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THE POPULISM OF THE EMPIRE AND THE MULTITUDE

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical study aims to contribute to the literature dealing with populism from a transnational perspective. I will apply the post-structuralist concept of Empire and Multitude developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to theorize transnational populism. This is not the usual way of thinking about populism, because there are several internal debates and tensions between Hardt/Negri and Laclau/Mouffe (Hardt, Negri: 2017). Although there are very important trends (Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis: 2014; Kioupkiolis: 2014) in the critical literature to reconcile the populist and post-hegemonic tendencies as the hegemony of the multitude. This study relies on these tendencies. In the first part I am investigating the nature of the neoliberal world order as the Empire in the context of hegemony and populism. As it has been analysed in the first part of this paper, with the crisis of liberal democracy we have entered the era of populist democracy and there is a fierce struggle between the left and the right to define and maintain the core nature of democracy. It will be argued in the third part that right-wing nationalist populism can be seen as a manifestation of populism in the context of the Empire. I will emphasize the multitude as a counter-populist concept compared to the Empire. In the fourth part I put forward that the multitude as an empty signifier can achieve some reconciliation between Laclau/Mouffe and Hard/Negri. I will also argue that transnational populism needs to have its transnational political subject which should be based on the multitude reinterpreted in populist context.

KEYWORDS

- Populism
- Empire
- Multitude
- Social Theory
- Populist Democracy
- Transnational Populism

1. The Neoliberal World Order, Hegemony and Populism

1.1 The Modern and Globalized form of Imperialism

In their seminal books Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005) tried to understand the structure of the new world order created by neoliberal globalization. This theory has been improved in their latest book, *Assembly* (Hardt, Negri: 2017). Hardt and Negri attempted to put forward a post-Marxist theoretical concept named Empire which is a new global form of sovereignty in the era of neoliberalism. The Empire is characterized by a lack of boundaries: "... the concept of Empire posits a regime that effectively encompasses

the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire ‘civilized’ world. No territorial boundaries limit its reign... the concept of Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity.” (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. xiv). The Empire is based on a new supranational form of sovereignty, it incarnates this form. Even though some nation states (especially the USA) have enormous economic and political power compared to others, all the nodes of the network Empire are entitled to cooperate, to create and maintain the current capitalist global order. Empire is a very new, decentred and deterritorialized form of imperialism, but this form is not based on the nation state’s imperialism.^[1]

Hardt and Negri’s starting point is the decline of sovereignty of nation states caused by the neoliberal global capital^[2] and several sub-national factors (for instance NGOs). On the one hand, the Empire has been stipulated as a new form of sovereignty, but on the other hand the Empire has constructed a counter-Empire, which is the Multitude^[3] that comes into account as an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges aiming at contest and subversion of Empire. They argue: “The Empire we are faced with wields enormous powers of oppression and destruction, but that fact should not make us nostalgic in any way for the old forms of domination. The passage to Empire and its processes of globalization offer new possibilities to the forces of liberation.” (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. xv).

The concept elaborated by Hardt and Negri is specified in terms of legal perspectives and pays attention to the juridical figures of the constitution of Empire. It is not just about the post-modern transformation of nation state sovereignty, but rather about the transformation of the political, legal and economic systems: “The transition we are witnessing today from traditional international law, which was defined by contracts and treaties, to the definition and constitution of a new sovereign, supranational world power (and thus to an imperial notion of right), however incomplete, gives us a framework in which to read the totalizing social processes of Empire. In effect, the juridical transformation functions as a symptom of the modifications of the material biopolitical constitution of our societies.” (Hardt, Negri: 2000, pp. 9–10).

1.2 Empire as a Concept of Hegemony and Populism

In my view, the concept of Empire and Multitude is about the so-called and debated hegemony in the left theory (Kioupkiolis, Katsambekis: 2014). Hardt and Negri put forward that the core pillar of the neoliberal world order is the hegemony of the USA which is “founded on financial, economic, and military structures” and it “was made to seem natural through a series of cultural and ideological operations” (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. 382) and this hegemony has become globally by the era of Empire. In the next section I will analyse that Hardt and Negri expressed doubts and revulsion about populism. At the same time their hegemonic concept can be understood in a populist

1 In conjunction with Hardt and Negri, imperialism refers to the extension of the sovereignty of the nation states beyond their own boundaries (Hardt and Negri: 2000, p. xii).

2 This global capital is materialized in the form of financial capitalist institutions.

3 I use the term of “Multitude” with a capital letter when I refer the political-theoretical concept. In those cases when I am analysing the multitude as a possible form of political community, I use the term with minuscule.

framework.

