This book is published by **LUKAS & STERNBERG** and produced by **FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN** together with **NIFCA** – The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art – on the occasion of the exhibition project '**POPULISM**', produced by **NIFCA** – The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art – in collaboration with:

CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE, Vilnius
9 April/8 June 2005

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN, Oslo
16 April/4 September 2005

STEDELIJK MUSEUM, Amsterdam
30 April/28 August 2005

FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN, Frankfurt am Main
11 May/4 September 2005

Editors: Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero, Nicolaus Schafhausen
Editorial Board: Vanessa Joan Müller, Marita Muukkonen
Editorial Co-ordinator: Eva May
Copy Editor: Jill Winder
Translation: Jeremy Gaines, Christopher Jenkin-Jones, Steven Lindberg, Caitlin Madden, George Frederick Takis
Illustrations: Atelier van Lieshout
Designed at M/M (Paris)
Printing and binding:
Druckerei und Verlag Otto Lembeck, Frankfurt am Main

Generously supported by:

KULTURSTIFTUNG DES BUNDES
The German Federal Cultural Foundation

DekaBank

EUROPEAN CULTURAL FOUNDATION
Active in culture and the arts as well as the media, and with an impressive track record in education since 1954, the European Cultural Foundation is Europe's only independent, non-national and pan-European cultural foundation. Running its own programmes and awarding grants keep it close to the grassroots cultural sector, and make it a credible advocate of strong cultural policies for Europe. For further information: www.eurocult.org

Education and Culture
Culture 2000
This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

nifca

This publication is also kindly supported by
Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung

Published by LUKAS & STERNBERG
Caroline Schneider
1182 Broadway #1602, NY 10001 New York
Linienstraße 159, D-10115 Berlin
mail@lukas-sternberg.com, www.lukas-sternberg.com

ISBN: 1-933128-04-6

© 2005 Lukas & Sternberg; the authors; Atelier van Lieshout for illustrations unless otherwise stated.

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.



THE READER

AKAD.BILD.K.WIEN
+R7053101

Bild.Künste in Wien * Universitätsbibliothek der Akademie der

90.414-E

POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY

Dieter Lesage

Populism has many different faces. Many different things can be called populism for very good reasons. We may not necessarily agree on the meaning of the term populism. And maybe the term populism should not necessarily have only one meaning. The usefulness of a term with different meanings resides in the fact that it may hint at family resemblances between different phenomena called populism. Therefore, in any project on populism, it might soon appear that the contributors – artists, academics, writers and other intellectuals – will use the word in many different ways. For some of those who look at the populism debate as it is staged, these 'intellectuals' will establish a supposedly well-known 'truth', and that is that 'intellectuals' never agree among each other, that they always quarrel about futile questions, if not to say that they don't know what they are talking about. From the very beginning, a project that wants to stage the debate on populism, with all its different approaches and insights, risks ridicule. The reason for this is that populism today is hegemonic, no matter how much this may sound like running in circles. Thus, any reflection on populism will be confronted with the hegemony of its subject matter the moment it becomes public. Therefore, whatever format the public reflection on populism is supposed to embrace, be it a book or an exhibition, at one point or another, the populist temptation might sneak into the production process leading to the final product. This populist temptation can take many forms. It may be the idea that reflection should be made 'sexy', in order to be able to tackle the populist reproach that any reflection is just boring. Or it could be that an art exhibition needn't be 'difficult', or should be made 'public friendly', in order to respond to the populist saying that art is all too hermetic. Obviously, in the struggle against populism – and any discourse on populism believes itself to be part of the struggle *against* populism – it is difficult not to give in to populism oneself.

