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Radical left-wing populism and democracy in Europe

Marco Damiani

1. Introduction

In the context of the vast literature on populism, this chapter aims to focus on a specific variety of Western European Populist Parties, namely the populist radical left parties (PRLPs). While international political comment dedicates ample space to populist parties (among recent publications: Pappas 2014; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Moffitt 2016), and, in particular, to Populist Radical Right Parties (Husbands 2002; Zaslove 2004; Mudde 2007), there has been limited interest in the study of the political processes which have determined the emergence of the parties of the Populist Radical Left in Europe.¹

The research questions behind this study are relatively straightforward: What exactly are the PRLPs, and what is their relationship with liberal democracy? In attempting to answer these two questions, two preliminary considerations should be addressed. Firstly, the motivation that led to the choice of this field of research. In this respect, we believe it is useful to examine this type of party because PRLPs display elements in marked contrast with the past, as they interpret new demands and new instances of change and transformation demanded by the community. Indeed, these parties have achieved electoral success, and brought substantial change to the way the party system works in the countries where they operate. Secondly, an analysis of the PRLPs is necessary to clarify the field of left-wing parties, a specific subcategory of European Radical Left Parties (March 2011; Dunphy and Bale 2011a, 2011b; Damiani 2016; March and Keith 2016). In the context of growing social fragmentation, the political struggles fought during the 20th and 21st centuries have become increasingly local (racial, ethnic, cultural, civil, gender related, etc.) and are unable to manage and articulate “great narratives”, as they are too specific or disparate, or part of the system of government. From this point of view, if the European Radical Left Parties define the framework within which the PRLPs are placed, this latter category attempts to provide a different political representation of the wide range of social complexities that have emerged, and give voice to the many and various interests that appeared in the European scenario at the turn of the century.

While they have not abandoned the interpretation of modern society conceived as the juxtaposition of capital/labour, the PRLPs attempt to organize conflict on top/bottom dynamics, identifying a “people” (no longer exclusively working class) in opposition to an
elite made up of the political leadership, which, in the people’s opinion, is part of the problem and not the solution. Unlike the non-populist radical left parties, one of the main features ascribable to PRLPs is the identification of a huge “people” of reference, which is no longer based on the centrality of the workers, and thus able to include a plurality of social categories that share an element of social exclusion.

At the beginning of the 21st century numerous PRLPs with these characteristics appeared on the European political scene, and contributed to changing the recent history of important nation states. In this perspective, in order to present the most significant characteristics of this category of parties, the three PRLPs that have had the greatest success in electoral terms will be used as case studies. We shall thus proceed to compare the cases of Podemos, France Insoumise and Syriza. With reference to electoral results it should be noted that Podemos (founded in January 2014) reached 7.8% in the European elections of June 2014, and then 20.7% and 21.1% in the political elections of 2015 and 2016. France Insoumise (founded in 2016) reached 19.9% in the French Presidential elections in 2017, barely missing out on the second ballot, and then won over 11% of votes and 17 seats in Parliament at the General Elections in 2017. Syriza, on the other hand, is in government. With a longer and more complex history than the French and Spanish cases (Damiani 2017), the Greek coalition of the radical left started to make progress in 2004 and entered government by winning the elections in January and September 2015.

It should be noted that all of these forces were born and grew to political maturity as attempts to represent a new “people” with institutional representation. They were formed in the main squares of Spain, Greece and France, respectively, with the gatherings of the Indignados Movement in May 2011; the protests in Syntagma Square following the autumn of 2009; and the French demonstrations in March–June 2016, after Manuel Valls’s socialist government approved the reform of the Jobs Act. All three movements organized strong protests against government-promoted austerity policies, and identified as their adversary the centre-right and centre-left political elite, which was held responsible for their negative record in government.

Following these considerations, we shall proceed to defining the European PRLPs, and in particular to examine the processes of their political development, the set of values on which they are based and the pressures for change engaged within in the present political system.

