Contentious politics or populism? Protest dynamics and new political boundaries in the case of Greek Indignados

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Abstract

In Greece, an intense anti-austerity protest campaign (2010-2012) was followed by the reformation of Greek party system (2012-2015). This development is strongly related with the emergence of a new political boundary dividing Greek society on the basis of the acceptance, or not, of the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF) inspired austerity policy packages. In this article I examine how mass mobilization influenced the emergence of this new political boundary, focusing specifically on the Greek Indignados protests. Theorists of populism have argued that contemporary (movement) politics is dominated by a new political boundary separating the people and the elites, but, as I suggest, they fail to unpack the boundary activity, since they underplay the differences between parts of the people as well as the huge cognitive work that took place among protesting masses. Instead, drawing from both the framing perspective and contentious politics theory, I argue that the emergence of a new political boundary was a result of operating cognitive and relational causal mechanisms and processes such as frame alignment, deactivation of traditional political boundaries, and boundary change. Finally, I discuss why theories of populism do not constitute an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements.

Keywords: Political boundaries, cleavages, framing processes, anti-austerity protests, Greek Indignados, movement of the squares, Greece, contentious politics, populism

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, a new wave of contention swept western countries. European Indignados and American Occupiers very quickly sparked a wave of academic conferences and publications. Some scholars approach post-2010movements through the prism of anti-austerity claims, while the imagination of others is captured by the innovative traits of "prefigurative politics". Researchers also call attention to the interplay of economic and political crises (e.g. Hernandez and Kriesi 2016, Kriesi 2012) and the interactions between social movements, parties, and electoral dynamics (e.g. Almeida 2015, Kriesi 2015, della Porta et al 2017, McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 2013). Similarly, Greek scholars have highlighted the positive relation between anti-austerity protests (Indignados in particular) and a new political boundary (Papanikolopoulos et al 2014, Simiti 2014, Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016), a

new electoral regime (Serdedakis and Koufidi 2018) and the rise of SYRIZA (Simiti 2014, Karyotis and Rudig 2016, Vogiatzoglou 2017, Papanikolopoulos and Rongas 2019). Unlike relatively minor political changes hat occurred in most countries hit by the economic crisis, the party system in Greece ended up totally reformed. Indeed, SYRIZA's rise was directly related to the emergence of a new political boundary: anti-memorandum vs pro-memorandum forces. Whoever was resisting austerity policies associated with the successive Memoranda of Understanding signed by the centre-Left and centre-Right Greek governments with Greece's lenders (EU, ECB, IMF) was dropped into the first category, while all those who considered the bailout agreements and subsequent austerity packages necessary were placed in the second.

Rather than focusing as suggested by Perugorria et al. (2016) on the cleavage structure of institutional politics to explain support for such extensive protests, in the Greek case it would be more appropriate to attempt the opposite as traditional boundaries had lost salience relative to the new boundary. Accordingly, in this article I examine the way protest dynamics contributed to the emergence of this new dividing line. Half a century after the emblematic work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), research on cleavages focuses on how social cleavages shape political boundaries and therefore party systems, attributing more or less weight to the agency of political elites, but ignoring the potential role of social movements when it comes to introducing/shaping/deepening political divisions.

In my analysis, I prefer to use the more empirical concept of political boundary rather that the notion of cleavage which is frequently referred to in the literature. Indeed, cleavage and political boundary are not identical concepts, although they are very often used as such. Cleavages constitute political expressions of historically embedded social divisions, like owners-labourers, centre-periphery, urban-rural, church-state (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In contrast, political boundaries are more plastic and ephemeral since they are more closely intertwined with the current political climate and economic developments. Cleavages feed political boundaries with raw material and ongoing political activity shapes the latter. In the 21st century, old cleavages have either lost their salience or their clarity, while new ones revolving around employment status, identity and culture, age and gender have emerged. In this way, it is more fruitful to focus on political boundaries rather than cleavages when striving to explain the political earthquake of 2011.

In this context, we could assert that the formation of the anti-memorandum – pro-memorandum political boundary gave shape to the existing debate around neoliberal policies signifying what della Porta (2015) called "the re-emergence of a class cleavage" as well as to the cleavage between winners and losers of the globalisation or denationalisation process (Kriesi et al 2006). As we will see, an articulation of these two structural conflicts took place in the Greek squares. SYRIZA, a small party belonging to the Radical Left, positioned itself astutely on the side of anti-memorandum forces, and subsequently saw its popularity and support skyrocket from 2012 to 2015. After winning the elections in January

2015, it formed a coalition government which attempted to annul the Memoranda of Understanding and ensuing austerity policies, but was finally forced by Greece's lenders to accept another bail-out program. The signing (in July 2015) and implementation of the latter by a re-elected SYRIZA-led government (in September 2015), along with its more tolerant approach to the migration issue and the signature of the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia which ended the nationalist dispute over the name of the latter, led to SYRIZA's re-positioning with regard to these two axes of conflict. Part of the electorate no longer considered SYRIZA to be a fully anti-neoliberal and truly patriotic party. Protests against the Prespa Agreement were massive, unlike those against the implementation of the new memorandum. In this case, the articulation of the two conflicts (economic and identitarian) was incomplete. By that time, all major political parties had accepted austerity programs, the last adjustment program being completed by Greece in August 2018. Thus, the anti-memorandum – pro-memorandum political boundary lost most of its salience. SYRIZA came under mounting criticism for its heavy taxation policy and was accused of national treason by the right-wing New Democracy party which shifted its positioning (at least on a communication level) regarding the aforementioned cleavages and went on to win the national elections in July 2019.

In this way, it becomes clear that a) cleavages are multiple; and b) their content is unstable and open to debate (e.g. the enemy of national sovereignty might be the EU or migrants/neighbouring states; anti-austerity may refer to salaries/pensions/subsidies or taxes). Therefore, their very existence is as important as their articulation into political boundaries. Political forces struggle both to position themselves within the structure of conflicts and to pinpoint their content. Hence, political boundaries are the contingent by-products of political activity and not the direct expression of social cleavages. Consequently, my analysis focuses on mechanisms and processes through which collective action transformed the political space in Greece.