They refer to Lenin, whose criticism and analysis of imperialism led directly to the theory of Empire. Lenin, understanding the populist criticism of imperialism, was able to understand and describe the new phase of capital beyond imperialism and that is why he recognized the totalitarian consequences of imperialist politics (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. 234.). Construing the political community and consensus in the framework of the nation state and empire has always been the core element of hegemony. Lenin showed the historical progression of the modern European state into the nation-state and then into the imperialist state. Hardt and Negri stipulate very clearly that: „At each stage in this development the state had to invent new means of constructing popular consensus, and thus the imperialist state had to find a way to incorporate the multitude and its spontaneous forms of class struggle within its ideological state structures; it had to transform the multitude into a people. This analysis is the initial political articulation of the concept of hegemony that would later become central to Gramsci’s thought” (2000: pp. 332–333). In this sense imperialism and Empire, which is a form of globalized neoliberal imperialism, can be characterized by populism or popular hegemony which is about the articulation of sovereignty in a hegemonic project.

There is a strong relationship between hegemony and populism: populism is to be understood as the operation of a hegemonic power that constructs “the people” as a unified figure (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 23). The theory and practice of hegemony has always been one of the main assumptions of Marxist thinking. Marx argues that not just economic exploitation is laid behind capitalism but there are other factors as well, especially the dominance of the ideas and values of the ruling class, which prevent the working class to recognize and reject the oppression caused by capitalism (Marx, 1968). Gramsci moved towards these thoughts in his seminal *Prison Notebooks* and elaborated the theory of hegemony. According to Gramsci the manufacture of consent is crucial, because hegemony is a combination of consensus and coercion. He argued that the capitalist state and the power of ruling classes made up the overlapping political society (which is ruled by force) and civil society (which is ruled by consent). The civil society is shaped by ideas and beliefs in which the capitalist hegemony is reproduced by the cultural sphere (media, universities, religious institutions) (Gramsci: 2000, p. 234) The political and ideological hegemony is preceded by cultural hegemony. Gramsci warned the limited impact of the direct revolutionary struggles for the capitalist means of production (war on attack) and put an emphasis on the war of position which is a struggle for a new hegemony in terms of ideas and cultural beliefs (Gramsci: 2000, pp. 225–228). In my view the populist struggle to maintain the new form of democracy, which has been called here populist democracy, can be investigated in this counter-hegemonic struggle.

The most influential social theory works investigating populism in the context of hegemony are *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and Laclau’s (2005a; 2005b) and Mouffe’s (2000; 2018a; 2018b) books on populism. The common starting point of these analyses is the Gramscian hegemony theory. The Gramscian interpretation elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe moves towards populism and they argue that Gramsci offered a thematization of hegemony which went beyond the Leninist category of class alliance and can be applicable both in

the advanced industrial countries and the capitalist periphery. They put an emphasis on the main and never-ending political dilemma of the left which can be seen as the internal tensions between the class- and mass-based politics. The disintegration of the traditional working class has sharpened the problem of how the left could create the social subject of its politics. In the context of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), populism and totalitarianism have been analysed as right-wing phenomena compared to the left-wing radical democracy. Even though they expressed some reservations about populism, it is still clear at the time that while elaborating their post-Marxist hegemony project, Laclau and Mouffe are committed to challenge and change the *class-based approach, statism* (the idea that the expansion of the role of the state is the panacea for all problems) and *economism* (from a successful economic strategy there necessarily follows a continuity of political effects) elaborating their post-Marxist hegemony project, on the left. Class politics has been investigated in their work (Laclau and Mouffe: 1985, p. 177) as the main obstacle of political success: “radicalizing certain of Gramsci’s concepts, we find the theoretical instruments which allow us to redimension the revolutionary act itself. The concept of a ‘war of position’ implies precisely the process character of every radical transformation... The multiplication of political spaces and the preventing of the concentration of power in one point are, then, preconditions of every truly democratic transformation of society.” (Laclau, Mouffe: 1985, p. 178).

These assumptions have been improved in the project of theorizing populism. The populist conception of Laclau is based on the hegemony investigated in a very close interpretation of Gramsci. Laclau argues that populism is about contracting popular identities and “[t]here is no hegemony without constructing a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands” (2005b, p. 95). In Laclau’s sense, the populist identity considers some kind of precondition of hegemony, which will be extremely important in understanding the left and right populism of our time, because creating a popular identity could be very contingent. Such a contingency has been stressed by Laclau who argues that Gramsci’s “entire theory of hegemony makes sense only if the popular inscription of democratic demands does not follow an a priori given or ideologically determined diktat but is a contingent operation which can move in a plurality of directions. This means that there is no demand with a ‘manifest destiny’...” (2005b, p. 127). In the next section I put an emphasis on this contingency and will analyse the struggle to maintain the nature of populist democracies of our time as a hegemonic struggle between the populist left and right.

2. The Concept of the Populist Democracy

According to my assumption we have entered the new era of democracy which I propose to be called here *populist democracy*. This is not a new type of democracy, but the ideological and theoretical backgrounds of democracy are being transformed. It is to say that the left and right in the framework of hegemonic struggle (Gramsci: 2000) started to maintain the nature of democracy in the era of populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde: 2004). There is a lack of hegemony in conjunction with the decline of liberal democracy which provided an opportunity to gain power for such political parties and movements that are committed to destroy the liberal nature of democracy.