2. The “people”: a new “historical bloc”

The European PRLPs are markedly different from both the traditional leftist mass parties of 20th-century origin and the more recent parties of the European Radical Left, which appeared on the international political scene after the fall of the Berlin wall and the implosion of the old socialist regimes. From this point of view the difference is conducible to the identification and definition of what can be seen as the new “historical bloc” of reference.

The historical bloc is a concept that was introduced by Georges Sorel and then used by Antonio Gramsci in his innovative reflections in Quaderni del carcere (Prison Notebooks) (1929–1935). It is an alliance of social forces whose common objective is to achieve the structural (economic) and super-structural (political, cultural, ideal and moral) hegemony necessary for the government of a given political community. For Gramsci, in a revolutionary sense, the historical bloc of the international proletariat should aim to build up a hegemonic project, in order to undermine the established order, and take the place of the industrial bourgeoisie in the role of the ruling class. Taking these considerations as a premise, and re-using and applying the historical bloc concept to the profoundly modified political context of the early 21st century, our assumption is to consider the PRLPs as political players
interested in the construction of a new historical bloc, which would be capable of regrouping social demand and pursuing ambitions involving political dominance and change.

With the end of the “Short Twentieth Century” (Hobsbawm 1994), the reorganization of the capitalist economy along neo-liberal lines and the concept of social class in its Marxian interpretation now in crisis, it has become necessary to arrive at a political proposal in Europe which can harbour ambitions of dominance, starting from the wish to pinpoint, build up and organize a new historical bloc (in the place of social class) which could recompose the numerous widespread interests in contemporary society in a single entity. This is what the European populist radical left struggled to achieve, in order to pursue institutional change, between the 20th and 21st centuries. The aim from the outset was to re-organize a historical bloc that is no longer conceived as being built around one single social class, made up of workers and the proletariat, but rather based on a shared set of values, a comparable life-style and the will to pursue a common plan of social emancipation. While made up of numerous and diverse categories, this “bloc” can come together in a majority alliance upon which a new political proposition can be built.

However, the issues that ensue from this standpoint are as easy to formulate in theory as they are complex to deal with empirically. The questions that the first part of this chapter aims to answer are as follows: What is the historical bloc that the European left of the 21st century envisages, at the basis of the driving force for change within political systems that operate in the world of the globalized economy? In what terms is it possible to refer to a different “bloc” from that of the past? How does one build a historical bloc capable of executing a plan for political dominance that could oust the government elite from the control of democratic countries?

Laclau (1990, 2005) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) are the political scientists who have dedicated the most attention in the literature on populism to the hypothesis of a New Radical Left that is capable of innovating contemporary political categories and making them more functional to political renewal. The starting point is provided by two fundamental assumptions. The first is that social conflict remains the conditio sine qua non of political change. A society can only start out on a process of change with the aim of making progress in the light of the conflict that arises between the collective competing players. The second is that all societies have the task of finding categories of analysis, in order to conceive each political phenomenon in its contingency and according to the categories of their own time. Mouffe and Laclau move on from these considerations in two directions. On the one hand, they propose an analysis of the nature and logics involved in forming collective identities, and the differences with the past; on the other, they attempt to lay the foundations of a concrete political proposal that can be adopted in practice.

The framework within which the foundations for a political renewal plan are presented is to be accomplished within a context of the dispersion and fragmentation of complex societies, characterized by the inability of the class structure to account for such social complexity on its own. In other words, it is no longer possible to consider the working class and the international proletariat as the only privileged subject of social change. Combined with this, another engine of change is the crisis of socialist regimes in the 20th century. This is the context, according to Mouffe and Laclau, from which emerge the conditions for re-thinking a truly democratic revolution, capable of achieving the aims of a “radical” and “plural” democracy, and thus the attempt to extend social conflict to a plurality of players.

