

Chapter 5

Syriza's Populism: The Ethical Dimensions



Sinan Evcan, Assist. Prof. Dr.

^aDepartment of International Relations, Cyprus International University, Nicosia, North Cyprus

*Corresponding Author: Sinan Evcan; sevcan@ciu.edu.tr

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Abstract

Populism has lately been subject to many discussions in both academic circles and in the world political arena. For ten years several right-wing populist parties have taken power positions in various parts of the world. Leftist populist parties, on the other hand, have gained strength relatively later than their right-wing counterparts and in terms of electoral success they are still far behind them. To understand the rise and success of left and right wing populisms we should first focus on the meaning of populism in practical politics. In Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization; populism, is a creation of a people. It has to do with the establishment of a boundary between an "us" and a "them," between the people and the establishment. To establish a hegemonic influence over people everything then depends on which "us" and which "them" is created both in the populist discourses and actions. The part of truth within the contents assigned to "us" and "them", their instrumentalization on the way to electoral success, and the way they are actually realized necessitate a crucial conceptual investigation with regard to the ethical connotations of these two created identities. Within this framework, this chapter will discuss ethical dimensions of Greek leftist populism represented by Syriza by analyzing the discrepancies between its electoral promises and its actual practices. In the practical level, the chapter will analyze the general ethical inconsistencies of Syriza in Power. Syriza experienced both power and opposition positions in politics. This gives us the opportunity to compare the consistency between Syriza's actions and its previously declared intentions to assess its ethical sincerity. The ethical inconsistencies of Syriza and the reasons behind its electoral rise and decline are two essential questions this chapter will try to answer.

Keywords: Left populism, Greece, Syriza, Ethics, Elections

5.1. Introduction

According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), Populism “is, by definition, anti-establishment in ethos and prone to justifying practices and/or policies that seek to capture the general will of the people, e.g., referenda and plebiscites, and that are responsive to their ‘common sense’” (p. 7).

Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashcaan (2020) quote Werner Müller and Takis Pappas arguing that “populism must be understood as a form of ‘democratic illiberalism’ and therefore must be treated with caution and contained” Here what Müller and Papas argue requires a little further explanation. What we should understand from democratic illiberalism? Why the formula is not an anti-democratic liberalism instead?

Dean and Maiguashcaan (2020), following Mudde’s ideas, argue that “as a fundamentally ‘opportunistic’ politics whose sole purpose is the attainment of power, populism remains a potential danger to any democratic project understood as an inclusive or plural one (p. 16)” If populism is an anti-establishment in ethos, populism in general should be questioned from an ethical perspective. For this reason, we have to investigate which dimensions of populism (as practiced by today’s political parties classified as populist) are against universal ethical principles. If we leave aside the “power-politics” which is the common understanding of politics in today’s global world, politics has also a universal ethical dimension when taken from the angle of universal justice and common welfare of all world communities. Opportunism, self-interest and status oriented aspirations when engaging in politics are against most of the ethical foundations advanced by philosophers of ethics. Taken for instance by the angle of Kantian ethics, no action should be done with a fear or personal benefit calculation behind. In Kantian lexicon this is called the categorical imperative. From the Kantian angle if someone does not lie simply by fear of punishment, this is not an ethical stance, because behind that stance there is no motif of a veridical ethical belief, but simply a fear of punishment therefore this stance is a calculating stance. If we extend the Kantian ethical position to political actions in general, we will have the following picture: If someone engages in whatever political activity with the purpose of personal benefit, power and status, this person ignores the ethical dimensions of politics which are justice and common good of the community.

By the same token, Alain Badiou, a contemporary French philosopher, advances a concept, namely, “disinterested interest” which according to Badiou constitutes the basis of an ethical stance. A disinterested interest according to Badiou (2001), identifies a subject deciding or choosing to follow the path of a truth procedure without calculating any associated benefit. In the source of all differentiations between two stances labelled as good or bad, there should be an ethical basis. In general, the deontological theories of ethics from Kant to Badiou take Universal Justice as the basis of any ethical stance. Badiou (2003) goes one step further than Kant’s strict rationalism and adds love to justice as another precondition of an ethical stance: “It is incumbent upon love to become law so that truth’s post-evental universality can continuously inscribe itself in the world” (p. 88). Ethical postures adopted by those philosophers are thus clearly anti-Machiavellian. Unethical means contradicting with universal justice can no way bring ethical ends.

