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Populism and the Mirror of Democracy

Edited by

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2

The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism

CHANTAL MOUFFE

The theme of populism has recently been put at the centre of attention in Europe. The unexpected qualification of Jean-Marie Le Pen for the second round of the presidential elections in France in May 2002 and the excellent results of the Pim Fortuyn List, which came second in the Dutch legislative elections on May 15 – after the murder of their leader – have created a shock which has forced Western democracies to finally take seriously the growth of right-wing populism. To be sure, such parties have already existed for some time, but they were considered marginal and their strong presence in countries like Austria was explained by specific national idiosyncracies, so it was possible to dismiss them as a ghost from the past, soon to be brushed away by the advances of the process of 'modernisation'

However, the increasing success of right-wing populist parties in most European countries and their increasing popular appeal makes it very difficult to maintain such a thesis. So instead of being seen as an exception, those parties are now presented as the main threat to our democratic institutions. But the fact that they have become a central subject of discussion has not meant that progress has been made in coming to terms with their nature. The reason is that the theoretical framework informing most democratic political thinking precludes grasping the roots of

populist politics. Hence the disarray in which all those who proclaimed the end of the adversarial model of politics find themselves. Having announced the dawn of a consensual politics 'beyond left and right', they are suddenly confronted with the emergence of new political frontiers which pose a real challenge to their post-political vision. By constructing an opposition between 'the people' and the 'establishment', not only does right-wing populism shatter the consensual framework, it also brings to the fore the shallowness of the dominant theoretical perspective. Indeed if, as I will argue, the attraction exerted by right-wing populist discourse is the very consequence of the 'end of politics' Zeitgeist which prevails nowadays, we should not be surprised by the incapacity of most theorists to explain what is currently happening.

The thesis that I want to put forward is that, far from being a return of the archaic and irrational forces, an anachronism in times of 'post-conventional' identities, to be fought through more modernisation and 'Third Way' policies, right-wing populism is the consequence of the post-political consensus. Indeed, it is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the 'voice of the people'.

The shortcomings of the liberal conception

An important part of my argument will be of a theoretical nature because I am convinced that in order to understand the appeal of right-wing populist discourse it is necessary to question the rationalist and individualist tenets which inform the main trends of democratic political theory. The refusal to acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension, and the concomitant incapacity to grasp the central role of passions in the constitution of collective identities, are in my view at the root of political theory's failure to come to terms with the phenomenon of populism.

While of course not new, those limitations have been reinforced by the recent evolution of liberal democratic societies and the effects of the prevailing ideological framework. This framework presents two aspects:

free market on one side, human rights on the other. Jointly they provide the content of what is today generally understood by 'democracy'. What is striking is that the reference to popular sovereignty – which constitutes the backbone of the democratic ideal – has been almost erased in the current definition of liberal democracy. Popular sovereignty is now usually seen as an obsolete idea, often perceived as an obstacle to the implementation of human rights.

What we are witnessing, actually, is the triumph of a purely liberal interpretation of the nature of modern democracy. According to many liberals, democracy is secondary with respect to liberal principles. As Charles Larmore, for instance, puts it, 'Liberalism and democracy are separate values whose relation, it seems to me, consists largely in democratic self-goverment being the best means for protecting the principles of a liberal political order.'[1]

Although agreeing with Larmore that liberalism and democracy are separate values, I do not think that the relation that exists between them could be reduced to an instrumental one of means/ends, as many liberals would have it. While human rights are indeed crucial and constitutive of the modern form of democracy, they cannot be considered the only criteria to judge democratic politics. Without effective democratic participation in the decisions concerning the common life, there can be no democracy.

Different terms have been used to refer to the new type of 'politeia' (regime) brought about by the democratic revolution: liberal democracy, constitutional democracy, representative democracy, parliamentary democracy, pluralist democracy. They all point to the fact that we are dealing with the articulation between two different traditions: the liberal tradition (individual liberty and pluralism) and the democratic tradition (popular sovereignty and equality). This articulation happened during the nineteenth century, when an alliance was established between liberal and democratic forces. The result, as C. B. MacPherson indicated[2], was that liberalism was democratised and democracy was liberalised. This process took place in a diversity of ways according to existing relations of forces, and the resulting configurations were therefore different.