In Mouffe's terms there is a "populist moment" when the hegemony of liberal democracy is being destabilized (2018a, p. 9).⁴ Under the circumstances of overlapping social, legal and economic crises several demands remained unsatisfied "[i]n such situations, the existing institutions fail to secure the allegiance of the people as they attempt to defend the existing order. As a result, the historical bloc that provides the social basis of a hegemonic formation is being disarticulated and the possibility arises of constructing a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order experienced as unjust" (Mouffe: 2018a, p. 11). As Mouffe argues during the crisis the consensus around the hegemonic project was challenged and it is called *interregnum* by Gramsci: "[t]he 'populist moment', therefore, is the expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony. These transformations have led to a situation that we could call 'post-democracy' to indicate the erosion of the two pillars of the democratic ideal: equality and popular sovereignty" (Mouffe: 2018a, p. 12). This situation gave rise to right-wing populism and nationalism, but the populist moment, as Mouffe argues very carefully (Mouffe: 2018b) is not necessarily a moment of right-wing hegemony, but it can be a political opportunity for the left to elaborate its own populist project. I tried to capture this multi-faced nature of rising populism with the concept of Empire and Multitude. On the one hand the populism of the Empire means the authoritarian right-wing populism which compromises with neoliberalism,⁵ on the other hand the populism of the Multitude is about the possibility of radical left populism in transnational scales. Understanding this hegemonic crisis, I analyse the internal tensions of liberal democracy very briefly.

2.1 The Tensions and Crisis of Liberal Democracy

According to the *two-strand model* of constitutional democracy, it has been a paradoxical relationship between the liberal/constitutional pillar and the democratic pillar (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 406; Mouffe: 2000). The paradoxical nature of constitutional democracy has a big contribution to the rising populism within contemporary democracies (Canovan: 1999 and 2002; Mény, Surel: 2002b). Both pillars can be characterized by their own rules and traditions. First, the "liberal pillar refers to the liberal tradition, which claims that the supreme authority in the state should reside with the law. This anonymous rule of law serves as a means to protect the individual rights of all citizens against the arbitrary exercise of power by the state or by other citizens." (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 410). This model ensures the checks and balances, the individual rights and the protection of minorities. The other tradition is the democratic pillar "which emphasizes that the anonymous rule of law is not as innocent as it seems. The law usually institutes and conceals the dominance of particular groups in society, such as, for instance, white, male property owners. Therefore, political legitimacy requires that supreme authority reside not with the law but with the people. The model focuses on the public autonomy rather than on the private autonomy of

4 I will refer the page numbers of Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* (2018a) book according to its eBook publication.

5 Neoliberalism, as a set of economic, political and cultural ideas, is the "ideology" of modern capitalism, which is based on reductions the government role in order to increase the role of the private sector and society economic liberalization policies (privatization, austerity, deregulation, free trade) (Slobodian: 2018).

its citizens.” (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 410). This pillar is creating a clear distinction between the inside and outside groups and legitimizes the will of the majority against the excluded minorities. This phenomenon could very easily become the tyranny of the majority. Up to now it seemed that well balanced compromises can be constructed between the apparently incompatible logics of the liberal and the democratic pillar by constitutional democracies (Mouffe: 2000). In that sense, populism, populist anger and moreover populist democracy emerges when the constitutional democracy fails to balance between the constitutional pillar and the democratic one: “Too many checks and balances and the idea that elected representatives are out of touch with the popular will generate the feeling that popular sovereignty is undermined. Populism then gives voice to the desire to restore power to the people by referring to the democratic pillar of constitutional democracy.” (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 410). This phenomenon has been put forward in several contexts. According to the context of democratic systems, Mény and Surel stressed that there is a “constitutive tension between its ideology (the power of the people) and its functioning (the power of the elites chosen by the people)” (Mény, Surel: 2002b, p. 8). Canovan (2002) analysed the contradictory relationship between the ideology (which promises populist claims) and the practice of democracy.

