



*CHRONICLE OF THREE  
YEARS OF STRUGGLE OF  
THE SOCIALIST DEPUTIES*

A SOCIALIST  
IN THE FACE OF( X) POPULISM( S)

BY BORIS VALLAUD, JUNE 2019  
AND VALÉRIE RABAULT

# CHRONICLE OF THREE YEARS OF STRUGGLE OF THE SOCIALIST DEPUTIES:

UNSOCIALISTE

FAC WATER (X)POPULISME(S)

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A winning strategy for some, a blatant impasse for others, populism is a never-ending debate.

Populism is on every mouth and in every ballot box. We either trust it or defy it. We either believe in it or we don't. Here it thrives, there it regresses. Populism has its contemptuers and its theorists. There are those who only talk about it and those who never talk about it (but always think about it). Some claim it outright, while others are exhilarated by the transgression of capturing its mystery, as when Emmanuel Macron, in front of the mayors of France, skulls forward, "we are true populists, we are with the people.

Are we really living in a populist moment? Should we be happy about it or worried about it? Is populism a revolution at the ballot box and the future of democracy? Is it a cure for political melancholy? Is there such a thing as progressive populism, left-wing populism? This is the fascinating debate that I was able to share with representatives of Podemos, Senso Commune or La France insoumise in various cenacles. Return of a socialist in the face of populism(s).

Considering the multitude of those who claim to be populist or those who are considered populist, the "political moment", despite the national and European electoral ups and downs, is tangible. The disqualification in the ballot boxes of the traditional parties could be enough in itself to give a measure of it a contrario. The multitude, however, does not create unity, and it is difficult to find more than one, often very distant, family resemblance to the Lega, Podemos, the National Front or the rebellious France. Populism lacks the substance to be politically normative.

Do populisms always and necessarily come together in the contestation of neoliberalism? Nothing is less certain to consider Matteo Renzi, who, long before

Emmanuel Macron, had soberly declared himself a populist (before proclaiming himself the remedy...), neither Orban, nor even less the Republic on the march to which, although it defends itself, one can find many stigmata of populism, in its intrinsic "degagism", the plebiscitary exercise of power of which the French have been witnesses for the past two years or the permanent staging of itself by its leader.

Do they converge in identity claims and xenophobia? The reactions of Podemos on the one hand and the Lega on the other during the Aquarius episode tend to demonstrate the opposite. Ports opened in Spain for the former, ports closed in Italy for the latter... as will remain the case for Marseille.

Would this then be the only challenge to the established order? Of the "system" served by necessarily corrupt elites, at least on the moral level, which should be freed, according to the word borrowed from the Arab revolutions? The emergence of an essentialized people? There is undoubtedly an objective convergence that makes populism more a shared method of conquering power than a similar exercise of responsibility. What, for example, would be the populist solution to the conflict between cabs and VTC? It is clear what the response of a liberal or social-democratic government could be. It is difficult to discern the populist answer...

### **What is the people?**

So there would be the people on one side, the elites on the other. And their confrontation would become the engine of history. But what is this people the populists talk about? Sometimes it comes up. There are moments of jubilation, revolt or popular communion in which one has the feeling of grasping "the people" in a form of physical reality. The storming of the Bastille, the burial of Victor Hugo, the liberation of Paris, the victories of the French soccer team in 1998 and 2018, on January 11, 2015. The people gathered, like a myth realized, in a community of revolt, joy or fear. The people who constitute themselves in action. The people that appears and, sometimes, disappears. The movement of the yellow jackets saw the emergence of a people from the traffic circles, for example, who seem to have disappeared in the ballot boxes or at least dispersed. The community of revolt did not give rise to a political community.

Reality, as everyone knows, is more complex, and the very meaning of the beautiful word "people" depends on who says it, on the speech, on the moment. "The people does not exist," Rancière says, "what exists are diverse, even antagonistic figures of the people, constructed figures.... ». The political people, sovereign and indivisible, the people in its republican sense, the heritage of Rousseau. The cultural people, with its avatars of identity, "authentic people" or "people of origin". The people in the social sense, the one the left is talking about and which covers the notion of popular classes.

