Populism *per se*, its founts

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"Populism" in Argentina usually refers to Peronism, but in South Africa the media uses the term to refer to the far-left margins like the *Economic Freedom Fighters* and the student "Rhodes Must Fall" collective. The two countries on the whole share a basic "populist" speech pattern[1]. The following essay attempts to provide a theoretical framework, a hypothesis, which analytical study will still have to validate.

The whole tenor of public discussion, both in political and media terms, actually seeks to mask the issue of the very existence of a people in a state of insurrection under apartheid and, in the second republic from 1994, of a troublesome people - a "people" radically different in political terms from the "rainbow nation". This "people" appears constantly in the second republic in violent one-off events - strikes and demonstrations that are fomented by a vocabulary that is correspondingly violent. The conceptual framework is straightforward: terrorism/the liberation struggle was the consistent underpinning phenomenon, which was both discursive and political under the first republic, but has become a phenomenon of specificity while its "populist" violence also ceased being consistent and became sporadic. But the principle remains the same.

No-one could grasp, either under apartheid or in the second republic, that this phenomenon comprises the political awareness of the individual expressed as an action, an action which plays out in the political sphere; and which, in concert with the acts of other individuals, takes on the form of a "people".

Thus, a voluntary, semi-insurrectional action, although still a personal action, weaves into the initiation of a human group collective which shares the same goals, the same methods and the same ethical sentiments. So, a "chain of populist justification" arose which now operatesas a dialectic in the inner cities and the suburbs, just as it operated in the segregated townships before 1994.

This chain is made up of individuals who can and want to act and whose willingness and capacity to act becomes what is conveniently

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[1]Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, New York, Verso 2007.

labelled "terrorism" and, bracketed under a political creed, forms a kind of revolutionary avant-garde: it is doctrinaire in its vocabulary, organized without constrictive committees, combat-ready, prepared to take the fight to the "class" enemy and promoting the message of a global revolution.

The most common line the media takes in encapsulating the phenomenon, even if, and especially because, it is not explicit, is the assertion that the "terrorists" of yesteryear and the "protesters" of today, are influenced or manipulated and are not representative of the "true people". Thus, any conscious political will is disregarded.

This public rhetoric will not accept that populism *per se*, in the precise meaning of the term, is the radical manifestation of what politics is based on, namely "differend"[2], in this case the refusal to enter into debate with the race enemy before 1994, and reprised in the declarations of the EFF and the "Rhodes must fall" types of today, and particularly with the class enemy or "post-colonials" after 1994. This differend manifests itself in rejecting any "dispute" dialogue, viz. refusing to speak the language and use the speech codes (whether of the media, of politics or of jurisprudence) of the opponents of populism that they are attacking.

All of *per se* populism's propaganda therefore aims at creating a linguistic demarcation which operates in parallel with the current political world so as to subvert, and ultimately supplant it. The use of the internet should not mislead us: the internet is a practico-inert tool, of no use in and of itself, in contrast to the political language we practise. Populism can thus give rise to a linguistic demarcation which represents its "people", using tools which aregenerally considered as "capitalist", such as the social networks of Web 2.0, and characteristic of their adversary.

This appropriation of tools is an insurrectional technique on the communication terrain itself. The trivial reaction is: "They protest against the 'haves' but they all have iPads" is dangerous because it hides the reality that these tools are only inert "utensils" as defined by Sartre[3], until such time as their use gives them a strategic and tactical dynamism.

Populism *per se* has four characteristics.

Firstly, it divides political society dramatically in two in any conceivable formulation: rich and poor, the legal state and the real country. In the case of South Africa, the pre-1994 basic division was black/white, and was narrowed down to a residue, in Pareto's meaning of

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[2] Jean-François Lyotard, The *Differend*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, NLB, 1976.

the term[4], as either quasi-mythological, like the Liberation Struggle, or profoundly and irrationally emotional (pathos in rhetorical terms). This residue thus imbues and becomes part of the debate as a pseudo-logical derivation (once again in terms of Pareto's conceptualisation) to adapt itself seamlessly and malleably to political circumstances: the residue is rooted in emotionally charged poles like "rich/poor", "enfranchised/disenfranchised", "powerful/powerless".

These derivations, above and beyond the residue, provide the opportunity to verbalise them by clothing them in words and arguments. The purpose of derivations is actually to present arguments that appear logical or ethical, while the residue gives them an emotional, mythical, reckless aura.

Derivations, rooted in a residue, thus account for the potential for populist violence stemming at once from individual will and from a social movement which are both linked to a "transcendence" viz. the residue. Populist movements over and over again play out the primitive, mythical scenario, transcending the racial divide, in disregard of political reality.