Abts and Rummens showed the limitations of the two-strand model and they put forward a model based on the *logics of democracy* for a deeper understanding of populist democracy (Abts, Rummens: 2007, pp. 412–415). Their assumptions are based on the conception of Claude Lefort, who states that *the locus of power* in the constitutional democracy remains empty (Lefort: 1988). According to Abts and Rummens: “In a democratic regime... the locus of power can no longer be embodied by anyone but has to remain an empty place. Democratic rulers cannot identify themselves with the locus of power” (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 412). In a liberal framework the locus of power is identified with the *rule of law* which is ensured by the constitutional order and institutions. In populist democracy there is an organic unity of the political community. This is a kind of populism which has been defined by Laclau (2005b) as a structuring logic of political life, evident wherever equivalence triumphs over difference. According to Laclau, populism is not only a certain political logic, it is *the* logic of politics. In other words populism is the discursive and performative construction of “the people” against the elite. Laclau argues: “if populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative” (Laclau: 2005b, p. 47). In the populist logic the locus of power is fulfilled with the image of the people as a homogeneous body (people-as-one). At this point of analysis, populism has been viewed by Abts and Rummens (2007, p. 412) as proto-totalitarian, which is implausible according to my understanding. I am following Laclau’s conceptualization of populism as the logic of politics and therefore populist democracy cannot be analysed as a hybrid regime. Of course, and we will see, populism could be authoritarian, that is why I introduced the populism of the Empire, in which a populist leader occupies the locus of power in the name of the people.

From my point of view, we should insist more on how populism becomes anti-democratic and what is the theoretical background of this phenomenon (Antal: 2017). Abts and Rummens put an emphasis on the role of Carl Schmitt’s understanding of

anti-democratic turn of populism. Schmitt's (2007) view on the theory of democracy is a systematic elaboration of the logic of populism: he defines democracy as the substantial identity of all citizens, which is "a homogeneous political body with a singular popular will" (Abts, Rummens: 2007, p. 415; see also Urbinati: 1998). Schmitt theorizes the concept of the populism of the Empire in which the legitimacy of the political leaders depends on the fact that they participate, create and represent the common and homogeneous identity of the political community.

2.2 Hardt and Negri on Populism

In *Empire* (2000) the controversial relationship of Hardt and Negri was stressed, in conjunction with Laclau's populism. It dates back to the fundamental debate between Negri and Laclau: "Laclau and Negri seek to think a concept of social antagonism not reducible to orthodox conceptions of working class identity assigning an ontological status to antagonism. Yet both do so in fundamentally different terms. The debate between them occurs precisely over... competing and incommensurable ways of conceiving the ontological status of antagonism." (Rekret: 2014, p. 134). At the same time there are several attempts to reconcile the theory of Negri and Laclau (Kiouпкиolis, Katsambekis: 2014; Kiouпкиolis: 2014).

In their new book, *Assembly* (2017), there is a certain shift, because Hardt and Negri have found some basic similarities between their Multitude and Laclau's populist thoughts. They admit the common starting point is the recognition of the social heterogeneity. They argue that Laclau "departs from us, though, when he rejects the terrain of immanence, that is, the prospect that the multiplicity of social subjectivities in struggle can organize themselves effectively, create lasting institutions, and eventually constitute new social relations. Instead Laclau maintains that a transcendent motor, a hegemonic force, is necessary to organize from above the plural social subjectivities into 'the people', which he emphasizes, rightly, is an empty signifier." (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 328).⁶ The main factor which led Hardt and Negri to accept Laclau's theory is the deep doubts about the hegemonic unification tendencies incorporated into populism. They argue that their "primary objection is that the multitude of social subjectivities should not (and ultimately today cannot) be organized as a united subject from above, by a hegemonic power; we maintain, instead, that social subjectivities have the potential to organize themselves as a multitude (not a people) and create lasting institutions. In effect, we fault Laclau for hanging on to the categories of modern politics and modern sovereignty, without being able to transform them sufficiently" (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 328). They draw attention to one of the main dangers of populism including radical left movements as well. In this sense it is a worrying phenomenon that populism in power tears itself away from the movement which brought it to power. Hardt and Negri basically blame populist actors with finding state power unhealthily

6 The *empty*, or also known *floating, signifier* is a signifier without a specific signified. Given the fact it points to no actual object and has no consensual meaning, according to Oxford Reference (available at: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095824238>) it "absorbs rather than emits meaning". Laclau argues: "The conclusion is unmistakable: if this 'levelling instinct' can be attached to the most diverse social contents, it cannot, in itself, have a content of its own. This means that those images, words, and so on through which it is recognized, which give successive concrete contents a sense of temporal continuity, function exactly as what I have called empty signifiers." (Laclau: 2005a, p. 76.).

important: “Populists overestimate the importance of state power and underestimate the political expressions of social movements for not only their own legitimacy but also the effectiveness of the project” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 23) and in my view this is the most important reason why Hardt and Negri are trying to contextualize their multitude in terms that differ from the populist one, as I will analyse it in the fourth part of this paper. Right- and left-wing populism carry the danger of the emergence of leader group over the political movement. At the same time Hardt and Negri put an emphasis on the specific dangers in conjunction with right-wing populism which is “infused by racial identity. To say that populism is grounded in the love of identity... is undoubtedly true, but behind identity lurks property. Sovereignty and racialized property are the stigmata that mark the body of right-wing populisms” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 51). They have noticed that right-wing populism is about to reinforce the power of some elites and this will be my crucial point of understanding the Empire as an elitist populist construction.