Apart from Deontologist theories of ethics we also have consequentialist theories namely act utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham, and rule-utilitarianism developed by John Stuart Mill. Those consequentialist theories find their nucleus in utility maximization and their maxim is: “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. However especially act-utilitarianism clearly contradicts Kantian deontology. Kant dismisses anything out of the call of duty which is ethics itself. For Kant no calculation of benefit should precede any action. However, act-utilitarianism has strategies and calculations to maximize utility. The consequences should benefit the greatest number of people but there is no prohibition of any means to reach that end. This means that any mean can be justifiable if it brings about the desired ends. Here, act-utilitarianism is nearly identical with the Machiavellian maxim: “the end justifies the means”. Later on, John Stuart Mill, another Utilitarian philosopher, tried to correct this ethical shortcoming of act-utilitarianism by introducing rule-utilitarianism. The rule-utilitarian, like the act-utilitarian, tries to benefit maximum number of people but through fairest and most lawful means possible. Even, here there is an open end in the formulation of rule-utilitarianism. Rule-utilitarian theory claims that the means that are utilized towards an end should be as fair and as just as possible, but it does not specify what to do if the means are not fair enough and there is no other possibility.

This open-ended formulation necessarily opens the door to relativism because it is blurry how someone will be able to decide on what the fairest and most lawful means are in a specific situation. Here, according to Kantian position, universal justice cannot be quantified. This means that something is just or unjust, ethical or unethical. A statement such as “This act is ninety percent ethical” has no place in the Kantian discourse.

Utilitarian theories want to collect effective results benefiting greatest possible number of people. However, despite John Stuart Mill’s efforts to place Utilitarianism in a more deontological status, the expression “greatest possible number of people” has ethical shortcomings inside because some people will necessarily not be amongst this greatest possible number. Consequently, no utilitarian theory of ethics, even in the best situation, may establish a total justice for all humanity.

Besides deontological and utilitarian theories of ethics there is also the virtue theory of ethics whose nucleus is acting on the basis of virtue and reason. Virtue theories derive their inspirations from Aristotelian philosophy.

What can be distilled from deontological and virtue ethical theories are the supremacy of universal justice and reason. If we add love to these two concepts we may obtain a general umbrella as a unifying shelter under which all ethical approaches may coexist: Justice, love and reason.

What is then the relation of populist politics with Ethics? The major promise of populism is the idea that People is the nucleus of politics. Populist leaders and parties defend the will of people against the unjust system established by the status quo. Populist politics usually engages in an anti-elite propaganda for the sake of People. All these anti-elite discourses have supposedly one major principle: Bringing justice to people against the corrupt elites. This is supposedly the ethical nucleus of populist politics. Nevertheless, defending people against the corrupt elites is just a formula Populism often uses to gain votes, to obtain power status and to reach some benefits. Populism at first introduces itself as the warrior of people’s rights, it also presents itself as people’s voice, but often violates its own promise after reaching the power position. This is the ethical dilemma most populist movements end up with.

This chapter will therefore analyze first the various academic definitions of populism, then it will investigate an example of leftist populism: Syriza of Greece.

Finally, the chapter will focus on the ethical dimensions of the Syriza case.

5.2. A Glance on academic studies on populist politics

Populism has been theorized in various dimensions by different scholars. According to Jonathan Dean and Bice Maiguashca (2020), there are two main orientations in academic studies of populism: The approaches represented by Cas Mudde and Ernesto Laclau. Cas Mudde sees populism as a form of “democratic illiberalism” whereas Laclau analyzes populism from a post-Marxist discourse theory of hegemony.

In Mudde’s and Kaltwasser’s (2017) words, populism is a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (p. 6).”

