whole world view of neoliberalism, with its entrepreneurialism, its cult of the self-regulating market and its vision of a borderless and interconnected world bereft of state controls. This ideological crisis has ushered in, across a number of countries at the centre of the capitalist system, and in particular in Europe and the US, a 'populist moment', or a 'populist zeitgeist' as it has been alternatively described: a time when the new political phenomena that are emerging to fill the void left by the crisis of establishment parties - which have all converted to the neoliberal dogma - all seem to bear the mark of populism.[3] In this post-neoliberal phase, populism appears in the guise of a tendency that cuts across divisions of right and left; and as a logic that is shared by forces that wage their attack on the neoliberal establishment from opposite sides: Donald Trump *and* Bernie Sanders in the US, Podemos *and* Ciudadanos in Spain, UKIP *and* Corbyn in the UK.

Confronted with this surging populist wave, neoliberal elites in Europe and the US are in despair about what they see as 'populism, populism everywhere'. Populism is truly emerging as the dominant trend of contemporary politics. However, we seem as uncertain as ever about what is actually meant by the term .

This confusion stems from its long and often vexed history: in recent decades populism has often been used as a catch-all term for any anomalous or pathological phenomenon; it is seen as originating in the so-called 'sickness of Europe' - the racism, anti-semitism and xenophobia of its many right-wing populist parties. Yet, this pejorative view seems of little use at a time when, far from being a marginal anomaly, populism seems set to become the hegemonic political logic - and one that manifests itself not only in the ugly face of the xenophobic right, but also in the hopeful vision of radical democracy and equality that is proposed by the likes of Sanders and Podemos.

The demand for sovereignty in a globalised world

The obligatory starting point for any discussion about populism in the twenty-first century is the work of Ernesto Laclau, and in particular his book *On Populist*

Reason, which has been pivotal for overcoming the reductive and pejorative view of populism, and was extremely prescient when it was written ten years ago.[4] For Laclau, populism is not an anomaly or an exception. It is a political logic that seeks to bring about a particular articulation of different elements in order to construct the unifying subject of 'the people', so as to mobilise them against what are regarded as unresponsive political institutions. This logic is present in different degrees in virtually all political phenomena, since all political groups are bound to refer in their discourse to the idea of the totality of the political community - that is, the people.

One problem in Laclau's discussion of populism, however, is that it risks analysing it as a question of form rather than actual content, of style rather than substance. Yet it can be argued that populism always involves content as well as form. The familiar features of populist rhetoric - its rants against the establishment, its appeal to unifying images of the people and the nation and its frequent identification with a charismatic leader - do not constitute an 'empty signifier' (i.e., a signifier that is detached from any specific empirical referent, and can be matched-and-paired to any political content).[5] Rather, they are the means of expression of a specific political content, one which possesses its own distinctiveness, and is evidently at odds with the neoliberal worldview that has dominated the globe for the last thirty years - the demand for popular sovereignty. Populism can in this sense be understood as an ideology that centres on the demand for popular sovereignty in conditions in which this principle, formally inscribed in all republican constitutions, appears in danger.

Sovereignty - usually understood as the state's capacity to maintain complete authority within, and govern over, its own territory - was widely regarded as having been consigned to the dustbin of history in the globally interconnected world of the internet and multinational corporations. But it is a notion that is insistently invoked by the new populist formations and leaders that have emerged on both the left and right since the 2008 financial crash. The Brexit Leave campaign, with its demand to 'take back control', centred on reclaiming sovereignty from a European Union accused of depriving the UK of control over its own borders. And Donald Trump's presidential campaign in the US also made sovereignty its *leitmotif*. He argued that his immigration plan and his proposed overhaul of trade agreements would ensure 'America's prosperity, security, sovereignty', and has often attacked the 'globalism' of the 'liberal elites'. In France, Marine Le Pen intones the word 'sovereignty' on every

available occasion, in the context of tirades against the EU, migration and terrorism, and this notion is the centre-piece of her campaign to become the next president of France. In Italy the Five Star Movement has often appealed to sovereignty: in 2016, Alessandro Di Battista, one of its leaders, declared that 'sovereignty belongs to the People', and that Italy should abandon the euro to regain control over its economy.

