

The good and evil. Politics and Religion in a possible genealogy of populism

Lo bueno y lo malo. Política y Religión en una posible genealogía del populismo

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RESUMEN

El presente trabajo analiza el bagaje antropológico y genealógico del populismo como concepto social. La palabra populismo en la actualidad se ha constituido como un término de moda para explicar falencias de sistemas democráticos, movilizaciones sociales o incluso ha quienes lo ven como una estrategia de campaña política o gobernanza. No obstante, la intención de esta investigación se basa en encontrar cuales pudieran ser los primeros vestigios del concepto de populismo en el entendimiento general del mismo. A través, de la idea Judeo-Cristiana de que el pobre es bueno, descrita por Friedrich Nietzsche en la genealogía de la moral y el análisis contra fáctico de Ernesto Laclau en libro la razón populista. Los resultados que podemos obtener de esta investigación nos permiten establecer una línea de investigación en la intersección de la política y la religión dónde la etimología del populismo pudiera actuar como un hilo conductor entre ambas instituciones sociales.

Descriptor:

Política, religión, populismo, etimología, vínculo, teoría, investigación, análisis, sociales, fenómenos.

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the anthropological and genealogical baggage of populism as a social concept. The word populism today has been constituted as a fashionable term to explain failures of democratic systems, social mobilizations or even those who see it as a strategy of political campaign or governance. Nevertheless, the intention of this research is based on finding what could be the first vestiges of the concept of populism in the general understanding of it. Through the Judeo-Christian idea that the poor are good, described by Friedrich Nietzsche in the genealogy of morality and the factual analysis of Ernesto Laclau in the book the On populist reason. The results that we can obtain from this research allow us to establish a line of research at the intersection of politics and religion where the etymology of populism could act as a common thread between both social institutions.

Keywords:

Politics, religion, populism, etymology, theory, research, analysis, social, phenomena.

Introduction and background

The relationship between politics and religion has been widely studied both in theory and in comparative politics, and although we cannot determine whether there is a correlation between both, there undoubtedly a clear link between them as institutions of the social structure that we have as a society and that coexist in the same social imaginarium. Both politics and religion have been found in the representation of power nuclei of relationships within society; Hence, they can be compared in terms of several aspects, from the formation of nation-states in much of the Western Hemisphere unlike in the Eastern Hemisphere. However, on this occasion, we will base our analysis on the conceptions of politics and religion in the Western hemisphere and, more specifically, on the phenomenon of populism.

There is currently a great interest in a specific academic area of political science, namely populism, that is guided by the speeches of heads of state around the world and by public opinion. The speeches of these politicians and even the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, have populist discourses, making this trend more and more apparent. However, our interest lies in wanting to understand whether populism is a phenomenon that apparently inhabits the political and even other social spheres such as religion. Therefore, this research becomes relevant, as it will explain how Laclau, like other intellectuals, bases his theory of populism on this Judeo-Christian notion that the poor person is good; however, our interest is in the basis that gives rise to this idea and whether this could reveal links between populism and religion.

There is a huge gap in the extant knowledge on the relationship between populism and religion, especially regarding the correlation or a determining link between them. Historically, the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* indirectly establishes the first approach in this relationship by marking the historical etymology of the words “good” and

“bad”. The etymology of the word good, how it has changed the relationships in society, its effect, and the construction of identities through the term in the social and historical development of human beings will be explored herein. The terms good and bad served as distinctions in the medieval era of the actions or reactions, wherein the nobles had to differentiate themselves from the commoners and the lower social stratifications. The church reversed the term and coined the same for the actions of the less favoured, vindicating it in the social sphere and presenting the Judeo-Christian idea that the poor are good. This will be one of the axes on which this paper will base its development and analyse the possible relationship between populism and religion. Further, the work of Ernesto Laclau in *On Populist Reason* is a key piece in the completion of this research. According to Laclau (2005), in the populist imaginarium, people acquire infinite virtues. The manual worker, i.e. the simple and poor man, embodies a political ideal, while the bureaucrat and the parasite banker are the enemies of society. This would explain the Judeo-Christian idea that the poor are good and its relationship with Nietzsche’s work.