Ernesto Laclau’s approach to populism, in terms of admitting that there are two antagonistic camps created within the populist discourse, is not very different than Mudde and Kaltwasser. However, Laclau’s point of view considers populist reflex as a precondition of today’s politics. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 3), Laclau’s conception of populism leads to the idea that populism can help achieve radical democracy by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo. What Laclau emphasizes in his *On Popular Reason* is not necessarily reintroducing conflict into politics but simply the idea that politics proceeds necessarily on the basis of antagonisms.

Stating that antagonism is the nucleus of populist politics, we should now begin to investigate the type of antagonism upon which Greek Syriza has built its party strategy. The basis of the antagonism which gives Syriza a chance to flourish is the atmosphere of the economic crisis which deeply influenced Greek middle and lower classes. The reason behind the crisis according to Syriza’s discourse was the global inequality caused by the neo-liberal global capitalism.

5.3. The case of Syriza

Syriza emergence dates back to 2004. According to Michalis Spourdalakis, party's founding member and a professor of political science in the University of Athens, Syriza is built upon a 'Left Dialogue Forum'. The forces that gathered around this initiative, including Synapsismos, which was the largest party, as well as other smaller Left groupings, decided strategically to emphasize its presence in the social field by participating in the social movements" (Gray, 2017, p. 333). Spourdalakis emphasizes that Syriza's difference from other parties was that it participated in these movements rather than patronizing them. The party did not impose its will on them:

We were there as radical Leftist individuals, groupings, and subgroupings in order to support them, to provide them with political, legal, and other kinds of resources, and to learn from them. That was a key strategic choice that built trust between the people in and around Syriza over a decade. (Gray, 2017, p. 333)

Syriza's electoral rise in 2012 and 2015 elections was then not surprising as the party established a strong bond between itself and the people. In the words of a Syriza strategist interviewed by Tsakatika (2016):

In the squares it was easy for a political milieu that was already constituted (SYRIZA) to become hegemonic. In something that is so fluid and spontaneous and a first for a vast part of the people, in all this aura of direct democracy and Assemblies ... our people were there anyway ... there was no (formal party) decision to be there, we were just there. (p. 527)

Syriza's bond with the people was beyond the parliament. The party was in direct touch with social movements. However, as the party increased the number of its deputies in the parliament and Syriza became the main opposition party, the extra parliamentary activities of the party started to decline (Tsakatika, 2016) Nonetheless, although Syriza did not directly take part in many social mobilizations after occupying the ranks of the main opposition, it continued to voice support for social movements in its political discourse. This was perhaps the major reason which brought Syriza to the power position in 2015 elections. According to Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014) "One should bear in mind here

that the radical left's dynamic was not self-generated, but probably fuelled by the massive anti-austerity popular movements already on the rise" (p. 126). In the 2015 elections, Syriza nearly won the majority of the seats in the parliament by receiving 36% of the votes. However, the votes were not enough to form a single party government.

First ethical inconsistency of Syriza happened when formed a coalition government with the right wing ANEL party. "For a start, the government coalition with the radical right-wing Independent Greeks/ANEL did not resonate well with the 'older' segment of Syriza's electorate" (Petsinis, 2016). First time in the Greek history a radical right and a radical left populist party formed a coalition party. Although their presumed ideologies and beliefs are diametrically opposite to each other, two parties established a partnership by jointly opposing austerity measures imposed to Greece by foreign creditors. This stance was a pure populist ethical relativism which proved that when situations impose opposite beliefs might come together. According to Aslanidis and Kaltwasser (2016) "ideologically disparate leaders, Alexis Tsipras (SYRIZA) and Panos Kammenos (ANEL), were communicating regularly and avoiding any open confrontations" (p. 1078). Although Syriza's inclusionary populism was the exact opposite of ANEL's exclusionary populism, the parties acted pragmatically by not bringing those issues to the fore in their partnership.