Political boundaries emerge as a result of a complex process which is cognitive and discursive as well as relational. People talk politics using broader social and political categories to define opponents and allies. Political boundaries change as people interact with one another in the social and political arena. In this context, I draw on both the framing perspective theory (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992, Benford and Snow 2000) and contentious politics theory (McAdam et al 2001, Tilly and Tarrow 2007) to establish an adequate theoretical framework to address the issueatstake. The identification of cognitive and relational causal mechanisms allows us to unpack the process of boundary changewhen every outcome is contingent. "Mechanisms are a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" while processes are regular sequences of such mechanisms (McAdam et al 2001, 24). In the first half of the article my research focuses on the Greek Indignados protests as this cognitive work was publicly staged to a crucial degree in main city squares during the summer of 2011. In order to explore these mechanisms and processes, I

conducted extensive fieldwork in Syntagma Square in Athens between 25/5 and 31/6/2011, which included participant observation, attendance of dozens of popular assemblies, and participation in working group discussions as well as a range of political and artistic events. However, I do not present original data, since Greek Indignados protests were widely reported, while an already published series of academic researches offer a detailed picture of the Greek movement of the squares. Hence, my analysis of protesters' boundary activity neither rely exclusively upon a primary empirical research nor it is a meta-analysis based on reflection on the existent literature.

By contrast, I proceed to such a reflection in the second part of the article in respect with the well established theory of populism. Theorists of populism have argued that contemporary politics is dominated by a new cleavage separating the people and the elites, but, as I will demonstrate, the latter fail to unpack the boundary activity since they underplay the differences between parts of the "people" as well as the huge cognitive work that took place among protesting masses. Furthemore, I discuss why theories of populism do not constitute an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements, highlighting that the notion of populism has been so overstretched that seems to include almost every political aspect, while many definitions of populism contain normative considerations currently included in the elite's rhetoric. Finally, I reflect on the question if "square movements" can be classified under a "radical democratic populist" label as suggested by some scholars or contemporary populism has to be considered simply as a collective action frame as proposed by others.

Convergence between anti-austerity socio-political forces

Throughout the (western) world 'pauperisation of the lower classes as well as proletarianization of the middle classes' marks a shift from a two-thirds society to a one-third society (della Porta 2014). In Greece, the vast majority of the population was opposed to austerity measures. Employees in the private and public sectors (77% and 78% respectively), the unemployed (73%) and students (75%) rejected austerity measures most categorically according to a first poll (Public Issue 2010). Researchers using actor attribution analysis (Kousis et al. 2016, Kanellopoulos et al. 2015) found that during the mass mobilisation of 2010-2014, Greek interest groups and other protest groups were placing the blame for economic hardship directly on the successive Memoranda of Understanding signed between successive Greek governments and Greece's lenders. The Memoranda were considered as a serious common threat, while an increasing majority realised that the cost of inaction could be higher than the cost of mobilisation. People felt frustrated and deeply discontent, while the highly educated and skilled youth who were worst hit by the neoliberal restructuration felt deeply frustrated due to the fact that the jobs they aspired to simply did not exist. However, unlike the Occupiers in New York (Milkman et al. 2013), Montreal (Ancelovici 2016) or Israel (Perugorria et al 2016) who were predominantly young, left-oriented and educated, young Greek people and in

particular those aged 25 to 35acted,in accordance with the general assumption put forward by Tejerina et al, "as catalysts, igniting but not really 'leading' the protests" (2013, 18). As Rudig and Karyotis point out (2015, 508) "the main carriers' of this protest movement were 'those involved most closely in economic life, rather than people on the margins or outside of the labour force".

Although Greek leftist parties were extensively involved in the street politics of the period, it is the trade unions that actually act as "internal governance units" within the anti-austerity campaign. Besides, Greece is not the only country where traditional labour organisations remained at the forefront of protest during the crisis period. Unions played a central role in staging demonstrations and strikes in Portugal (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015), Spain (Cristancho 2015), and Italy (della Porta, Mosca, Parks 2012).The backbone of the anti-austerity campaign consisted in a series of five well-articulated networks (trade unions, SYRIZA, KKE, ANTARSYA, anarchists) (Kanellopoulos et al. 2017) present in the vast majority of the Large Protest Events (Kousis 2016).

Figure 1 (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2014) depicts the boundaries between different movement actors that began to lose salience in favour of new political boundaries. Before the imposition of austerity policies by the Troika (EC, ECB, IMF) and their implementation by Greek governments, trade unions, parliamentary parties (KKE, SYRIZA) and extra parliamentary organisations (ANTARSYA) of the Left as well as anarchist groups formed different networks on the basis of conflicting political positions (Kanellopoulos et al. 2017). Leftist unionists and political forces accused PASOK's (PASKE) and ND's (DAKE) trade union fractions of "governmental unionism". In their turn, anti-governmental forces were divided on the grounds of ideological issues. SYRIZA is a party of the Radical Left aiming for a peaceful transformation of the political institutions (national, local and European) in which it has a longstanding presence. In contrast, extra-parliamentary leftist organisations, KKE, and the anarchists uphold anti-capitalist solutions to political, economic and social problems. For that reason, the latter refuse to cooperate with those they consider to be "reformists", with the exception of ANTARSYA which cooperated at that time with SYRIZA's forces in many student, human rights, and labour protests. Use of violence constitutes another controversial issue among movement forces. While nobody on the left of the political spectrum rejects a priori defensive violence, almost only the anarchists engage in violent actions on a regular basis. All the aforementioned dividing lines lost salience relative to the boundary between pro- and anti-memorandum forces that emerged as a result of the economic crisis. In this context, the latter joined forces to reverse Troika-inspired austerity policies. Neo-fascist Golden Dawn opposed austerity too, yet found itself left out of this coalition structure made up of actors that traditionally stand against fascism. As a result of this ensuing political isolation, Golden Dawn found itself unable to participate in the anti-austerity protest campaign in a visible way, although its members did strive under the cover of anonymity to create a political space for their activities during the Indignados protests.