Since then the history of liberal democracies has been characterised by the sometimes violent struggle between social forces whose objective was to establish the supremacy of one tradition over the other. This struggle has served as a motor for the political evolution of Western societies, and it has led to temporary forms of stabilisation under the hegemony of one of the contending forces. For a long time this adversarial form of confrontation was considered legitimate, and it is only recently that this model has been declared outdated. For some, the end of the confrontation means the victory of liberalism over its adversary, while for others, the most democratically minded liberals, it means the end of an old antagonism and the reconciliation between liberal and democratic principles. Both groups, however, see the present consensus as a great advance for democracy.

What those liberals fail to grasp is the necessary tension which exists between the logic of liberalism and the logic of democracy, and the impossibility of a final reconciliation. In fact to announce the end of the confrontation signifies accepting the prevailing liberal hegemony, and foreclosing the possibility of envisaging an alternative to the existing order.

The liberal conception also misses the crucial symbolic role played by the democratic conception of popular sovereignty. The legitimacy of modern liberal democracy is grounded on the idea of popular sovereignty, and those who believe that it can be discarded are profoundly mistaken. The democratic deficit that manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways in a growing number of liberal democratic societies is no doubt a consequence of the fact that people feel that no real scope is left for what would be a meaningful participation in important decisions. In several countries this democratic deficit has contributed to the development of right-wing populist parties claiming to represent the people and to defend its rights, which have been confiscated by the political elites. It is worth noting that they are usually the only parties which mobilise the theme of popular sovereignty, viewed with suspicion by traditional democratic parties.

The end of politics?

The effacement of the theme of popular sovereignty in liberal-democratic societies constitutes a first important element for apprehending the current rise of right-wing populism, and we can already see how it has to do with the kind of liberal consensus existing today both in political life and in political theory. There is indeed a striking convergence between the lack of effective alternatives offered to citizens in advanced industrial societies and the lack of an adequate theoretical grasp of the complex relationship existing between democracy and liberalism. This explains in my view why it has become so difficult to challenge the prevailing liberal hegemony. Think for instance of the way in which, in one form or the other, most social-democratic parties have been converted to the ideology of the 'Third Way'. Nowadays the key terms of political discourse are 'good governance' and 'non-partisan democracy'.

Politics in its conflictual dimension is deemed to be something of the past, and the type of democracy that is commended is a consensual, completely depoliticised democracy. This 'politics without adversary'[3] chimes with the consensual way in which the discourse of human rights is utilised. Indeed the subversive potential of human rights is neutralised by their articulation with the neoliberal dogma. Human rights are reduced to providing the moral framework that such a politics needs to support its claims of representing the general interest beyond partisan fractions.

As a consequence of neoliberal hegemony, most crucial decisions concerning social and economic relations have been removed from the political terrain. Traditional democratic political parties have become unable to face societal problems in a political way, and this explains the increasing role played by the juridical sphere as the realm where social conflicts can find a form of expression. Today, because of the lack of a democratic political public sphere where a political confrontation could take place, it is the legal system which is made responsible for organising human co-existence and for regulating social relations. This displacement of the political by the legal terrain as the place where conflicts are resolved has very negative consequences for the workings of democracy.

No doubt this fits with the dominant view that one should look for 'impartial' solutions to social conflicts, but this is precisely where the problem lies. There are no impartial solutions in politics, and it is this illusion that we now live in societies where political antagonisms have been eradicated that makes it impossible for political passions to be channelled through traditional democratic parties.

In my view, it is the incapacity of traditional parties to provide distinctive forms of identifications around possible alternatives that has created the terrain for the flourishing of right-wing populism. Indeed, right-wing populist parties are often the only ones that attempt to mobilise passions and create collective forms of identifications. Against all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations, and that it is driven by the pursuit of self-interest, they are well aware that politics always consists in the creation of an 'us' versus a 'them' and that it implies the creation of collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse, because it provides collective forms of identification around 'the people'.

If we add to that the fact that, under the banner of 'modernisation', social-democratic parties have in most countries identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle classes, and that they have stopped representing the interests of the popular sectors – whose demands are considered 'archaic' or 'retrograde' – we should not be surprised by the growing alienation of an increasing number of groups who feel excluded from the effective exercise of citizenship by the 'enlightened' elites. In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neoliberal form of globalisation, and that we have to accept its laws and submit to its diktats, it is small wonder that more and more workers are keen to listen to those who claim that alternatives do exist, and that they will give back to the people the power to decide. When democratic politics has lost its capacity to shape the discussion about how we should organise our common life, and when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth working of the market, the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration.