Having acknowledged the inevitable aspect of change involved in social conflict, based on input from published considerations, one part of the left began to envisage a progressive process of political autonomy which would make it possible to overcome the juxtaposition of right and left (which, according to this reasoning, was no longer capable of describing the...
terms of the existing conflict), and propose an interpretation of contemporary society as a struggle between two opposing collective subjects, to be identified as “us” (the “people”) and “them” (the elite or political class in government). Unlike the idea presented by Carl Schmitt (1927) regarding the opposition that is produced in political circles between friend/enemy, in the contemporary people/elite dyad (or bottom/top), it is necessary to pursue a pluralistic democratic order, abandoning the Schmittian idea of the politician as a player intent on destroying his enemy. The aim is to arrive at the concept of the dominant game of friend/enemy in terms of legitimate differences. In this view, the antagonistic pluralism of complex societies becomes a constituent element of modern democracies, which, far from being a threat to social stability, can be seen as a precondition of liberal democracy.

A similar perspective can be observed in the praxis of a number of radical left-wing European parties. The “enemy” of the populist parties of the European radical left is either the ruling elite, or, depending on the circumstances, the political class, the representatives of international finance, or the power of the banks and the global economy. In Spain, the leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, uses the term “trama” to describe networks that control economic, political and cultural power in the absence of transparency. In this sense, the trama is the representation of the enemy, against whom the “people” must oppose and organize their dissent. In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (2014), explicitly inspired by developments in Spain, uses the same slogans, calling on the “people” to fight against the oligarchy. This appeal would become the basis of the discourse upon which France Insoumise built its electoral success in the 2017 presidential elections.

The political proposals of all European PRLPs follow this line. After the collapse of faith in the established teleological and political narratives, and before the proliferation of countless nationalist, ethnic and religious conflicts, this part of the European left chose not to identify its function in either the reconstruction of the fragments of the 20th-century mosaic, in order to return to the Marxist project at the point when it was interrupted, or in the tendency to yield to post-modern isolationist promises. For the populist parties of the European radical left, the task is to formulate a new democratic programme with “radical” and “plural” characteristics, which could be the expression of a “general will” for a new historical bloc, identifiable (no longer by only one social class, but rather) as the “people”, opposed to an enemy identified in a collective trama which pursues objectives contrary to those of the working classes.

Given the context of reference, the aim of this chapter is to arrive at a definition of “the people” from the literature, in order to clarify the assumptions that determine – in this attempt at political reconstruction – the representation of a new historical bloc. The reference to “the people” implies the construction of a new form of political representation, to be built ex novo, through the possible division between “us” and “them”.

In particular, from this perspective, the denunciation of false universality in the existing political order, which is incapable of representing changing popular needs, becomes the condition that the parties of the European radical left put forward to claim a new form of political universality.

The concept of structural “equivalence” (Laclau 2005) comes into play in this context, according to which apparently conflicting demands could artificially be grouped into a single collective subject, in that diverse social groups acknowledge the same political objective. In this regard, Laclau states: we shall call popular demands “a plurality of demands which, through their ‘equivalential’ articulation, constitute a broader social subjectivity” (Laclau 2005, 70). In this sense, the author believes “the people” can be regarded as a heterogeneous collective subject, composed by the “logic of equivalence”, which allows for the aggregation of several
demands into a single political subject. The identification of “the people” (as opposed to a social class), intended as an internally heterogeneous collective subject, as it is made up of a plurality of social categories, demonstrates, in the author’s view, a capacity for political aggregation which could lead to the formation of a new generation of political movements and parties. Given the differences from the past, some parties and movements of the populist radical left have attempted to adopt this perspective as political action by presenting a totally different popular identity from left-wing parties in the Marxist tradition. This is the case, for example, for Podemos, France Insoumise and Syriza. Each of these political groups, at the time they were established, or at the moment of their electoral success, far from only organizing the working class, worked to establish an alternative political project which could gather together diverse categories, which were the product of the process of fragmentation, around a single political project with distinct emancipatory ambitions.