But this question of sovereignty has not been the sole preserve of right-wing and centrist formations: it is also widespread on the left. The demand for popular sovereignty was key within the movement of the squares of 2011 - the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, the Greek Aganaktismenoi and Occupy Wall Street, which called for a reclaiming of state institutions by the people and for control over flows of trade and finance. In Spain, Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, has often described himself as a *soberanista* (sovereignist), and he has consistently adopted a patriotic discourse. Though critical of the strategy of Brexit, Iglesias has argued that nation states should recuperate their 'sovereign capacity' within the EU. In the US, Bernie Sanders has criticised global finance and - like Donald Trump - global trade. Opposing the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal (TPP), Sanders has argued that it would 'undermine US sovereignty'. Furthermore, left-wing nationalist movements such as those in Scotland and Catalunya have laid claim to the idea of sovereignty in the pursuit of their demand for national self-determination.

It could therefore be argued that sovereignty has become the master-signifier of contemporary politics: it is the discursive and political battleground which will determine whether the contest for hegemony in the post-neoliberal era will take a progressive or regressive direction. But what is actually meant here by sovereignty, and by popular sovereignty more specifically?

In approaching this question it is necessary to assert that sovereignty itself is a term whose meaning is open to contestation. Though many left-libertarian authors such as Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri have seen sovereignty as necessarily connected with authoritarian and right-wing politics - a suspicion that continues to be harboured by many activists - the meaning and political implications of this notion are far more complex than this judgement would imply.

It is true that the notion of sovereignty emerged at the time of the rise of absolutist and monarchical states, which were trying to impose absolute rule over a given territory. However, in its specific variation as 'popular sovereignty', it also became a pillar of national-popular democracies and was seen as a necessary

condition for effective democratic government. The concept of popular sovereignty was a foundational notion in the development of the left, as seen in its centrality in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the influence this idea exercised on the Jacobins and the French Revolution, as well as on the American Revolution.[6] The demand for sovereignty was also a feature of nineteenth-century movements such as the Narodniks in Russia (from whom the term populism originated) and the Chartists in Britain, who are often described as populists: these were groups which sought to mobilise the power of the people against autocratic political regimes. Finally, the notion of popular sovereignty was mobilised by post-war national liberation movements in the Third World, as well as more recently by the Latin American socialist populism of Chavez and Morales, in connection with their attempt to free their nations from the grasp of US imperialism.

In our present historical circumstances, in the aftermath of the greatest capitalist crisis since 1929, and at a time of all-pervasive interconnectedness - as manifested in the global tentacles of capitalist companies such as Google, Amazon and Facebook - this demand for popular sovereignty has acquired new relevance. Populist movements of both the left and the right are demanding, in different ways, a recuperation of territorial sovereignty - a spatial basis for popular self-government - in response to the damage and insecurity provoked by the intrusiveness of neoliberal globalisation. At their core lies a perception that the project of neoliberal globalisation, with its high-minded vision of a borderless and interconnected planet, has created a nightmarish 'flat world' (as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman described it), a space without control and regulation, to be seamlessly traversed by flows of capital, services, commodities and people, irrespective of the social consequences on local and national communities. It is this alienation of political power by global market forces that gives rise to demands to 'take back control', as expressed in the flagship slogan of the Brexit referendum campaign: a demand for territorial self-determination and autonomy as a reaction to a world in which global flows are perceived as undermining all attempts at territorial control.

To many people on the left, especially those of more libertarian and cosmopolitan leanings, this emerging politics of sovereignty appears inextricably linked to a right-wing agenda, fuelled by chauvinism and xenophobia. However, as is shown by the progressive reclaiming of sovereignty by Podemos, Bernie Sanders and others, the picture is not as simple as this. The embrace of populism by some on the post-crash

left is not a surrender to the cultural hegemony of the right. On the contrary, it stems from acceptance that the left project needs to be radically revised if it is to be able to respond to the present crisis of globalisation. This task will involve getting rid of a number of problematic neoliberal assumptions that the left has internalised.

