Down with democracy! Long live the people!

'The people' as a critical idea in contemporary radical political philosophy

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12 February 2013

Boyan Znepolski remains far from convinced by recent attempts by contemporary philosophers to get to grips with the relation between democracy as a political regime and "the people". He discerns a deficit of creativity in the thought of Zizek, Badiou and Laclau.

Some of the most serious contemporary critiques of democracy are founded on a problem that is constitutive of democracy itself: the relationship between democracy as a political regime and the people is not unambiguous because the very relationship between the sovereign-people and the empirical people cannot be unambiguous. Democracy can rightfully be accused of being repressive, for it resolves this tension by resorting to violence: the sovereign-people cannot be constituted in any way other than through repression over the empirical people. This problem is discussed by Charles Taylor (1999) in his essay 'Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)', where he points out the serious difference between sovereignty in aristocratic societies and sovereignty in modern democratic societies: unlike the sovereign-king whose sovereignty is immediately given, the sovereign-people needs to be constituted as a unified political subject. The fact that modern democracies are bound up with nationalism can be explained precisely by the effort to resolve this problem. Insofar as a nation presupposes and requires cultural homogeneity of citizens, it serves democracy as it provides a reliable foundation for constituting a unified political subject which of course comes at a cost. In this connection, Taylor defines democracy as being both inclusive and exclusive: democracy is inclusive because it is, in principle, government by all the people; at the same time, however, democracy is exclusive because it is actually government by those belonging to the dominant culture who, by virtue of their cultural cohesion, can reach consensus comparatively easily and readily form a common collective will. The others who are not part of this cultural majority are ipso facto excluded from the people because, owing to their cultural difference, they cannot fully participate in civic debates and would even impede the process of forming a common collective will.

A similar problematic is addressed by Giorgio Agamben (2000) in his essay 'What Is a
People?’. The starting point of his analysis is the same, constitutive of democracy, problem: how the empirical people, with all its ethnic and social divisions, can be transformed into a unified and indivisible People that is the carrier of sovereignty. According to Agamben, the solution to this problem is sought through biopolitics: paraphrasing Freud, he claims that ‘modern biopolitics is supported by the principle according to which “where there is naked life, there has to be a People”...’ (ibid., 45). Unlike Taylor, Agamben places the emphasis not on the couple democracy/nationalism, but on the couple democracy/capitalism, and tends to view the unity of the people in social terms: as a project for the elimination (through development) of the poor classes. Regardless of the differences between them, which are not important in this case, both Agamben and Taylor point out a main characteristic of modern politics and, in particular, of modern democracy: the aspiration to homogenize the people (through exclusion, cleansing, assimilation, and so on) in order to make it more united, and hence – in the most general sense – more productive (as a political, economic, military force).

The critique of democracy founded on the latter’s internal tensions and on the violence applied in the implementation of its normative principles remains a critique of democracy in the name of democracy itself. Today, however, a more radical critique is gaining momentum, a critique which unambiguously defines contemporary democracy as the political legitimation of capitalism and as an excuse for the capitalist exploitation of the people, thereby calling into question both capitalism and democracy. According to the logic of this critique, whereas the people, through the bourgeois revolutions, established democracy as its political form through which it would govern itself, today this project has proved a failure and the people must reject it in order to become free again in history. But what is the people – the bare people, if we paraphrase Agamben – without the political form ‘democracy’? I will examine this problem through the prism of three texts – by Slavoj Zizek, Alain Badiou, and Ernesto Laclau – which make, each in its own way, the people a central figure of social critique.

**Slavoj Zizek: From democracy to divine violence**

Zizek is undoubtedly one of the most radical and most popular contemporary philosophers; his popularity, however, is due not only to his radicalism but also to his ambivalence. This ambivalence only seems to stem from the eclectic mix of styles and confusing abundance of references (philosophical classics, psychoanalysis, political history, literature, cinema, popular-science books, journalistic publications, [1] all of them constantly embellished with anecdotes and aphorisms); it actually comes from the tension in the philosopher’s split figure. In his texts Zizek appears as two different characters. One is Zizek the political analyst, astute and speculative, at times brilliant in his controversial judgments, but at the same time self-restrained because he is aware of his subjective limitations (his own, but also those of every point of view, of every human project). The other is Zizek the historical materialist and psychoanalyst who decodes the unconscious in the historical process and thus speaks, as it were, with the voice of history itself. The radical Zizek is precisely the second Zizek: the one who delights in surrendering to the historical predestination that is paving the way for the downfall of world capitalism behind the backs of contemporary plutocracies.