The people of the populists, the people of the 99% of Occupy Wall Street is a constructed figure. Is there really such a people, in the singular, who see urban and rural, young and old, workers and managers, workers and the unemployed, the able-bodied and the disabled, the native French and the paper French, Gavroche and the Thénardiens, cohabit in a supposed community of revolt, interests, destiny? It is a word shell, but in politics the singular is always suspect. Above all, it misrepresents the people in its diversity and the conflicting interests inherent in any society. "He who knows what the people are will not be long in distributing certificates of authenticity that will assign one to the glory of being one, another to the infamy of not being one," Gérard Bras writes quite rightly. Behind the question "Who is the people?" another, frightening one emerges: "who is not the people? »

### **Populism, a simplification without substance**

Populism is a sociological simplification, it does not have the finesse of analysis of socialism, which rubs up against the complexity of the world and which, through the meticulous analysis of what is in this great whole that is the people, seeks to resolve democratically, through intermediate bodies and through deliberation, conflicts to achieve the common interest. Durkheim saw socialism not only as a "cry of misery" but as a call for a better knowledge of societies that this intrinsic proximity to sociological science allows. The Left is primarily social, in the sense that it conceives of the world in differentiated social classes, sometimes in struggle, sometimes allied. It is not satisfied with binary and simplifying choices. And only the finesse of sociological analysis peculiar to socialism makes it possible to understand the world and to transform it without sinking into the lyrical illusions that flatter feelings.

This sociological simplification therefore corresponds, almost necessarily, to a political simplification. Populism is pre-political in its direct dialogue between the reified people and a leader who would speak on their behalf ("Woe to the people who need a leader"), where liberal democracy, with all its obvious imperfections and inadequacies, is a mature construction that allows the diversity of individuals and their interests to emerge from the common and overcome the risk of the tyranny of the majority. We need a democracy that is sophisticated in its procedures, in its mechanisms, in its representations of the people (and we need to multiply the representations of the people). We need intermediary bodies, countervailing powers, independent media and collaborative democracy. Pluralism. This is the essence of social democracy, as a method of government, and its infinite superiority over any kind of illiberal democracy.

To proclaim the superiority of the will of the reified people is to risk emptying the "popular classes" of their historical and social substance. It is even taking the risk of forgetting them, and I am not sure that populism is ultimately the best ally of the people it claims to defend. Populism could even be the surest way to make the people lie, one might say by parodying Proudhon. The test of the vests

In this respect, yellow has put populism to the test of the people. With a paradox: on the one hand, the people of traffic circles, after those of squares, slipped through the fingers of those who claimed to embody it. A movement where horizontality commands and forbids all forms of representation, from which no leader emerges without taking the risk of immediate disqualification. On the other hand, a political recovery of the crisis through a great debate conducted in an eminently plebiscitary, vertical manner by a President of the Republic restoring his authority in a direct dialogue (or allegedly such) with the people, multiplying the stage performances taking the place of asserting the political power of the leader.

### **Reaching out to the people**

Finally, there is one last dead end, that of the denial of the right-left cleavage which opens the way to all transgressions. Substituting the left-right cleavage for the people-elite cleavage means taking the risk of subjective but above all dangerous objective alliances. To those who claim progressive populism, I reply that there is an insoluble oxymoron between progressivism and populism.

However, let's take this "populist moment" as a call to order. People is a word that thrives as democracy moves away from it and injustices flourish. Mirabeau said of the people that it is a "word that lends itself to everything ; which, modest today, can enlarge our existence as by their obstinacy, by their faults, the privileged classes will force us to take in hand the defense of national rights, of the freedom of the people". That is where we are now.

Albert Camus said of the role of the writer in his speech from Sweden that he "does not part with difficult duties. By definition, he cannot put himself today at the service of those who make history: he is at the service of those who undergo it. »

This is basically a way of responding to the central challenge of our fragile democracies and our atomized societies, in which individuals are no longer capable of understanding themselves as members of a community of destiny: "making people", that is to say, creating the common, the universal, the general interest. From this point of view, there is a major stake, to join the people in the sense of Sartre, to put oneself at the service of those who suffer history: the popular categories, the precarious, the poor, the losers of unfair globalization and liberalism.

This is also the path of an awakening of the "people of the left", that of the transfer of the ashes of Jaurès to the Pantheon in 1924, that of 1936, of the immense demonstrations of Charonne or the Bastille on a tidal night in 1981.

The challenge for left-wing progressives, as long as there is right-wing progressivism, is to go beyond the stage of populism, to reach that of socialism. Instead of manipulating the magnified people, we must always prefer the transformation of unjust societies.