The reason for this lies in the character of populism's hegemony. The hegemony of populism means that populism should be understood not only as what one has called a 'speech regime', but also as a regime of representation.[1] Populism is a specific rhetoric of representation. It dictates that things should be kept simple and clear. Even if populists don't know much about deconstruction, formally their populism could be read as deconstruction bashing. Populism is the grand restoration of all binary oppositions and dichotomies. Therefore, the primordial 'other' for populism isn't 'the alien' or 'the immigrant', no matter how much both have obviously been a target of political populisms throughout Europe, but 'the intellectual'. Populisms from the right *and* from the left have all declared the intellectual to be their prime enemy, even if this declaration is based on an interpretation of opinion polls and research with focus groups, both being activities in which quite some intellectual labour is deployed.[2] Indeed, paradoxically enough, populism's anti-intellectual rhetoric is very often an intellectually motivated choice. Currently, one way to give in to populism's anti-intellectual speech regime would be to think that what we need the most in a debate on populism is a clear-cut definition of populism. A project on populism, therefore, should claim as a basic right the right to use the term in different ways. It should claim the right to differ, in ways of meaning and in ways of speaking. It should enact difference. It should differ from itself. It should reflect its own presuppositions.

In so far as the populist rhetoric of representation has acquired hegemony, and given the hegemonic status of the representative concept of democracy today, populism is also defining the representational regime of today's liberal democracies. In the last fifteen years, populism has been widely referred to as a danger for liberal democracy[3] It should be noted, however, that populism is a pitfall inherent to the organisation of liberal democracy itself. The territorial boundaries of liberal democratic nation-states define to a great extent the constituency toward which politicians have to address themselves in order to get elected. In a territorially defined liberal democracy, politicians have little interest in reckoning with the interests of inhabitants of other (national) constituencies. They don't have a right to vote in national elections, so in a certain sense they don't count. All politicians, even politicians not usually suspected of being 'plain populists', are sensitive to this aspect of the liberal-democratic game, and thus are not immune to populist arguments. In this sense the populist argument is to voice the majority of one's constituents. And as far as the largest possible constituency in today's supposedly posthistoric liberal democratic world is still the nation-state, the populist will want to make an appeal to 'the people', the collective subject that most nation-states have been trying to produce in one way or another. It may well be that the populist's concept of 'the people' is in many cases identitarian, or *völkisch* but that doesn't mean that populism and national identitarianism are one and the same. In some cases one can encounter a concept of 'the people' related to *Bevölkerung* that is no less populist. Even if there are reasons enough to consider the nationalist concept of 'the people' as the more problematic one, this is no reason to applaud every so-called multicultural concept of the people. Some multicultural concepts of the people are in fact no less identitarian and suppose a clear-cut concept of belonging to a culture that should be problematised and deconstructed as much as populism's hegemony still allows us to do so.

In a representative democracy, politicians are supposed to represent a constituency, to voice the opinions and feelings of their constituents. The politician's power is supposedly based on the adequacy of his representation. Under populism's hegemony, politicians are confronted with two contradictory expectations: on the one hand, they should *lead* when the people are confused.

[1] Jan Blommaert defines populism as a 'speech regime'. See Jan Blommaert, 'Populisme als spreekregime', in *Populisme*, Jan Blommaert, et al. (Berchem: EPO, 2004), pp. 123–150. See also, more generally: Jan Blommaert. *Discourse: a critical introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] See Jan Blommaert, 'Populisme als spreekregime', pp. 147–148.

[3] See Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusion populiste. De l'archaïque au médiatique* (Paris: Berg International, 2002), pp. 22–36.

This is, clearly, a leftist expectation wherever there is an increase of racist and anti-immigrant feelings. But it can also be a rightist expectation when, for instance, ordinary people supposedly don't see the dangers that threaten our society: then it's said it's good to have real leaders. On the other hand, politicians should *voice* the will of the people. This can be a leftist expectation, as was clear during the 2003 resistance against the prospect of a war in Iraq, when European political leaders from both the left and the right were deservedly applauded for their sensitivity to European public opinion in this matter. One may think of the memorable 'free speech' of Joschka Fischer at the *Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz* on 8 February 2003 in response to Donald Rumsfeld, or the elaborate speech of his French colleague Dominique de Villepin, a few days before that at the Security Council in response to US Secretary of State Colin Powell's infamous and awkwardly hawkish multimedia presentation of all the fictitious dangers represented by Iraq. But it can also be a rightist expectation, for instance when politicians are supposed to take seriously, and thus voice, the ordinary people's sense of insecurity.