In this case, the PRLPs appear to converge around what is known as the “community-organizing” process. This concept, first expressed by Saul Alinsky (1971), is common in countries of Anglo-Saxon political culture, although it can be extended across Western democratic states, and describes the capacity of some public players to organize a community of people to fight for better their own economic and social conditions by collective action. Diverse types of individuals unite to pursue a mutual campaign, without questioning their own identity and, moreover, use their differences to widen the motivations for their political demands. The fundamental characteristic that led to the birth of the PRLPs in Western Europe is precisely this kind of performance. Their success in political and electoral terms is rooted in the procedure of community organization that they managed to activate in order to build upon the previously mentioned historical bloc. Without delving into the historically determined conditions which led to the birth of the PRLPs, it is worth noting that this perspective can include not only the events in Syntagma Square, which in the first two years of this millennium led to the electoral ascent of Syriza in Greece, but also the Movimiento de los indignados, which began in Madrid on 15 May 2011, from which Podemos took shape.

A similar situation occurred with the French demonstrations in 2016, which saw a wave of large-scale political demonstrations protesting against the labour reforms introduced by the socialist government of Manuel Valls. These were the circumstances in which France Insoumise was formed, establishing a new composite and pluralistic historical bloc, which resulted in political campaigns in the framework of the populist radical left parties, with strong leadership that expressed strong resentment towards politics, founded upon strong anti-establishment feelings.

The following section will describe the value system of the PRLPs, and highlight the relationship between their values and the relations that exist between them.

3. Social imaginary

For the parties of the European populist radical left, the main break from the past is evident in their discontinuity with the parties of the traditional left. Indeed, due to the social fragmentation that emerged at the turn of the century, far from distinguishing themselves for an explicit ideological uniformity, the PRLPs stand out for the wide variety of ideas they represent. While the social-communist parties of the Marxist tradition had a non-negotiable Unitarian content, the plurality of identities and reference values among the parties of the populist radical left is an absolutely new characteristic. The variety of ideas that define such forms of political organization can be attributed to the overturning of the relationship between politics and society. In the past, ideology arrived from the top down in people’s individual experience, determining their action.
In the current era the relationship between politics and society has generally been the other way round, and the consequent production of values and ideas has mostly come from the social sphere.

The concept of “social imaginary” (Castoriadis 1975; Wunenburger 1998; Taylor 2004) is of use in this context if interpreted as a specific form of collective thought, distinct from all others (myths, common sense, religion, ideology and utopia). From a theoretical point of view this involves a series of images, often implicit and not formalized, with which individuals interpret themselves to define their own needs. In the political field, the term social imaginary is used to symbolically indicate a great store of ideas which is the result of the contribution of numerous social groups, each of which becomes the bearer of specific contents, even if often supplied in an involuntary and restricted way (Santambrogio 2015). Social imaginary, therefore, can be understood as the set of ideas, representations and visions of the world produced by many groups, each of which provides its own contribution, even though they may often be unaware of this. In this regard, this is the fundamental role of social movements. In the history of the post-bipolar era, the heritage left by the workers’ movement was grafted upon with new and diverse ideas, which on the one hand fed on the heritage of the past and, on the other, overtook it and took significant steps forward (ibid.). Taking these considerations into account, what follows is a description of the values of the European PRLPs in this millennium. In an era of collapsing ideologies, the social imaginary tends to take over the ideological system of the past. Where ideology was once called upon to provide a logical connection, capable of proposing a coherent interpretation of the world (Mannheim 1929), the social imaginary presents a different perspective. It draws directly upon daily experience, and ends up building a thought system, which is not necessarily structured. In these conditions, within a specific political community, the values, principles, ideas and symbols which make up a specific social imaginary (potentially opposed to other “de-ideologized” social imaginaries) can be represented and promoted by a single collective subject.

Starting from these considerations, we wish to use the concept of social imaginary to interpret the complex and unitary symbolical universe of the PRLPs, in order to describe the field of values which, in a state of fragmented collective interests, is able to organize the capacity to voice the political demands of the new historical bloc within a political proposal.

