Praise of Political Convertism

Medak / Milat [IUC 2006]

1.

We start our presentation with two remarks, one more of a systemic nature and the other somewhat historical.

To begin with we quote Derrida at some length: *Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name. Including the idea of the constitutional paradigm and the absolute authority of law. It is thus the only paradigm that is universalizable, whence its chance and its fragility. But in order for this historicity - unique among all political systems - to be complete, it must be freed not only from the Idea in the Kantian sense but from all teleology, all onto-theo-teleology.* **(Derrida, Rogues, 87)**

First, it seems that a consubstantiality of democracy and its model, or of democracy and its paradigm or idea is irreducible. But political action tries in every instant to overcome or to make obsolete that heterogenity and that gap, or at least policital action tries to render that heterogenity imperceptibile - insofar it cannot do away completely with it. It seems also - notwithstanding one's attitude towards Hegel - that the basic formula of Hegelianism [ie. to subjectify the substance and to substantialize the subject] which expresses the desire of doing away with the irreducible consubstantiality of democracy and its model - finds its full and true meaning in the realm of political philosophy. So to say, to model a democracy and to democratize a model.

Of course, that same programmatic formula has been already put in question by Hegel himself in his latest lectures on the philosophy of religion and the proof of the existence of God, where at the very end it is obvious and irrefutable for Hegel, a matter-of-fact, that absolute religion as the coming-together of the subject and the substance in the form of a relation and as the prototype of communal life has experienced a complete desaster. This failure is important inasmuch as it leaves, at least, one essential question undecided for Hegel, or at least within the architectonics of his own system: If religious life has been a catastrophe, is there a way for a political community proper to exist without the substantial background of the religious system?

Hegel has answered those questions invoking the historical situation of late Roman Empire, but this is hardly more than a common-place taken from the inventory of cultural pessimism. And refering to a late Roman imperiality would also imply a certain hope and promise of a renewal, which would inevitably follow the decay of political and social order.

Taking Hegel's statement seriously, without the cultural-pessimist's premisse, would for us mean to focus on the specific form which is articulated best within religion, and that for Hegel is relationality. Not just the basic relation of Man and God, but the notion of relation itself. Which, to refer to Hegel again, has failed. This then would imply a question even more dramatic: Is there possible a polity without relating, outside of political and social relationships?

Those questions have for three decades actually been a testing ground for the political theory in vein of Foucault, or what has been called biopolitical theory. In various and not always identical ways that theory has answered to those question, but

the general mistrust regarding the notion of relation has been its prevalent, though not all the time its most obvious element. From Foucault to Negri and Agamben the critique of a notion of the political community based on relationality has foremost been excercised as a critique of sovereignty, which for those authors embodies the stance of the realized subject-substance. And its catastrophe. Failure, again, of the democracy and its model.

But, what if – and this is our critical question towards the biopolitical theory – what if this failed conjecture of a democracy and its (any perceivable & possible) model nevertheless has generated a way of political action, which neither amounts to be fully democratic nor succeeds to be completely paradigmatic (ie. universalizable), but in a distorted or even pathologic way articulates the desire of the final overlapping of democracy and its idea? What if this action, politics caught in the limbo of neither/nor – being the inadequate realization of that basic conversion of democracy into a paradigm, and vice versa – is paradoxically the only referent of a politics, or even its remainder after the presuposed desaster and withering away of the political?

That specific kind of action we would like to call populism.

Second, what would be the dominant form – if there is ever possible to conceive just one and not many forms of it – of populism? At this stage we cannot propose a thorough argument, but our guess that the dominant form of populism is actually convertism runs in two (unsubstantiated) directions:

a) it is the basic desire of converting democracy into a paradigm, the fundamental fantasy of that interchangeability that allows for a specific convertism to be,

b) a prima faciae analysis of historical material shows a recognizable tendency of populist regimes and figures to excercise convertism. In passing, we recall such figures as Slobodan Milošević, whose socialist apparatchik carrier, rising to power and a rather long hold of that same power, notwithstanding the obvious failures and evils it has generated even for his own constituency, would be incomprehensible without refering to some kind of convertism. Or the late Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, whose case of converting from hardline communist general to a no less radical nationalist could serve as a prime example of a somewhat old-fashioned case of convertism.