According to a common thesis of contemporary radical philosophical critique, today it is not enough to criticize capitalism (and, in particular, neoliberalism) as it cannot be
substantially reformed (or overcome) without dismantling its political form, democracy. A successful attack against capitalism requires attacking democracy as its institutional foundation (and political legitimation). According to Zizek, this problem can be resolved by uncoupling democracy from capitalism and dispelling the illusion that they are necessarily connected. But what will we achieve in this way, what do these two prospects offer us: on the one hand, a democracy that is free from capitalism, and on the other, a capitalism that has emancipated itself from democracy? And here the two planes – Zizek’s personal analytical (and civic) positions and the hidden meaning of history (the cunning of reason or the collective unconscious of humanity) which is expressed in his texts through analogies, anecdotes, and paradoxes – intertwine or sometimes converge to a large extent, but they can still be distinguished.

For Zizek, the vision of a triumphant capitalism capable of existing and prospering even without democracy, a capitalism indifferent and invulnerable to any political form, is associated with the example of today’s China. This example reveals, as it were, the objective historical process, the fateful plan of history, which Zizek (2011b, 107) contemplates with some apocalyptic delight:

What if “the vicious combination of the Asian knout and the European stock market” proves itself to be economically more efficient than our liberal capitalism? What if it signals that democracy, as we understand it, is no longer a condition and driver of economic development, but its obstacle?

Zizek’s more general and radical question is: What if China proves to be not simply an Asian-despotic, distorted version of western development but a harbinger of the future of the western world? Such a historical scenario, the Chinese scenario, obviously cannot be concordant with radical critique, for it would make no sense to attack democracy as the institutional foundation of capitalism if capitalism itself could easily do without democracy. Zizek’s project, the project of the radical left with which he identifies himself, is not about capitalism without democracy, but about the opposite – democracy without capitalism. To achieve this goal, the radical left must take over democracy by the rules of democracy itself – by winning free elections, but then it must institutionally transform democracy by imprinting its ‘class bias’ on it:

That is why when radical leftists came to power through elections, their signe de reconnaissance is that they move to “change the rules,” to transform not only electoral and other state mechanisms but also the entire logic of the political space (relying directly on the power of the mobilized movements; imposing different forms of local self-organization; etc.) to guarantee the hegemony of their base, they are guided by the right intuition about the “class bias” of the democratic form. (Ibid., 120)

Zizek’s vision of democracy allows us to identify two opposite models of the political. One of those views, which is characteristic of proceduralist theories, including that of Jürgen Habermas, regards democracy – defined through strictly specified conditions – as the most rational form of the political. In the perspective of such theories, democracy is simultaneously integrating, reconciling, and universalizing: the public debates upon
which it is founded integrate different views into themselves, reconcile those views and, at the same time, overcome the particularity inherent to each and move towards a possible universality. The public debates are ultimately aimed at reaching consensus and forming a common political will in which all participants in them should be able to recognize the expression of their own will. For authors like Zizek – who fits into the Marxian tradition and share the idea of the class character of the State – democracy also has a class character. In this sense, those who win power should (and in fact inevitably do) redefine institutions in the spirit of their class ‘bias’. Whereas for Habermas democracy is in principle capable of overcoming political antagonisms through its neutral integrating procedures, for Zizek, who is close to Laclau and Mouffe in this respect, the political is insurmountably antagonistic, and in this sense, democracy as a political form is not only incapable of overcoming political antagonisms, it itself is a stake in those antagonisms. However, the opposition between proceduralist and antagonistic views of the political (and of democracy, in particular) should not be regarded solely from a theoretical but also from a historical perspective: from the point of view of the historical experience encoded in each theory. Whereas the so-called ‘trente glorieuses’ or ‘glorious thirty’ (the years from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1970s), the end of the Cold War, and the project on a single Europe set a horizon and lend credibility to the proceduralist theories, 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, globalization and consequent growing social inequalities, the global financial crisis and ubiquitous protest movements seem to speak more in favour of the antagonistic theories. The question today is: Even if we admit that proceduralist theories do not offer solutions to problems important to humanity and that they have lost much of their credibility in the last few years, should we necessarily take an antagonistic view of the political; and if we do, then how, with what tools, should we conceive of present-day antagonisms? To my mind, Zizek turns to Hegel, Marx, and Lenin too hastily and automatically, he adapts them to the contemporary contexts too fragmentarily (citing selected excerpts). But could we revive them so easily, could we make them our allies so literally, and what is more, in the form that is most convenient to us, as if their legacy remains untouched by the passage of time? If we are enthusiastic Hegelians, such as Zizek obviously is, then we would have to agree that between us and Hegel or Marx there are the proceduralist theories, Habermas, and Rawls – we can of course reject them but only by sublating them, that is to say, by acknowledging and accepting their impact on the way we conceive of antagonisms today.