The current state of liberal-democratic societies is therefore particularly favourable for the development of right-wing populism. The displacement of the idea of popular sovereignty dovetails with the idea that there is no alternative to the present order, and this contributes to the creation of an anti-political climate that is easily exploited to foment popular reactions against the governing elites. We should realise that, to a great extent, the success of right-wing populist parties comes from the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things could be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable mechanisms of exclusion, where xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when they are the only ones to offer an outlet for political passions, their pretence of offering an alternative is seductive, and their appeal is likely to grow. To be able to envisage an adequate response, it is urgent to grasp the economic, social and political conditions that explain their emergence. And this requires the elaboration of a theoretical approach that does not deny the antagonistic dimension of the political.

Politics in the moral register

I think that it is also crucial to understand that it is not through moral condemnation that those parties can be fought, and this is why most answers have so far been completely inadequate. Of course, a moralistic reaction chimes with the dominant post-political perspective, and it had to be expected. This is why it is worth examining it in some detail since this will bring us important insights into the way political antagonisms manifest themselves today.

As we saw earlier, the dominant discourse announces the end of the adversarial model of politics and the advent of a consensual politics beyond left and right. However, politics always entails an us/them distinction. This is why the consensus advocated by the defenders of the 'non-partisan democracy' cannot exist without drawing a frontier and defining an exterior, a 'them' which assures the identity of the consensus and secures the coherence of the 'us'. To put it in another way, the

consensus at the centre, which is supposed to include everybody in our post-political societies, cannot exist without the establishment of a frontier, because no consensus – or no common identity, for that matter – can exist without a frontier. There cannot be an 'us' without a 'them', and the very identity of a group depends on the existence of a 'constitutive outside'. So the 'us of the good democrats' needs to be secured by the determination of a 'them'. Nowadays the 'them' is provided by what is designated as the 'extreme right'. This term is used in a very undefined way to refer to an amalgam of groups and parties whose characteristics and objectives are extremely diverse and it covers a wide spectrum which goes from fringe groups of extremists, skinheads and neo-nazis to the authoritarian right and a variety of right-wing populist parties.

Such a heterogeneous construct is of course useless to grasp the nature and causes of the new forms of right-wing politics. But it is very useful to secure the identity of the 'good democrats' and to procure a positive image of the post-political consensus. It is clear that, since politics has supposedly become 'non-adversarial', the 'them' which is necessary to make possible the 'us' of the good democrats cannot be envisaged as a political adversary, and the frontier has to be drawn in the moral register. So, to draw the frontier between the 'good democrats' and the 'evil extreme-right' is very convenient, since the 'them' can now be considered as a sort of moral disease which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically. This is why no attempt is made to try to understand the reasons for its existence – an understanding, in any case, made impossible by the amalgam on which the very notion of 'extreme-right' is based. Moreover, attempts at understanding are deemed suspect, and perceived as a move towards condoning something which is morally unacceptable. As a consequence, moral condemnation and the establishment of a cordon sanitaire have become the dominant answers to the rise of right-wing populist movements.

The increasing moralisation of political discourse that we are witnessing goes hand in hand with the dominant post-political perspective. Far from indicating a new stage in the triumphant march of democracy, such a phenomenon represents a very negative development. Let's not

misunderstand my point. It is not my intention to defend Realpolitik and to deny that normative concerns should play a role in politics. But there is a big difference between morality and moralism, which limits itself to the denunciation of evil in others. Yet today's good democrats are so confident that they have the truth, and that their mission is to impose it on others, that they refuse to engage in debate with those who disagree. It is no doubt easier to present them as a moral enemy, to be destroyed and eradicated, instead of having to envisage them as adversaries in the political terrain.

In fact what is happening is very different from what the advocates of the post-political model, like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, would want us to believe. It is not that politics with its old antagonisms has been replaced by moral concerns about 'life issues' and human rights. The political in its antagonistic dimension is very much alive, and political antagonisms are still with us. The main characteristic of our 'end of politics' age is that politics is now played out in the register of morality, and that antagonisms are being framed in a moral vocabulary. Far from having disappeared, frontiers between us and them are constantly drawn, but nowadays they are drawn in moral categories, between 'good' and 'evil', between the 'good democrats' who defend the universal values of liberal democracy and the 'evil extreme right', racist and xenophobic, which must only be 'eradicated'.