The opposition between the political left and the political right appears then as an opposition in the expectations towards the political class in certain circumstances. When the left thinks politicians should lead, the right quite often believes they should voice; and when the left thinks politicians should voice, the right is almost sure to believe they should lead. Therefore, it's not the case that the distinction between left and right is a distinction between a representative concept of politics and an authoritarian concept of politics. Left and right seem to choose their political concept *à la carte*, as it suits them. It should be recognised that from time to time the left is desperate for authority, and that from time to time the right seems better in touch with the popular will.

Now it may seem quite obvious to define the populist politician as the one who would rather voice the will of the people than lead. But Pierre-André Taguieff pointed out that populists in fact both voice *and* lead. Following a remark by Bernard Lewis that many political terms are *enantiosemic*, in that they have completely opposite meanings, Taguieff says this is applicable to the concept of populism too: '"Populism", in today's ordinary language, forces to coexist, in tension, the idea of demophilia and the idea of demagogy. Oscillation between a mythic transfiguration and a cynic instrumentalisation of the people.'[4] The populist follows the people, in order to be better able to lead. What gets lost in the populist dialectic of demophilia and demagogy is what Proudhon has called 'démopédie', 'that is the care to instruct and educate the people in view of universal (or universalisable) aims, rather than to sacralise or to seduce it in order to force it to act in the desired sense'.[5] The resistance to populism in politics begins with the deconstruction of the false alternative between voicing and leading the people. The people need to be educated. And the first thing to learn in these times of globalisation, then, might be that the people is not the people. That is to say that 'the people', whether understood as '*Volk*' or as '*Bevölkerung*', does not coincide with the world population. If politicians really want to educate, they will have to review the way they represent.

One should think about ways to democratically represent the world population in global political bodies and ways to organise global elections for these representative institutions. One should definitely go beyond the idea of the nation-state as the ultimate territory of political action and 'the people' as the largest possible constituency. There should be a class of global politicians that can be held responsible by a political world community. It is correct to say that the few, more or less global political bodies that nowadays exist, such as

[4] Ibid., p. 88 (my translation). Taguieff refers to a little study by Bernard Lewis, 'Islam et démocratie', *Notes de la Fondation Saint-Simon*, no. 54 (June 1993).
[5] Ibid., p. 88 (my translation).

the Security Council, are in desperate need of reorganisation, but it's a shame that the prevailing political logic of that reorganisation is still one that refers strictly to national interests. The massive response of the so-called 'world community' to the devastation that hit so many Asian countries after the seaquake in the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004 doesn't particularly count as convincing proof that the insight that global, democratically elected political bodies are needed in order to cope in a just way with the global problems the world community is facing is gradually growing. All politicians throughout the world who responded in some way or another to the tsunami disaster, were – at least *also* – calculating the effect of their action on their own limited national constituency, even if many of them are not usually considered to be 'populists'. It was also no surprise that the so-called global response was soon enough translated in rankings of the contributions of different countries, in statistics about their relative importance given their respective GNPs, in interpretations about the reasons why some countries were contributing so much (one of the most shocking explanations, instantly denied by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder at his joint press conference with Joschka Fischer on 6 January 2005, was that Germany, one of the largest contributors, was somehow lobbying for its desired permanent seat on the Security Council) and in all too well-known national media exaggerations, when for instance, on 3 January 2005 the important Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* headlined its front page: 'Une catastrophe nationale'. Indeed, at that moment, there were still seventy-four Belgian tourists missing. So even in times of global catastrophes, national interests are prevailing all too much, simply because there are no global institutional incentives for politicians in electoral terms in order to think and act differently, that is to say: globally.