Unfortunately, the relationship between populism and religion has not been studied extensively; for many academics, populism is only a political phenomenon. Of course, these scholars base the idea of populism on a theory very different from Laclau's. The theory that Laclau developed, like other intellectuals of populism like Chantal Mouffe, Francisco Panizza, and Yannis Stavrakakis, will allow us to generate an analysis and subsequently answer the questions posed herein. How does an appeal to the concepts of “good”, “evil”, “ressentiment”, and the “people” and the “other”, as understood by Laclau, Nietzsche, and those who draw on their work, contribute to our understanding of the relationship between populism and religion?

Finally, in order to establish an axis of analysis between religion and populism, we will adopt the ideas of collective identity, identification, ideology, and discursive construction through

discourse. In this part, the texts of David Howarth, Jason, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis based on discourse theory and political theory will be crucial. These will allow us to clarify the proximity between populism and religion in the axis of dimensions that inhabits the social imaginarium, where the political, social, ethical and ideological dimensions (myths), will explain the notions of the people, the other, good and evil, and the possible link between populism and religion.

Key concepts in the notions of populism and the genealogy of morals (Material/Methods)

Populism has been studied vastly in sociology and political science; however, for the present research work we will take a symptomatic reading of populism that would incorporate empirical and historicist approaches, which use base concept analysis of the constitution of the people as a political actor (Stavrakakis, 2002). This approach understands populism through the political constructions of antagonism as an anti-status-quo expression that would simplify the political spectrum between the “people” and “the other” (Laclau, 1977).

The idea that the populist discourse fulfils its goals in the face of institutional deficiencies is evidence that populist mobilisation represents a deviation from the habitual transit from a traditional to modern society (Germani, 1969). Populist practices arise from the failure of existing social and political institutions to confine and regulate political subjects within a relatively stable social order. For this reason, the narratives given as a result of the populist discourse seek to generate new forms of identification in times of instability and misalignment, in light of the previously established social values (Panizza, 2009).

Laclau maintains that the situation that leads to a populist rupture is a situation in which a plurality of demands coexists with a growing inability of the institutional system to absorb them.

In this process, a populist identity arises from the dislocation of the specific identities of the owners of the particular demands (marginalised social spectrum) and their reconstitution in the imaginary unity of the people. Thus, an institutional system becomes less and less capable of differentially absorbing social demands, leading to an internal gap within society and the construction of two antagonistic chains of equivalence. This is the classic case of a populist or revolutionary rupture, which is the result of the crisis of representation, which Gramsci called "Organic Crisis" (Laclau, 1996).

In other words, since Laclau (2005) was looking for a general logic in the emergence of identities, the Laclauian notion of "the people" is going to be used to refer to several phenomena that were not considered initially populist expressions or that belong to the management of demands of a people. Since the term "the people" is a totality, although an impossible totality, it can only be manifested by its absence and necessity. The term "the people" itself does not have a predetermined ultimate referent; instead, it is a reality that is reconstructed continuously as it acquires context within the social imaginarium. In Laclau's understanding, populism, far from being determined by the left or right political spectrum, is a way of constructing the political, and it becomes so indispensable that it makes the social structure viable and the construction of "the people" possible in the unreachd unity of the heterogeneous. In turn, Laclau not only defines the formation of popular identity as a political category but contrasts it in his analysis of the dialectical relationship with differential chains and chains of equivalences that clearly show how the construction of a people is an indispensable condition for the democratic legitimacy, both in the sense of participation and in the liberal idea of political representation.

These mentioned elements make up the theory on the populist reason. In the face of the institutional system as well as the idea of the democratic, the individualism that can be generated

in a society as well as social marginalisation are based on the fact that they can be integrated into the same logic that explains each element and finds an explanation in the correlation that exists between these elements. The lack of being able to develop an element outside the system is what leads Laclau to think of the role of the socially marginalised. Because these cannot find meaning before the place they are occupied in social antagonism because they are extrinsic to the system and, hence, they play a key role in social transformation. This is where the chains of equivalence are linked to the floating signifiers as displacement of borders in heterogeneity that makes the political articulation viable.