It seems that in the context of Hardt and Negri’s controversial relationship towards populism there is a room to understand and debate Empire and Multitude in populist terms. In the next two sections I will analyse the concepts of Empire and Multitude in the light of current populist tendencies. My claim here is that in the context of Empire right-wing authoritarian populism prevails and the Multitude could be a possible breaking point towards transnational left-wing populism.

3. Populism of the Empire

3.1 Right-wing Populism as an Elitist Pact with the Empire

Criticizing Hardt and Negri, Amin is right when he claims that imperialism does exist in our time and there is a conflict between the centre and periphery: “The discourse of development has disappeared and been replaced by that of ‘adjustment’. In other words, the current world system (the ‘Empire’) is not less imperialist but more imperialist than its predecessor!” (Amin: 2015). Despite the existing imperialism, right-wing nationalist populisms show seminal similarities anywhere in the world. In my view, this common concern of right-wing nationalist populism can be identified and investigated as a populism of the Empire. The most important common aspect of these various kinds of populism in the context of Empire is the *elitist* view of politics. I have started the investigation of the political-theoretical tenets of elitist populism in the context of contemporary right-wing government in Hungary (Antal: 2017) and it is a widely accepted assumption that the vast majority of right-wing populist tendencies have become or have always been part of the political elite: „The paradox at the heart of these populist right-wing movements is that while they are products of popular anger – and appear a rejection of the globalized, hyperconnected world extolled by the elite – it’s also segments of this elite that are helping power these movements.” (Marcetic: 2017).

On the one hand we have even seen Hardt and Negri (2017) put an emphasis on the danger that the governing populism tears itself away from the movement which brought it to power. On the other hand, they reveal one of the main dilemmas of right- and left-wing populism which is the shared anti-elitism. They argue: “We don’t doubt the sincerity or intelligence of many right-wing activists’ protest against the

elites of finance, global institutions, and national government” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p 52). It is true that right-wing populism is anti-elitist in the sense that it takes populism as a weapon against some parts of the global elites, but there has always been an elite of right-wing populist parties and movements (as well as left-wing populist elite) and this nationalist elite made a pact with the neoliberal Empire. The Hungarian Orbán-system shows a more recent example of an authoritarian-nationalist populist system which depends on the Western (especially German automobile) companies. Tamás calls this phenomenon post-fascism: “Post-fascism finds its niche easily in the new world of global capitalism without upsetting the dominant political forms of electoral democracy and representative government. It does what I consider to be central to all varieties of fascism, including the post-totalitarian version.” (Tamás: 2000). The nationalist right-wing populism is articulated in racial, civilizational terms and takes politics as the us/them confrontation elaborated by Carl Schmitt (Tamás: 2000). The populism in the framework of Empire mobilizes the realm of emotion to create collective political identities (Mouffe: 2018a).

The elitist character of a populist regime is neither undiscovered, nor unprecedented in the literature. For instance, Zsolt Enyedi (2016) emphasized the merging of populism and elitism: using the Hungarian example his study “investigates how elitism can be integrated into an overall populist appeal” (Enyedi: 2016, p. 9). Investigating the extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany, Manuela Caiani and Donatella della Porta (2010) have discovered that there are some “tensions in the conceptualization of ‘populism’ when applied to the extreme right (...) On the one hand, there is a hierarchical (elitist) and exclusive conception of the people, according to which the extreme right identifies itself as with the people (‘we’ are the people, the people are ‘sovereign’) but allocates to itself the task of protecting a passive people” (Caiani, della Porta: 2010, p. 19).

3.2 The Legal Framework of the Empire

The emergence of modern Empire, which is totally different from the territorially cantered imperialism, has begun with the construction of modern sovereignty. As it has been stated, the Empire itself decentred and deterritorialized (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. xii). The never-ending and unstoppable (hyper) globalization has created a new world order constituting a new form of political sovereignty. This global order can be characterized by intemperate capitalist relations and less political control because of the deregulation of international markets. The sovereignty of nation-states, but not the sovereignty as such has gradually declined. Hardt and Negri claimed that “sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire.” (2000, p. xii). The traditional form of nation-state’s sovereignty has been challenged by new players of Empire (for instance international organizations, NGOs, global financial systems, global terrorism). It can be said that the Empire is the post-modern form of capitalism which is based on “biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another” (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. xiii).

It is interesting (and further investigations are needed to be done in this field)

that several nationalist-populist right-wing regimes (Hungary, Turkey, Poland, Russia, Brasilia) are able to collaborate with the Empire in which, on the one hand, nation-state sovereignty is reduced and constantly challenged and on the other hand the right-wing elite has gained several privileges and the state is captured by them. In this sense the concept of nationalism is to be reconsidered in conjunction with the Empire, because it is an existing phenomenon, but the nationalist elites cooperate with the actors of global capitalism.