Zizek’s critique of democracy [2] does not seek to overcome democracy – with regard to the idea of modern democracy, it rather represents a regress towards more archaic layers of the political imagination. Democracy, at least as a regulative idea, includes the notion of a community that determines itself (its rules and norms) through legitimate procedures and delegation of power to its elected representatives, and which at the same time oversees whether power is exercised transparently and in the name of the electorate. Zizek substitutes all elements in this picture with more archaic ones: instead of a relationship of equality between the members of the community as a basis for legitimate political decisions and acts, there is a hierarchical relationship between a leader and the people; formal procedures for forming a common political will are substituted with the violent clash of the oppressed people with the oligarchy, where it is the imposition of class interest that is at stake; the question of whether power is exercised democratically is replaced with the question of who is exercising power.
In his essay Zizek devotes a paragraph to the comparison between democracy and totalitarianism with regard to popular representation – whereas in democracy popular representation is always incomplete and inevitably characterized by alienation between the people’s representatives and the people, what we have in totalitarianism is not representation but embodiment of the (true) people in the figure of the leader:

Democracy presupposes a minimum of alienation: those who exert power can only be held responsible to the people if there is a minimal distance of re-presentation between them and the people. In “totalitarianism,” this distance is cancelled, the leader is supposed to directly present the will of the people – and the result is, of course, that the (empirical) people are even more radically alienated in their leader: he directly is what they “really are,” their true identity, their true wishes and interests, as opposed to their confused “empirical” wishes and interests. (Ibid., 118)

After this pithy and clear analysis which obviously suggests, as it were, that we should always opt for the partial, and potentially manipulable, democratic representation rather than for the complete alienation of the people in totalitarianism, Zizek takes a sudden turn and paradoxically introduces a new perspective which changes the meaning of the above quote. Zizek (ibid., 118-119) declares that there is ‘a moment of truth’ in totalitarianism, which can be found already in Hegel:

Hegel already pointed out how political representation does not mean that people already know in advance what they want and then charge their representatives with advocating their interests – they only know it “in itself”; it is their representative who formulates their interests and goals for them, making them “for-itself.”

Further on in his essay Zizek (ibid., 119) defines the relationship between the leader and the people also in terms of the relationship between the psychoanalyst and the patient: ‘a leader is necessary to trigger the enthusiasm for a cause, to bring about the radical change in the subjective position of his followers, to “transubstantiate” their identity.’ Thought through this prism, political decisions and acts appear to be a consequence not of debates and argumentations but of activation and release of energies. Zizek seems to call on us to pour out our energies – whatever they might be and whatever the consequences – which the political form ‘democracy’ restrains in us. What is more important here, though, is the very split of the civic community into leaders and their followers, which also leads to a split in the plane of truth: between the truth of people, which is illusionary and delusional, and the truth of the historical process, which remains accessible to them only through the mediation of the enlightened leaders. Here we see the ambivalence of Zizek’s position in a new form: on the one hand, a leftist empowerment of the people which is called upon to pour out its energies in history, freeing itself from the passive role of the voter (who feels politically unrepresented) in democratic societies, and on the other, an elitist (and archaic) alienation of the people from the sense of history, which makes the people only a tool for the realization of the hidden plan of history. In this perspective, the people is an energy force that must be mobilized to carry out a radical social change, but it is not a discursive force (the people
must, so to speak, be discursively activated by someone else) because the direction of this change is determined not by the people but by the leader, the organization, and so on.