Secondly, populist discourse produces another rhetorical form, the favourite theme of the treachery of the elite. The dichotomy is no longer between the "haves" and the "have-nots", but, from the point of view of the majority who watchfrom the side-lines the sparking of populist discourse and violence, between "know" and "know not". Nevertheless, it is better to be wary of the following: the rhetorical workings in play are dialectic and not simply binary, since, in a second phase the contestation can be reversed: those who are oppressed "know better" than the oppressors. There follows a third phase– the growth of social wisdom which challenges the initial perspectives reduced, through populist debate, to useless concepts, outdated, oppressive, vertical: a fake perspective.

It can be argued that populist groups actually construct a horizontal outlook, assisted by Web 2.0 which, through its dynamic content, has the result of supplanting the original vertical perspective. The criticism frequently used by the press and the man in the street like "these protesters know nothing about (Rhodes, for example)" is strategically misplaced because, in fact, populism creates a horizontal perspective which is more persuasivethan the "normal" or expert perspective (in this case, anhistoric perspective).

Clearly, for those who want to, it is in the field of this social-cognitive reversal of perspective that combat by argumentation should be

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[4]Vilfredo Pareto, *Traité de sociologie générale* [*Treatise of General Sociology*]

pursued, and not from an external perspective which, from the outset, is decried as "oppressive".

Populism has a third characteristic which is to designate the "Other" as the enemy. Naming it thus is all-powerful.

It is essential to denounce, unmask and destroy those who collaborate in the enslavement of the "true people". Populism has to caricature its adversary so as to delineate its salient features. That is why in South Africa, extreme left-wing populism takes aim at enemy symbols - symbols named directly (urban place names) or indirectly (monuments): it is the nomenclature that is the target. Pre-1994, the assault was physical. After 1994, it metamorphosed into a symbolic guerrilla war waged in its turn, with sanitised violence, what is referred to as "weaponizing speech"[5]. This is a populist insurrection pursued by other means, but now protected or tolerated in the name of the right to free speech.

A fourth element of populist rhetoric is the exclusion argument. In populist terms, it is recognised that the claims made by "the people" from those who are decried as "bad" have their genesis in,and bear the marks of, "exclusion". Those "excluded" make their demands from their excluded position. By dialectic reversal, the excluded position becomes thesuperior position: a sense of powerless outrage confronting the power of the "corrupt" and a sense of amplified injustice, transformed into anaffirmation of glorious isolation. These are the new "damned of the earth" who assert that a new but corrupt political order has excluded them and therefore the excluded must rally together as an expressive force.

These four elements form a logical chain.

Muscular populism thus refers simultaneously to a coalescing group and to individual spontaneity. The theory of populism goes so far as to assert that "the people" takes on its true form and its real existencethrough this double linkage. The terrorism debate prior to 1994 and the vocabulary of populist violence after 1994 in South Africa reveals both the ideal of a people in the making, and individualist action.

In Sartre's analysis, this would be defined as a Fraternity of Terror[6]: in populist activities, the foot-soldier acts without receiving specific orders "from on high" only on the basis of slogans, and in the Web 2.0 era, on the basis of the watchwords of a discursive and horizontal

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[5]Roger Stahl, "Weaponizing Speech", *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 102/4, 2016, pp. 376-395

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, *op. cit.*

fraternity. Violent populism consists of a dialectic between the willing individual and a social formation in motion which weaves them into a chain of action.

As this movement grows, it becomes the warp and weft constituting "the true, good people", it is a sudden emergence of the "people", which takes on irresistible political form and which manifests a radical hostility towards those designated as the enemy.

How can the rise of this populist chain be explained?

It should be kept in mind that populism, as it has been conceived here, is defined as a rationale, or chain, of individual equality and not as a rationale or chain of substitutions[7]. Here is an elucidation: a population governed by codes and political management (governance) operates, when it is making demands, as a social logic by substitutionto manifestsectoral discontent. By contrast, human groups in an insurrectional phase operate by deploying the group consciousness of persons of equal volition.

So, in non-populist politics, the management of social demands is rooted in a mechanism of dialogue (hence the expression: "social dialogue")[8] which consists of separating one demand from another, meaning that differing appeals do not become tangled together in one massive and unmanageable demand. The process advances by the substitution of one demand after the other, each one subject to variable sectoral dialogue.

By contrast, the creation of a populist chain of logic springs from a series of discursive equivalences where the single individual,linking his own situation with those in similar situations, creates chain of equivalences between him and his struggle comrades. Reading blogs and messages of violent populist networks in South Africa confirms this.

In analysing the basic arguments of a populist nature in South Africa and Argentina, we shall need to concentrate on these two rationales or chains, rather than adopting an Aristotelian approach.

Translated from the French by Babrius Translation Services.

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[7]Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a name?" pp. 32-49, in Francisco Panizza (Ed.), *Populism and the mirror of democracy*, London, Verso, London, 2005.
[8] Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *L'Hyperpolitique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2009, Ch. IV.