To explore the ambivalent nature of the populist era, and the politics of sovereignty that lies at its heart, it is necessary to proceed from the perspective of the *longue durée*, one which it is quite difficult to adopt in turbulent times like the present - a period when, after a long phase of apparent stasis, we seem to be living through 'weeks where decades happen', as Lenin put it. From this perspective we can see that the present conjuncture coincides with the fault-line between two different political eras each with its own dominant narrative: the neoliberal era and the populist era.

The neoliberal assault on sovereignty

The neoliberal era, as a period of dominance of the neoliberal 'free-market' ideology, is usually seen as having emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s.[7] It was informed by a number of thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper and Ayn Rand, and made into governmental policy by right-wing politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. As argued by Michel Foucault, key to this ideology was the construction of a social fabric whose basic units would have 'the form of the enterprise'.[8] Neoliberalism, especially in its German 'ordo-liberal' variant, moved away from the naturalism of early liberalism's *laissez faire* principle, which viewed the free market as a natural phenomenon. Instead it saw the existence of the market as depending on the construction of what Foucault called a 'juridical-institutional framework', the establishment of a legal space in which the game of capitalism could be played out.[9] This framework was constructed during a period when a global system was superseding national control over the economy, and opposing social policies that sought to redress the imbalances of the market.

This neoliberal doctrine emerged as a critical response to the politics of socialism and social democracy, which early neoliberals such as Hayek perceived to be the hegemonic logic at the time of their intellectual intervention. Socialism was considered by neoliberals to be a tendency that existed across all forms of contemporary mainstream politics, in left-wing, right-wing and centrist

manifestations: it included 'New Deal and Popular Front policies of state control and intervention … National Socialist economics and politics … [and] the political and economic choices of the Soviet Union'.[10] According to neoliberals, all these formations implied an interventionist state whose ultimate point of arrival was necessarily Nazism. Criticising the socialist and social-democratic *dirigiste* idea of the state as a planner ensuring full employment and economic redistribution, the neoliberals asserted the primacy of freedom of enterprise and market competition.

It can be argued that we are currently witnessing a paradigmatic shift similar to the one that took place between the socialist and neoliberal eras. The populist era involves a new central narrative that re-organises the entire political space, forcing all actors to position themselves in relation to it, either in its support, or in antagonism to it.

As with the transition to the neoliberal era, which was constructed in opposition to socialism, the populist era sets out from a negation of the ideas and values of the preceding political era. Populist movements are arising in opposition to the neoliberal view of the nation state as bereft of any substantive social aim and revolving simply around the effective participation of all nations in a competitive global market.

Central to this criticism of neoliberalism is a recuperation of the notion of sovereignty, and a determination to find effective forms of local and national autonomy and self-determination in a world characterised by pervasive interconnectedness. The question of sovereignty is the point of contact between right-wing and left-wing populists. These two camps share the impression that today's central political question is how to reassert forms of territorial control and self-determination in a world characterised by extreme interconnectedness. But they propose radically different answers to this question.

In the neoliberal era, the key political question was how to construct a new world beyond the disappointments of the planned state economy, and the bureaucratism of the Fordist era; how to construct a world in which the creative energies of society, and the spirit of initiative of individuals, could be given free rein. The main evangelists of neoliberalism - Hayek, Mises, Friedman and others - saw socialism (which they considered to be hegemonic when they were first writing) as tantamount to slavery, and state planning and social policy as interference by the bureaucratic power of the state into the spontaneous dynamics of society, as

expressed in Hayek's famous distinction between *kosmos* (the spontaneous order of society) and *taxis* (the artificial order of the state).