Speaking of the political in general, Zizek substitutes the ‘discursive’ language which uses terms like discussion, argumentation, consensus and agreement, with an ‘energy’ language which borrows terms and metaphors from psychoanalysis. Zizek (ibid., 111) cites, for example, Peter Sloterdijk, who claims that ‘[l]eftist political movements are like “banks of rage”: they collect rage investments from people and promise them large-scale revenge, the reestablishment of global justice.’ Elsewhere, citing Alain Badiou’s thesis about the ‘excess of representation over the represented’, Zizek binds the exercise of power to the cruelty typical of the figure of the Superego. In this way, situating ourselves at the level of instincts and effective investments, we would indeed find it difficult to attain the mode of argumentation and consensus; it is only natural that the clash of energies will be resolved in the mode of violence. In Zizek, violence, political violence in particular, is given a twofold justification. On the one hand, according to Zizek (ibid., 116), the moral consensus of a society is not binding on those citizens who do not find recognition within this society: ‘if a class of people is systematically deprived of their rights, of their very dignity as persons, they are eo ipso also released from their duties toward the social order, because this order is no longer their ethical substance’. Now this means that those classes have the right to oppose the social order by resorting to violence. On the other hand, every form of government is characterized in principle by the ‘excess of representation over the represented’ discussed also by Badiou, which consists in appropriation of delegated power, in the latter’s arbitrary and indiscriminate use for repressing its subordinate citizens. This structural ‘excess of power’, which takes the form of violence, is naturally and entirely justifiably met with more violence on the part of the people:

This obscene excess [of power] is a necessary constituent of the notion of sovereignty – the asymmetry is here structural, i.e., the law can only sustain its authority if subjects hear in it an echo of the obscene unconditional self-assertion. And the people’s “divine violence” is correlative to this excess of power: it is its counterpart – it targets this excess and undermines it. (Ibid., 117)

The problem is that for Zizek there seems to be no way out of this vicious circle of violence: power invariably presupposes ‘repressive violence’ which is countered by the ‘vengeful violence’ of the people, [3] which, after destroying the violence of those in power, itself turns – in the form of dictatorship of the proletariat, for example – into repressive violence, and so on. Ultimately, the question is not in eliminating violence from the exercise of power, it is in who is exercising power or, as Zizek (ibid., 119) puts it:

What this means is that the ultimate question of power is not “is it democratically legitimized or not” but what is the specific character (the “social content”) of the “totalitarian excess” that pertains to sovereign power as such, independently of its democratic or non-democratic character?
But in rejecting the idea of a possible consensus (moral, ethical, or whatever we want to call it) binding the citizens of a society regardless of their cultural differences and social divisions, we find ourselves in the zone of populist distinctions: ‘us or them’, ‘them or us’, where ‘us’ and ‘them’ are mutually interchangeable. In today’s era of populisms, Zizek has a worthy place. Populism is usually associated with extreme oversimplification of ideas and problems to the point where they are turned into unambiguous slogans capable of arousing the nervous system of many. Zizek’s approach is more complex: he is a twoway mediator – he simplifies philosophical concepts, bringing them close to mass attitudes, but he also elevates mass attitudes to the level of philosophical concepts. He is the author of a philosophically enriched populism – a populism for intellectuals that represents itself in the form of provocative ideas for popular use, but without a clear addressee. [4]

**Alain Badiou: The democratic emblem**

Badiou’s critique of democracy is twofold: it is a critique of democracy as a political form and as a society, but it is primarily a critique of ‘the democracy emblem’ that guards democracy itself. Today we are all democrats, everyone claims that he or she is a democrat, but the problem here is not in that the word democracy has been voided of content because of its universal and excessive use as, for example, Wendy Brown (2011, 44-57) thinks; the problem, according to Badiou, is that everyone feels compelled by the emblem to be a democrat – there is no way we can be anything other than democrats, we cannot even think of being anything else. There is no alternative; the emblem obliges. Badiou’s critique (2011, 6-7) is aimed against this limitation of thought and imagination:

> Well, I say this: before one can even begin to apprehend the reality of our societies, it’s necessary, as a preliminary exercise, to dislodge their emblem. The only way to make truth out of the world we’re living in is to dispel the aura of the word democracy and assume the burden of not being a democrat and so being heartily disapproved of by “everyone” (tout le monde).