The idea of socially marginalised, on which Laclau works, exhibits an idea that allows us to connect it with the development of the second essay in the book *On the Genealogy of Morals* by Friedrich Nietzsche, before the conceptions of the words good and evil. Beyond the fact that the idea of good and evil fulfil an objective of putting the poor with the good, there is a wide margin over which Nietzsche (1887) conceptualised a critical aspect, – resentment. “Resentment” is the emotion felt by the oppressed. As used by Nietzsche, it is synonymous with “resentment” or even a particular kind of resentment. It is the imaginary revenge to which those who are incapable of reacting against oppression through direct action are handed over. From the hatred and desire for revenge felt by those who were held in check by the nobility come the high values of compassion and altruism according to Nietzsche. This is intended to create a historical description of what happened and penetrate the psychology of those who carried it out. The commoners who could not aspire to the lifestyle of the nobility invested, in their frustration, the value system of the good and the bad. Instead of adopting the noble’s perspective on morality, the commoners put forth their own, which subverted the status quo. According to the morality of

the plebeians, the noble vision of life, based on the power and values of the warriors, was evil: the mistreated, the poor, and humble were the good ones.

There is a definite link between the historical notion of resentment and the meaning of “the other”. It poses a transparent barrier to the differentiation between the nobles and plebeians. The fact that it discursively places a term opposite the other, in this case between the relationship (good and bad), generates a marked differentiation that precludes any similarity; this is a rhetorical displacement since as Laclau (2005) states, whenever a figural one substitutes a literal term, we could call it a rhetorical displacement. Specifically, this is apparent in this case by the fact that the terminology for this differentiation is generated. Rhetorically and discursively, there would be a marked representation of opposite meaning (Laclau, 2005). Laclau establishes that discourse is the first step in the construction of an object, beyond a constitutive way of language. Therefore, good and bad were established as terms, which allow us to understand this relationship with the other that existed as the etymology of these words.

Finally, before the reconfiguration of the word good, we can observe, that there is a reconstruction of its meaning and an acceptance of it. As in populism, Laclau (2005) explains that the best construction that could exist for the understanding of this situation would be Saussure's explanation of the signified and signifier, on which the signified is immaterial, the idea or concept evoked in our mind. Meanwhile, the signifier is the sensitive part – it can be acoustic or visual, but it is always something material, namely the physical, material, or sensory part of the linguistic sign, i.e. one that can be perceived by the senses because it has a physical nature: that which is heard when we speak or what we see when we read. Given this clarification about what we will understand about the signified and signifier, we can establish a point of connection of this terminology with the already described word "good." The fact that the word

good cannot obtain a material signifier since the vagueness of the term does not allow us to represent it in something acoustic or visual compels us to view it as a concept or idea evoked from our mind. Therefore, the Nietzschean conception of the good would be a clear explanation of why the construction of the good today has the connotation with which it comes and also evokes a connection with what society lacks as signified, that finds a possible signifier in the word good.

Saussure's explanation of meaning and significance allows us to connect it in the subsequent parts with the text of Laclau (1996) in *Why do empty signifiers Matter to Politics?* on the notions of floating and empty signifiers, thus allowing us to compare it with the emergence of populism through the discourse on the relationship between populism and religion both specifically and in general.

Nietzsche and the genealogy of morality, good and evil.

The book by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) consists of three essays: the first is about the relationship between good and evil, the second deals with consciousness, while the third deals with asceticism. Nietzsche explains his theory about origins of our essential moral vocabulary to approve and disapprove the words "bad" and "good" used in a moral context. He develops these opinions by criticising the thoughts of English psychologists who hold that "good" was applied at first to altruistic actions, not so much because the actions were in themselves good, but because they were useful for those who were benefited by them, i.e. those who were doing well. With time, people forgot the origins of the word and went on to think that altruistic actions were good in themselves, rather than because of their effects.