Seeing state planning and protectionism as the enemy, these thinkers took aim at all forms of democratic sovereignty, and all forms of territorial jurisdiction and regulation, which they saw as obstacles to the self-regulating market and entrepreneurialism. The enmity towards sovereignty was explicitly thematised in Hayek's seminal book *The Constitution of Liberty*, in which he depicted sovereignty as a principle of the 'doctrinaire democrat', and described it as 'the justification for a new arbitrary power'. He recommended that majority rule be strongly limited by long-term principles that would preserve the freedoms of companies and individuals vis-a-vis the meddling state.[11]

This blueprint found its concrete application in the neoliberal policies of economic and financial deregulation that started to emerge with the ending of the link between the dollar and gold in 1971 and the 1973 oil crisis, and triumphed in the 1980s and 1990s. Multinational corporations began to operate with much greater mobility of capital, operating across national borders and side-stepping nation-state jurisdiction. The supranational scale of their operations provided capitalists with a means of blackmailing governments in order to obtain more favourable employment and tax rules. Meanwhile tax havens proliferated, designed as a means to frustrate sovereign control over taxation and capital flows. As described by Nicholas Shaxson, tax havens subverted sovereignty by turning it on its head, claiming sovereignty for tiny islands or micro-states that were used as pirate coves to hide proceeds stolen from national treasuries.[12] Trade liberalisation, achieved through a number of global trade treaties and the formation of the World Trade Organisation, also weakened the sovereignty of nation states by depriving them of the ability to protect local industries through the use of tariffs and other trade barriers, thereby exposing local workers to a global race to the bottom, resulting in falling wages and worsening working conditions.

There is no denying that the interconnectedness of finance, trade and communication brought about by neoliberal globalisation can be seen every day in a number of positive developments: the potential for communication with people around the globe that comes from the internet; the exotic produce available on our supermarket shelves; the greater mobility enjoyed by the affluent middle classes because of the lessening of travel restrictions; and the greater tolerance towards

ethnic and gender diversity that constitutes the progressive aspect of neoliberalism, as argued, for example, by Nancy Fraser.[13] However, global interconnectedness has also ushered in unprecedented levels of inequality, leading to a situation in which, as documented by a famous Oxfam report, published in January 2017, eight individuals currently own the same amount of wealth between them as the total that is owned by the poorest 50 per cent.

Given these effects of neoliberalism's war on sovereignty, it should not be a surprise that, amidst the current crisis of neoliberalism, sovereignty is seen by many as a necessary principle in devising an alternative political and social order. However, the left - apart from exceptions such as Sanders and Podemos - has in the main been dumbfounded at this turn of events. This is partly because large sections of the left, both moderate and radical, have absorbed parts of the neoliberal mindset, shifting their attention towards the post-materialist demands of middle-class constituencies and away from widening economic inequality and the representation of those at the bottom of society, sometimes described as the left-behind of globalisation. If it is to face the seismic shift produced by the 2008 crash, the left urgently needs to get rid of this unwitting subordination to the neoliberal project, and recuperate its historical mission of protecting workers and communities from the ravages of capitalism and fighting for social and economic equality.

Reconstructing territorial democracy and protection

The populist era starts out with an overturning of the axiomatic assumptions of the neoliberal era, and in particular its war on national-popular sovereignty.

Approached from this viewpoint, populism appears as the nemesis of neoliberalism. Where neoliberalism preaches the free will of the individual unrestrained from any collective control and regulation, populism asserts the primacy of a collective popular sovereignty. Where neoliberalism proposes the image of a globalised world, with no borders and no barriers, populism revolves around the assertion of territory and nation, and strong political communities founded within these discrete and bordered spaces. In short, populism attempts to recuperate the very principle by means of which neoliberalism initially launched its attack on socialism: popular sovereignty.

The main dilemmas of contemporary politics concern the question of how

to recuperate sovereignty in a global world - that is, how to reconstitute forms of territorial authority that can offer protection, security and support in a world characterised by global interconnectedness. This return of the question of sovereignty, with its implication of territorial power, reflects the way in which social anxieties in the post-crash era have been particularly focused around the flows - of trade, finance and labour - that constitute the sinews of the globally interconnected economy. At the height of neoliberal hegemony these flows were mostly seen as a source of wealth, but in a world of economic stagnation, precarity, geopolitical instability and global terrorism they are increasingly perceived as a source of risks.