All forms of political populisms content themselves with the territory of the nation-state. They also share the idea that the nation-state – either an existing nation-state or a nation-state in the making – is to be considered as a filter of flows (of goods, of capital, of people).[6] Under the pressure of 'market populism' – which has been defined by Thomas Frank as the conviction that the market is the expression of the will of the people – most political populisms adopt an asymmetric attitude towards the flows of capital and goods on the one hand and the flows of people on the other hand.[7] Capital and goods should circulate as freely as possible, while the circulation of people (and thus of 'human capital') should be strictly limited.[8] This concept of the nation-state as an ambiguous filter is in fact a reformulation of the classical capitalist function of the nation-state, as has been described so meticulously by Immanuel Wallerstein.[9] In considering the nation-state as a filter, political populisms are completely in agreement with the functional role that Empire, the new global sovereign described by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, assigns to the nation-states.[10] The voluntarism of political populisms situates itself exclusively on the level of the nation-state and thereby it takes the whole Imperial apparatus and its capitalist logic for granted. The political choice for the nation-state as the terrain of political action par excellence automatically entails a gigantic democratic deficit. One could argue that populisms are anti-democratic as far as they block every instructive – and, with Proudhon, one could say *demopedic* – discussion of the asymmetry between the political and the economic space in the era of globalisation and the inequalities that follow from it. The global constitutionalisation process that is taking on an Imperial form should be democratised as soon as possible, but the political populisms from the right and the left prefer to entrench themselves on the territory of the nation-state. Therefore, these populisms can be considered as global anti-politics, even if some of them strongly condemn any kind of local anti-politics: they may well express their belief in society's 'makability' on a well-defined territory (that of the nation-state, or a part of it, be it a region,

[6] For a detailed analysis of this point, see Dieter Lesage, 'Populisme, de natiestaat en het Imperium', in *Populisme*, Jan Blommaert, et al. pp. 61–121.

[7] Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God. Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001).

[8] See, among many others: Ulrich Beck, *Macht und Gegenmacht im globalen Zeitalter* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002).

[9] See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-Sytem. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); *The Modern World-System II. Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); *The Modern World-System III. The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840s* (New York: Academic Press, 1989).

[10] See Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). I cannot go into a detailed critique here of this widely discussed, both very stimulating and problematic, antiglobalist cult book. For my ample criticism of *Empire*, see Dieter Lesage, *Vertoog over verzet. Politiek in tijden van globalisering* (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2004).

[11] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 282–283.

[12] See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London/New York: Verso, 2000), p. 119.

a city or a burrough), but at the same time they think that on a global level society is 'unmakable'. In this sense, the well-known slogan 'Think globally, act locally', could be recycled in order to acquire a new populist meaning. One might say that this slogan could also indicate that one may be able to *think* globally, but that political *action* has to be situated on the local level. Global politics would be for thinkers, philosophers, dreamers, in short 'intellectuals', while action could only materialise on a local level. However, one of the main challenges today is precisely to *act globally*.

It should be noted that the populist refusal to think political action beyond the level and the territory of the nation-state could find, if it were only interested to look, intellectual support from a major theoretician of liberal democracy. Indeed, in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama states that a world democracy is simply unthinkable. History ends with the institution of liberal democracy – and capitalism as its necessary supplement – on the territory of the nation-state. And one could only hope that as many nation-states as possible will join the posthistoric era. For Fukuyama, sovereign states are to be considered as protectors of different cultures, and at the same time those cultures would be the reason why nation-states will not disappear in favour of a global democratic state. However, Fukuyama doesn't undertake any effort at all to think of a global political structure that would still allow for cultural differences to thrive. If cultural difference can be protected in the context of a federal state, why would it not be possible to protect cultural difference in the context of a federal world state? According to Fukuyama, on the global level, the only imaginable political steps beyond the level of the nation-states would be those that would resemble the structure of NATO, that is to say: a treaty between sovereign liberal democratic nation-states. Globalisation would find its highest political expression in the non-violent regulation of the relationships between liberal democracies.[11]