4. Populism of the Multitude

The populism of the Multitude is a theoretical counter-concept compared to the populism of the Empire and it is based on the tenet that the left-wing transnational populism is a possible alternative way towards populist democracy. Given this assumption it can be seen as a utopia, but it may be useful to the deep understanding of the system of challenges that the contemporary left faces. Compared to the populism prevailing in conjunction with the Empire this utopian populist framework needs to be based on an inclusive concept of political community, the balance between the power of institutions and political leaders and first and foremost the transnational concept of political identity and populism which is critical towards the imperialist nature of capitalism. In conjunction with the populism in Multitude my main thought is that the concept of Multitude can be a solution to the dilemma of transnational populism, which is seeking its transnational political subject.

4.1 Alternative within the Empire

Multitude is about the possible realization of democracy, although it is hard to say that contemporary political regimes achieve the commitments of democracy. Hardt and Negri put forward a thought which says our incomplete democratization has been caused by the permanent state of war: "...the primary obstacle to democracy is the global state of war. In our era of armed globalization, the modern dream of democracy may seem to have been definitively lost. War has always been incompatible with democracy. Traditionally, democracy has been suspended during wartime and power entrusted temporarily to a strong central authority to confront the crisis." (Hardt, Negri: 2005, p. xi).

Not only has the Empire been constructed by the forces of globalization, but a counter-Empire, too: "The struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a real alternative, will thus take place on the imperial terrain itself" (Hardt, Negri: 2000, p. xv). In the context of Multitude, the new form of democracy and constituent power will be defined which will take the political community beyond the Empire.

4.2 The Hegemony of the Multitude as a Possible Reconciliation of Hard/Negi and Laclau/Mouffe

The concept of radical democracy (Laclau, Mouffe: 1985; Mouffe: 2000, 2018a) means an alternative direction in conjunction with the "populist moment" and populist democracy in terms of this paper. Hardt and Negri's Multitude is grounded on very similar assumptions to Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy. The main distinctions

are the perception of political/state power, and, in this sense, political subjectivity. The reconciliation of Hardt/Negri and Laclau has become a very important trend in the critical literature. Kioupkiolis put forward the “hegemony of the multitude” project that was created by the deconstruction and reconstruction of Hardt/Negri’s and Laclau’s positions. He argues: “we should pit Hardt and Negri against Laclau, the most influential thinkers of post-hegemonic multiplicities and populist democratic hegemony, respectively. But we should also bring them in contact in modes of political thought and praxis which remain alert to residual domination...” (Kioupkiolis: 2014, p. 150). The concept which I would like to discuss here is the “hegemony of the multitude” in terms of Kioupkiolis (2014).

Hardt/Negri and Laclau/Mouffe share the idea that there is a crisis in representation caused by the neoliberal hegemony which is called Empire by Hardt/Negri and post-democracy and post-politics by Mouffe. Until recently, they have proposed basically different counter-concepts. Mouffe argues (2018) that the crisis we faced is not the crisis of the representative democracy itself but a crisis of its current post-democratic version. That is why Mouffe and Laclau do not agree with the extra-parliamentarian solutions and the strategy of desertion and exodus proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005). These directions are about the abandonment of state power. The radical democracy elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe is about how the left could catch the hegemony and state power. This assumption has been improved by Laclau (2005b) and Mouffe’s (2000, 2018) to an overarching project of populism in which on the one hand Laclau put an emphasis on the populism as created political subjectivity and on the other hand, Mouffe insisted on the need to break with the post-political consensus and to reaffirm the partisan nature of politics in order to create the conditions of an “agonistic” debate about possible alternatives. Further, she also asserted a strategy of “engagement” with the state and with representative institutions. Laclau took Hardt and Negri’s multitude concept as a miserably inadequate conception of political agency and struggle for our times (Kioupkiolis: 2014, p. 153).

This cleavage between Hardt/Negri and Laclau/Mouffe has been significant until the last book of the theorists of Empire and Multitude. Mouffe argues (2018) that there is a significant change in Hardt and Negri’s theory in terms of exodus elaborated in the Assembly. They insist that the Multitude should not follow the strategy of withdrawal and it cannot avoid the need to take power, but in a different way (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 288.): “The first key to taking power differently is to understand that sovereignty is not synonymous with freedom, autonomy, and self-determination. On the contrary, sovereignty is always a mechanism for one class to rule over others; it always carries a colonial relation at its heart.” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 289).

Hardt and Negri seem to accept political leadership in a very limited way, because it is subordinated constantly to the multitude: “If leaders are still necessary and possible in this context, it is only because they serve the productive multitude. This is not an elimination of leadership, then, but an inversion of the political relationship that constitutes it, a reversal of the polarity that links horizontal movements and vertical leadership.” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. xv). According to Mouffe (2018) the main aim of Hardt and Negri here is to avoid the dangers of any right- or left-wing populisms which, as it has been argued here, overestimate state-power and underestimate social

movements. In this sense populism “is thus characterized by a central paradox: constant lip service to the power of the people but ultimate control and decision-making by a small clique of politicians. In this respect left populism and right populism are too often uncomfortably close.” (Hardt, Negri: 2017, p. 23). In my view, in Assembly, Hardt and Negri shifted from their original concepts and the multitude can be interpreted in the context of populism, but they are convinced that the main dangers of populism come from overwhelming state power.