Any regulation of global flows will involve a radical rethinking of the role of the state, and the adoption of a different tack from the hollowing out of state power that has been facilitated by neoliberal deregulation. The dominant aspiration of the neoliberal era was to crack open the rigid shell of a state apparatus that appeared overreaching and meddlesome. Today, in complete contrast, the aspiration is to find ways of constituting new protective barriers, regulative institutions and forms of state intervention that can provide some form of security in a world marked by instability and overexposure. The neoliberal world's openness of markets, borders and communication systems, far from engendering a culture of openness - a sort of mass cosmopolitanism - has instead produced precisely the opposite: a sense of agoraphobia, a fear of open spaces, and a chauvinist nationalism.

This perception of loss of control has provided combustible material for right-wing populists such as Le Pen and Trump, who have successfully connected agoraphobia with xenophobia. This is therefore no time for the left to be ignoring such preoccupations and leaving the discourse of sovereignty to the right. Demands for a recuperation of sovereignty ultimately spring from the all-too-real experiences of social suffering and humiliation that have been unleashed by the neoliberal demolition of the nation state, and must be paid attention to. Only if the left manages to understand this global agoraphobia, and to articulate a convincing response to it, will it have any chance of dislodging the dominance of the new right in this phase of economic and political crisis.

Left-wing and right-wing populists strongly differ in their understanding of what is actually meant by sovereignty, and which global forces and flows are the real source of their lack of control. For right-wing and xenophobic populists, sovereignty is first and foremost national sovereignty, the power associated with a

national community, often defined along ethnic and isolationist lines and mobilised against external enemies. It is a vision of sovereignty that carries strong overtones of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, for whom the prime mission of politics was to ensure security and protection against other nations.[14] The reassertion of sovereignty in this context means closing borders to migrants - including refugees escaping from war - and ostracising internal minorities suspected of endangering security and social cohesion - in particular, these days, Muslims. This xenophobic take on sovereignty was clearly on display in the Brexit referendum, where the Leave campaign won by appealing to suspicion of migrants and refugees, who were accused of undercutting wages, depleting public services and facilitating terrorism.

The progressive vision of sovereignty that lies at the heart of left-wing populist politics, from Podemos to Bernie Sanders, has a radically different complexion. For left-wing populists, the recuperation of sovereignty is not a matter of national security. It is instead, first and foremost, a matter of democracy, because no real democracy can exist without some notion of sovereignty, some specification of the territory over which people's power can assert its supremacy over the 'special interests' of companies and individuals. In this sense, a restoration of popular sovereignty can be seen as a response to the present democratic deficit, to times of 'post-democracy' as Colin Crouch has analysed it; and this is why in left discourse one often sees a close interlinking of sovereignty and democracy.[15] Furthermore, the demand for sovereignty is linked to the recurring need to reconstruct forms of economic protection after a period of market domination, as in Karl Polanyi's theory of 'double movement', where a demand for protection and regulation typically emerges after every phase of capitalist expansion, as a necessary reaction to the way in which capitalism has 'disembedded' the economy from society.[16] Left-wing populism's vision thus centres on the construction of new defensive structures and protective barriers, against the 'tornado capitalism' that has emerged on the open prairies of neoliberal globalisation.

The enemies identified by left-wing populists are also different - corporations and banks, not foreigners and refugees. It is the flows of finance and trade that are considered to be truly menacing to the well-being and security of territorial communities, not the flows of migrants. Sovereignty is conceived as a defensive weapon to be wielded by the many against the few, by ordinary citizens seeking to protect themselves from a supranational power elite that is opposed to the people's

will, and which benefits from the unsettling and disruptive effect of economic flows. Bankers, corrupt politicians and lobbyists, as well as global institutions such as the Troika and the IMF, stand accused of interfering with the legitimate demand for some degree of autonomy for local and national communities.

The future will tell us which of these narratives of sovereignty will prevail in the populist era, who will win the battle for hegemony. At the moment, right-wing populists seem to have the upper hand, to a large extent because the left is hesitating about abandoning its conversion to neoliberalism and laying claim to sovereignty as a necessary component of democracy. To respond to the rage and disarray caused by the economic, political and moral crisis of neoliberalism, the left urgently needs to return to its foundational idea of popular sovereignty, and to construct a progressive view of territorial control, geared towards the construction of new forms of radical democracy and social protection against the power of global capitalism.

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Notes

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