Political Identification in Europe

Community in Crisis?

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-125-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-124-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-126-4 (Epub)

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

ACP	Africa, Caribbean, Pacific
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
ALFA	Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch (Alliance for Progress and Awakening)
BTO	Brussels Treaty Organisation
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDU	Christian Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
DG	Directorate-Generals of the European Commission
DRP	Deutsche Reichspartei (German Empire Party)
EC	European Community
ECHR	European Convention of Human Rights
ECI	European Citizen Initiative
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EEA	European Economic Area
END	European Nuclear Disarmament
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
EURATOM	European Atomic Energy Community
FCN	First Country National
FrP	Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party, Norway)
GAL/TAN	Green, Alternative, Libertarian versus Tradition, Authority, Nation
GDR	German Democratic Republic
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOs	International Organisations
KI	Kreisau Initiative
LKR	Liberal-Konservative Reformer (Liberal-Conservative Reformers Party, Germany)
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MS	Member State of the European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOK	Norwegian Krone
NPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party Germany)
NSU	National Socialist Underground
OEEC	Organisation for European Economic Cooperation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OST	Ontological Security Theory
PEGIDA	Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident)
PHARE	Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party, Poland)
SCN	Second Country National
sECI	Self-Organized ECI
SECR	Supranational European Citizenship Regime
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TCN	Third Country Nationals
TEU	Treaty of the European Union
TFEU	Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Preface

Yannis Stavrakakis

This collective volume comes at a crucial conjuncture. Both the European Union and our national and local communities seem to have entered a very delicate and bumpy phase with no obvious resolution in sight. It follows a series of consecutive crises (from the global economic crisis of 2008 to the global pandemic of 2020, just to mention the most recent ones) and persistent dynamics (such as increasing inequality and the erosion of democratic decision-making) that undermine any effective and timely response to the aforementioned crises. Brexit may be the most visible symptom, but the *malaise* goes far deeper. How can we assess the historical trajectory and the current predicament of Europe and its people(s) in this moment?

The title of this book alone challenges certain intuitions, because extraordinary times demand challenging displacements and reorientations in our conceptual and analytical frameworks. Mere complacency and the continuous reproduction of obsolete perspectives and stereotypes will not do. Let me provide a few examples that demonstrate the innovative profile of the volume that Machin and Meidert have put together.

First, why talk about 'identification' and not 'identity', as is usually the case? Arguably, in pre-modern societies identity issues did not emerge in the same way as in ours, simply because it was largely taken for granted. Identity was usually seen as determined by a rigid social topography guaranteed by mythical dynamics and religious forces. Identity, in other words, was something assigned by what the community defined and obeyed as its undisputed unifying principle. Modernity, in contrast, by proclaiming the 'death of God' and by advancing individualisation and capitalism, radically disrupted this long-term stability. It involved a multitude of dislocations of traditional practices and types of behaviour, and initiated a period of constant disruption and change. If, as a result of social transformations taking place in modernity, identity is not considered as given any more, then it can only be seen as the result of social processes of construction and sedimentation. Hence the expression 'social identity'. Furthermore, if identity is understood as the result of social processes then this also opens up the possibility of a political contestation and re-articulation of identity. Hence the expression 'political identity'. This was the secondary radical implication put forward by the establishment of the modern horizon.

And this was not limited within the field of social and political reflection. Crucially, it extended into political action. As a result of this transformation, a multitude of groups began to question their traditionally established 'identities'.

Women, for example, contested their location within patriarchal representations of the social, which had been previously taken as given, and they entered the political arena in Western democracies and then globally.[1] Furthermore, this contestation, initially unsettling the *hierarchy* between the sexes, ultimately generated a self-critical questioning of the idea of the two sexes themselves, on the basis of a queer sensibility.

This process has allowed both the development of a reflexive intellectual ethos and the continuous radicalisation of democracy through the extension of rights, redressing inequalities, etc. But it is a process of intellectual enlightenment that has been stalled. A political radicalisation that has been arrested. Our intellectual horizon increasingly suffers from the re-emergence and sedimentation of biased *orthodoxies*. In our post-democratic public spheres and institutional settings as well, with the firm establishment of ideological horizons like the 'end of history' or the so-called TINA (There Is No Alternative) dogma, no alternative identifications can flourish while power asymmetries lead to what can only be described as a political short-circuit. Here, beyond Brexit, the way that European institutions dealt with the Syriza experiment in Greece is rather instructive. No wonder that, given the crisis-ridden framing of our lives, we seem to be experiencing what Gramsci described as the *interregnum*: crisis partly 'consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276).