Figure 1. Dividing lines between organisations/groups involved in the movement

In general, participants in the Indignados protests were "a combination of experienced political activists and people participating in street politics for the first time" (Simiti 2014, 16), with 43% leaning to the left of the political spectrum, 38% to the right, and 38% declaring no ideology, the latter being people who had voted for PASOK or New Democracy in 2009 (26% and 17% respectively) or had abstained or cast a blank/invalid ballot (Public Issue 2011). Although popular participation increased to unprecedented levels during the Indignados protests (2011) in comparison with the labour-dominated protest events (2010) and the younger generations were more extensively involved, Karyotis and Rudig (2016, 7) found that "more than 70% of protesters had engaged in both types of protest". Consequently, "the profile of 2011 demonstrators is relatively similar to that of those from the earlier wave, with the exception of younger age groups" (ibid, 6). Data from other countries (Italy, Spain, Belgium, UK) provides similar evidence, namely differences in protestor profiles between union-based mobilisations and Indignados/Occupy protests with respect to socio-demographic composition as well as organisational embeddedness and similarities as to their motives, ideology, and sense of efficacy (Peterson et al. 2013).

All that said, we can conclude that at least two interrelated causal mechanisms played a crucial role in the initial phase of the anti-austerity protest campaign: *attribution of threat* and *coordinated action*. McAdam et al (2001, 95) consider attribution of threat as "the diffusion of a shared definition concerning

alterations in the likely consequences of possible actions (or, for that matter, failures to act) undertaken by some political actor". Threats can be related to state repression or economic or other harms currently experienced or anticipated (Goldstone and Tilly 2001, 184-5). On the other hand, coordinated action entails "two or more actors' mutual signalling and parallel making of claims on the same object" (Tilly and Tarrow 2017, 216). These combined mechanisms produced an ongoing process of *convergence*, "where increasing contradictions at one or both extremes of a political continuum drive political actors between the extremes into closer alliances". (McAdam et al 2001, 189)

Deactivation of traditional political boundaries

Indignados protests, as I have already mentioned, were triggered by a combination of unprecedented economic distress and massive political dealignment. Calls for peaceful protests in Athens, Thessaloniki and Patras were addressed to every social group hit by the crisis, seeking to reinforce what Mc Adam et al. (2001, 334) identified as *attribution of similarity* mechanism, that is "the mutual identification of actors in different sites as being sufficiently similar to justify common action."

Hundreds of thousands of people passed by or stayed for long periods of time in Syntagma Square, thus giving shape to Large Protest Events (Kousis 2016). What for? As Castells puts it, "these movements are rarely programmatic movements", "they do have multiple demands", which is both "their strength (wide open appeal), and their weakness (how can anything be achieved when the goals to be achieved are undefined?)" (2012, 227). However, it is worth attempting to define them in order to understand the real dynamics of such movements. Did Greek Indignados aim to overthrow the whole systemic order, or did they have more moderate goals like shrugging off neoliberal dominance and political corruption (Douzinas 2011), struggling to bring down the government and repeal the Memorandum (Simiti 2014)? Indignados refused to continue suffering what they perceived to be constant downgrading and called Greek people to join forces to overcome it.In fact, they engaged in all three core framing tasks outlined by Benford and Snow (1988): diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. "Diagnostic framing involves identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality", prognostic framing suggests "solutions to the problem" and "identifying strategies, tactics, and targets", while motivational framing consists in "the elaboration of a call to arms" (idid, 200-2).

As Papanikolopoulos et al. (2014) have indicated, social movement organisations participating in the anti-austerity campaign showed remarkable agreement on diagnostic framing, targeting economic and political structures and agents, on a national and international level. Among the Indignados however, marked division emerged between "upper" and "lower" square narratives (Simiti 2014, Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013) or political imaginaries (Kaika and Karaliotas 2014). Protestors in the upper square, mainly

leaning to the right of the political spectrum, tended to explain the crisis through the prism of politicians' widespread corruption and foreign lenders' hostility towards Greece. Meanwhile,mostly progressive and leftist protesters in the lower squarefocused on democracy, social and political rights, as well as the economic and political institutions. In other words, "accusations of 'national treason' prevailed in the upper square, while accusations of 'social justice' were predominant in the lower square" (Simiti 2014, 27). Nevertheless, people who filled city squares shared strong feelings of injustice. These "injustice frames" (Gamson et al. 1982) quickly dominated the public sphere.

Similar differences emerged with regard to prognostic framing. Some participants, and in particular the older generations, supported the idea that the Indignados should appoint delegates in order to negotiate their claims with the powerholders, or even form a new party and take part in the elections. Meanwhile, others and especially the younger generations rejected every form of "old politics" and insisted on non-institutional self-organised collective action seeking to block the parliamentary decision-making process while simultaneously transforming people's consciousness. However, there was overwhelming agreement throughout the square when it came to the idea of blocking parliamentary approval of the Mid-term austerity program and reversing austerity policies, even if a change of government was required to ascertain this. Similar convergence emerged among core activists with regard to motivational framing, since they all adopted a discourse focusing on severity of the threat, the urgency of addressing the problem and the most efficacious strategy to be adopted by each and every citizen. "Ohé, ohé, ohé, get off the couch" was chanted by thousands of participants almost every day in front of the Parliament.

The average discourse remained simple and calm, in contrast with the unappealing stereotyped political rhetoric. All attempts made by political activists from the Left or Right to impose a slogan reflecting their own exclusive rhetoric failed outright (Stavrou 2011). What made tens of thousands of people feel comfortable with the decision-making processes of the squares was the inclusiveness regarding both procedures (every person could speak independently of his/her rhetoric capacity, political status or affiliation) and language (exclusive concepts and symbols were precluded) (Giovanopoulos 2011). As Prentoulis and Thomassen (2014, 224) put it, "the signifiers through which the protesters are represented, and through which they represent themselves, are sufficiently abstract and vague to be able to include just about everybody". The strong causal relation between inclusiveness of framing and the massive scale of the Indignados protests was highlighted by other scholars too in relation to the Spanish and Israeli cases (Perugorria et al. 2016).