But it seems that narrowing the domain of populist convertism just to autocratic and repressive regimes itself is misguided, since it appears that a specter of convertism haunts the entire globe. Turning anarchic street-fighting men into prophets of capitalist inevitability and military interventions and former drug-addicts into pious apostles of a moral majority.

As we already said - a longer analysis would be needed to discern the phenomenon of convertism, especially to differentiate between convertism and opportunism. In this moment we put this task aside, since our primary goal is not to outline a comprehensive description of convertism in all of its historical figures, but to present two recent socio-theoretical approaches which have praised both populism and convertism, taking those phenomena to be the basic constituent of a contemporary polity. Both of those approaches we regard to be noteworthy in their respective domains of investigation, though we will focus on just a few possible perspectives those theoretical enterprises imply.

The first volume we will introduce is Ernesto Laclau's On Populist Reason, published in 2005. Laclau basically wishes to conceptualize populism as the primary political logic.

Second book that we will deal with here is The Jew, the Arab - subtitled A History of the Enemy - by Gil Anidjar (Columbia University), published in 2003. Anidjar's undertaking is one of exploring deep cultural patterns (of convertism) which govern our political life.

2.

In his recent study *On Populist Reason* Ernesto Laclau has put forth for himself a difficult task to try to rehabilitate a concept that hasn't been very appealing to political theory, at least not as a concept signifying something rather positive. Moreover, the term *populism* has been and is still being used, almost unanimously, in negative or pejorative meaning, meaning a kind of deficient and malicious social intelligence. If Laclau's task was just to rehabilitate the populism as concept, his analysis would turn out to be a rejection (above everything) of *ethical* underrating of that phenomena and others presumably related to populist movements. Ethical aspect of (intellectual) underrating of populism is certainly based on presumption that it is epistemically deficient, taking into account manipulative and irrational aspects of populism. The task undertaken by Laclau is much more ambitious and cannot be filed under mere rehabilitation of an anachronistic conception: while others talk about manipulation and irrationality, Laclau points out to constructiveness and affective quality of populism. We are dealing here, no more nor less, with theoretical adventure to try to think populism as an axes or base for the

emergence of collective identities. Populism is, in other words, for Laclau the very core of the political.

The sequence of steps making populism possible, according to Laclau, reads as follows: *Populism requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps – one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole; this dichotomy involves the antagonistic division of the social field; and the popular camp presupposes, as condition of its constitution, the construction of a global identity out of the equivalence of a plurality of social demands.* **(Laclau, On Populist Reason, 83)**

The part (plebs) which claims for itself that it is a whole (*populus*) is with its mere coming to existence already antagonistic, agent of division in the society, because prior to this there is a lot of different social demands that have been unrecognized and unfulfilled, so that from this situation shared by many – utterly heterogeneous – social actors stems, following the logic of equivalence and affective investment of solidarity, a camp which (by its pure appearance) provoces the power-structure. In continuing his own line of argument, and that of Chantal Mouffe, going back to their pivotal volume *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* written in 80's, Laclau inscribes the emergence of populism in the coordinates of hegemonic logics. This argument wants to clarify that the moment of birth of collective, universal identity i.e. the moment in which we perceive and articulate for the first time the equivalence of heterogeneous demands – is the moment of the subjective or the particular. The articulation of universal and collective cannot cope without particular and subjective in both meanings of these terms – as something that is simultaneously contingent and individual. But, the condition which allows the part to articulate the whole (with which it becomes that very whole, here-and-now) is such that the particular has to be disinvested from any previous individual/particular content, so that it could compress, represent, and eventually intensify the moment of equivalence of heterogeneous elements against that other realm – the existant power

structure. Particular that in its articulation makes the collective is according to Laclau's nomenclature the *empty signifier*. Signifier which is – however particular, subjective, and in its large extent even arbitrary – *necessary* for foundation of (hegemonic) logics which leads to the appereance of collective identity. A force of this empty signifier is in its (full) antagonization of social relations.

Let's ask ourselves what is happening in the case when a specific element of the hegemonic equation (a specific demand, for example) could be or is eventually already taken from the rival camp and when it is no more fully and completely possbile to antagonize, to divide up the social field? When our adversaries and we are no more in a *black-white* situation, but when inside our textures there are sites of a little cracks and abysses of something foreign and different that frettens to destroy our overlty Manichean conception? In that moment, Laclau, will introduce the notion of floating signifier, as that articulate mechanism which corresponds to above mentioned situation i.e. to the moment in which a specific demand could be inscribed in different, even conflicted social sequences.