Why doesn’t Badiou want to be a democrat? Democracy has been criticized in terms of its fundamental principles – freedom, equality, democratic representation: because power restricts the liberties of citizens or oppresses minorities; because it allows inadmissible social inequalities; because it does not form and express the will of the electorate but follows private interests, and so on. Badiou’s critique focuses on equality – he accuses democracy of being a seemingly universalistic project which is in fact particularistic, conservative, and discriminatory. Democracy, according to Badiou (ibid., 7), is the political project of rich western societies which recognize as democrats only their likes and guard their ‘world’ solely for themselves:

> Basically, political endogamy obtains: a democrat loves only another democrat. For the others, incomers from zones of famine and killing, the first order of business is papers, borders, detention camps, police surveillance, denial of family reunion. One must be “integrated.”

All those who are not yet democrats could hardly be recognized as democrats or treated
equally with them. But this critique of democracy is a commonplace ‘frontline’ critique through which Badiou declares his belonging to a particular political and intellectual circle. In him we find, however, another critique of democracy - a more intimate and scathing, and at the same time more vulnerable, critique of democracy as a way of life.

Citing both Plato and Lenin, Badiou (ibid., 8) sets the following perspective of the critique of democracy:

Thought must shift the focus from the legal framework to the emblem or from democracy to the democrat. The capacity of the democratic emblem to do harm lies in the subjective type it molds; and, not to mince words, the crucial traits of the democratic type are egoism and desire for petty enjoyments.

Adapting passages from Plato’s *The Republic* to the present-day world, Badiou (ibid., 13) describes the life of a present-day democrat as follows:

Democratic man lives only for the pure present, transient desire is his only law. Today he regales himself with a four-course dinner and vintage wine, tomorrow he is all about Buddha, ascetic fasting, streams of crystal-clear water, and sustainable development. Monday he tries to get back in shape by pedalling for hours on a stationary bicycle; Tuesday he sleeps all day, then smokes and gorges again in the evening. Wednesday he declares that he is going to read some philosophy, but prefers doing nothing in the end. At Thursday’s dinner party he crackles with zeal for politics, fumes indignantly at the next person’s opinion, and heatedly denounces the society of consumption and spectacle. That evening he goes to see a Ridley Scott blockbuster about medieval warriors. Back home, he falls to sleep and dreams of liberating oppressed peoples by force of arms. Next morning he goes to work, feeling distinctly seedy, and tries without success to seduce the secretary from the office next door. He’s been turning things over and has made up his mind to get into real estate and go for the big money. But now the weekend has arrived, and this economic crisis isn’t going away, so next week will be soon enough for all that. There you have a life, or lifestyle, or lifeworld, or whatever you want to call it: no order, no ideas, but nothing too disagreeable or distressing either. It is as free as it is unsignifying, and insignificance isn’t too high a price to pay for freedom.