In the case of Greek Indignados, inclusiveness was provided via a *frame alignment process* (Benford and Snow 2000) between the two aforementioned distinct discourse repertoires, i.e. the leftist and the patriotic. Radical left activists performed a balancing act, trying to "gradually insert elements of their radical agenda, without scaring the public with maximalistic claims" and

"without coming forward as unduly antipatriotic, which would alienate the conservatives of the square" (Aslanidis 2016, 315). They actually performed what Tarrrow (1998) considers being one of the key framing tasks undertaken by activists: avoiding very unfamiliar and scary slogans on the one hand and very familiar ones which are incapable of mobilising people on the other. At the same time, the upper-square conservatives were constantly heard shouting the well-known leftist slogan "Bread-education-freedom, junta did not end in '73". Similarly, the leftist agenda focusing on economic hardship was combined very productively with the patriotic one highlighting the loss of national sovereignty. "We don't owe, we don't sell, we don't pay" was one of the favourite slogans on both sides of the square. While some Greek scholars still focus on the incompatibility between the two narratives (Simiti 2014, Kaika and Karaliotas 2014), others have recognised this very frame bridging process (Roussos 2014).

Anti-austerity and sovereignty claims were finally integrated into the "democracy" claim (Diani and Kousis 2014, 503). However, this does not mean that "democracy, rather than the economy, was clearly at the centre of popular reactions to the Greek crisis" (ibid, 504). Research into attributions of responsibility made by trade unions and other protest groups showed that blaming authorities on the grounds of austerity policies was at the core of protestors' discursive activity (Kousis et al. 2016, Kanellopoulos et al. 2015), although general assembly debates were dominated by both political demands: cancellation of the Memorandums and real democracy (Gaitanou 2016).

However, what did the "democracy" claim mean in the Indignados' context? "Democracy' was transformed into "real democracy" or "direct democracy' via "frame amplification", "frame extension" and even "frame transformation" strategies (Benford and Snow 2000), depending on the scope of changes someone was seeking for. Democracy was considered to be malfunctioning and everybody tended to propose measures correcting democratic institutions, reinforcing people's participation (amplification) as well as expanding democracy on every level of social life (extension), or even going beyond parliamentary democracy (transformation). In this context, "real/direct democracy" functioned as a "master frame" (Snow and Benford 1992), a kind of collective action frame so broad in interpretive scope, inclusivity, flexibility, and cultural resonance that it could be used by almost every protester seeking to voice his/her claims.

Some participants declared it was the first time they had spoken with people with such different political affiliations (Papapavlou 2015). Individuals leaning to the left and right of the political spectrum were chanting slogans together or singing the same songs, and acting in unison to defend their ground during cases of police repression (Stavrou 2011), in solidarity with unknown people (Roussos 2014). Apart from the upper and lower square extremists, the majority of participants did not remain stationed exclusively at one end of the square (ibid).

A conscious effort was made, in particular among core activists, to avoid using concepts or adjectives that could exclude anyone (Giovanopoulos 2011). For this

very reason the organisers avoided playing music identified with the Left (Papapavlou 2015). Some protesters reacted positively to being able to take part without being obliged to identify with specific organisers, while others participated as "individuals" stressing the fact that "the presence of parties divides protesters and imposes differentiations" (Gaitanou 2016: 196, 200). Meanwhile, others blamed themselves for being aligned for decades with parties that ended up deceiving them (Stavrou 2011). It seemed that in Syntagma Square the post-civil war division between victorious Right and defeated Left, which fuelled the power relations for almost 60 years, came to an end (Douzinas 2011). Despite the fact that the Greek Left initially resisted this outcome, part of them gradually put aside the traditional rhetoric and symbols (Aslanidis 2016). This erosion of the differences between within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions, which was facilitated by the *attribution of similarity* and *frame alignment* among protesters, denotes a *boundary deactivation* process (Tilly 2003, 21, 84).

The boundary deactivation process was marked by the extensive use of national symbols, especially by more conservative and elderly people. Participants were singing the national anthemas well as Cretan songs associated with the concept of Hellenism, while waving national flags of various sizes (Papapavlou 2015). As this was not a common feature of popular protests, it needs to be explained. Some social scientists tried to explain it through the catch-all concept of populism (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016). According to this perspective, nationalism is an unavoidable (if not constitutive) element of populist mobilisations.

Contrary to this argument, let us consider both the expressive and instrumental aspects of this choice. Successive austerity packages were imposed by external institutions (Troika), while people were contesting the ability of their representatives to lead the country (Sotiris 2011). It was easier for people with no prior experience of collective protest and unfamiliar with traditional symbols of labour movements and the Greek Left to appropriate national symbols (ibid). Let us now turn to the strategic aspects of this choice. First, it is difficult to imagine how people can involve themselves in politics without addressing the only legitimising authority of the nation-states era, the nation, or call into question the legitimacy of elected authorities without references to higher-level concepts. Second, use of national symbols helps people express massively what Charles Tilly (2004) considers the core tasks of (successful) social movements: the public presentation of Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, Commitment. Third, activating popular historical narratives and bridging them with the current situation, such as claiming the heritage of the Greek resistance against the Nazis, is a relatively typical *frame alignment* process (Benford and Snow 2000), and is simply an inherent part of the protesters' communication strategy.

Therefore, considering that protesters, some consciously and others not, undertake to bolster the political leverage of protests, we have to ask: did the use of national symbols increase "frame salience" by securing "frame centrality" and "narrative fidelity" (ibid)? Were beliefs, values and ideas associated with

protest frames essential to the lives of the wider public (frame centrality)? Were they culturally resonant (frame fidelity)? If we answer positively (as I do), then speaking of (national)populism prevents us from understanding how protesters try to defeat their opponents by unpacking their strategies and rationales. It would be at least paradoxical if protesters could not respond to a government claiming to serve the nation's interest while downgrading the overall standard of living, by conveying that this is not the nation's will or interest, especially in Greece where notions of massive popular mobilisation, uprising or even revolution are highly resonant and constitute an integral part of the national narrative (Kouvelakis 2011). "Nation" as well as "people" or "society" are but modern "master frames" that everybody can use at will. These are "empty signifiers" that anyone may fill with whatever transforms them into a winning discursive formula.