In this regard, we use the concept of “radial categories” proposed by George Lakoff (1987). Lakoff distinguishes between “primary category” (or “central subcategory”) and “secondary categories” (or “non-central subcategories”). In this specific case, our idea is that the central subcategory of the European populist radical left (its “core competence”) is different to that of the left parties of the Marxist tradition, and the other left parties which appeared between the 20th and 21st centuries. Indeed, while for the social-communist parties of the 20th century, and also for the more recent parties of the contemporary left, the primary category made explicit and exclusive reference to the principle of equality, and the pursuit of the ideal of substantial equality in material conditions amongst the members of the same political community, the approach of the populist parties of the European left is different. In their case, the primary category, far from being represented by the exclusive principle of substantial equality, becomes – in a more extensive form, in order to mobilize the different social categories of the renewed historical bloc of reference – the principle of social inclusion. Abandoning the past, the PRLPs stop pursuing and making direct reference to a society of “equals”, freed from profit and the class struggle, and recompose social conflict within the field of Western democracy, recovering the demands of different social actors.

Through the principle of inclusion, the European populist parties of the radical left can reach all members of the same political community, no longer being merely a part of them,
thus claiming the active participation of all the “people”, not just the working class and international proletariat. From this point of view, while they share areas of common meaning, the concept of inclusion is not entirely superimposed to that of equality. According to Habermas (2008), inclusion does not mean assimilatory hoarding or closure. Inclusion means being open to those citizens who are strangers to each other and want to remain so. Putting the principle of inclusion at the centre of the construction of one’s identity, however, does not mean waiving the role of agent in the economic, social and political change attributed to the parties of the left. Vice versa, for PRLPs using the principle of inclusion as the “primary category” of their social imaginary means referring to the construction of a radical democracy, founded on the Welfare State and on developing a wider society of well-being. All this, rather than prefiguring a structural change to the dominant political system, creates the necessary conditions for the pursuit of greater internal social justice with respect to the rules of the current democratic system.

Clearly, inclusion is not the only element of the social imaginary of the European populist radical left. If we continue to use the terminology of Lakoff’s proposal (1987), the “secondary categories” of the social imaginary of the European PRLPs can be seen in other reference values. Amongst the most important are the following: i) pacifism, which reclaims non-violence as an instrument of social and political change; ii) a wider democratic process in government procedures, in the shape of wider participation from below; iii) feminism, in the form of greater attention to gender equality and the creation of complementarity between people of different sexual orientations; iv) recognition of the civil rights of citizenship to all those who do not yet have full rights, in particular migrants and homosexuals; and v) care for the environment, seen as the necessary condition for safeguarding the global eco-system and the defence of the sources of energy production.3

All these values, brought within the system by the principle of inclusion, contribute to defining and confining the field of ideas of the populist radical left. The essential point is that these values are not in themselves elements that distinguish the populist radical left alone, as they can be seen in other political cultures, first of all liberalism and the Christian faith. However, these values are also the heritage of the PRLPs, to the extent that they are oriented towards pursuing the principle of inclusion of all members of the same political community within the current social and democratic system. An example of respecting and expanding citizens’ civil rights is the attention paid to the rights of homosexual couples. This theme qualifies the electoral programmes and political intentions of all the PRLPs in question. In this case, however, it is not possible to state that this value is exclusive to the field of the left, let alone the field of the populist radical left. It is a tout-court liberal value, which regards the creation of the conditions necessary for the respect and full realization of the human being. This is true insomuch as in the UK, gay marriage as an institution was approved in 2013 by David Cameron’s conservative government. The same can be said for pacifism, feminism and the defence of the environment. These are not exclusively left-wing values, as they belong to a much wider political belief. The peculiarity of the populist radical left is that it represents this set of values as an original “mix”, which takes on political meaning in terms of its own social imaginary, as it is conceived with the aim of pursuing conditions of greater social inclusion. In the populist left parties, each reference value is, or at least should be, seen as enlarging social inclusion, with the idea of changing the relationships between forces to provide all individuals with the possibility of imagining a progressive process of political, cultural and economic emancipation. In this respect, whereas the ideological approach of the 20th century social-communist parties tended towards the utopian pursuit of a society where everyone was equal, the populist radical left claims new issues of change. Having abandoned
the role of the revolutionary anti-establishment parties, in the social imaginary of these political groups there is no room for the idea of totalitarian equality. In its place is the necessity to include diverse social categories within a society of well-being, in order to improve the conditions and life-style of all involved.