This is because our institutions (both intellectual and political) have declared war on the new, on the heterodox. Thus, when new perspectives and political identifications emerge they are immediately treated with suspicion and summarily discredited. And this is not only a political issue, but also something plaguing the social-scientific domain. On both levels, Europe has become the name of a *malaise* and a *cul-de-sac*. Intellectual projects like the one represented by this book demand our attention, because the rigorous investigation of the current – and often conflicting – meaning(s) of class, citizenship, the people, the nation and the EU itself could reveal the different dynamics and the multiple possibilities at play.

Of course, the problem affecting our (late) modern intellectual horizon is far from new and has been documented long ago. Going back to debates within German sociology in mid-twentieth century, we could give it a Blumenbergian emphasis: it concerns the legitimacy of modernity.[2] In short, has modernity been worthy of its name and promise? Or has it eventually reoccupied pre-modern patterns of questioning – around ultimate foundations – that undermine its potential and trap its development within secularised political and economic theologies? Here, the fragment by Walter Benjamin on the operation of capitalism itself as a religion acquires an eerie relevance (notice, in this respect, the marginalisation of critical economics). To use Bruno Latour's well-known formulation, what if 'we have never been modern' enough (Latour, 1993)? What if we have managed to develop and sanctify new orthodoxies that severely limit the scope for true

[1]For a full elaboration of this argument, see Stavrakakis (2000).
[2]See, in this respect, Blumenberg (1985).

intellectual and academic fermentation and disallow the mapping of new alternatives when these are most needed, at times of crisis? The ongoing pandemic provides a good example:

Economic orthodoxy supports the narrative that this pandemic is a unique disaster no one could have prepared for, and with no wider lessons for economics and politics. This story suits some of the world's billionaires, but it's not true. There is an alternative: the pandemic provides further evidence that to tackle the climate emergency, inequality and any emerging crises, we must re-think our economics from the bottom up. (Aldred, 2020)[3]

If this is the case, then the *politicisation* (and pluralisation) of identity cannot take place any more; it cannot acquire any (or even partial) permanence or long-term efficacy. In order for the political character of identity to emerge, the obviousness of social identities (which replaced religious foundations, replicating their constraints and reintroducing aristocratic privilege in the guise of meritocracy, technocracy, etc.) has to be called into question. This radical questioning is surely one of the defining characteristics of democratic societies which a contemporary move to post-democracy seems to threaten. In societies that cannot ultimately rely on any kind of naturalist, theological or essentialist social foundation, the construction and continuous reconstruction of identity can only be acknowledged as a radical institution, an institution *constitutive* of social practices; in other words a truly *political* institution. The political dimension of identity becomes fully visible only when it is recognised that there is no such a thing as a natural, essential or intrinsic social identity, when neoliberal capitalism and its intellectual apologists are not recognised as the ultimate limit of what is sayable and doable.

What would have been the crucial conceptual implication of embracing our modernity, in fact our 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2000)? How would it affect our intellectual horizon? Let us assume then that identities are socially and politically constructed, that they are not guaranteed by any essential ground. Here the collapse of any essentialist grounding would make possible the radical questioning of any identity. Yet doesn't this entail that identity itself – as a fully guaranteed order, an order established beyond contestation – becomes impossible? The answer can only be affirmative in the sense that the continuous political construction of social identities never results in a closed, self-contained and absolute identity (no matter where this totalisation would rest; on left or right-wing utopia). Identity, at both the personal and political levels, is only the name of what we desire but can never fully attain.

[3]All in all, as far as universities are concerned, 'university faculty are less and less likely to threaten any aspect of the existing social or political system. Their jobs are constantly on the line, so there's a professional risk in upsetting the status quo. But even if their jobs were safe, the corporatized university would still produce mostly banal ideas, thanks to the sycophancy-generating structure of the academic meritocracy. But even if truly novel and consequential ideas were being produced, they would be locked away behind extortionate paywalls' (Nair, 2017) Also see, Stavrakakis (2012).

Such a conclusion is obviously disorienting, but not detrimental for human subjects and social life – it involves a certain loss of certainty, an absence of guarantees, but it is what renders possible disagreement, argument and the gradual emergence of the new under conditions of reflexive deliberation, hegemonic struggle and democratic debate. Living with it certainly requires a shift of perspective: from end-points to practices; from blueprint and eschatological utopias to co-existing (post-fantasmatic) radical projects registering their ontological limits.[4] Indeed, what is the name of this practice which, although it always fails to produce a full identity, plays a crucial role in structuring our lives? The name of this practice is *identification*.