Boundary change and the formation of the anti-memorandum "us"

After the signature of the 1st Memorandum, the political climate was polarised. *Polarisation* can be defined as the "widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode" that "vacates the moderate centre [and] impedes the recompositions of previous coalitions" and combines mechanisms of opportunity/threat spirals, competition, category formation, and the omnipresent brokerage" (McAdam et al 2001, 322). Every large protest event (general strike and demonstration in the centre of Athens) resulted in violent clashes with the police forces. Indignados' large scale protests in front of the Parliament during the two general strikes (on 15 and 28-29 June 2011) were met with harsh police repression too. Vociferous chants were aimed at politicians, the police, or broadcasters of the main private news programmes who were considered to be *threatening* popular interests. State repression triggered a "backlash effect", with some participants declaring they had changed their minds concerning the political system, the role of the state and their own social position (Gaitanou 2016), and others directly linking this shift to the fact that they had personally experienced repression for the first time (Papapavlou 2015, Roussos 2014). This process was reinforced by the widespread practice of "citizens' journalism" which brought social media and mass media into direct confrontation. *Competition* across the lines for uncommitted allies in society and the linking of previously unconnected sites and individuals (*brokerage*) brought about further convergence between different components of every single bloc. Everyday interactions between a converging "us" and a respective "them" overshadowedallotherpolitical boundaries resulting in the formation of almost exclusive categories. The *category formation* process was captured by slogans like "it is either us or them", "they decided without us, we move on without them".

However, as I have already mentioned, the boundary between organised democratic anti-memorandum forces and mainstream pro-memorandum ones was as deep as the respective boundary between the former and the Golden

Dawn, according to relevant research based on interviews and questionnaires (Papanikolopoulos et al. 2014). Despite this, "ideological convergence of the extremes" became the favourite motto of pro-bailout parties and media (Doxiadis 2016). Obviously, the aim of this political assumption was to defame protests by concealing that the convergence process between anti-austerity protesters took place not in favour of the extremes, but against the extremes of pro-bailout forces on the one hand and authoritarianism/fascism on the other. Besides, the formation of the anti-memorandum oppositional structure was triggered by the convergence between governmental parties of the Centre-left and Centre-right on the grounds of neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

Did the aforementioned processes (convergence, boundary deactivation, boundary change) result in the emergence of something more than an alliance structure? Scholars have suggested a series of such protest outcomes. The emergence of a social (Giovanopoulos 2011) or collective subject (Simiti 2014), a social coalition (Sotiris 2011), the social category of Multitude (Douzinas 2011), an inclusive identity (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016) are among them. The pluralism of concepts reveals the difficulty to deal with a movement process with contingent and uncertain outcomes as well as unclear, complex and possibly transitory forms of doing popular politics.

First and foremost, it would be a mistake to underestimate the "frame disputes" (Benford and Snow 2000) through which collective action frames were developed. Stavrou (2011) describes three such disputes, which I personally observed from up close. Left-wing activists migrated from the lower to the upper square and started shouting leftist slogans to balance the nationalistic ones that prevailedduring the first few days. Similarly, in order to offset the impression created by the omnipresent national flag, they distributed flags of Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, they managed to persuade a crucial majority that trade-unions are not total sell-outs (as most of them were thinking) and the movement of the squares could cooperate with labour movements. In this context, we can acknowledge different identities feeding Indignados protests (Simiti 2014) or their activation, consolidation, amplification, and convergence (Roussos 2014), whereas *identity* or *actor constitution* (McAdam et al. 2001) could hardly been identified. Aslanidis and Marantzidis (2016) assert that an indignant citizen's identity was constructed, although Kioupkiolis (2019) considers such an identity as a practical one. On their part, Prentoulis and Thomassen stress that Indignados "never achieved a unified, full political identity" (2014, 231). Fieldwork provides evidence that "the Greek Square Movement was not a representative case of a social movement sharing a minimum collective identity", since "even though protestors shared a common opposition to the memorandum, they did not always identify positively with each other because of their conflicting norms and values" (Simiti 2014, 8). Serious tensions appeared "between those who only want to restore their old privileges and those who think that 'another world is possible'" (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013, 453). As an interviewed participant put it, "you could find among the five thousand in the square, at least two thousand perceptions of what was happening" (Gaitanou 2016, 256). Protestors did not abandon their

particular political identities in favour of a new one. In fact, out-group dynamics were more developed than in-group ones, so they did not create a coherent collectivity (and a respective internal life) which could continue acting as an entity. Instead, they voted for different anti-memorandum parties in the elections of 2012 and 2015 (SYRIZA, Democratic Left, Independent Greeks, Golden Dawn). Hence, the anti-memorandum socio-political category did not develop into something more than a coherent electoral pool.

Theories of populism and contentious politics

Populism is a contested concept. As a matter of fact, there are four different approaches to the study of populism: populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004), populism as a strategy (Weyland 2001), populism as a discourse (Laclau 2005), and populism as a style (Ostiguy 2009). However, when it comes to qualifying a political actor as populist, all of them seem to include as minimum denominators what Stavrakakis (2017, 528) has called "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism" criteria. Thus, a common feature between populist parties, movements or leaders is that society is considered as being divided into two main blocks: the unprivileged people and the established elites. According to ongoing research, economic and political distress produced by the Great Recession and the way national governments dealt with it gave rise to populist phenomena, including populist social movements (Aslanidis 2016, 2017, Gerbaudo 2017, Kioupkiolis 2019). However, theories of populism do not seem, at least to me, an adequate analytic framework for the study of social movements, for many reasons.

Is every social movement populist?

Even if we put aside that the notion of people does not seem to be brand new, since it can be considered as a "modification of the idea of proletariat" (Dean 2014), "people" is not the only key-word that the so-called populists use in their rhetoric. They share with non-populists their systematic appeals to "society" and the "citizens", which in fact are synonyms of "people". Hence, as Stavrakakis et al (2015, 73) have shown, populism is a matter of degree, since all parties use a populist framing, albeit in varying degrees. Besides, many scholars have indicated that populism is to be found both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, in the streets or in power, organised in top-down or in bottom-up fashion, leader-centric or leaderless, statist or neoliberal, democratic or anti-democratic, agonistic or antagonistic, refined or vulgar, and so forth (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, Katsambekis 2019). In this sense, the notion of populism has been so overstretched as to become almost all-embracing, thus leading some scholars to call into question its relevance (e.g. Meade 2019, 12).