Democracy is condemnable less as an objective institutional form than for its subjective impact – for molding a specific type of human character. For Badiou, what is aesthetically intolerable in democratic everyday life is the combination of absence of order and plans in life, the desire for immediate petty enjoyments and the cult of youthful vitality and energy which, however, are devoid of cultural value. He calls this combination, in Plato’s words, ‘anarchy’, or in his own words, ‘insignificance’. [5] But why doesn’t Badiou blame the individuals themselves for having chosen this way of life, why does he blame democracy? How does democracy create and foster this anarchy, this insignificance of people and their everyday life? In Badiou’s essay democracy is defined several times through its formalism – less a formalism of the procedures, of the laws, of the bureaucratic rules that determine the relations between institutions and people as well as
between people themselves, than a formalism of money as a universal equivalent, as a principle of ‘universal substitutability’ that relativizes every difference, dissolves every opposition, makes even the most disparate things deceptively commensurable (and interchangeable), and thus thwarts every order. For Badiou, democracy is condemnable not because it actively molds people according to some model or project but, conversely, because it leaves them to themselves. Left to themselves, people will naturally descend into the most immature and undemanding forms of everyday life — absence of order, ignorance, petty pleasure-seeking, or, generally, all characteristics of adolescence: ‘There is something essentially juvenile about the democratic ethos, something that feels like universal puerilization.’ (Ibid., 11) In this sense, according to Badiou (ibid., 8), democracy does not create a ‘world’: it is ‘just a word for a conservative oligarchy whose main (and often bellicose) business is to guard its own territory, as animals do, under the usurped name world’. If democracy as a political regime infantilizes people, making their life animal-like, then we may presume, purely negatively, that Badiou is in favour of the type of regime and society where people strive for maturity and their life is ordered, organized, and full. A regime that actively models and cares for the subjectivity of citizens. Badiou (ibid., 15) calls this regime ‘aristocratism for everybody’ but then promptly goes on to explain that ‘aristocracy for everybody is just a way of formulating the highest aspiration of communism’.

We can only guess what Badiou understands by ‘communism’. Badiou (ibid.) claims that ‘the opposite of the kind of democracy we have had served up to us during the “long good-bye” of capitalist parliamentarism is not totalitarianism or dictatorship. It is communism’. But he does not say exactly what we should understand by ‘communism’, he merely mentions that today we face ‘the ancient dilemma: either we reinvent communism or we undergo some reinvented form of fascist barbarity’ and he adds further that roads to communism ‘are gradually becoming visible even now’ (ibid., 15). Still, there is one main distinctive feature of democracy that communism should surmount: formalism. The formalism of institutions but also the formalism of the universal quantitative equivalent — money. And here we see Badiou’s idea of a politics and of a people that are freed from democracy: of a politics that comes from the people and that is in complete harmony with the people, a politics that has nothing to do with the kind of politics practiced in present-day democratic societies. If democracy presupposes formalism, then formalism means alienation both of the State and of politics in general from the people. Communism will remove all formal, quantitative, nonhuman mediators and processes from the life of the people: ‘the order of circulation must no longer be that of money, nor the order of accumulation that of capital. Private property simply cannot be allowed to dictate how things are going to be.’ (Ibid., 14) As for politics: ‘Politics will not be subordinated to power, to the State. It is, it will be, the force in the breast of the assembled and active people driving the State and its laws to extinction.’ (Ibid.) Politics under communism will be the direct, non-alienated expression of the people without the mediation of institutions, procedures, mechanisms, representation. Speaking of communism, [6] Badiou rehabilitates the word ‘democracy’, associating it with mystically sounding expressions in which at least one of them ought to clarify the other, but neither does that and in fact both remain obscure: ‘From that perspective, we will only ever be true democrats, integral to the historic life of peoples, when we become communists again.’ (Ibid., 15)

Badiou’s analyses leave one with the impression that the people is internally structured
and self-organized, and capable of existing on the basis of its own interior life and traditions, while the State is only a tool for violence and exploitation that must be removed from the body of the people. If, however, we draw on the hermeneutic tradition, for example, we may call into question the opposition between the interior life of the people and the state institutions foreign to it. To know and govern itself, a people must transcend itself, that is to say, it must pass from the interior into the exterior dimension, objectifying itself in a legal system, a financial system, cultural institutions, state institutions (including political representation), and so on. But self-expression through objectification unavoidably includes a moment of loss, of alienation, of movement away from the self. The legal system or political representation are not a direct expression of the people in itself; the point is that without them a people cannot constitute and maintain itself as a long-lasting political and social community.

