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An Analysis of Populist Temptation - Example in Hong Kong

Chan Wan Hang

Evolved from Marxist idea of class struggle which emphasizes on singular demand, populism suggests a simultaneous connection of all demands through the logic of equivalent to confront against the hegemony. It realizes a total, instead of representational, democracy. (Laclau, 2005) Its attempt to consider all demands from the society makes populism seemed to be a brilliant solution of democracy. However, due to the increasing frequency of usage of the word "populism" in daily (political) language, especially during the election debates, the meaning of populism has been distorted. It becomes a negative term in describing a kind of thought which blind worships the power of "the people" and is no more than destructive force for the governance. Is "populism" a solution, or an obstacle, to democracy? Is there another model in solving the challenges of satisfying the demand for democracy? This essay attempts to discuss these problems by firstly reviewing on Laclau's populist logic with reference to its attempt to resolve the inadequacies of Marxist's class struggles. The challenges, contradictions and limitations of his logic will be explained with an emphasis on Zizek's criticisms with supports of Hong Kong examples.

Review on Populist Logic of Laclau

The populist logic of Laclau can be seen as a response to the inadequacies of Marxist's class struggles. The characteristics of Marxist, which emphasis on essentialism as a traditional thought in political philosophy, will be discussed. Then discussion will focus on the problems of such essentialism identified by Laclau, and his attempt to response through the notion of radical democracy. The operation of populist logic, as an alternative proposal to the confrontation against the ruling class' hegemony, will then be explained.

Marxists advocate class struggle, in the belief that the source of social problems, such as exploitation of labors, social inequalities and monopoly of social resources, can be solved once all proletariats are united and overthrow the capitalists though class struggle. Such idea, along with many traditional thoughts in political philosophy, implies essentialism. (Smith, 1998) Essentialism assumes a single and fundamental struggle, is more important than other

different kind of struggles that might exist in the society. In other words, essentialism overlooks other demands and believes that the demand it concerns is the utmost important. It also stresses that all others demands would be met after the demand concerned is met. The best and apparent demonstration of essentialism can be found in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The dictator in the story, Napoleon, saw "animalism" as only way to escape from the cruel treatment of human, to achieve autonomy and independence of the animal kingdom (The Animal Farm), and to the better livelihood of every animals. In the case of human version of essentialism, Marxists concludes, if not simplifies, all struggles in a society can be solved and all social demands can be met through class struggle; the same applies to feminists, through women liberation; and nationalists, through independence of nations.

Laclau rejects such essentialists' logic. To Laclau, none of any single struggle is adequate to meet and response to the differential demands. (Smith, 1998) Unlike the era of the Industrial Revolution, when the dominant struggle lied between proletariats and capitalists, the modern world appears to be much more complex due to the bloom of thoughts as well as the interactions between countries. The raises of nationalism, racism, feminism, environmentalism, etc, after the Second World War and especially during the Cold War in the 60-70s, for instance, reveal the insufficiency of Marxist's power struggle as the panacea to unsatisfied social demands. Laclau attempted to introduce a different political logic in confronting the hegemony.

According to Laclau, the smallest unit of populism has been the "social demand". (Laclau, 2005) From the populist's point of view, in order to motivate social paradigm shift, the reveal of an individual unsatisfied demand is insufficient unless such demands are linked to form a greater demands and attracts more concerns from *the people*. (Lin, 2005) Such linkage, denoted as "the logic of equivalent" in Laclau's populist logic, is the essential component of populism. Laclau suggests three conditions to make populism possible: "(1) *the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from the power; (2) an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of the 'people' possible; [... and (3)] the unification of these various demand [...] into a stable system of signification.*" (Laclau, 1995: p.74) The three conditions are in cause-and-effect sequence. That is, within the society, the "people" with unsatisfied demands, such as demand for public participation, for education, for housing, for social benefits, etc, must be firstly identified. Then such demands from the people will form an equivalential chain through the logic of articulation, and thus unified

under a signification, such as, *the people*. The power which fails to satisfy such demands are, on the other hand, being accused to be the people's enemy, so as to create an antagonistic frontier between the people and the hegemony. By then, this “united” social group acquired significant social attention and thus the power to confront with the hegemony.