Similarly, at least in the work of the most prominent populism scholar (Laclau 2005), the logic of populism is the logic of (democratic) politics, which means that all democratic politics are populist in one way or another. Having said that,

in the democratic era (and area) political actors can only overcome their political opponents by gathering forces under the umbrella of the normative principle of "people" (and its synonyms). The notion of people is the master frame of the democratic era, as was "God" during the Middle Ages, when everybody was fighting in his name. In this way, characterising political actors as populist when they claim that "he or she cares about people's concerns" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, 323) makes no sense. Who can address multiple political issues nowadays without making reference to the people, except if they abide by oligarchic or dictatorial principles? I believe (and hope) that the answer is "none".

Furthermore, if we differentiate populist movements from other types of social movements on the grounds of their broader scope of membership and policy range (Aslanidis 2016), we have to conclude that movements for national liberation, democratisation, social-democratic, communist or other radical change, are by definition populist. In this context, using the catch-all concept of populism in social movement studies does not seem fruitful. Having said this, it is logical to ask ourselves if there are any political actors out there who are undoubtedly non-populist. Most definitions identify the elites as standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from populists, while many scholars speak of an emerging populism/anti-populism frontier (Stavrakakis 2014, Moffit 2018). However, populism scholars frequently make abstraction of the stance of the elites in the face of populist challenges: "you do not truly represent people, we do". In this way, the elite claims that it is the real representative of people's interest, while the populist opposition is a kind of political, ideological or economic elite, which tries to take advantage of people's discontent. Even members of the establishment or a privileged class may use populist rhetoric when they criticise the state of political affairs (Vittori 2017). Similarly, anti-populist discourse, although it targets and demonises populism, "conveniently ends up by incorporating all references to the people as well" (Stavrakakis 2014, 506), while moralisation and binary consideration of politics characterises both populism and anti-populism.

Populism and the elite's rhetoric

Aslanidis states that "social movement scholars have thus far failed to give populism its deserved attention and to incorporate it into their field of study. Although sociologists, political scientists, and historians have explored diverse facets of the intersection of populism and social dissent, there has been no concerted effort towards building a comprehensive framework for the study of populist mobilisation, despite its growing significance in the past decades" (2016, 301). The truth is that the unwillingness of social movement scholars to use the concept of populism to characterise popular protest is rooted in the rejection of Le Bon and Tarde's argument about the transformation of mobilised individuals into undifferentiated and unreasonable masses as well as of the subsequent academic sociology focusing on psychological strains rather than rationality and strategic options of social movements. The theory of populism,

like the aforementioned "old-fashioned" social movement theories, does not constitute an analytical tool alone, since "populism [...] was consciously transformed in an all-encompassing word aimed at denigrating or, at least, criticising those movements or parties, which contrast the mainstream views" (Vittori 2017: 43). If Calhoun's remark that "the most widespread, powerful, and radical social movements in the modern world have been of a type we may call 'populist'" is valid (Aslanidis 2016, 302), why is the opposite not so? Do the elites not call every widespread, powerful and radical movement "populist"? Indeed, during the Great Recession we witnessed "the proliferation of new types of 'anti-populist' discourses aiming at the discursive policing and the political marginalisation of emerging protest movements against the policing of austerity, especially in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal" (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, 134).

If we define "populist social movement as non-institutional collective mobilisation expressing a catch-all political platform of grievances that divides society between an overwhelming majority of pure people and a corrupt elite, and that claims to speak on behalf of the people in demanding the restoration of political authority into their hands as rightful sovereigns" (Aslanidis 2016, 304-305), 1) we exclude as a priori incorrect any explanation of crisis based on the unwillingness and incapability of political and economic elites to deal with crisis on behalf of the middle and working classes; 2) we consider as "populist" every ideology that does not recognise the necessity and legitimacy of inequalities; 3) we name "populist" even the denouncement of the many constitutional violations on the part of the elites during the crisis era. In this case, it would be difficult to distinguish the definition of populism from the elite's rhetoric. Similarly, defining populism as "democratic illiberalism", whose main feature is supposed to be the idea of people's political sovereignty (Pappas 2015), would lead us to criticise as illiberal the Greek Constitution itself, which explicitly declares that "all powers derive from the People and exist for the People" or that "observance of the constitution is entrusted to the patriotism of the Greeks who shall have the right and the duty to resist by all possible means against anyone who attempts the violent abolition of the Constitution" (last article of the Greek Constitution). But it is impossible to be faithful to a liberal constitution and an enemy of political liberalism at the same time. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to state that definitions like the aforementioned include normative considerations and political connotations currently included in the elite's rhetoric. By contrast, even prominent populist scholars have argued that "actors or parties that employ only an anti-elitist rhetoric should not be characterised as populist" as well as "discourses that defend the principle of popular sovereignty and the will of the people are not necessarily instances of populism" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 151).

Furthermore, it is important to note that many definitions identify populism with any endogenous movement resource that can make a movement really dangerous for the status quo: mass mobilisation and leadership (Roberts 2006, 127), as well as moral struggle (de la Torre 2010, 4). Given that, we have to think of how mass non-populist movements can emerge. For most social movement

scholars it is difficult to imagine such a movement not relying on the mobilisation of mass constituencies, injustice framing, and formal (or informal) leadership (or leadership tasks).

(Protest) politics without "us-them" confrontation?

Democratic politics are dominated by a series of antagonisms and confrontations. But populism is supposed to recognise only a single battle line separating society into two antagonistic social groups, the people versus the elite. Yet, "populists" are not alone in adopting this Manichean way of thinking.

Adversary framing is the typical discursive strategy of every challenger, in contrast with power holders who are likely to call for "unity". In this context, both challengers and power holders seek to increase their political leverage via simplification and binary logic. Populism scholars bypass the fact that social movements are polycephalic and heterogeneous with these various parts being devoid of any control mechanisms, and consequently "populist" simplifications are unavoidable. A protest movement is not endowed with the ability to address authorities via detailed analyses and long discussions; it is not a party or a person. Consequently, it makes no sense to associate simplistic construction of "we"-"them" identities with conspirational theories. "Boundary framing" (Hunt et al. 1994) is a very typical social movement activity.

