Where Would We Be Without Barbarians?

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"Muslims submit themselves", "Christians cling to dogmas", "Europeans are civilised", "women like men who are wealthy and strong" and "black people have a feel for music". Images about 'others', people of other cultures, religions, sex or colour, is a recurring topic in modern history. Usually a contradiction is constructed between the self and the other, the other forming the negative of our positive self-image. The savage Turk against the civilised European, for instance.

Today, these kinds of generalised, fixed images of others are easily found in our societies. All over Europe, we have been confronted with rising political movements we usually refer to as 'populist', far right or even racist. Those parties are known for defining their own political perspective by way of creating fixed images of others, who should be excluded because they are a danger to 'us', to the 'real people'. Populists act in similar ways to the fundamentalists they hate so much: they take a part of a whole, and turn it into an absolute truth.

The question of our event today is: are these political movements her to stay? My answer is a clear 'yes'. Firstly because of the actual political situation, in which populist parties flourish, the other because the populist way of doing politics goes back to a mechanism which we all know too well.

Before going into populism as an actual political phenomenon, I would like shortly go into the importance of populist simplifications to all of us.

We often define ourselves by what we are not, by creating a contrast between 'us' and an 'other'. The meaning of the creation of fixed images, stereotypes for our identity, is strikingly articulated by the Greek poet Kavafis in his poem '*Waiting for the barbarians*'. After a long day of waiting, the barbarians have not come – until somebody announced that there were no barbarians anymore. This causes a huge consternation on the market square. 'And what should we do now, without barbarians?' ask the people in the poem, 'At least those people offered a way out…'

"Barbarians" still provide us with a way out of our own frustrations, identity-conflicts and forbidden feelings. That is the case with populists, but not only with them. We are all susceptible to this mechanism of projecting our own problems and dark sides onto others. That's also the reason why there is no easy answer to populism. We ourselves, and by that I mean in this context: we as political progressives, are part of the problem.

New Populist Movements

At least since the nineties we are confronted with movements that claim to speak in the name of 'the people'. These movements pit themselves against mainstream politics, which they regard as elitist. Their proclaimed aim is to protect the identity of the 'Christian Western civilisation' by closing borders and attacking cultural, ethnic and religious minorities. They create an unbridgeable gap between the 'bad' elite, the 'good' people and the 'other' (usually minority groups).

We usually refer to these political movements as 'populists' – the latin word populus means 'common people' – although there is no clear definition of this term. The interpretations of populism differ: it can be seen as a way of doing politics in an emotional, simplistic and manipulative style that might be employed

by both left-wing and right-wing parties; one can, however, also think of this phenomenon as a new postmodern ideology or as nationalism in a new shape.

The origins of the concept of populism are twofold: on the one hand, the term goes back to the American farmers' protest movement at the end of the nineteenth century; on the other, to the Russian narodniki in the same period. Both were agrarian movements fighting for the improvement of the hard life of farmers. Later on, in quite another context, the concept was used to describe political regimes in the Third World countries governed by charismatic leaders, and applied above all to Latin American politics from the sixties on.

Today, as we have seen, the concept is once again undergoing transformation.

Populist are those political movements that partly use the heritage of the extreme right, and partly have a different character. On the one hand populists, like the extreme right, play on the mechanisms of exclusion and differentiation; they use a demagogic, protectionist and xenophobic nationalism. On the other hand they mostly declare themselves to be democratic. They thrive on democratic support and call for more instruments of direct democracy in our political system. A shift can also be observed from collectivism to individualism and a certain type of liberalism. All populists seem to like freedom a lot, as most of these parties have the word freedom in their name. In the same time we see a shift from racial arguments to cultural elements. Populists defend democracy, liberty and equality, they defend women rights and sometimes even gay rights, but those values are seen as exclusive for the mainstream, "enlightened" culture. Populist take old left-wing ideals like liberty, solidarity, equality and nationalise them. They are not accessible to immigrants from other cultures or religions that are seen as 'backward' and primitive. This time, the 'barbarians' took the shape of Muslim extremists and fundamentalists. Populists know all about the true nature of Islam. Religion and culture are not being considered as something that changing and self-evaluating all the time, but as phenomena with a fixed and eternal essence.

Because Green and left-wing parties consider populist politics to be a threat to the most fundamental European values like diversity, open-mindedness, critical (self)reflection and tolerance, the Green European Foundation, building on the work of the Dutch Green foundation "Bureau de Helling" took the initiative to ask politicians, scientists and journalists from different parts of Europe to analyse what is going on in our societies today. The result was a book: *Populism in Europe*. It was not a coincidence that the initiative for this book came from the Netherlands. This country loved to see itself as liberal and tolerant, and the rise of the new generation of populists came as a major shock. It might also not be a coincidence, that it was published in an Austrian publishing house.

The Post-Political and the Democratic Gap

There are a lot of different explanations of the rise of populism in Europe: the economic crises, the gap between politics and citizens, the fact that globalisation has created new contradictions between the highly educated that profit from it, and the unskilled lower class who is more or less a looser in the process of globalisation. You can read all about it in the published book.

For the moment, I would like to focus on one explanation of political populism, given by Merijn Oudenampsen in his article 'Populist Realism' in *Populism in Europe*. This is not because I see his explanation as the only or most important one, but because I think also left-wing and Green parties are deeply touched by it and therefore it needs closer consideration. Oudeampsen relies on the analysis of Chantal Mouffe, who states that the eviction of the political from politics that occurred after 1989 gave

right-wing populists the opportunity to reshape the political landscape. She introduces the term 'post-political', which refers to a political sphere without political and ideological conflict. Oudenampsen describes it as follows: "[In the nineties], the polarity between left and right, which until then had been the defining opposition in politics, all but ceased to exist. Social Democratic parties abandoned their ideological stance for a pragmatist, (neo)liberal approach. […] Politics became increasingly a matter of expert administration, technocratic governance and public management."