Another ethical inconsistency in Syriza's acts was the rise of the party leader's powers after the 2012 elections. Syriza members' influence in party decision making gradually decreased after the leader has gained some autonomy in decision making (Kouvelakis, 2016). A founding member and a former spokesman of the party Michalis Spourdalakis openly admits that when "the first Congress of Syriza was held, instead of talking about strategic goals and innovative ways of organizing, most of their time was spent on deciding the processes of electing the leadership" (Gray, 2017, p. 336).

Leader orientedness is an ethical paradox that many populist parties adopt including Syriza. At first those parties claim that they are the voice of people and they walk together with the people, but when they approach power position or they simply capture the power the leader suddenly takes hold of everything. The leader often legitimizes his/her autonomy by saying that he/she rules in the name of the people. Hugo Chavez's populism was a perfect example of this

disproportional autonomy the leader enjoys within the party.

The biggest share of Syriza's electoral success no doubt belongs to the party's "anti-austerity" campaign. This promise was the key factor which brought Syriza to power in 2015 elections. However soon after Syriza came to power, it became apparent that the party was not prepared at all to keep its most fundamental promise. Spourdalakis says in his interview with Paul Gray (2017, p. 337) that before coming to power the party had no idea, and still have no idea about how state power is articulated through the networks of the civil servants. This open confession proves that Syriza promised citizens without having the knowledge of how to concretely realize these promises. At first it called an anti-austerity referendum to relieve the burden over its shoulders. The people said a solid "no" to the austerity package in the referendum. Finally, Syriza understood that it is their responsibility to negotiate the conditions of the austerity with their European counterparts. At the end Syriza had to approve a new austerity package despite all of its anti-austerity promises to the people.

It is true that European debtors and Troika have shown no flexibility for easing the economic conditions for Greece, but it seems equally true that Syriza's promises were populist in nature and there has been no plan prepared by the party to counter balance the imposed austerity measures. Moreover, according to Spourdalakis, the party has chosen the easy way by being seduced by the state power (Gray, 2017, p. 346), therefore it acted by an office-seeking reflex rather than a policy-seeking one.

When Syriza's leader Alexis Tsipras assumed office as the Prime Minister of Greece on 25 January 2015, he stated that Greek people chose change over establishment, leaving behind the years of 'humiliation' and 'pain' (Maltezos & Papadimas, 2015). SYRIZA's discourse prior to the elections was highly anti-memorandum, blaming the 'establishment' and the Troika (the European Commission; European Central Bank [ECB]; International Monetary Fund [IMF]). "Winning the elections, however, meant that the party had to collaborate with the actors they perceived to be responsible for the Greek financial crisis" (Dikaios & Tsagkroni, 2021, p. 612). During the months following the elections there have been harsh negotiations between Syriza government and the Troika. Finally, "Greece agreed not only to extend a programme, that according to their pre-electoral narrative, it would have instantly denounced and replaced it with a

programme of reconstruction, but also agreed on working under the monitoring of the European Commission, the ECB and the IMF” (Dikaïos & Tsagkroni, 2021, p. 620)

5.4. Ethical dimension of Syriza’s populism in comparison with right-wing populisms

At first sight Syriza’s discourse is based on egalitarian premises. The party declares that it is against the world neo-liberal capitalist system which brings about unequal distribution of resources. The party’s anti-austerity campaign was deriving most of its momentum from its anti-capitalist discourse. In this regard Syriza’s anti-capitalist stance is peculiar to left wing populist movements. Almost none of the right-wing populist parties in the world adopt such anti-capitalist tendencies.

In addition, right wing populist parties such as the Fidevs of Hungary, Front National in France or Donald Trump’s Republican campaign, all adopt anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner policies in their discourses and practices. As opposed to these exclusionary tendencies, Syriza’s populism claims to be inclusionary with regard to foreigners and immigrants.

Given the first two criteria, Syriza’s populism might seem ethically more solid than its right-wing counterparts because at least discourse wise it defends two fundamental ethical principles such as equality and inclusion. In terms of ethical theories these principles have positive connotations because both equality and inclusion refer to altruism against egoistic tendencies of legitimizing inequality and exclusion as natural and inevitable consequences of all societies. In this respect, right wing populist parties are not only in good terms with wild capitalism but also, they usually present foreigners and immigrants as potential threats against their nation’s economic resources.