If we continue to apply Lakoff’s radial categories to the social imaginary of the European PRLPs, a further consideration that can be put forward here is that the secondary categories of the same social imaginary, while they do not contain the same sets of values, share part of their identity content with the primary category. This means that all the attributes of value, such as pacifism or feminism (and any other value making up the social imaginary of the European populist radical left), are not equal to each other, but share significant content with the central subcategory, which in this case corresponds with the principle of social inclusion. From this point of view, only the sum of all the non-central subcategories returns the total content of the central subcategory (Collier and Mahon 1993).

Once the values of the post-20th-century PRLPs have been defined, it becomes important to consider their functional relationship. With the premise that the primary category represents the end-value of these political parties, not all of the groupings in the populist radical left have an identical scale of priorities regarding the values and means with which their objectives are to be achieved. This results in an asymmetry between individual parties of the same political category, with regard to the instruments used in each case to achieve their final objectives. In fact, depending on the nature of each case, some parties may find, for example, that the value of feminism is the fundamental element of their action for political change, while others may find greater unity around the subject of pacifism, or any other value contained in the secondary categories (or a mixture of these). It is through these different modalities of independent choice that the set of values of the European populist radical left is redefined, in a different manner on every occasion, on the level of real power relationships. Unlike the social-communist parties, with their strong ideological stability, with the populist radical left we find ourselves faced with political groupings in continuous change, with a complex relationship between means-values and end-values.

4. “Democracia real, ya”

All forms of populism born in Europe between the 20th and 21st centuries, comprising populism on the radical left, were born, grew and prospered within the borders defined by democratic political regimes. Ultimately, contemporary forms of populism are structured on the same rules of representative liberal democracy, founded on free elections, the majority principle and party pluralism, which allow the respect of political liberty. In her famous distinction between “Agrarian Populism” and “Political Populism”, Margaret Canovan (1981) associated what she defines as “populist democracy” with the latter type of populism. With this definition, the English political analyst indicated all forms of populism that aim at promoting participation and popular sovereignty. From this point of view, populist democracy took the form of “radical” democracy, capable of criticizing indirect democracy models, due to the tools provided by direct democracy and its forms of political consultation.

The PRLPs born in Europe between the 20th and 21st centuries can be collocated in this space. After the crisis of democratic inclusion processes, the radical left parties pointed out the alleged necessity of “Democratizing Democracy”. Considering the critical indicators that refer to the task performed by political parties in their traditional role of gatekeepers between the higher and lower parts of society, given the progressive decline in electoral participation in the most important European democracies, and given the global governance mechanisms which
tend to subtract democratic decision-making spaces from the collective governing process, for the PRLPs a “radical” turning point in democracy was necessary, in order to return to exerting a diffuse popular sovereignty. The intention was to integrate the forms of representative democracy (which they held to be insufficient in the governments of contemporary societies) with the tools of direct democracy, through the use of ad hoc devices capable of gathering the dispersed opinions of citizens. The objective was to return the direct power of intervention to the people, in the face of an increasing professionalization of politics which, in their opinion, risks becoming a technocracy, or, worse still, plutocratic control of the governance of public affairs. In order to recover the distance between the governors and governed, the European radical left populist parties set the objective of returning elements of control over the leadership to the “people”, detracting from the administration of an elite of bureaucrats and officials that is ever more disinterested in pursuing the “general will” of the “people”.