Genealogy is, literally, the action of tracing family origins to establish a family tree. Nietzsche (1887) uses it for tracing the roots of specific concepts, mainly by analysing the history of the changing meanings of words. His instruction in philology (the study of languages and the origins of words) enabled him to pursue the changing meanings of the words he researched. His application of the genealogical method in *The Genealogy of Morals* aims to illustrate that the opinions received about the sources of morality are wrong and that, from the historical point of view, concepts such as moral goodness, guilt, loyalty, and self-denial have originated from angry feelings against others or against oneself. Being the point of connection with the already described resentment, the feelings of anger originated between one and the other. The differences would make room for the construction of an object of resentment where Nietzsche attributes this radical revaluation of the "values of the enemies" to the Judeo-Christian tradition and qualifies it as the first revolution of morality carried out by slaves. Without realizing it, we have inherited the consequences of this revolt, a revolt that has served the interests of the oppressed. For Nietzsche, morality is not something determined forever and unveiled in the world; instead, it is a human creation and, therefore, the moral terms have their history.

Understanding the genealogy of these words would explain the configuration of a social imaginary in which, historically, there is a co-dependence on the viability of the social structure, between politics and religion, where they played a fundamental role in, what Laclau (1996) calls, dislocation. Being the link between politics and religion a necessary link. Thus, *The Genealogy of Morals* gives us a step that would be lacking in the explanation that several populist theorists give to the base concept of the Judeo-Christian idea that the poor are good. In

turn, the genealogy of morality establishes a pattern of origin over the idea of populism in the society.

Populism and religion are linked by the etymology of word “good” (Results)

As I mentioned at the beginning, populism has become one of the most important conceptions of political science in recent years in political theory and comparative politics. In many universities in the United States, scholars have generated methods for measuring populism in societies. Nevertheless, even if there is a common thread among them, populism obtains different connotations owing to the Judeo-Christian idea that the poor are good; therefore, the link that gives rise to that notion becomes vital for the development of this paper that seeks to explore the intersection between politics and religion.

Looking at the etymology of the words good and bad, we can verify the Saussurean relationship between the signified and signifier; this aspect will allow us to connect it with the theory of empty and floating signifiers of Laclau (1996). Religion re-adapted the concept of good and evil through the discourse which sought to vindicate the plebeians (socially marginalised) before the nobles (elite) in the social structure, because politics, the same as religion, has an integrating discourse and that seeks the ideal of unity. This relationship born of the antagonistic historicism of the relationship between one class superior to another could be considered as a populist expression (Laclau, 2005). Populism is thus a mode of identification available to any actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, form the core elements of its political imaginarium (Laclau, 2002 pp.38-39).

It seems that religion has built the understanding of the word good and connected it with an empty signifier so that society finds a nucleus of development and the socially marginalised spectres obtain hope. Therefore, the fact that populism fulfils the goals of modernisation of the state (Germani, 1969) may not be a purely political phenomenon but also a social phenomenon (Torfing, 1999). Then, the discourse would become a fundamental piece in the link between these aspects – the discourse, beyond populist traits, is the very form of the constitution of the social, where nothing exists outside the discourse. It is the discourse that allows the articulation or disarticulation of different elements; it has a real character as it builds reality (s), insofar as it is able to articulate the material properties of objects. Building relationships, identities, subjectivities (political subjects), and positions; generating several types of practices; and allowing the establishment of a political field of differences and pluralism with antagonistic actors that seek to implant a different representation of "reality" as hegemonic do not translate into the struggles or systems of domination, it is, the power that someone wants to own (Laclau, 2002 pp.38-39).

Based on the discourse theory, another link that we have been able to notice is through hegemonic practices, this being the articulation between different identities and subjectivities in a unit or common project. As Howarth, Norval and Stravakakis (2000) mention it, while the hegemonic formations are the outcomes that come from this new unit project and that group a dispersed variety of dislocated elements. Therefore, we could say that both politics and religion are constructed through antagonistic relations and hegemonic practices, where (Howarth, Norval and Stravakakis, 2000 p.15) assert that no discourse is capable of completely hegemonizing a discursive field a field of antagonistic constructions. This gives way to one of the points on which Laclau and Mouffe both developed in their discourse

theory, being the aspects of distinctive conception between myth and social imaginaries, aspects that will help us to demonstrate another point of intersection between politics and religion. For that Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) on the Laclaunean theory of discourse, the myth is born of an emerging condition of the dislocation in the social structure, the effectiveness that this presents is due to that inherently hegemonic, and its objective is the re-articulation of elements dislocated. While the social imaginarium would be a discursive configuration, which based on a collective ideal, is established in society as a composite core; therefore, it would be a form of before the dislocation of elements in the social structure.