What I am suggesting is that what has been presented as the disappearance of antagonism is in fact the generalisation of a different form of its manifestation. To be sure, the moralistic type of rhetoric is not new. It has been used before, and the Americans are particularly fond of it. Remember Reagan's 'evil empire', not to mention the current crusade of George W. Bush against the 'axis of evil'! But this language was usually reserved for international relations, while now it pervades domestic politics. And in that field the consequences are different, because such a rhetoric transforms the very way we envisage the workings of democratic politics.

When politics is played out in the moral register, democracy is endangered. Besides preventing us from adequately grasping the nature and

causes of current conflicts, this moralisation of politics leads to the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be managed by the democratic process and redefined in what I propose to call an 'agonistic' way – i.e. as a struggle not between enemies, but between 'adversaries' who respect the legitimate right of their opponents to defend their position.[4] It is clear that when the opponent is defined in moral terms, it can only be envisaged as an enemy, not as an adversary. With the 'evil them' no agonistic debate is possible. This is why moral condemnation replaces political struggle and why the strategy consists in building a cordon sanitaire to quarantine the affected sectors. As far as right-wing populist parties are concerned this strategy is generally counterproductive since, as we have seen, their appeal is often linked to their anti-establishment rhetoric, so their exclusion by the governing elites serves to reinforce their oppositional image.

There is an urgent need to understand that it is the incapacity to articulate proper political alternatives around the confrontation of distinctive socio-economic projects that explains why antagonisms are nowadays articulated in moral terms. Since there is no politics without an us/them discrimination, when the 'them' cannot be envisaged as a political adversary it is constructed as 'evil', as a moral enemy. This explains the flourishing of moralistic political discourse in circumstances where the adversarial model of politics has lost its capacity to organise the political system, and when its legitimacy has been undermined by Third Way theorists. The 'extreme right' is therefore very handy for providing the 'evil them' necessary to secure the 'good us'. This of course is not meant to deny the existence of something that should be properly called 'extreme-right', but to insist on the danger of using this category to demonise all the parties who defend positions that are seen as a challenge to the well-meaning centre-establishment.

Right-wing populism in Austria

I have chosen the case of Austria to illustrate my argument because this will give me the opportunity to examine the two aspects of my thesis: the

negative consequences of consensus politics, and the inadequacy of the moralistic answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.[5]

To grasp the reasons for the success of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) it is necessary to recall the type of politics that prevailed in Austria since the beginning of the second Austrian Republic. When Austria was reestablished in 1945 the three existing parties – the Socialist Party (SPÖ), the People's Party (ÖVP) and the Communist Party (KPÖ) – decided to govern in coalition in order to avoid the conflicts that had dominated the First Republic, which had exploded into a civil war in 1934. The KPÖ was quickly excluded because of the effects of the Cold War, and the coalition reduced to the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Those parties were the representatives of the Christian-conservative and the Socialist Lagers around which Austrian society was organised after the break-up of the Habsburg monarchy. They devised a form of co-operation through which they managed to establish their control on the life of the country in a variety of fields: political, economic, social and cultural. Thanks to the 'Proporz system' the most important posts in the banks, hospitals, schools and nationalised industries were divided between their respective elites. Furthermore, the development of social and economic partnership secured co-operation between the organisations representing employers and employees in order to reach acceptable compromises, thereby avoiding industrial conflicts and strikes.

To be sure, this kind of consensus politics played an undeniable role in providing the basis of stability for the political system, and when in 1955, after ten years of Allied occupation, Austria won its sovereignty and independence, it had recovered its confidence and prosperity. But the fact that – except for the years between 1966 to 1983 – the SPÖ and the ÖVP formed a Grand Coalition to govern the country led to the blocking of the political system, since very little space was left for any type of contestation not directed against the system itself. Indeed, even when governing alone, the two main parties continued to maintain close contacts through the 'Sozialpartnerschaft'. This created the conditions which were later to allow a gifted demagogue like Jörg Haider to

articulate the diverse forms of resentment against the governing coalition and its bureaucratic machine, in the name of 'democracy' and 'liberty'.