With reference to Mèny and Surel’s considerations (2002), it can be said that populist movements and parties, together with the radical left, showed reservations towards the mechanisms of political representation because they aspire to a collective realization of the “general will” of the people, in contrast to the binding mandate imposed by the establishment. Pierre Rosanvallon’s (2006) “counter-democracy” concept is of interest in this context. According to the French researcher, contemporary democracy can no longer be conceived as the people’s self-government alone, as it should necessarily be extended to the control of the governed over the governors. In this perspective, the citizen’s sovereignty is not imaginable only in the positive (it can no longer consist in merely being the authors of the decisions which govern their own lives), as it is also conceivable in the negative (in the necessity to organize a surveillance action, so that the governors do not use their powers for other purposes). In this manner, the democratic practice of complex societies in the contemporary era requires the simultaneous action of two fundamental elements: 1) the activation of mechanisms capable of allowing citizens to directly adopt communal decisions; 2) the use of instruments through which citizens can exert control over the political processes carried out in the name of, and for, the sovereign people.

Among the various possible typologies, this chapter proposes the inclusion of radical left populism in the category of “inclusionary populism”, which Mudde and Rovira (2013) use to make a distinction from the “exclusionary populism” typical of the radical racist and xenophobic right. Inclusionary populism is a form aimed at pursuing the political integration of the many categories that result from social fragmentation. The aim of these parties is to broaden democratic borders by following the project of “including” the “excluded” in the most advanced model of social democracy that they are willing to pursue. The idea that emerges from this form of populism is that of opening, not closing, decisional processes, and opening to the plurality of social categories (not only those involving organized interests), which the procedural mechanisms of liberal democracies tend to exclude from the governance of public affairs, not to mention the less wealthy who live and work within the national borders. The inclusionary populism of the PRLPs is aimed in particular at two specific categories of the “excluded”, migrants and gender minorities, to whom they would like to offer a path of full political, social and economic inclusion. Hence, it is clear that, if from the point of view of the social imaginary, PRLPs identify their symbolic reference universe in the social inclusion of categories excluded from current decisional processes, the inclusionary populism attributed to the parties of the populist radical left takes on precisely such features.

Taking this idea from theory to the empirical level, Mudde and Rovira (2017) present Syriza as a typical case of European inclusionary populism. Syriza is the party that won two
elections in a row and a consultative referendum in 2015 (called to decide whether to accept
the proposals presented to Greece by the main players in international governance) thanks to a
political project aimed at recovering, through inclusion, the social categories that paid the
heaviest price for the economic and financial crisis. According to the leaders of Syriza, the
crisis was badly managed by the dominant political class of both the right (New Democracy)
and the left (the Pasok, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement), which had ruled the country
since the early 2000s. According to Mudde and Rovira, Tsipras continued to reference non-
privileged “people” in his speeches even after Syriza won the parliamentary elections in 2015.
In the words of Tsipras, “Syriza won three crucial elections in just a few months, and one
crucial referendum. It won the elections [...] with the Greek people and Greek society as its
sole ally.”⁴ Furthermore, in a speech opening a Syriza party conference in 2016, Tsipras
stated, “the Greek people have suffered for so many years and deserve to be compensated”.⁵

At this point the question remains: who are the “people” to whom Syriza and Alexis
Tsipras refer? As previously mentioned, the “people” of the Greek coalition of the radical left
comprise diverse social groups, incorporating those who lost their jobs, or never found one, in
the years of the crisis, and all the people who suffered the consequences of the austerity
policies adopted by their country. The cement that holds all the categories that come under
Syriza’s definition of the “people” together is the democratic fight against corruption in public
institutions and the governance models the European Union adopted in the Greek case. The
“people” called upon by Syriza to participate in the new democratic process of transformation
is an inclusive and plural subject, not limited by ethnical, racial, sexual or gender restrictions.