Applying the concept of populism to the Multitude can be identified in the context of political subjectivity. On the one hand the concept of Multitude means a radical breakup with the classical left class politics and on the other hand it is not about the political identity of the masses: “Insofar as the multitude is neither an identity (like the people) nor uniform (like the masses), the internal differences of the multitude must discover the common that allows them to communicate and act together” (Hardt, Negri: 2005, p. xv). Amin argues that “Hardt and Negri think that we have arrived at... historical turning point, that classes (along with nations or peoples) are no longer the subjects of history. Instead the individual has become such (or is in the process of becoming such)” (Amin: 2005), because of this the multitude emerges. The notion of multitude needs to be distinguished from other social subjects such as the people, the masses, and the working class (Hardt, Negri: 2005, p. xiv). Compared to the people, which is a unitary conception because it reduces social diversity to an imaged unity, multitude is many: “The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity-different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations” (Hardt, Negri: 2005, p. xiv). The masses can be characterized with indifference, because all differences have been dissolved in the mass, while in the field of multitude social differences remain. It is necessary to distinguish the multitude from working class which concept delimits workers from owners and others who work. In contrast multitude is an open and inclusive concept and tries to capture biopolitical shifts in global economy: from the changes in conjunction with the status of working class to the biopolitical consequences of social production. The multitude is a distributing network which tries to gather these diverse actors of social production. In my opinion this concept of multitude is open to interpretation in the framework of Laclau’s empty signifier.

4.3 The Multitude as an Empty Signifier

I’ve already mentioned that according to Laclau (2005a, 2005b) populism is not just only a political logic but it is *the* logic of the political. This logic can be “characterized by the discursive construction of a popular subjectivity, that is a ‘we’/the people’ and its enemy, that is a ‘they’/the establishment” (Panayotu: 2017, p. 3). The possible populist understanding of Multitude does not deny the existence of the antagonistic cleavages within the political community and the contingent nature of the Political. Laclau, who has articulated the most in-depth theoretical insight into transnational construction of “the people”, proposed a chain that articulates different demands existing in the political community under a common denominator. This form of articulation has been called *the logic of equivalence* by Laclau “in which all the demands, in spite of their differential character tend to reaggregate themselves” (2005a, p. 37). The

logic of equivalence creates an equivalential chain by “articulating a ‘we’ that includes particularities which are united as long as they share the same opposition against a ‘they’” (Panayotu: 2017, p. 3). Laclau added to this that “the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called empty signifier” (2005a, p. 44). *Empty signifier* can include political concepts, names, personalities, terms, slogans which “lose their specific content and can be presented as universal” (Panayotu: 2017, p. 3). Laclau’s concept, because “the rallying point in the constitution of a ‘people’ remains largely open” (Laclau: 2005a, p. 191), is applicable at transnational level. Laclau points out that “[i]t is perfectly possible to constitute a ‘people’ in such a way that many of the demands of a more global identity are ‘universal’ in their content, and cut across a plurality of ethnic identities” (2005a, 198).

I am arguing that the concept of Multitude in terms of an alternative global society can fulfil these requirements and is able to function as a *transnational form of empty signifier* which creates global chains of equivalence. The populism of Multitude needs to have central reference to the people, and the separation or antagonistic opposition between “the people” and the system/establishment, and both are to be understood in transnational context. In my view this transnational and anti-nationalist interpretation of populism can reinforce the corrective nature of populism in conjunction with democracy which is always populist in its radical form (Laclau: 2005b, p. 169). Because of the “democratic paradox” (Mouffe: 2000), discussed in the second part of this paper, it needs to have this corrective populism. The multitude based on transnational populism as a particular logic which can “articulate in a radical, progressive way the tension between liberalism and democracy” (Panayotu: 2017, p. 4). Nevertheless, to become an empty signifier, from a Laclauian perspective, political leadership must be concerned with the multitude, because “there is no ‘people’ out there just waiting for the populist leader to speak on their behalf – rather, populist leaders must construct ‘the people’ that they purport to speak for through representation” (Moffitt: 2017, p. 7). It is my strong opinion that this can be justified by the recognition and rehabilitation of political power delivered by Hardt and Negri in the context of multitude and the possible reconciliation of multitude (as a theory of Hardt and Negri) and populism (in the framework of Laclau and Mouffe) could give a rise to what can be called *transnational populism*.