When Haider took control of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in 1986, the party was facing extinction.[6] The FPÖ, which in 1956 had succeeded the League of Independents (VDU), founded in 1949, was heir to the third component of the Austrian political structure – the German national-liberal Lager which had supported national-socialism and had therefore been marginalised after the war. Since 1960, the FPÖ had tried to redefine itself as a centrist third party under the leadership of a former SS officer, Friederich Peter, by cultivating an image of a progressive, liberal party. But it had been weakened by three years of participation as a junior partner in a coalition with the SPÖ, between 1983 and 1986, and its potential vote was estimated at between 1 and 2 per cent.[7] The situation was therefore critical, and intra-party disputes culminated in 1986 at the Innsbruck conference in the ousting of the party chairman, Norbert Steger. Things changed quickly with the new leadership of Jörg Haider, who drastically transformed the party's orientation, and from then on the FPÖ experienced a dramatic upsurge in electoral support. Notwithstanding temporary setbacks, its share of the vote increased steadily until the November 1999 elections when it became the second party in the country, slightly overtaking the ÖVP with 27 per cent of the vote. Despite lengthy negotiations the ÖVP and the SPÖ were unable to agree on terms for reconvening their coalition, and a new coalition government was established between the ÖVP and the FPÖ in February 2000.This alliance was violently denounced in Austria and abroad, and the other EU members retaliated with a series of measures aimed at isolating the new government. However, the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition managed to withstand this opposition, and when it collapsed in September 2002 it was because of an internal struggle, not external pressure. I will come back to these events when I discuss the response to right-wing populist parties, but we first need to examine the rise of the FPÖ under Haider.

Haider's strategy

As soon as he assumed the leadership, Haider transformed the party into a protest party against the 'Grand Coalition'. He actively mobilised the themes of popular sovereignty and freedom of choice in order to articulate the growing resistance to the bureaucratic and authoritarian way in which the country was governed by the consociational elites. At first his campaigns were directed against the federal government, which he accused of corruption, excessive political patronage, and presented as being responsible for rising unemployment. He advocated the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, lower taxes and a reduction of regulation on business and individuals. From the 1990s onwards, starting with the federal parliamentary campaign in Vienna, the theme of immigration began to play a central role, and the discourse of the party acquired a clearly populist character. It was at that moment that the party, presenting itself as the voice of the 'little man' against the 'establishment', began to appeal to working-class voters disillusioned with the SPÖ.[8]

An important element to take into account in this shift of loyalties was the profound impact of the transition to a post-fordist form of capitalist regulation on the composition and forms of organisation of the working class. Its consequence was the erosion of the traditional links between the workers and the SPÖ. The forms of 'quasi-clientelism' which existed before became eroded, as the workers lost several of the benefits of the consociational system. Since, in the meantime, the Socialist Party under the leadership of Franz Vranitzky, had moved towards the political centre – renaming themselves 'social-democrats' and becoming more middle class in orientation – the terrain was laid for the workers to be attracted by the populist rhetoric of Haider.[9] Besides providing a channel of expression for the increasing disaffection with the political system, the FPÖ also served as an outlet for the growing anxiety and fears induced by the process of globalisation. By articulating all the diverse forms of resentment through a xenophobic discourse, the party could present itself as defending the interests of 'the people'

both against the uncaring political establishment and the foreigners, visualised as a threat to the jobs of 'good hard-working Austrians' and their traditional way of life. No doubt the unconditional support given to Haider by the popular daily *Kronen Zeitung*, read by around 3 million Austrians, also contributed greatly to the amazing growth of the FPÖ during those years.

The discursive strategy of Haider[10] consisted in constructing a frontier between an 'us' of all the good Austrians, hard workers and defenders of national values, against a 'them' composed of the parties in power, the trade union bureaucrats, foreigners, and left-wing artists and intellectuals who were, all in their own way, contributing to the stifling of political debate. In his book *Die Freiheit, die ich meine* he declares:

> The ruling political class has got the formation of public opinion in its hands and individual opinion is neglected. A dialectical process of extensive nationalisation of society and socialisation of the state has broken the classic separation of state from society. Ideas and opinions of the citizens cannot be conveyed directly but have been usurped by institutions, interest groups and parties. Between them and the state a power game takes place, leaving little scope for individual freedom and self-determination.[11]

In his view one of the main issues where popular consultation is foreclosed is the question of immigration and multiculturalism. He forcefully argues for the people to be able to decide how many immigrants to allow: 'The question is, Who should decide which path to take? In my opinion: the people. Whoever doubts the role of the people as the highest sovereign, questions the very essence of democracy. People have the right not just to go to the polls every four years but are entitled to have a say in questions which are decisive for the future of their country.'[12]