The analysis carried out on Syriza can also be proposed for Podemos and France Insoumise.
In both cases the plea to the “people” presents strongly inclusive content, in the attempt to
conjugate the collective interests of the workers (as traditional referents of the European left
parties) with those of multiple and heterogeneous social categories, which risked exclusion
from the traditional democratic process. It is in this sense that the populist message can be read
as being directed to the unemployed, occasional workers, students, craftsmen, the small and
medium entrepreneurs oppressed by the crisis, and intellectuals and academics. Furthermore,
apart from such categories, already internally mixed, the PRLPs also aim to include the non-
privileged groups of citizens and non-citizens in their political plea, such as the community of
migrants and the poor of the whole planet that are running from famine and war, and the
LGBT community.

However, such a project is not immune to difficulties and contradictions. The “logic of
equivalence” proposed by Laclau (2005) is both ambitious in theoretical terms and complex in
practical terms. In the southern European countries, the “Great recession” contributed to
the construction of a heterogeneous and mixed “people” aggregated around criticism of
government leadership for the responsibilities attributed to the advancing economic recession.
However, while in the desistens phase the PRLPs’ project seemed to obtain (in a patchy
fashion throughout European countries) encouraging political results, in the construens phase,
when the composition of those interests must be transformed into a collective project of
communal government in democratic institutions, marked political difficulties emerged. In the
Greek case, the difficulties experienced by Syriza and Tsipras in government should be read in
this light, in the awareness that the moment of anti-establishment criticism, capable of rallying
the “people”, is clearly separate from the situation in which the same fragmented interests
are brought together in a unitary political project for the construction of a government
programme. Here, in the face of experiences of aggregation and opposition, as well as ongoing
developments in government, we simply wish to point out the potential and the risks of the
actions of such forces.
5. Conclusions

Having concluded the presentation of the main characteristics and peculiarities of the PRLPs, in order to answer the questions presented at the beginning of this chapter, we believe it is appropriate to concentrate on two aspects in particular.

The first regards the differences that the PRLPs demonstrate when compared to the past. While they stem from the same cultural matrix, these parties are different to those of the classical Marxist tradition, as they wish to widen the building of a new historical bloc not only to the working class, but also to all the other categories produced by the unstoppable process of social fragmentation that followed the collapse of the 20th-century ideologies, the reorganization of the processes of capitalist production and the crisis of the traditional mass parties. In this sense, regardless of their success or failure in the elections, the PRLPs are the product of profound change in the economic and social sphere, which drove them to try to organize more complex forms of political representation.

The second issue we would like to address in answering the research questions regards the relationship between PRLPs and the current democratic system in Western Europe. As it has already been asserted, on the basis of the characteristics acknowledged by the case studies, it would appear possible to recognize a substantial status paci between the PRLPs and the current democratic institutions in Western countries. Indeed, the assumptions of the populist radical left do not aim to destroy contemporary forms of liberal democracy. Notwithstanding the demands of “Democratizing Democracy”, formulated with the intention of introducing more “radical” changes to current representational democracy, which in their opinion has been impoverished by international governance policies and the changes from the past, the PRLPs differ, according to the hypothesis presented in this chapter, from many other types of populist parties (Urbinati 2014), because of their compatibility with models of liberal democracy. Rather than representing a risk to the stability of a democratic State, PRLPs appeal to a higher degree of political implementation, to be pursued by mechanisms of bottom-up participation, in order to integrate, rather than substitute, the conventional tools of representative democracy. In terms of democratic principles, the aim of the PRLPs is to increase the level of social inclusion within, and not outside, the democratic system, by extending decision-making to non-privileged sections of the population, who would otherwise be excluded from policy-making.

Notes
1 For a complete review of populism see Anselmi (2017).
2 Source: www.eldiario.es/politica/Pablo-Iglesias-concepto-definir-historico_0_618038538.html.
3 These values were identified using the “content analysis method”, which involves the analysis of the statutes, internal documents, electoral programmes and important speeches of the principal leaders of the European PRLPs that can be consulted online. The parties examined are those that are the focus of this study: Podemos, France Insoumise and Syriza.
4 Tsipras’ speech. 2015. SYRIZA, 1 December 2015 (in Mudde and Rovira 2017, 62).

References