However, the theory of populism could shed light on the strategic options of protests. As Aslanidis notes, "cultivating the antagonism between People and elites was the best way to sustain a healthy level of mobilisation. The identity of the sovereign People-citizens became a jealously guarded treasure. Whenever individuals or groups attempted to assert a competing identity invoking class, religion, ethnicity, or other category, their actions were considered divisive or centrifugal and were met with great hostility by a majority of vigilant protesters" (2016, 315-316). Notwithstanding, he does not link these concerns with protesters' attempts to find a winning formula with respect to the legitimation/delegitimation game between themselves and the authorities. In other words, he underestimates the instrumental use of discourse and symbols. In final instance, protesters want to win their struggle, not express themselves. Even Tejerina et al., who consider that "one of the central themes in *occupy movements* has been the attempt to attain/restore valorised identities that provide the person or the group with recognition and dignity", specify that "these movements cannot be said to be expressions of *identity* politics" (2013, 19).

A new kind of populism?

Some researchers of contemporary protest movements prevent us from fully embracing the pan-populism argument by arguing on the one hand that extreme right activists cannot be considered fully populist in the strict sense of the term and on the other that populism that may be observed in the Occupy

and Indignados movements is highly specific. In particular, serious doubts have emerged concerning the conceptualising of the extreme right as populist, since the latter seems to be seeking to replace selfish and greedy elites by a more protective nationalist elite instead of returning the power to the people (Caiani and della Porta 2011), while mostly denigrating the immigrants, leftists, lgbtqi or roma people, rather than the dominant elites themselves. In this sense, the profile of the extreme right is more nationalist and nativist than populist (Stavrakakis et al 2015, 65-66).

By contrast, contemporary grassroots left-wing activism holds a more democratic, inclusionary and pluralistic profile (Gerbaudo 2017, Mead 2019, Kioupkiolis 2019). Contemporary mass movements, like the 2011 "square movements" are markedly different from traditional populist movements in a number of respects: they are leaderless, organised in a bottom-up fashion, through open, inclusive and participatory procedures (Gerbaudo 2019, Kioupkiolis 2019). They intentionally move away from the top-down, leader-centric populism of the past, which relied upon a vertical model of representation of a passive and homogeneous people. In this sense, most definitions of populism prove inadequate here. "Square movements" constitute a new kind of populism, a "radical democratic grassroots populism" or "post-populism" from the bottom-up (Kioupkiolis 2019), or a libertarian and individualistic variation of populism, a convergence of "neo-anarchism" and "democratic populism" that Gerbaudo (2017) call "citizenism". However, to my understanding, it would be difficult to consider as populist a political discourse that has "citizen" in its centre (Gerbaudo 2017, 8) or is centreless, pluralistic, practical and hardly engaged with identity processes (Kioupkiolis 2019).

Horizontality and autonomy were the real novelty of the 2011 movements (Castells 2012), and this key trait prevented protests from taking a hegemonic and representational form (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2014). This very characteristic of "square movements" which combined the capability and intention of acting together with the incapability and unwillingness of self-transformation into an unitary entity with unitarian features led some scholars to speak of the emergence of a "multitude" in Hardt and Negri's terms (Douzinas 2011, Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013). For theorists of multitude, this latter is defined as a heterogeneous group of singular individuals that act in common without representatives creating a common political will (Hardt and Negri 2004, 2012). If it is true that postmodern capitalism promotes individualism and networking instead of ideological identities and political concurrence (Douzinas 2011), we understand that it provides both opportunities and obstacles to collective mobilisation, since it facilitates mobilisation against an external common enemy, while it weakens in-group dynamics. This was exactly the Indignados case: the creation of a mobilised (but internally divided) social category unable to transform itself in a self-serving, self-reproducing and self-representing entity.

Hence, despite some attempts having been made to combine the theories of populism and multitude (Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014), no common

political culture or set of beliefs could unite the logic of hegemony and that of autonomy. In fact, there were different sets of participants in Syntagma Square with opposite values and ideas.

Did many passers-by, employees, elderly people or parents who participated for a while in the squares' activities find the idea of direct-democratic social or political organisation attractive? Were they disposed to undertake such commitments and pay the associated personal costs? Of course not. Since we suggest that horizontality and autonomy on an organisational level is linked to the efforts to create a micro-society according to a prefigurative logic (Ancelovici 2016), we have to take into account that the direct-democratic discourse was expressed by only a few thousand people from particular social groups: leftists and politicised youths. Horizontalism and prefigurative politics are associated basically with the protest community and culture (ibid). The majority does not express such concerns. They mobilise mostly on the grounds of fear rather than on the grounds of enthusiasm. Crisis of representation, which is "old" among the younger generations and "new" among the more elderly, constituted the common ground on which they met.

"Direct democracy" was a frame adopted after voting during one of the first General Assemblies in the lower square (27 Mai 2011) dominated by leftists and younger age groups (Mitropoulos 2011). As I have already mentioned, the politically more conservative protesters in the upper square made use of very different political imagery. Slogans were mainly aimed at politicians and the Parliament (Papapavlou 2015). A general agreement emerged on this topic, while everything touching on "direct democracy" remained shrouded in vagueness (ibid). Gaitanou's research "revealed that participants tend to locate the problem in the specific functioning of the Greek political system rather than questioning the structure of the system as such", since "the majority of participants claimed that the problem is not inherent in parliamentary democracy as a regime, but in the way it functions in Greece or in its political representatives (parties, politicians, etc.)" (2016, 177, 209).