Another feature of right-wing populism is leader orientedness. In a quick glance at populisms of Bolsanaro, Orban, Trump or Marine Le Pen, one can easily see that those movements are shaped strictly by their leaders. In this respect left-wing populism has not a better record in terms of the domination of the leaders. Latin American populisms in general and Hugo Chavez’ populism in particular is a perfect example of leader dominated movements. Although Syriza started its

political life as a strong social movement where different opinions are expressed freely and equally, it started to change axis while approaching the power position. When Syriza became the main opposition party in 2012 elections, one of the first step the party officials has taken was to change the party's organizational structure to make it more hierarchical and leader oriented.

Why then increasing the leader's power is ethics wise problematic? Simply because as many other populist parties promised, Syriza also promised to be a people's party. While talking about democracy, equality, freedom of speech and using the discourse of "we, the people"; it is difficult to convince reasonable people that the party has more internal solidarity when its leader holds the control of everything. The more leader increase its power, the less the party is in touch with the people. This means that the party does not hold the very promise it gives at the beginning: Being people's voice. In this respect Syriza also turned into a system party starting to disconnect itself from social movements. This is perhaps its first ethical inconsistency.

Syriza's second ethical dilemma is related to its coalition partner ANEL. Although Syriza is inclusionist in its discourse, its coalition partner ANEL was the exact opposite. "Tsipras and his team struggled to insulate European audiences from the nationalistic, xenophobic, and at times even racist and anti-Semitic, rhetoric of their junior partners. ANEL's discourse was set aside for the domestic audience" (Aslanidis & Kaltwasser, 2016, p. 1081). This stance can be explained by nothing but a pure opportunism which ignores, for the sake of attaining power, all the ethical principles that the party claims to adopt. How come a party claiming to be inclusionist and internationalist may shake hands with a party having exclusionary and nativist tendencies? This might be the point where populism erases all the ethical principles in favor of opportunistic power coalitions.

Another populist promise which has been given but not kept by Syriza was no doubt the anti-austerity promise. Although austerity measures were rather imposed on Greece and rejecting them was beyond Syriza's power, the party's electoral promises were uncalculated and populist in nature. Soon after Syriza assumed office it has been clear that the party has no any road plan for austerity negotiations. The ethical problem in those promises was that harsh austerity packages imposed on Greece have been used as a pivotal opportunity by Syriza and ANEL to gain votes. It should be impossible that Syriza does not know, right

before the elections, how difficult it was to change the rules of the austerity plan. Syriza should have also known that after assuming government's authority it would be impossible to act against EU and Eurozone.

5.5. Concluding remarks

Theory wise Syriza's ethical stance best fits act utilitarian theory developed by Jeremy Bentham. In Bentham's theory the means utilized to reach a goal have no importance. If the consequence of an action is on balance positive, we do not question whether the means utilized are ethical or unethical. When Syriza made an anti-austerity propaganda in its electoral campaign, neither Tsipras nor the other party decision makers seriously thought whether they can fulfill their anti-austerity promises. The consequence of their action was the most important for them and this was winning the elections at all price.

By the same token Syriza's coalition with ANEL was also a highly utilitarian and Machiavellian action. We know that for Machiavelli the end justifies the means. With regard to Syriza the easiest way to capture the power was this coalition partnership and on this road some principles are compromised.

In conclusion Syriza's ethical record is no better than its right wing counterparts in terms of opportunism, utilitarian calculations, leader domination and unkept promises. The decrease of party's votes from 2015 to 2019 can be a proof of this ethical insincerity. Syriza could have written a success story if it was sincere in its promises and if it remained loyal to the social movements which gave momentum to its rise. However, Syriza has ethically chosen the opportunist and utilitarian path instead of Kantian categorical imperative or simply virtue ethics. One last word could be the following: It is very difficult to be honest in today's parliamentary post-truth politics. The possibility of power alone may trigger a masquerade and corrupt good intentions. Populism, in its right and left wing versions, is the name of this new masquerade.

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