That which was before an insufficiency of populism or its stupidity – that was, as you will, contained in its unspecified nature, and in its affective, but shallow rhetoric – in Laclau's text becomes its very strength and validity. Populism, being far from a prototype of collective uniformity, is making in the heterogeneous element of articulation a passage from particular to collective, from arbitrary to necessary.

Bearing in mind the convincing nature of author's exposition, we will ask now the question of differentiation between the *empty and the floating* signifier? It is clear – that in Laclau's view we are dealing with gradual, quantitive differentiation, which allows different forms and levels of populism. But, is this type of gradation i.e.

decision to differentiate effects of social articulation in this way, justified － bearing in mind the one standing on the other side － that is our adversary or foe?

Some thoughts to conclude with Laclau － In his *Theory of the Partisan* Carl Schmitt reflects about different types of enemies (*actual* or real: *absolute* or total). It seams that Laclau's differentiation between *empty: floating* signifier in analogy repeats Schmitt's delineation. Constellations and investments, in question are, of course, completely diverse, but Laclau's rhetorical gradation enables us to ask whether such differentiation is indeed (*just)* rhetorical? By rhetorical, we don't assume insignificant. Is it not that populism being that elementary kind of the political, since it poses politics in its own element – as articulation– in that very differentiation between empty and floating signifier imprisoned to endlessly make decisions about the nature of the enemy as its only left rhetorical criteria, choosing therefore, always between two evils? Choosing signifier/s, staying permanently the war zone.

3.

It has almost become a common-place to say that "for hundreds of years, Muslim Spain was the most tolerant place in Europe", where "Christians, Muslims and Jews were able to live together more or less peacefully" in a tolerant *convivencia*, coexistence. The same acceptability will hold true for a claim which says that after the Christian Reconquest, accomplished in 1492, that same coexistence has been irretrievably destroyed, prefiguring a legion of similar events of expulsion and exodus in modern European history. This is unquestionably a matter-of-fact, but our focus will turn to a more specific problem in that historical case. It is the fate of the Marranos which interests us.

According to the Jewish Encyclopedia "Marranos (Spanish and Portuguese, deriving probably from the Arabic moharrama or muharram or mahram meaning 'a forbidden thing'), were Sephardic Jews who were forced to adopt the identity of Christians, either through coercion as a consequence of the persecution of Jews by the Spanish or Portuguese Inquisition, or who, for form's sake, became Catholic converts. Many Marranos maintained their ancestral traditions as crypto Jews, by publicly professing Catholicism but privately adhering to Judaism. In both Portuguese and Spanish, the term marrano also came to have the meaning of 'swine' or 'filthy'...".

It is the Marranos who now for centuries came to represent a sort of cultural shibboleth, turning to a general metaphor of a very specific kind of existence and identity, as Elaine Marks had put it.

The most prominent recent case of that linkeage would be Jacques Derrida, who in an adress to Antonio Negri has proposed "a coded language" which they could use "like Marranos". Where "in philosophical company we could act as if we were still speaking the language of metaphysics or ontology, knowing full well, between us that this was not all so." (Derrida, Marx & Sons, 262)

So at the one hand Marranos are the prime example of anti-dogmatic, tolerant and even subversive stance in a wider European history, if we consider just the most known cases from Spinoza on - but they also come to refer to a emergence of proper biopolitical regimes, centuries in advance. Just to recall the "famous Statutes of the Purity of the Blood", introduced in 1449, that distinguished between original Christians and conversos solely on the basis of blood lineage.

Gil Anidjar's The Jew, the Arab is a volume devoted to a conceptual reconstruction of types of enmity in Western history. It traces the most important moments of that history by way of exemplary figures like St. Paul, Augustine, Shakespeare, Kant, Hegel, Freud and Carl Schmitt.

The elementary Anidjar's assumption reads as follows: Europe's history and its condition of existence has been fundametally shaped by a double enemy - by the Jew and by the Arab. Not just in the usual sense in which Jews and Arabs would represent all those outlawed, marginal and cursed parts of the European societies throughout the history. No, this strange syncopal figure - the Jew, the Arab - in Anidjar means something just slightly, but essentially different. Namely - the Jew, the Arab is the name for a political history which constitutes itself by way of discerning different types of enemies. Jews are being the theological enemy while the Arabs are the political one, argues Anidjar.