The articulation here deserves further investigation. The use of articulation of meaning under the populist logic is important. It makes representation of variety of demands under a signifier possible. The concept of articulation was borrowed from Saussurean linguistics, which suggested that meanings are merely constituted through the relational differences between words in a language, and that language will become meaningless if the language or word itself is taken away from its context. (Saussure, 1966) This suggested the meaning of words used (as a signifier) is not fixed but can be changed and stuffed with other meanings under different context. The signifiers used in political language are, according to Laclau and Mouffe, articulate through the relational differences of different (political) elements. (Smith, 1998) However, such signification, or empty signifier, has inherent negativity (Laclau, 2005) as it emerges from the articulation of the *unfulfilled* demands. During its constitution of the equivalential chain through the articulation of demands and expansion of meanings, the signifier becomes less and less presentable to its original meaning, and eventually becomes “empty” in meaning. (Laclau, 2004)

Up to this point, it is apparent that empty signifier on one hand is crucial in connecting different demands in order to construct an antagonistic frontier against the enemy; while on the other hand the emptiness of such signifier implies that such signifier can signify nothing except its failure to signify. (Lin, 2005) The emptiness is, therefore, itself problematic.

Criticisms from Zizek

Slavoj Zizek contributed much in the criticism on the nature, formation and operation of Laclau’s populist logic. In his paper *Against the Populist Temptation*, (Zizek, 2006) he demonstrated the insufficiencies and pitfalls that he found in populism and attempted to reveal its underlying meaning and nature. According to his paper, his arguments against populism can be summarized as follows:

- The failure to focus on the *Real* problem

- The lack of intention to challenge the hegemony
- The failure to explain the confrontation between the Left and Right

His criticisms listed above will be explained further. As most of his supporting examples are sourced from Europe and the US, and the intellectual discussion on populism is increasingly significant yet utterly insufficient in Hong Kong, this section will attempt to apply Zizek's criticisms towards populism under the context in Hong Kong.

1. Failure to focus on the *Real* problem

Zizek's first criticism on populism is that it does not challenge the system but only "*the intruder who corrupted it.*" (Zizek, 2006, p.555) In his *Against the Populist Temptation* (2006), he pointed out those populists see the cause of problems (in society) as the problem of *the intruders* instead of the system. In order to arouse populism (ie. the making of logic of equivalence of demands), it is difficult put overthrowing the system as the agenda. Instead, it is more feasible to link all unsatisfied demands through the logic of articulation, and accuse the intruder as the main cause of social problems. The pseudoconcreteness of such intruder, or enemy, is important in Laclau's populist logic: to make a public enemy that hated by most of the people, the enemy must demonstrate a variety of "negative" characters. Since it is difficult to find such enemy, the only way out is to *signify* such enemy with these "negative" characters. However, after such manipulation of meaning, Zizek suggested that the real causes of the problem are not revealed. Therefore the operation of populist logic has no use in tackling the real problem occurred in the society. The current conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland people shows excellent example in explaining this point of view.

Hong Kong's economy had been severely hit by the outbreak of SARS in 2003. In attempt to help with Hong Kong's economy, the Central Government of China allowed individual travellers to visit Hong Kong in the same year. Despite a significant economic boost up, the quality of life of Hong Kong people did not improved much, if not deteriorated. With the widening of income gap, rising price level, rising land rent, limited job opportunities for the unskilled labour, oligopoly of industries, etc, the society began to accuse those Mainland travellers for their encroachment of local economy. This accuse implies a populist operation such that a common enemy is created and being blamed for being the root of the problems.