Political issues were no longer defined by socio-economic divisions between left and right, but marked by a cultural opposition between the cosmopolitan multicultural and libertarian elite on the one hand, and the more conservative, nationalist and authoritarian 'people' on the other. While Green parties are campaigning for post-material issues like environment, equality, individual freedom and minority rights, populist politicians started claiming to be the voice of the people neglected by the libertarian elite. In doing so, they also started to shape this "will of the people", though. They focused on the decline of traditional norms and values, the erosion of social structures such as the family, the loss of national identity and sovereignty, and the need for more repressive and authoritative political methods. They did not use the conventional political methods of convincing and reasoning, but their main tools were – and still are – provocation and the building of fixed images, which tend to be very effective in our media culture. The left-wing slogan from 1968 "*l'imaginaire au pouvoir*", seems to be very effective these days, but in a completely different way than the movements of those days dreamt about. We see a symbiotic relationship between populism and media and even advertising. In our culture, the imaginary succeeds over the rational and influences political dialogue as well.

To come back to Chantal Mouffe, she states that this post political way of doing politics, created a political sphere without political and ideological conflict. Everything that could cause conflict, which falls outside the scope of what is negotiable in the given balance of power, is simply excluded from the political sphere. But, Mouffe states, politics involves much more that a rational assessment of interests and problems. It involves emotions, passions, conflicts. It is deeply human to formulate a 'we' by formulating a 'them'. Mouffe argues that with the fading away of the polarity between left and right, antagonism is bound to resurge along other lines, like ethnicity, religion or other forms of cultural identity. The ideological implosion that took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall, resulted in the exchange of a 'clash of ideologies' for a 'clash of civilisations'.

Populists start to redefine the political sphere. They started to talk about the gap between the elite and the people and they started to define the people in contrast to other cultures and religions. And so they brought back antagonism, but without the control of a functioning political sphere. What is important to highlight, therefore, – and this is an important conclusion of Oudenampsens article – is that in the end populism is not so much about giving voice to the will of the people – for that remains largely a virtual entity. It is more about shaping the people and the will of the people.

If progressive parties are confronted with populism, Oudenampsen argues, they often react in two ways: both are equally problematic, if we take the analysis of Mouffe seriously. Those who are opposed to populism tend to take the moral high ground and condemn its simplifications and xenophobia. In this way they more or less confirm the division between the elite and the people. They discredit the populist imaginary outright, without engaging with it. On the other hand you have the reaction of accommodation that aims to win back the populist voters, rejects the populist solutions, but uncritically accepts the idea that populists speak in the name of the people. Is there another way to react to populism?

Without Barbarians

Left-wing and Green parties should start to understand politics as a struggle over the definition of reality. They have to undertake an in-depth analysis not only of the manner in which populist are framing political talk, but also of the way they are influencing the political talk of mainstream parties. In politics, it is all about images and imagination. The corresponding new term for this phenomenon is Framing (after the American linguist George Lakoff). It means that you use a metaphor or a well-chosen image to present your own way of thinking. If your image is strong, others will use it as well and without noticing, start to think about an issue in your terms.

Populists are very successful when it comes to framing. Their images of Islam and immigrants are all over the media and a lot of mainstream politicians are using them. (e.g. the contradiction of the enlightened West against a backward and fundamentalist Islam) Left parties themselves are not indifferent to the populist frames of Islam and religion in general as backward and anti-modernist. The voices that question the role of orthodox religion in public space are becoming louder and louder, and they often come from the left. Religious people more and more seem to play the part of the 'barbarians'.

Progressives should be more aware of the power of framing and of images. They should ask themselves the question to what extent they are following the populist frames without knowing it. They should not follow populists in their tendency to use the term 'people' in an absolute and exclusive way. The left should develop its own stories, frames and images. This seems to be one of the important challenges to progressive parties: how to profile themselves clearly in the political debate. Will they have to become more populist in their methods, show more emotions, become more personal? Or should they stick to the old political practice of convincing others by way of arguing and reasoning?

Is it possible to design a frame that promotes a life without having to resort to the picture of "barbarians"? That seems only possible if we are constantly aware of our own deep need to project our own negative thoughts and fears onto others, and when we are open to be corrected and criticised. To live without labelling "barbarians" means to live with others, who are not like us, but who aren't our opposites either. The best way to fight fixed images and generalizations, or the "production" of barbarians, is by getting to know them, their history, their habits and their daily worries in our societies. It is a lot less spectacular and needs a constant effort.

Every image, because it is so compelling, should be analyzed critically. The identity of immigrants and other minorities is only partly defined by religion – a lot of them are secularising rapidly. Instead of following the populist frame of reality in cultural and religious terms, left-wing parties should go back to hammer on the old social-economical way of looking at reality. We shouldn't talk about Muslims when we mean immigrants or their children and grandchildren – why are they still called immigrants anyway? Criticism is fine, but it should always go together with self-criticism.

Tell stories and create frames and images that correct the fixed images, not by denying difficult questions, but by accepting others in their different ways. We should defend the right of people to have secrets, to be incomprehensible and mysterious. There are no fixed images, neither of others nor of ourselves. The nature of no culture or religion is fixed. Even fundamentalists change their views, although they will not easily admit it. Reality is constantly moving, balancing between cracks and cohesion.

When we manage not to pin people down on what is behind them, but to take them with us to another world where there is a place for everybody, maybe then we could start to live without barbarians.