This perspective is expressed in a very convincing manner in an essay titled ‘What Makes a People a People? Rousseau and Kant’ by one of the popular contemporary philosophers from the leftist political spectrum, Etienne Balibar (2000). Following Kant, Balibar (ibid., 124) defines the people as a community that is capable of self-organization by means of freedom’s constraining of itself: ‘The proper name of this generic constraint is the State.’ It is indisputable that the State is an ‘exterior’ institution vis-à-vis the ‘interior’ life of the people and that it has constraining and repressive functions, but it is also indisputable that without this ‘exterior element’ which, for example, guarantees the possibility of the legal system, a people cannot constitute itself as a community. Balibar’s main argument is that a people cannot exist solely on the basis of the moral conscience/consciousness of the separate individuals. The interior element, moral conscience/consciousness, and the exterior element, the law, mutually support and determine each other in the formation of a community: the existence of the law would be unthinkable without the morality of individuals (the voice of conscience), but morality also needs support from an objective and constraining codification in law. Viewed from the perspective of the question ‘What makes a people a people?’ the State must not be defined only purely empirically – through its concrete historical forms and its concrete (repressive) functions – but also transcendentally: as an institutional condition that makes possible the existence of the people as a community. Of course, the principled question about exactly how the State should be defined remains open. As for the question about the abolition or withering away of the State, it does not stem from the fact of the State’s repressive functions, such as it indisputably and unavoidably has; this question concerns the possibility of a moral community that does not need to rely on exterior institutional constraint, or, on a more functionalist plane, the possibility of satisfying people’s needs to the point where the existence of a repressive social order becomes unnecessary.

**Ernesto Laclau: Populism: What’s in a name?**

The last concept of ‘the people’ I would like to examine is introduced by Ernesto Laclau (2005b) in his essay ‘Populism: What’s in a Name?’ and expounded more thoroughly in his accompanying book *On Populist Reason* (2005a). What makes Laclau’s approach original is that he derives the concept of ‘people’ not from ‘democracy’ but from the concept of ‘populism’, which he defines in a novel and ambitious way. Laclau turns populism from a political science term used in day-to-day political analyses and journalism into a philosophical term that elucidates the very constitution of the political.
Populism is usually defined – for example, by political scientist Cas Mudde (2004) – as a type of ideology used by different political actors, that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’. British political philosopher Margaret Canovan (1999) proposes a theoretically more abstract and ambitious definition of populism, turning it into one of the two constitutive aspects of democracy: whereas the ‘pragmatic’ face of democracy refers to the democratic institutions in charge of the day-to-day administration of life whose task is to resolve the problems and conflicts of interest between citizens, its ‘redemptive’ face is associated with the rejection of the administration of life and the aspiration towards collective action on the part of the people that will innovate the social order and institutions in a way that will make them concordant with the wishes and ideals of people. Ernesto Laclau adopts a similar division, but he projects it onto a wider scale, turning it into a constitutive division of the political in general. He defines the political through two interconnected logics: on the one hand, the differential logic that corresponds to the institutional administration of life in a society where individuals are divided depending on their social roles, statuses, and so on; and on the other, the populist logic related to moments of crisis and conflict in society when institutional divisions between individuals are suspended and replaced with the basic antagonism between the people and power (or the elites).

The ‘populist logic’ reveals the formal practical conditions under which ‘the people’ is formed. In Laclau’s concept, the people is de-substantialized: it does not have concrete social or ethnic content; it is not identified with any class or social stratum. The constitutive units of the people are not groups but the ‘social demands’ of citizens which, in certain historical situations where they remain unsatisfied, tend to reaggregate themselves, in spite of their differential character, on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied. Laclau defines this reaggregation of unsatisfied social demands with the term equivalential chains, signifying the accumulation of protest energy regardless of the differences of the concrete demands. The people emerges precisely in the process of accumulation of protest energy which gradually dissociates itself from the initial social demands, homogenizes itself through common emblems – for example, ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity’ – identifies itself with the figure of the leader, and above all, constructs itself by focusing on the enemy image. In this connection, Laclau makes a distinction between democratic subject and popular subject: the democratic subject is the subject of particular social demands that can be satisfied within the framework of democratic institutions; the popular subject constitutes itself as a subject in its antagonism to power (the elites) when the particular demands are no longer important and what is put into question is the very political system and social order.