Zizek pointed out that such operation, however, do nothing but merely establish an enemy. Even worse, such operation restricts people from delving into the root of the problem, such as the post-Fordism effects on modern economies, the nature of capitalism, etc, and possible solutions accordingly, through intellectual works and dialogues. Problems remain while the dissatisfactions and tensions continue.

Zizek therefore suggested that “*there is a great need to re-create an artificial concreteness in order to enable individuals to relate their complex environs as to a meaningful life-world.*” (Zizek, 2006: p.556) However, such claim does have its own insufficiency. For instance, what is the meaning of *an artificial concreteness* that helps people to understand their environment? Is what Zizek named *empty signifier* concrete enough to *enable individuals to relate their complex environs as to a meaningful life-world*? Or, in another words, does such empty signifier enough represent the reality, to the capacity of ordinary people? Take Hong Kong example again, it is rather impossible to let Hong Kong people understand the economic and social problem is caused by, for example, the capitalists’ logics. However, to understand such problems are rooted by the huge demand and competition from the Mainland China would be much more layman. After all, we cannot deny the effect of the Mainland individual travellers on Hong Kong’s socio-economic condition. Zizek’s criticism overlooked the competence of the people, not only due to the poor knowledge of those people, but the complexity of the reality that even intellectuals find difficult to understand. In order to make a political agenda supported from people, it is required that the agenda appears to be important and easy to understand. Laclau’s populist logic sounds a good way to make a political agenda sound.

2. The lack of intention to challenge the hegemony

Developed from Zizek’s first criticism on populism, Zizek further elaborated that populism does not have the intention to challenge the hegemony. He criticized that the aim of populism is merely the request (to the hegemony, or the power) for fulfilling social demands. (Zizek, 2006) Zizek challenged such request is a form of surrendering to the existing power, but not, as other kind of struggles would do, to destroy or overthrow the power. He acknowledged the democratic components of making such individual demands public. Yet he accused that such demands (and also dissatisfactions) are only limited to “demands to be satisfied” but not transformed to any revolutionary actions against the hegemony.

Zizek's point of view, I would suggest, rather outdated in today's complex political context. His criticism would be rather sound if we put the context back to the era of Industrial Revolution, when the social needs and living conditions were rather homogeneous within the same social group identified (such as the capitalists and proletarians). Today, there is a great variety of social needs due to the differences in conditions and backgrounds of people; even within the same geographical territory (Is it the reason for the rise of populism?) Furthermore, the cost of *destroying the power* has been too high, probably due to the improved living standard, as most of the basic needs of people have been satisfied and a set of social benefits that aim at safeguarding the unprivileged has been well established in most of the nations. This may explain why the overthrow of governments or revolution is seldom found in the developed world in recent decades.

Using Hong Kong as example, it is undeniable that the conflicts between the government and citizens have becoming fiercer. Demonstration is frequent, and the number of participants has been increasing in these ten years. It is uncommon for decades, for instance, more than ten thousands of people gathered in the governments headquarter for more than a day for a single social issue (the anti-patriotic education). The great number and enthusiasm of participants alerted Hong Kong, as well as the Central government. However, there was no significant, if any, changes in the current political order, not to mention the possibility of over-throwing the governance. The failure of such social movement, as Zizek may see, can be explained by the relative stable and affluence society, as well as a good social welfare system in Hong Kong. A lot of Hong Kong people, even they participated in various demonstration with great dissatisfaction to the current governance, it is unlikely that they want a paradigm change in action. People are simply unlikely to jeopardize their current life style for revolutionary acts.

Despite that it is unlikely to destroy the power due to various reasons in different regions, the operation of populism still have its value in articulating different needs into a sounder need in order to pledge the power to fulfill people's request. In this sense, populism demonstrates certain extent of democracy and allows people to negotiate with the power while maintaining the current governance at *status quo*, which is perhaps more constructive than destroying the hegemony.