5. Conclusion: The Multitude and the Project of Transnational Populism

The populism of the Multitude is about to change the taken-for-granted relationship between populism and nationalism (Moffitt: 2017, p. 1) and represent the agenda of transnational populism. The biggest challenge of transnational populism is to specify the people “that populists appeal to and claim to speak for”, because it “must go beyond the borders of the nation-state” (Moffitt: 2017, p. 2) and that is how the multitude as an empty signifier seems to be crucial in this project. The populism of Multitude is not a political style, rather a possible form of populist democracy constructed by the transnational political subject based on the multitude. As it has been analysed here, the multitude is a transnational network prepared for the biopolitical shifts in global

economy: especially the biopolitical consequences of social production. This could be the main cohesive force in conjunction with populism of the Multitude because various social groups are hurt by the elitist group in the Empire and the main challenge is how the equivalential chain can be created from the various types of harms at the centre and the periphery of global capitalism.

Moffitt refers to De Cleen (2017), who has distinguished between two possible dimensions of transnational populism. The first is about the international cooperation and coordination between national populist parties/movements and national populist leaders. Moffitt correctly adds: “this seemingly ‘transnational’ form of populism is better understood as ‘international populism’, given that it revolves around international ties between populist actors who are concerned with representing firmly nation-based conceptions of ‘the people’, rather than the construction of an explicitly transnational ‘people’” (Moffitt: 2017, pp. 2–3). According to my interpretation, this is not transnational populism, rather a cooperative form of populist parties. Transnational populism is unthinkable without a concept of the political identity in transnational terms. In my opinion this political agenda is dedicated to the multitude which invents new democratic forms and a new constituent power. That is why I proposed here the reconciliation of Hardt/Negri’s post-structuralist Multitude concept with the populist one of Laclau and Mouffe. De Cleen’s second conception is very close to this, because he is dealing with a form of populism which constructs: “a transnational people-as-underdog as a political subject that supersedes the boundaries of the nation-state, rather than merely linking up national people-as-underdogs” (De Cleen: 2017, p. 19).

Although there are existing examples of transnational populism (for instance the Occupy movement, Indignados, moreover DiEM25 tried consequently to create a common European political subject), the case of transnational populism is declining. Creating a transnational political identity from the multitude as people-as-underdog depends on how the multitude can become an empty signifier. The international cooperation of populist actors (or as De Cleen argues, “meta-populism”) does not create political identity, it is “a coalition of nationally bounded peoples-as-underdog who share similar concerns or a shared enemy” (Moffitt: 2017, p. 3) (for instance campaigns against Brussels organized by European right-wing nationalists). In my view the proposed common enemy is so far not enough to create transnational populism. Creating enemies without a common political identity is a threatening danger towards the possible populist project based on the Multitude. Without a democratically organized community there is no room to debate the real dangers and the political leader will be the only political actor who can decide on crucial political dilemmas – this exactly happens in those countries that are governed by right-wing nationalists.

It must be recognized that constructing a popular identity is much more difficult at a transnational level than at a national one. Moffitt’s explanation is that “despite the fact that we live in a globalised world, the nation-state still maintains primacy in terms of being the central organ of democratic representation and thus the main space for the construction of ‘the people’” (Moffitt: 2017, p. 8). The modern form of nationalism is an emerging phenomenon in the East as well as in the West, or in the Central as well as in the periphery. It is also true that nationalist popular identities are more familiar, and they have been built in the historical and political

agenda of the nations. It is much easier to make the constitutive process of speaking for “the people” at national level. Transnational identities are constructed identities and transnational representation claims on behalf of the people are more constitutive than national claims (Moffitt: 2017, p. 8), but these statements are also true for national identities and claims at national level. Moreover, there is a hegemonic fight between the political right and left to maintain the nature of contemporary democracy which has been called populist democracy in this study. This hegemonic struggle is not a new phenomenon and it has been described by Antonio Gramsci (2000). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) are convinced that Gramsci’s political theory is the most appropriate strategy to lead the left to power. Gramsci paid attention to the role of the ruling elites in the political struggles: “Considering that ruling élites not only own the means of production, but enjoy what Gramsci calls ‘hegemony’ in terms of political culture and leading worldview, a violent revolution would not be the most sensible strategy to impose socialism. On the contrary, the forces of the left should constitute a ‘historic bloc’, combining all non-establishment groups of society, in order to conduct a ‘war of position’, so as to conquer hegemony. The struggle has thus to focus on persuasion and conviction.” (Ferraresi: 2016).

The “historic bloc” is in the making, the problem is that right-wing nationalist forces recognized the importance of the hegemonic struggle worldwide, maintaining the nature of contemporary democracy. After the meltdown of liberal democracy, the elitist actors’ populism tried to gain hegemony ruling political culture and leading worldview in the framework of Empire. Without a strong counter-concept and transnational political identity the democracy of the near future will be dominated by right-wing nationalists. This study aimed to reconcile the project of the Multitude and populism shaping the social theoretical backgrounds of transnational populism.

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