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YANNIS STAVRAKAKIS. POPULISM: MYTHS, STEREOTYPES AND REORIENTATIONS

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The debate over the concept of populism in Greece began some decades ago, but the recent forceful rise of the radical left (SYRIZA), through a strong populist discourse, has rekindled the research interest on populism. Dozens of books and research papers have been published, many international conferences and events have been organized, and TV documentaries have been created about the resurgence of the populist phenomenon. Nevertheless, the majority of the Greek publications presents a clear anti-populist perspective and recognizes pathological elements in the populist phenomenon. Apart from that, most of the times, populism is linked to nationalism, racism, conspiracy theories, authoritarianism or clientelism, while it is presented as an ideology with common ‘dangerous’ characteristics both on left and right, reproducing thus the theory of ‘the two extremes.’

Yannis Stavrakakis' new book does not belong to the above category. His work comes to fill the lack of in-depth studies that criticize the anti-populist wave in academia, as well as provide strong responses to the recently developed theories and analytical approaches on populism. Stavrakakis is Professor of political science at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and his research interests include

political theory, populism, post-democracy and artistic practices. He has published extensively on populism, anti-populism and democracy, while he is the director of the POPULISMUS observatory.

In his new short book, which derives many arguments from some of his earlier publications, Stavrakakis proposes a new orientation to the research of populism. Initially, he starts with a brief genealogy of populism, tracing its modernist origins in Tsarist Russia with the Narodniks and in the US with the Populist Party. After that, he describes the case of Latin American populism, focusing more on Argentina and Juan Domingo Perón, while he continues his interesting description with European left-wing and right-wing populist parties, movements and leaders. In the second chapter, Stavrakakis analyzes the main theories and analytical approaches on populism, especially focusing on 'the anti-populist wave'. He locates the roots of the contemporary anti-populism in the work of Richard Hofstadter during the 1950s and criticizes modernization theories that present populism as an 'irrational' phenomenon and as 'a pathology' of politics. In this context, he highlights the weaknesses of the concept of 'cultural dualism' (by Nikiforos Diamantouros) that has been widely used by theorists, journalists and politicians to oppose populism in Greece. After that, Stavrakakis highlights the pitfalls of the 'new orthodoxy' in the studies of populism, which accepts the homogeneity of the two antithetical camps ('the people' and 'the establishment') and the attribution of a moral character to the political antagonism between them. According to Stavrakakis, moralistic appeals are inevitable in any political situation and 'it can take political or anti-political, democratic or undemocratic, reactionary or progressive, heroic or even a banal character' (p. 78). In the last chapter of the book, Stavrakakis defines what populism is, using Laclau's formalist approach, while he finds performative approaches as an extremely useful research tool. Moreover, shortly before the end of his book, Stavrakakis feels the necessity to respond again to the anti-populist narratives and explain what populism is not, by arguing that it is not equivalent to nationalism, nativism, fascism and clientelism, while it is not inherently based on charismatic leadership. Finally, while Stavrakakis belongs to a group of scholars who recognize a democratic perspective in the populist phenomenon, he argues that even if populism will be detached from negative stereotypes, it should not be treated as a 'political panacea' and as something *a priori* positive (p. 107). In this logic, the Greek-British political theorist recognizes some limits on populism, but not the ones usually denounced by the anti-populist discourse.

It is perhaps the first time in the Greek literature that a book criticizes strongly the dominant 'orthodoxy of moralization'. Furthermore, it is perhaps the first time [after the previous publication of Sevastakis and Stavrakakis on populism, anti-populism and crisis (Athens: Nefeli, 2012)], that a theoretical book clearly opposes the anti-populist logic that is well established in the country, aiming to shatter the negative stereotypes that have been formed all these years around this

phenomenon. Stavrakakis emphasizes the need to detach populism from modernization remnants of the Cold War period, which do not help political analysis in any way but serve only to polemical writings. Additionally, it is important to note that this well-written book, which follows a laclauian perspective, does not view populism as a panacea or as an exclusively democratic solution, responding in a clear manner to all these people who argue that the Essex's school theorists accept the development of any populist mobilization.

This book is important to be read by anyone who studies populism, anti-populism, political discourse and democracy to understand the boundaries of the contemporary anti-populist argumentation, as well as the problems of the 'new orthodoxy' of 'moralization' in the study of populism. So far the problem is that the book is available only in Greek. We hope that it will be published in other languages soon.

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