What followed the signature of the Mid-term austerity program by the Greek Parliament (29th June 2011) was somewhat revealing of the dynamics of this movement. The masses withdrew, leaving a few thousand (and gradually a few hundred) "usual suspects" in the square. Afterwards, instead of a substantial diffusion of direct-democratic procedures or institutions, we witnessed spectacular changes in the party system along with the spectacular rise of SYRIZA. Assuming that the Greek anti-austerity campaign encompassed characteristics of both "contained" and "warring" movements (Diani and Kousis 2014), we consider the magnitude and type of changes Greek protesters were seeking to impose upon the Greek political system. There was an overwhelming desire to regain control over political decision-making through active participation. But not in order to replace parliamentary democracy with another, direct one. The masses sought to restore the state's capacity rather than decrease it. While many left-wing youths were inspired by direct-democratic ideals, the vast majority of citizens were inspired by its opposite: statism.

With this in mind, we can hardly argue, at least within the framework of our case study, that "the movement of the squares tried to build an 'under-power', a power from below, which starting from the square could progressively reclaim all levels of society, including state institutions" (Gerbaudo 2017, 10). What Gerbaudo (2017, 17-18) and Kioupkiolis (2019, 180-188) indicate as distinct features of "citizenism"/"anarcho-populism" and "radical democratic grassroots populism" respectively constitute the political culture of just one demographic component of the "squares movement", the left-wing youth. "Populism" among the more elderly and/or more right-wing participants was totally different, and clearly more traditional. Hence, populism scholars should speak of the coexistence of different kinds of "populisms". In such a case, what really counts is the examination of the frame alignment processes. But, if so, the contentious politics theory seems to be more relevant than the theory of populism when addressing this issue.

Populism is just a frame

Bringing together conflicting orientations is not only a matter of adequate political discourses. It is equally a matter of a) a new repertoire of action (square occupations, popular assemblies) that allowed people with such different social and political profiles to gather all together; b) the massive presence and mobilisation of the "movement community", members of acknowledged leftist and anarchist organisations, groups and networks, holders of skills and social capital acquired via previous engagement in social movements, campaigns or the December 2008 uprising, that all contributed to secure inclusiveness of popular assemblies, appeasement of tensions, direct-democratic processes in decision-making, sustainability and viability of square occupations and encampments as well as the coordination with other civil society actors, that are all crucial for protests to reach a massive scale, durability as well as social and political leverage; and c) claim-making on the grounds of master frames (anti-austerity and democracy). Populism can explain neither the physical presence of the people in the squares nor the development of protest dynamics. Instead, tactical innovation, networking of the protest community, and frame alignment processes can do. Hence, it is more fruitful to examine the role of relational and cognitive mechanisms and processes activated during the hot summer of 2011 in the shaping of protest dynamics in Greek Squares.

As Caiani and della Porta (2011) suggest in relation to social movement studies, it would be more useful to conceptualise populism as a frame, which can easily be bridged with other frames. At least one scholar of populism follows their suggestion (Aslanidis 2017). I preferred not to use the theoretical framework of populism at all for several reasons, which I will outline in a brief, yet analytic way.

Let us take Laclau's definition of populist discourse, which is articulated through the establishment of a chain of equivalence among unmet demands of heterogeneous social groups, the formation of an antagonistic frontier

separating the people from the unresponsive power bloc, and the construction of an identity around of the notion of people. In my analysis, I preferred to use the relevant notions of Dynamics of Contention Program (McAdam et al 2001). More particularly, I spoke of *convergence* among protesters, instead of chain of equivalence, because convergence includes physical face-to-face interactions which are as important as the equalization of social demands on a discursive level. Furthermore, on the protest level, convergence presupposes *deactivation of traditional boundaries* between protesters with different values and ideas. In fact, this is where the difference lies between top-down and bottom-up political procedures: the latter take place exclusively among people with flesh and blood, whose communication is a demanding interpersonal and intra-group give-and-take process that exertsdiscursive articulation of claims, which can be accomplished by representatives. Moreover, equalisation of claims is not sufficient for protesters to converge, since common (or compatible) diagnostic and prognostic framing is needed too. For that reason, the establishment of a chain of equivalence among popular demands needs to be completed by *frame alignment*. As we saw earlier, scholars of populism associate different individuals and groups' opposition to authorities or the elites and their self-identification with empty signifiers (e.g. people) with the construction of an identity. In contrast, contentious politics theorists focus on the middle level of framing activity and its outcomes, which are considered to be contingent and subject to the broader protest dynamics. In this context, the *polarisation* process between protesters and the authorities can lead to *category formation* (McAdam et al 2001, 323), but not necessarily to the formation of a new identity. Finally, *boundary change* and the "formation of an antagonistic frontier" are obviously synonyms, albeit in our analysis boundary change is a by-product of both state repression and state unresponsiveness.

Concluding remarks

Many scholars have tried to explain the Occupy/Indignados protests through the prism of populism. It is of the utmost importance for activists to be aware of the uses of populism by both academics and politicians or journalists, since populism is mostly used as a pejorative concept. As we have seen, many definitions of populism contain normative considerations currently included in the elite's rhetoric, while targeting whatever makes protests dangerous for the elites: contentiousness, massiveness, moral strength, and leadership. In contrast, contentious politics theory avoids political connotations, while being a very useful tool for the study of protest dynamics by focusing on mechanisms and processes activated mostly through experienced protesters' agency. Protest dynamics and the emergence of new political boundaries cannot be explained by the diffusion of a new kind of rhetoric alone. As the Indignados movement has shown, mass mobilisation from below entails much more than adopting a catch-all populist discourse.

Political conflict in the democratic era (and area) has much to do with the attempts of governments, parties, movements, and other political actors, to

transform social cleavages into political boundaries in a strategic way. The Greek "movement of the squares" is significant insofar as it enabled the emergence of a new political boundary that shaped the Greek political landscape and substantially changed the Greek party system. Indignados protests were characterised by social and political inclusiveness. Most importantly, previous boundaries between protesters started to lose salience, since a wide process of frame alignment was under way. In this context, a huge cognitive task was undertaken by thousands of activists, whose capability to appease internal disputes, bridge differences, highlight commonalities, and canalise common action towards common targets, proved a crucial precondition for long-lasting grassroots mobilisation in times of unprecedented social and labour fragmentation. For movements concerned with the victorious resistance to the neoliberal dictates, this strategic boundary framing must be resolutely employed as a tool for the reconstruction of key socio-political blocs that are capable of striking back.

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