On the other hand, the definition of "ressentiment" is explicit in the genealogy of morality and unleashes a clear connection with an expression of populism that was developed by Torcuato Di Tella in 1976, namely the theory of "incongruous groups". This part of the dislocated society, which does not find representation in the political and religious spheres, is dislocated and breaks the social structure. Laclau (1996) describes this phenomenon in *The Impossibility of a Society*. Politics and religion are found and develop in different social spheres and both share the same social imaginarium. The social imaginarium is a central axis in the analysis of the relationship between politics and religion, especially in the specific case of religion and populism. A religion exemplifies a social grouping that has acquired what Di Tella (1976) would call "incongruent groups". This refers to dislocated and out-of-context social segments, such as the impoverished and lower classes, who are not accepted in the higher circles, or even to displaced ethnic groups. These are social sectors that accumulate resentment and may develop vengeful attitudes against an establishment that they consider unfair. Thus, these incongruent groups would represent in a more modern context a form of resentment towards their social marginalisation.

Discussion

The original approach of this paper was maintained throughout, where the question was able to mark a clear thread while the evidence on the link between religion and populism was being developed. The lack of research on this link is noteworthy. Populism and religion share different relationships in several social spheres, although there is no direct link between them, and the form of constitution of their concept comes from antagonistic relations in society. While populism has the ability to simplify the political spectrum, as described by Stravakakis (2002 pp.224-239), in many cultures, religion plays a significant role in the ideological establishment of the state. Populism and religion are, therefore, ways of identifying the disposition of any actor or political agent that operates in a discursive field in which the notions of the sovereignty of the people, populism, and freedom of religion represent central elements of the political imaginarium.

A part of the structure that supports populism is the Judeo-Christian cultural anthropological idea that the poor are good; in this paper, we have analysed the etymology of this notion and the concepts that encompass it, through the definitions of Laclau. We defined populism, discourse, the people, and the other, and we have presented a revision of these concepts in their constitution of populism as a term in political science. On the other hand, the idea of resentment and the etymology of the words good and bad unleash an explanation of the phenomena adjacent to populism, social marginalization, or the development of disparate groups in society. Hence, we can get an answer to our question: How does an appeal to the concepts of “good”, “bad”, “resentment”, the “other”, and the “people” as understood by Laclau, Nietzsche, and those who draw on their work, contribute to our understanding of the relationship between populism and religion? We have developed the answer throughout this paper, obtaining a clear link between

populism and religion, with a focus on the terms analysed. At the same time, the theories of disparate groups of Di Tella, such as those of Laclau of empty and floating signifiers, allowed us to understand the relationship that arises in the discourse on populism in politics.

Finally, this paper, in its objective to return to an academic focus on the relationship between politics and religion, finds in populism an aspect with a background that allows it to continue building on this line of research of intersections between politics and religion. The fact that there is not much bibliography that develops this link makes it a possible area of development within the Social Sciences; few academics have linked populism with religion, most recently Yannis Stavrakakis, who carried out analyzes on his native Greece. " Religion and Populism: Reflections on the 'politicized' discourse of the Greek Church. " During the last few years and with the stay of Pope Francis as the head of the Catholic Church, several media outlets in Argentina and Italy have begun to say that the Pope is populist. It is evident that the theme gained enough strength and restored populism as a subject of analysis within Political Science and other Social Sciences. Although what is developed in this paper, does not allow us to say that religion and politics are correlated, or that populism could be an expression of the society in general, our analysis will enable us to say that there is a link between politics and religion through of populism and that this could be activated through discourse not only in the political as Laclau and Panizza previously mentioned but also in the religious. Future research on the subject should develop an analysis that allows us to continue investigating the issue in greater depth, a next step could be to analyse the phenomenon of populism in the political and religious sphere, through the theory of Logics as a unit of explanation and see their similarities or differences before the political, social and fantasmatic logic. If something, in turn, is worth noting is that the speech is such a rich

source in which further research could find a thread to analyse and develop progress on the subject.

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