The paradoxical nature of identity revealed in the role of identification is something constitutive of our subjective and political predicament: 'Life without the drive to identity is an impossibility but the claim to a natural or true identity is always an exaggeration' (Connolly, 1991, p. 67). In addition, it has become gradually evident that identity cannot be defined without reference to what stands outside its field. What creates my identity, what defines sameness, is that I differ from the identities of others. Identities are relational and differential.[5] As William Connolly has cogently put it, 'difference requires identity and identity difference' (Connolly, 1991, p. ix). Alas, our contemporary intellectual horizon marginalises such views. It is a crucial accomplishment of this collection that it enlists the conceptual apparatus to bring back to the limelight such a refreshing rationale.

Yet, as we have already seen, this is not merely an epistemological or theoretical issue: it is, crucially, a political issue as well. During recent decades, however, the ideological hegemony of the neoliberal consensus has attempted to naturalise the fiction – the empty grand narrative – of a non-antagonistic 'third way', beyond left and right. Both conservative and social-democratic forces have followed this course, which has undermined the *agonistic* registering of division entailed in democratic institutions. It is in this meta-political orientation that one encounters the roots of the emerging post-democratic imaginary. Indeed, post-democracy is founded on an attempt to exclude the awareness of lack, contingency and negativity from the political domain, which leads to a political order that retains the token institutions of liberal democracy but neutralises the centrality of political antagonism. Jacques Rancière is among to the political theorists who have utilised this term:

From an allegedly defunct Marxism, the supposedly reigning liberalism borrows the theme of objective necessity, identified with the constraints and caprices of the world market. Marx's once scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today an obvious fact on which

[4]See, in this respect, Stavrakakis (1999) and Stavrakakis (2007).

[5]It is possible to ground this observation in a variety of ways. Take structural linguistics and semiology, for example. Here, we know from de Saussure (2011) and from the whole structuralist and poststructuralist tradition that the meaning of a particular element within a system of signification can only arise via its differentiation from other elements within the same system.

'liberals' and 'socialists' agree. The absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the 'forms' of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy. (Rancière, 1998, p. 113)

Difference as antagonism is banished and political alternatives proscribed. The first casualty here is the value of dissent. In addition, unable to understand and reluctant to legitimise the centrality of antagonism in democratic politics, the post-political, post-democratic *Zeitgeist* forces the expression of this dissent – when it manages to articulate itself – through channels bound to fuel a spiral of increasingly uncontrolled violence. Whereas a recognition of the adversarial nature of the political permits the transformation of antagonism into *agonism*, the taming of raw violence, a post-political approach by contrast leads to violent expressions of polarisation and hatred which, upon entering the depoliticised public sphere, can only be identified and opposed in moral or cultural (and eventually military) terms. Indeed, as Chantal Mouffe has put it, when opponents are defined in an 'extrapolitical' manner,

> they cannot be envisaged as 'adversary' but only as 'enemy'. With the 'evil them' no agonistic debate is possible, they must be eradicated. Moreover, as they are often considered to be the expression of some kind of 'moral disease,' one should not even try to provide an explanation for their emergence and success. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 76)

Notice how the re-emergence of populist movements and the concomitant development of a whole field of populism research – another crucial topic debated in this volume – demonstrate the dual *malaise* we have already indicated. Isn't it astonishing that both mainstream politics and institutions as well as mainstream socio-political research share the same instinctual *anti-populism* (irrespective, in fact, of the particular movements and ideologies under examination)? On both levels, then, contemporary Europe emerges as the name of a dangerous premodern regression – politically, as a failure to openly and democratically reflect on its aristocratic, post-democratic mutation and to honour its enlightenment commitment to registering heterogeneity through popular sovereignty; and intellectually, as a failure to move beyond anti-democratic stereotypes that underlie an *a priori* pejorative take on any kind of popular demand, movement and government (summarily denounced as *evil populism*).