So if Europe's history is that of an ever more elaborated and intensified ways of enemy-making, to paraphrase Nelson Godmann's famous title, it could be well stated that Anidjar fits into the recent Schmittian revival. Though this is completely correct, since Anidjar in regards of his proceeding very seriously takes the fundamental formula of a polity being constituted in a decision upon the friend and the foe, Anidjar's intention - it seems to us - runs counter to each of Carl Schmitt's presumptions and statements.

This is best expressed in two singular cases that play the most significant role for Anidjar. In both of them conversion is at stake, always hardly compatible with the case of Marranos but nevertheless reinforcing and expanding that prototype. Also, in

both of those cases conversion actually means a breakdown, or the impossibility to differentiate furthermore among the different types of enemies - and this the place where Schmittian model finally could be rendered useless. At least Anidjar believes so.

We begin with the, so to say, negative example - expressing both the most known historical case of violence and perhaps a case where - if we are to follow Anidjar's intuition - biopolitical theory touches upon its own limit.

It's the case of the Muselmann, the Muslims from Auschwitz, in regard of whom Primo Levi has said that if he could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, he would have chosen that image most familiar to him. Jews becoming Muslims, within the barbed wire of the concentration camps.

And this is the place where Anidjar's criticism of the biopolitical theory sets in, then though he will agree that it was Agamben who has "broken new ground" in his writings, offering a new perspective of such an important phenomenon like the extermination camps, Anidjar's attention will be drawn by the circumstance that, at least for Agamben, the highly culturally saturated motif of conversion from a Jew into a Musulmann, into the Arab goes unnoticed. Anidjar argues that such a conversion is not, as it most likely seems for Agamben, just an act brought about by the purely industrial and bureaucratically rational killing of people, where Musulmann would be the figure of the most debased life. For Anidjar it is more likely that such a conversion produces a side-effect, which escapes the logic of the political as it was defined by Schmitt. Conversion of the Jew into the Arab inside the camp, though it could be hardly argued, that it is an voluntary act of subversion, nevertheless brings about the breakdown of a certain logic of the political realm,

since with that conversion the possibility to differentiate among types of enmity has been stalled.

In passing, we will notice, that an analogous argument has been put also in reference to Foucault's distinction between the archaic and the modern form of racism, as Foucault has developped that distinction in his lectures in the 70's. Then it seems that even though the new racism of the state, which for Foucault basically is life-promoting, does not need to recurr to the old-fashioned repressive standards of governance - at least provisionally it does need the back-up by the culturally charged imaginary of the old kind of racism, where the repressive social and political selection was not just a mere technological act or administrative decree, but an act embedded into the complex network of racial, ethnical, geographical and other differences.

The second, if you will a positive, example offered by Anidjar is the historical figure of Shabbatai Zvi - the most important modern Jewish prophet. Sabbataism emerged as movement around the year 1666 mainly in the East Mediterranean and it was argued that it was the most important messianic movement, of whatsoever confessional denomination, in the history since the Old times. Basically, it is a story of a young man who claims to be a Messiah, who then provokes an incredible reaction among the Jewry of the Mediterranean. But then when he has been received by the vezir in Istanbul, he converts at the spot to Islam. And even many of his followers.

Anidjar takes this example of Shabbatai Zvi in strict analogy to the conversos of Spain and Portugal, and in discerning them it is easy to perceive the non-coercive nature of the latter conversion of Sabbateans into the Islam. And it also could be

argued while the Marranos have converted to Catholicism just to preserve the naked life, that the Sabbatean converts had converted out of an religious calculation, or out of the economic rationale. The term economic taken in its oldest theological meaning, referring to the providential plan.

But there again certain political action arises, and though it is just a minimal one - the one which refuses to be bound by the procedure of searching & destroying, of targetting the enemy - it is an initial step in the other direction. Convertism has inasmuch gained a new prominence in Anidjar, and it will be interesting to observe whether he amounts to a fully analysis what could the pragmatics of political convertism beyond the usual ad-hoc opportunism of the moment.