What does Laclau actually propose with his concept of ‘the people’? [7] He frees the people of substantiality, but by doing so, he de-politicizes the people – the people may be leftist or rightist, reactionary- or progressively-minded; it seems that what is important here is not the ideology but the energy of the people. Laclau also frees the people of historical determination (of a philosophy of history), but in doing so, he detaches the people from any conscious and planned effort at creating a community. The people is of the order of pure events: it emerges briefly under uncertain circumstances, and after clashing with power, falls apart either according to the old differential logic or according to a new differential logic. The popular subject constitutes itself precisely in this brief historical interval on the frontier between different differential logics. Its emergence
marks the moments of historical crisis and sometimes also of historical transformation.

In conclusion, we may ask ourselves: whence the intensive use of the concept of ‘the people’ as a critical idea in contemporary political philosophy? The main and obvious reason is the crisis of the subject of social change after the decline of the proletariat and the 1970s protest movements. The people, in Ernesto Laclau’s words, is an ‘empty signifier’ that does not signify but, rather, appeals for the future emergence of such a subject. But the concept of ‘the people’ also has another dimension which we may understand if we examine it in the light of Badiou’s key concepts of ‘event’ and ‘rupture’, and the concept of ‘divine punishment’ used by Zizek. In this conceptual context the people appears as an advent, as a ‘punitive’ event whose mission is to mete out justice. Here we see a definitive peculiarity of the radical political philosophy that unites Zizek and Badiou with other similar authors, including Laclau: this philosophy is not guided by some utopia but by the very act of ‘rupture’, of the abolition of a society (the capitalist society) and its political form (democracy), which is desired in itself regardless of exactly what the future society will be. In contrast to Marx’s proletariat, the people is not the carrier of a new project for the world, it is an embodiment of a destructive rage that must punish an unjust social order by destroying it. Purely historically, viewed as an expression of (and reaction to) a particular historical situation, this radical political philosophy attests to a twofold deficit of creativity: to the impossibility of the present-day political model to respond productively to the growing social discontent in the world, on the one hand; to the inability of the critical imagination to transcend productively the set limits of liberal democracy, on the other.

References


**Footnotes**

1. Much of Zizek's oeuvre is published in the press and on websites across the world. In October 2011 even the Bulgarian *Trud* daily published his speech at Occupy Wall Street. See Zizek (2011a).

2. His is a critique of the form of democracy where democracy has merged with capitalism, where capitalism has left its 'class' imprint on democracy.

3. Zizek defines popular violence through mutually interchangeable terms such as 'vengeful violence' or 'divine violence'. The second term, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, signifies immediate, destructive violence which is not constitutive to law -- on the contrary, it destroys law (that is to say, the existing social order) and is directed against the privileged. In this connection, see Benjamin (1996).

4. The late British historian Tony Judt is the author of a short, condemning description of Zizek in a similar vein. According to Judt (2010), 'public intellectuals are best when they are grounded in a particular language, culture, debate.' Such is the case with Camus, Habermas, Sen or Orwell, but also with Havel or Michnik: *The opposite is the ridiculous Slavoj Zizek: a "global" public intellectual who is therefore of no particular interest in any one place or on any one subject. If he is the future of public intellectuals, then they have no future.*

sums up his critical pathos as follows: *The gloomy charm of The Century comes from the combination -- in favour of the communist past -- of the two major types of critique of democracy: one exposing the prosaic mediocrity of bourgeois society, and the other accusing bourgeois society of failing to keep its promise of equality. The success of Badiou's oeuvre partly comes from the fact that it expresses anti-democratic passions that have by no means disappeared among a large part of the radical left... In his somewhat sketchy and dogmatic analyses of Badiou's oeuvre Raynoud nevertheless succeeds in identifying one of his important distinctive features that we could also ascribe to Zizek: Badiou's social critique, as, in fact, Zizek's, is not unambiguously leftist, that is to say, progressist; it draws on the traditions of the conservative critique of modern society.*


7. We may also ask ourselves what is the analytical value of Laclau's concept. The term of *equivalential chains*, as defined by the author, indisputably has such value because it allows us to judge whether social protests are successful or not regardless of the context in which they occur. On the other hand, the very concept of *people* or of *popular subject* seems to lack analytical value. They posit an abstract equivalence of different significant events -- the French Revolution, the October Revolution, the rise of Juan Peron in Argentina, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, the 2011 riots in the UK -- but hardly help us understand the cultural significance of each one of them.