Indeed, a multitude of heterogeneous and even antithetical phenomena are currently being discussed under the rubric of populism: from the European Far Right in France, Austria and the Netherlands, and illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, on the one hand; to Bernie Sanders, the so-called Pink Tide of left-wing populist governments in Latin America and inclusionary populisms in the European South triggered by the brutal *ordoliberal* management of the European crisis, on the other. Very often, the movements, parties, leaders and discourses under examination seem to have nothing or very little in common as they range from the radical left to the radical right of the political spectrum and

from egalitarian to authoritarian orientations. Yet, one thing is obviously certain. They seem to cause surprise. Mainstream media, established political forces and academics are quick to denounce their *scandalous* nature: all of a sudden, the unthinkable seems to be happening. Populism is seen as violating or transgressing an established order of how politics is *properly, rationally* and *professionally* done. It emerges *where* it should not *when* it should not; it disrupts a supposed 'normal' course of events and could only be the index of an anomaly.[6]

However, there should be no cause for surprise here. It is already many decades since the historian Comer Vann Woodward summarised the lessons from the long and bloody debate on American populism between the 1950s and the 1970s: 'The study of populism is instructive about the consequences of condescension, *arrogance*, and *ignorance* on the part of elites and intellectuals' (Vann Woodward, 1981, p. 32). In fact, our understanding of 'populism' as an incarnation of whatever violates the (naturalised) established order of things has been shared by political and academic elites and popularised through mainstream media since the 1950s. During this period, commencing with the publication of the true diachronic matrix of academic anti-populism, namely Richard Hofstadter's revisionist attack on the US People's Party (Hofstadter, 1995), *normality* was generally embodied by a unidirectional, universal *modernisation* process supposed to embody and materialise the only version of modernity feasible and desirable (the one associated with the USA and the Western paradigm, blending capitalism with representative government in the form of so-called *Democratic Elitism*). Populism, by contrast, was often seen as an indication of 'asynchronism', of its local exceptions/anomalies. In particular, it was, more or less, denounced as an *abnormal* political formation articulated by *abnormal* leaders and addressed to *abnormal* constituencies.

Such grand narratives and stereotypes continue to influence, if not dominate, public debate in a variety of contexts. Of course, the disciplinary, normalising function of modernisation has been taken over largely by narratives concerning the 'end of history' and 'globalisation'. In this sense, modernisation can be seen as the matrix of what later came to be known as the TINA dogma (There Is No Alternative).

By un-reflexively adopting an exclusively pejorative definition of populism, a large part of populism research has also adopted the normative, if not axiomatic and stereotypical fallacies of Hofstadter, and has, by default, placed itself in the service of a normalising, disciplinary technology of domination defending at all cost the post-democratic mutations of the established order (Crouch, 2004; Habermas, 2013), against all challengers irrespective of their ideological belonging, democratic credentials, discursive genealogies and political agendas. In a bid to justify these choices, *arrogance* and *ignorance* have become, once more, defining characteristics of Euro-centric approaches to populism. Sometimes the picture painted is of something so irrational, unthinkable, abnormal, even monstrous, that it could not possibly be appealing to real people.

[6]I develop this argument in a more detailed way in Stavrakakis (2017).

This does not mean, of course, that populism research should not encompass situations in which 'the people' itself is invested with a reified mystique in the style of political theology, or that it should not examine the ambivalent relationship between populism and nationalism (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). Yet the first step forward for contemporary populism research would be to move beyond obsolete pejorative stereotypes and try to approach populism anew, beyond any demonisation or idealisation, escaping the tight grip of the galloping (a priori anti-populist) economics and politics of privilege – even when the latter utilise a populist grammar and/or imaginary. Only then does it become possible to examine in detail a variety of challenging issues that highlight different facets of populism revealing important points about politics and identification more generally – emotion, memory, security, communication – as discussed in many chapters of the book.

More broadly, especially given that populism is not the only theme of this collection, the need to restore critical reflection within the social sciences and the potential of dissent and the value of the alternative within politics, to be able to assess the different risks and possibilities every contingency brings to us (whether we call it a 'crisis' or not), may be the foremost challenge of our age. The chapters in this daring volume encircle and highlight this challenge in a thoroughly productive way, conceptually – thematically – politically!

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Acknowledgements

This book is the outcome of a workshop held at Zeppelin University in the early Autumn of 2018. The workshop itself as well as the subsequent project of collecting and connecting together the chapters has demanded efforts from a large number of people, whom we would like to acknowledge here: Yannis Stavarakakis for his valuable support throughout, Hazel Goodes for her patient editorial guidance, Elise Bilger for her adept editorial assistance, Martin Beckford for his masterly copy editing, Ute Lucarelli for her help in securing funding, the Heinrich Böll Foundation Baden-Wuerttemberg and Zeppelin University for their financial backing of the workshop, Claire Perrot-Minot for her tremendous organisational skills, and Alexander Ruser for his continuous advice and encouragement. We are particularly grateful, of course, to the authors themselves who bore our numerous requests and suggestions with great patience and affability and also to the participants of the workshop who have not contributed to the book but supported the project with their contributions to the fruitful discussions.

AM and NM

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