A debate has been raging in Austria and elsewhere concerning the nature of the FPÖ, many people insisting that it should be described as right-wing extremist, even neo-nazi.[13] There is no doubt that an aspect of the FPÖ's rhetoric was also aimed at rallying the nostalgics of the

Third Reich, and one should not overlook the specificity of the Austrian situation and the complex relationship of many Austrians with their past. Moreover, coming from a nazi family, Haider has a very ambiguous attitude towards the crimes of nazism that he tends to minimise.[14] But it would be a serious mistake to overemphasise this element and to attribute the FPÖ's success to it. Those nostalgic sectors correspond only to a very small fraction of its electorate and, although they cannot be denied, the references to the nazi years do not play an important part in the party's ideology. To claim that Haider and his party are 'neo-nazi' completely misses the specificity of this new form of right-wing politics. It might satisfy the good conscience of those who reject any type of collaboration with them, but it does not help anyone to grasp the causes of their success and their appeal for so many workers and young people.

In fact it can be argued that the strategy of *Ausgrenzung* aimed at permanently excluding the FPÖ from government, thanks to the cordon sanitaire established by the two main parties, contributed to its remarkable rise in the last decades. The refusal of the SPÖ and the ÖVP under the last two legislatures even to consider the possibility of an alliance with the Freedom Party allowed it to be perceived as 'victim' of the political establishment, and reinforced its populist appeal. Indeed it could appear to be like David fighting against Goliath, defending the 'little people' against the elites in power.

It is clear that Austrian politics was trapped in a vicious circle. On one hand, the lack of a real democratic discussion about possible alternatives resulting from consensual politics was at the origin of the success of the FPÖ; on the other, success contributed to the permanence of the coalition, whose main justification had become to stop Haider coming to power. The negative consequences of such a situation were exacerbated by an attempt by the government to arrest the progress of the FPÖ by implementing some of the policies that it was advocating, mainly in the field of security and immigration.[15]

It must be stressed that this strategy to win back voters was accompanied by a strident moral condemnation of Haider's xenophobia, and by his demonization as 'nazi'. Of course, such a hypocritical stance made it

impossible to challenge the FPÖ seriously. But the moralistic response to the rise of Haider was very convenient for the governing parties, because it exonerated them from making any autocritique, and from acknowledging their responsibility in his success.

The impasse of moralism

It is always very tempting to claim the moral high ground, but it does not provide a political strategy and it is likely to decrease the appeal of right-wing populist movements. In that respect the case of Austria is very instructive, and it brings us important insights concerning the mistakes to be avoided. Indeed, I believe that the European reactions to the formation of the coalition government between the ÖVP and the FPÖ represent the very definition of the wrong strategy. We witnessed an explosion of moral indignation, which led France and Belgium – worried by the possibility of similar alliances at home – to a series of bilateral measures against the new Austrian government. In the name of the defence of European values and the struggle against racism and xenophobia – of course always easier to denounce in others than to fight in your own country – the other fourteen European governments ostracised the new coalition before it had even done anything that could be deemed reprehensible. All the good democrats saw it as their duty to condemn the coming to power of a supposedly 'nazi' party and raised the alarm against a return of the 'brown plague'.

I do not want to deny that there was some cause for concern, or that precautionary measures were legitimate. But this does not justify the near-hysterical outcry that took place. The fourteen could easily have issued a strong warning to the new coalition, announcing that they were going to be under serious observation, and threatened them with sanctions in case of any deviation from democratic norms. However, moral condemnation replaced political analysis. No serious attempt was made to scrutinise the nature of the FPÖ, nor the reasons for its success. It was enough to point to the past history of Austria, and to declare that the problem was that it was never properly 'denazified'. People

overlooked the fact that, far from being a specific Austrian phenomenon, right-wing populist parties were already on the rise in many other European countries: Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Led by a militant press, only too happy to have found a new devil to fight, an incredible campaign of demonisation was launched, which quickly came to focus on all of the Austrians, perceived as being collectively responsible for the rebirth of the 'fascist danger'.[16]

What we witnessed during this episode was a typical case of 'self-idealisation' – that is, the condemnation of the 'bad Austrians' served to construct the 'us' of the good democrats, morally beyond reproach. We are here dealing with a very perverse mechanism, since it allows people to assert their virtuous nature through an act of rejection. It is also a very powerful way of mobilising passions and creating unity among people who feel that their conscience is bolstered by the very act of excluding others. This is no doubt one of the reasons for the seductiveness of the moralistic approach, and its increasing role in politics.