3. The failure to explain the confrontation between the Left and Right

In his *Against the Populist Temptation*, Žižek pointed out that there are two opposed logics of universality when talking about the participation in global order of the US. He identified one as the *state bureaucracy* and the *university embodied in the element that sticks out of the existing others*. (Žižek, 2006: p.564) In other words, the two logics of universality are the “state bureaucracy” and the “non-state bureaucracy” (the latter shall denote, although not described explicitly in his work, the left and the populist). Compare with Laclau’s populist logic, which different demands in society are articulated and equated into one signifier in order to confront with the power (the right), Žižek seemed to provide another dimension to understand the two different “universes” in the society. Laclau assumed society appear as a whole, until demands are articulated and populism emerged due to the failure of the power in meeting such demands. Žižek, however, assumed the underlying “A” and “not-A” dualistic society.

In short, Žižek assumed dichotomy of social expectations, while Laclau assumed that different social expectations occur only when unsatisfied social needs emerge. It is impossible and no point to argue which assumption, Žižek’s or Laclau’s, better represents the reality. In fact, their models are over-simplified in describing the confrontations, regardless left vs right or people vs power. The empty signifier, an important component constructed by the articulation of different social needs, is in fact a floating signifier (Lin, 2005), which suggests the meaning and the demands entailed are ever changeable. Therefore, the debate on the confrontation of the Left and the Right is meaningless, simply because the Left and the Right are themselves articulated through different social demands and thus both are empty/ floating signifiers.

The conflicts in Hong Kong do not perfectly demonstrate the dichotomy, nor do these show a singular articulation. In fact, I would argue, Hong Kong is experiencing populism with *two* contrasting logics of universality, yet both of them equates their needs under the same notion, the *citizen* (or *the people*). For instance, some people demand for harmony, rational, stronger governance, prosperity, further cooperation with China, better economic development, etc, and such demands are articulated as *the people* by the “pro-establishment camp”; on the other hand, some people demand for justices, democracy, rational, sustainable development, etc, and such demands are also articulated as *the people* in the “(pan-) democratic camp”. Instead of stable, non-changing hegemony, whom is the enemy of *the people*, mentioned in Laclau’s populist logic, the hegemony in Hong Kong seems requires some sort of populism in order to

maintain its legitimacy and supports. Furthermore, the dichotomy of Left and Right does not work in Hong Kong. If a dichotomy is needed for an analysis of populism or politics in Hong Kong, terms like the “pro-establishment camp” and the “(pan-) democratic camp” will best describe dichotomy of politics in Hong Kong. Laclau’s populist logic here is no longer applicable in Hong Kong since there is *the enemy* is not the hegemony; and the so-called *hegemony* (the pro-establishment camp?) also employs *the people* as the equivalential chain against the “(pan-) democratic camp” (yet the latter is not the hegemony). Such situation alone has already made the analysis of populism under Laclau’s populist logic not applicable in Hong Kong. Zizek’s concepts of the Left and the Right also failed to explain the current political situation in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

People often criticize the root of dissatisfactions of Hong Kong has been the result of the rise of populism. While some may argue the only way out to solve the problems in Hong Kong is through democracy, they also denied populism. Populism has been a term with a lot of contradictories. It is democratic, in the sense that all different needs and demands are considerate; yet it is not democratic, as those different demands are equated to one empty signifier by the logic of articulation. It is revolutionary, as its ultimate goal is to confront with the hegemony by unifying the people; yet it is not revolutionary, as it confronts with the hegemony for negotiation of benefits, which reinforces the existence of the power. Nevertheless, populism has its role in intellectual foundation in political practices as it acknowledges, emphasizes, and stresses the diverse demand in the society and the people’s will. Does populism bring people democracy? Do we have a better model for practicing democracy? Perhaps it is better to ask what kind of democracy we need, before we dig into the problem of how to make democracy possible. As Zizek in *Against the Populist Temptation* (2006, p.574) said, “*it is time for us to become aware that we have to make a properly political decision of what we want.*”

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