By stating the impossibility of a liberal-democratic world state, Fukuyama allows for an unsolvable internal contradiction in the system that he defends: capitalism is a worldwide (and thus deterritorialised) economic system, while liberal democracy is confined to national or regional (and thus territorial) demarcation. Chantal Mouffe is only one of many authors who conclude that the space of politics is dissociated from the space of the economy.[12] This dissociation between the space of politics and the space of the economy has far-reaching consequences for the way in which the action of democracy, if indeed it is supposed to be limited to the territory of the nation-state, should be understood. Indeed, populism, in its many different political colours and mutual hybridisations, would no longer be able to maintain its beliefs about the relationship between politics and economy. One could no longer present democracy as a supplement to the economy, either as a supplement that has to correct the economy (social democracy), or as a supplement that has to stimulate the economy (liberal democracy), or as a supplement that has to correct the economy by stimulating it (the 'purple democracy' under former Prime Minister Wim Kok in The Netherlands or Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt in Belgium, the 'Third Way' of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens in the United Kingdom). Indeed, the range of a territorially defined democracy is much narrower than the range of the global economy. The territorial asymmetry between democracy and capitalism, together with the capitalist penetration of the democratic territory, leaves us with a democratic deficit that cannot be remedied within the territory assigned to democracy.

One may ask why Fukuyama, and with him all political populists, don't want to put an end to the dissociation between the space of politics and the space of the economy. Why are they so averse to the idea of a liberal democracy that

would encompass the entire globe? Fukuyama seems to suggest that the idea is impracticable, that it would not be realistic to strive for a world democracy. At the same time, he nevertheless endorses the international foreign policy, adopted since the 1980s by the United States, of putting pressure on other nation-states in order to adopt a democratic regime, however much that policy may be unrealistic as well.[13] The question is why Fukuyama endorses 'democracy promotion' in nation-states that aren't democracies yet, rather than supporting the democratisation of global political institutions. Can one consider the official American foreign policy of 'democracy promotion' as a credible one, now that the United States has adopted a habit of rejecting the conclusions of international fora on global matters, even if these conclusions are supported by the rest of the 'posthistoric world'? Is 'realism' the real reason why Fukuyama restricts himself to the 'idealism' of 'democracy promotion', which is always local (the 'democratic (r)evolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine to be considered as its latest successes)? Or is there another reason why liberal democracy – as perfect as it may be according to Fukuyama – is supposed to content itself with the limited territory of the nation-state? Maybe it is because the idea that liberal democracy would encompass the entire globe is simply unbearable for capitalism. Indeed, capitalism thrives exactly on the dissociation between the space of politics and the space of the economy. A world democracy could mean the end of capitalism: it would become very difficult to profit from socio-economic differences between subterritories, which is an important source of profit today, as nation-states are pitted against one another, the threat of 'delocalisation' of firms having become an almost ritualised form of economic blackmail. Some may therefore fear that a 'capitalist world liberal democracy' is a contradiction in terms. As far as Fukuyama's theory is based on the provocative thesis that capitalist liberal democracy is the only imaginable political and economic system that is not flawed by any internal contradictions, Fukuyama cannot but pass over hastily the idea of a global liberal democracy. The populist who considers the nation-state as the maximum territorial range of political action is also an accomplice to the undemocratic functioning of capitalism, even if he would want to present the locality of his political action precisely as evidence of its pre-eminent democratic character. If one confines political action to the territory of the nation-state, one enforces de facto the hegemony of a small elite in the world-system, even if one pretends to focus one's political action on the interests of 'the people'. Populists are responsible for the reinforcement of the ideological alliance between a transnational elite and 'the people' – an alliance that is supposed to ensure the hegemony of this transnational elite over 'the people'. The main problem with populists, therefore, is their elitism. But it will take quite some 'démopédie' before 'people' may even begin to realise this.

[13] On the American policy of 'democracy promotion', see William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy. Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).