A few months later the fourteen European governments realised that the 'sanctions' were counterproductive, and that they had to find a way out of the impasse without losing face. Again unable to envisage a political approach, they acted this time on the juridical terrain, deciding to ask three 'wise men' to scrutinise the nature of the Freedom Party. When their report concluded that the party, 'despite the presence of extremist elements', was not 'neo-nazi' but 'right-wing populist', and that it did not contravene democratic norms, the bilateral sanctions were lifted.[17] Of course, both sides claimed victory. The FPÖ announced that its legitimacy had been vindicated, while the fourteen declared that, thanks to their reaction, the new coalition had been kept in check.

Clearly the whole episode had negative consequences for the EU. For instance, it antagonised small nations like the Danes, who felt that such treatment would not have been used in the case of a more important country. And, as was demonstrated by the lack of European reaction to the much more dangerous coalition established by Berlusconi in Italy with Bossi's Lega Norte and Fini's Allianza Nationale, they were

right. Moreover, this stragegy of moral denunciation did not have the intended effect of arresting the growth of right-wing populist parties. Witness the good results of the Progress Party in Norway in September 2000 (14.6 per cent of the vote), the People's Party in Denmark in November 2001 (12 per cent), the Pim Fortuyn List in Netherlands in May 2002 (26 per cent), not to mention the 18 per cent gained by Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential elections on 5 May 2002.

Particularly interesting for my argument is the case of the Vlaams Blok (VB) whose strong performance in the national Belgian elections of October 2000 should also bring about some rethinking of the effects of the cordon sanitaire. By the way, doubts in this regard had been expressed by Patrick Janssens, the president of the Flemish Socialist Party, one of the very few Belgian politicians to have criticised the measures against the Austrian government. In an interview published in the Belgian daily *Le Soir* on 7 February 2000, he affirmed that in his view the best way to fight the VB was not to establish a 'sacred union' among all the good democrats from right to left, but on the contrary to revive the opposition between left and right, in order to offer the voters real alternatives, instead of leaving to the populist right a monopoly of the opposition to the existing order.

It is important to note the obvious similarities between the Belgian and Austrian cases. As in Austria, where the grand coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP allowed the FPÖ to appear as the only real alternative to the 'system', so in Antwerp the centre of VB power (where it reached 33 per cent of the vote in the last elections), a coalition between Socialists and Christian-democrats has monopolised political power for several decades. The effect of the cordon sanitaire was of course to reinforce the image of 'outsider', and therefore the appeal of the VB.[18]

However, the best argument against the strategy of 'Ausgrenzung' is provided by what has been happening in Austria since the establishment of the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition. In the elections that took place in November 2002 the FPÖ's share of the votes was reduced to 10 per cent, after having reached 27 per cent in November 1999. This proves

that participation in the Austrian government was fateful for the party. When in opposition it could manage – thanks to a skilful rhetoric combining neoliberal themes with xenophobic ones – to attract groups with opposed interests, but once in power that was no longer possible. As a result it began to lose ground in all local elections: Styria in October 2000, Burgerland in December 2000 and Vienna in March 2001. When Jörg Haider realised that the situation was becoming critical, he attempted to regain the initiative by openly opposing several policies of the government. But his *coup de force* backfired, provoking a split in his party and the resignation of several FPÖ ministers. The outcome was the dissolution of the coalition government and the organisation of elections, which saw the resounding victory of the ÖVP, which with 42.3 per cent of the vote managed to overtake the SPÖ, which lost the leading position that it had long occupied. Reduced to third place and having lost two-thirds of its electorate, the FPÖ was in deep crisis, and its apparently irresistible rise had been stopped. The ÖVP-FPÖ coalition was re-established after the elections of 2002, and the decline of the FPÖ continued. In the European elections of June 2004 they only received 6.3 per cent of the vote, and the very survival of the party is now at stake.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from what happened in the Netherlands, where the centre-right coalition established with the Pim Fortuyn List collapsed after less than 100 days in power because of an internecine power struggle in the party of the murdered politician. Since then the party's popularity has drastically declined. To be sure, this is in part due to the disappearance of their leader, which created disarray in the party, but it is very likely that bringing it into the government – instead of allowing its populist rhetoric to flourish in opposition – accelerated the crisis.

Back to politics!

Let's recall the main points of my thesis. First I want to emphasise that my aim has not been to propose an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon of right-wing populism, but only to put the accent on one

aspect that is generally overlooked in the literature on this topic. It is my contention that a crucial dimension of the recent success of right-wing populist parties in Europe is usually omitted. This is due to the fact that most studies are informed by a rationalistic theoretical framework that prevents them understanding the specificity of the political. They tend to adopt an approach inspired by either an economic or a moral framework, which prevents them from realising the ineradicability of antagonism, as well as the central role played by passions, in the formation of collective political identities. Although this evasion of the political in its antagonistic dimension has always been one of the main shortcomings of the liberal approach, in recent years theories about the end of the adversarial model of politics have amplified this problem. In a political conjuncture in which the move towards the centre by formerly socialist parties has led to the blurring of the frontiers between left and right, this has created a situation in which the cleavage between 'us' and 'them' constitutive of democratic politics can no longer take place within the context of the traditional democratic parties. As I have tried to show, this has created a void which is currently occupied by right-wing populist demagogues who, by articulating a diversity of fears and resentments, have been able to constitute a new form of us/them opposition through a populist discourse in which 'the people' is constituted on the basis of a chain of equivalences between all those who are, in one way or another, presented as being oppressed by the 'power bloc' constituted by the political elites, the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia.

What is problematic is not the reference to 'the people'. Indeed, I have argued that it is necessary to reassert the democratic side of liberal democracy, and this implies reactivating the notion of popular sovereignty. The problem lies in the way in which this 'people' is constructed. What makes this populist discourse right-wing is its strongly xenophobic character, and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people, while multiculturalism is perceived as being imposed by the elites against the popular will. In most cases this populism also contains a strong anti-EU element, European integration being identified with the authoritarian strategy of the elites.[19]

To be able to offer a counter-strategy, it is necessary to acknowledge that, for several decades, important changes have taken place in European countries without real popular consultation and discussion of possible alternatives. It is therefore not surprising that a sense of frustration exists among all those who have not profited from those changes, or who feel that they are jeopardising their present conditions or future prospects. As long as traditional parties refuse to engage with those issues, with the argument that this evolution is a necessary one and that there is no alternative to the neoliberal model of globalisation, it is likely that right-wing populist parties will continue to grow. And it is certainly not moral condemnation that will make them disappear; it might even have the contrary effect.

It is no doubt encouraging to see that the appeal of those parties diminishes once they become part of the government, and that they seem able to strive only when in opposition. This reveals their structural limits. However, without a profound change in the workings of democratic politics, the problems which have led to the emergence of right-wing populism will not disappear. If a serious attempt is not made to address the democratic deficit that characterises the 'post-political' age that neoliberal hegemony has brought about, and to challenge the growing inequalities that it has created, the diverse forms of resentment are bound to persist; and there is even the danger that they will take more violent modes of expression.

But let's not be too pessimistic. At the moment right-wing populism might be on the rise, but there are also some positive signs that things are beginning to change on the left. The recent evolution of the 'anti-globalisation' movement shows that, after a 'negative' phase limited to the critique of institutions like the IMF and the WTO, serious attempts are now being made to construct a positive alternative to the neoliberal order, and this is very promising. The success of the Social Forums reveals that what is at stake in this emerging movement is not, as some would have it, a somewhat futile rejection of a supposedly 'neutral' process of globalisation, but the critique of its neoliberal mode and the struggle for another globalisation, informed by a different political

project; a globalisation aiming at a different world order, where inequalities would be drastically reduced, and where the concerns of the most exposed groups would be addressed – instead of an exclusive focus on the welfare of the middle classes. It is by engaging fully with such a project that we will be able to offer an effective political answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.

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66 Canovan, 1981, p. 9.
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1 ERNESTO LACLAU

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2 CHANTAL MOUFFE

I want to thank Marcus Klein, my research assistant of several years, for his invaluable help in collecting very extensive documentation about the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

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11 Jörg Haider, *The Freedom I Mean*, 1995, p. 16.
12 Ibid., p. 34.
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15 See in this connection the article by Richard Mitten, 'Jörg Haider, the Anti-immigrant Petition and Immigration Policy in Austria', in *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1994.
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3 BENJAMIN ARDITI

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